COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 25:31-46

by Dr. Knox Chamblin


A. The Scene.

It is one of heavenly splendor, dominated by the figure of the king and judge, the Son of Man (v. 31; cf. Dan 7:13-14), before whom are gathered all the nations" (v. 32a).

B. A Parable of Separation. 25:32-33.

Like the two preceding parables, and some of those in Mt 13 (vv. 24-30, 36-43, 47-50), this one witnesses to the division that shall occur at the Last Judgment: "and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (v. 32, RSV). "Them" means people within the nations, not the nations themselves; NB the shift from the neuter (panta ta ethné, v. 32a) to the masculine (autous, v. 32b). Palestinian shepherds commonly herded sheep and goats together but separated them at the end of the day. Sheep, with their heavy wool, prefer the open air (cf. Lk 2:8), while goats need the warmth of shelter. Given the sheep's greater value and their lighter color, it is appropriate that they stand for the saved (cf. Gundry, 512).

C. The Brothers.

Addressing the redeemed, the King says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (v. 40; cf. the negative and shorter counterpart in v. 45). Just who are the "brothers" (adelphoi)?

1. The prevalent view. It is often suggested (and increasingly in our day, it seems) that "brother" here means anyone who is in distress, especially the world's poor and oppressed. According to Jeremias, "the 'brethren' in this passage are not the disciples, but all the afflicted and needy" (Parables, 207). Desmond Tutu, an Anglican bishop in South Africa, is typical of many contemporary interpreters: In this story Jesus declared that it "would be whether we fed or did not feed the hungry, whether we clothed or did not clothe the naked, whether we visited the imprisoned or did not, which would say what our final destination was going to be" ("Christian Witness in South Africa," Reformed Journal, Oct 1985, p. 13).

2. A suggested alternative. Viewing the term adelphoi in this passage in light of its usage elsewhere in Mt, I conclude that Matthew, like Jesus before him, refers to disciples. For support of this view, see Carson, 519-20. (J. C. Fenton, Matthew, 402, rather strangely, wants to have it both ways: "Matthew probably thought of the brethren
here as the disciples of Jesus; but in the original parable it may have referred to anyone who was in distress.") Consider the following evidence:

a. 12:46-50. Told that his mother and brothers (adelphoi) are seeking him, Jesus "replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers [adelphoi]?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers [adelphoi]. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven [cf. 7:21-27] is my brother [adelphos] and sister and mother.'"

b. 23:8, "You have only one Master and you are all brothers [adelphoi]." Their common allegiance to Jesus makes them brothers to one another.

c. 28:8-20. Jesus instructs the women, "Go and tell my brothers [adelphoi] to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (v. 10). It is "the eleven disciples who, in obedience to this command, gather in Galilee (v. 16).

D. The Nations.

1. Their identity. The words "all the nations" (v. 32) embrace Jews as well as Gentiles. The people of the nations (the autous of v. 32b) are distinguished from the brothers.

2. Their actions. The people of the nations, whether Jewish or Gentile, are judged according to the way they have treated the brothers. The context for their actions is provided in Mt 10, in Jesus' missionary charge to the twelve apostles (and disciples generally). This chapter envisages (1) a mission to both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 5-23), (2) both favorable and unfavorable responses to the disciples' message (vv. 11-15), and (3) both hostility and compassion toward Jesus' followers (vv. 16-36, 40-42). Observe how the chapter concludes: "He who receives you, receives me [cf. 25:40]. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives a cup of cold water [cf. 25:35, 37] to one of these little ones [cf. 25:40] because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward [cf. 25:34]" (10:40-42). Viewing the present passage in that light, I conclude:

a. The people of the nations respond to the "brothers" precisely in their capacity as bearers of Jesus' preaching and teaching: note the repeated "because he is" in 10:40-42. The "sheep" are those who respond favorably to the Gospel of the Kingdom and its bearers, the "goats" those who respond unfavorably.

b. Included among those bearers are not just apostles (or professional "missionaries"), but disciples generally - all of whom are expected to proclaim Christ's gospel and mediate his teaching (5:14-16; 28:19-20). The close of Mt 10 significantly
speaks not only of the "prophet" (v. 41a), but also of the "disciple" (v. 42), each of whom is instructed to be "righteous" (v. 41b; cf. 5:20).

c. The services described in 25:35-36 are largely if not entirely rendered on account of the brothers' experience of deprivation and persecution on account of Christ (cf. 5:10-12; 10:16-23; 24:9-14).

Ronald J. Sider comments on this passage: Jesus "warned his followers in the strongest possible words that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation" (Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, 1st ed., 66). The very opposite is closer to the truth! Jesus is issuing a solemn warning to those who receive the witness of his followers, and who demonstrate their attitude to the message by the way they treat the messengers. How the people of the nations receive that witness, will determine their final destiny.

3. Their reward.

a. The coming judgment. This passage, like the two foregoing, points to the Final Judgment. But whereas the parables of 25:1-30 speak of professing disciples, and make a division between disciples true and false, the present story speaks of recipients of the gospel and distinguishes between those who embrace it ("the righteous," vv. 37, 46) and those who reject it (the "cursed," v. 41); cf. Gundry, 511.

b. The sheep's destiny. Jesus declares in 10:41-42, that those from among the nations who receive his representatives, will surely be rewarded. Their reward, in a word, is salvation. In the end Jesus will say to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (25:34). To "inherit the kingdom," is to "enter into eternal life" (v. 46; cf. the interweaving of these two themes in Jn 3:1-21). That the kingdom is "prepared for you since the creation," underscores its reality and its certainty, and offers great hope amidst present trials - which these persons are sure to suffer, now that they too have become brothers! The humble services which they render to the brothers (vv. 35-36), are the very ones expected of disciples (20:26-27). Moreover, their lack of self-consciousness (vv. 37-39) is just the attitude which shows their discipleship to be genuine and not phony (cf. comments on 6:2-4; 20:20-23).

c. The goats' destiny. Those who fail to minister to Jesus' followers, thereby demonstrate their hostility or (more likely) indifference toward the message they bear and the Christ they represent. Such persons shall, on that account, suffer eternal loss (25:41-46). The "Lord" of v. 44 is no more substantial than that of 7:22.

E. The Mission of Jesus.

One cannot read the Gospels without recognizing Jesus' compassion for the materially impoverished and the physically afflicted (a compassion expressed in Ron Sider's book,
quoted above). Yet Jesus was principally concerned about man's relationship to God, not his environment; and his singular mission was to save his people from their sins (1:21), not from their poverty or hunger. He allowed nothing to deter him from this mission (cf. comments on 4:2-4; 5:3-10); and it is this mission, and responses to it, which are in view here at the end of his final discourse in Mt.