

## Bible Study Guide: Week of 11-16-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

### Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, <sup>[a]</sup> you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

**<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.**

This judgment narrative (which has some features of a parable) is the last discourse in Matthew’s gospel prior to Jesus’ passion. Its position at the end of the teaching section of Jesus’ ministry is important for us to remember because this passage cannot be interpreted without the context of the preceding narrative. The themes we saw in the last few parables are continued here—judgment, reward vs. punishment in the age to come, and the importance of acts of mercy and love as markers in the lives of disciples.

**<sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.**

This word for “nations” here is *ethne* (the plural form of *ethnos*), meaning “peoples, nations, races.” It is often used in Matthew and elsewhere in the New Testament to mean “the Gentiles”—(i.e. “the nations” other than Israel). How we translate and understand this term here determines how we interpret this parable. If we translate *ethne* as “the nations” then it seems we are talking either about all the peoples of the earth or, perhaps all the Christians from all nations of the earth. If, however, we translate *ethne* as “the Gentiles” then we would be talking about God judging all those who are not otherwise part of God’s chosen people (either Israel or, perhaps, Israel and Christian believers). Thus, it is not entirely clear who is being judged here.

**<sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’**

For Matthew, as for the Epistle writer James, faith without works is not really faith at all. Here, Matthew presents a saying of Jesus that urges his followers to do good works and show mercy and love to those who suffer or find themselves in need.

**<sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’**

The righteous ones ask when it was that these things happened. They display a sort of holy ignorance. They are so innocent and unassuming that they are not even aware of having done their deeds of mercy and love. Once again, how we interpret this passage hinges on whom we think Jesus is referring to by saying “one of the least of these who are members of my family.” The Greek here is *adelphon mou*—literally “my brothers.” The NRSV says “members of my family” to preserve gender neutrality. This word is most often used in Matthew’s gospel to refer to members of the community of faith—i.e. fellow church members. So it seems that “the least of my brothers” could refer to suffering or struggling church members. So either the “sheep” here are non-Christians who nonetheless showed kindness to persecuted Christians or the “sheep” are Christians who cared for and loved one another in obedience to Jesus’ new commandment that we love one another as he loved us.

**<sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’**

Meanwhile, the “goats” display not a holy ignorance, but a clumsy indifference. While the “sheep” were blissfully unaware of the good they did, the “goats” were blissfully unaware of the needs of the least of the members of Jesus’ family. The repetition of the actions, twice by Jesus and twice by the sheep/goats hammers home the importance of holy actions and showing love and care for all—even the least and the forgotten. It is worth noting that as Jesus is teaching these words, he knows he is heading for the crucifixion. He could have used his last words to urge his disciples to smite his enemies or avenge his death. Instead, he urges them to give and receive love and care.

#### **Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

- 1. Why do you think that neither the sheep nor the goats in this passage had any idea what they had done to/for Jesus?**
- 2. What difference does it make that these words are the last words of Jesus’ teaching prior to the crucifixion?**
- 3. Which of the services Jesus describes (feeding the hungry, etc.) are easiest for you to participate in? Which are hardest for you? Why do you think that is?**