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Volume 5 – 2016

**Harsh Sayings of Jesus:
Is Jesus’ Language of Judgment and Sin too
Condemnatory to Deal Graciously with Human Sin?
A Reflection from Matthew’s Gospel**

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Introduction

Scholars have long recognized judgment as a central motif in the Gospel of Matthew.² Indeed, some of the most rigorous dominical sayings concerning divine judgment originate from the First Gospel:

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² For example, the standard Greek word group used in the N.T. to convey judgment is κρίνω/κρίμα/κρίσις. These appear in the Synoptic Gospels a total of 33 times: once in Mark, 13 times in Luke, and 19 in Matthew. For recent examinations of the theme of judgment in Matthew’s Gospel, see [Footnote continued on next page ...]

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20)... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (6:14–15).

Does this stringent attitude the Matthean Jesus exhibits towards personal righteousness and sin extinguish any hope for people in the Day of Judgment? U. Luz, for one, has argued that the inclusio of Matthew 1:23 and 28:20—the twin promises of God’s presence—suggests that grace predominates over judgment.³ Other commentators appeal to N.T. texts like John 3:16–17 or Romans 8:1 to counterbalance these harsh Matthean logia, but it remains highly unlikely that Matthew’s original audience had access to these or other such offsetting texts. The present study seeks, therefore, to examine whether Jesus’ language of judgment prohibits him from dealing graciously with sin from a solely Matthean perspective.

While many passages in Matthew address the topic of judgment,⁴ and each deserves an analysis, this study focuses on the Final Judgment pericope in Matthew 25:31–46 for several reasons.⁵ From a source-critical perspective, the Final Judgment passage is exclusively Matthean and without parallel in the Olivet Discourses of Mark and Luke, thus presenting a uniquely Matthean window into the question of judgment. Narrative-critically speaking, if the Olivet Discourse, with its strong eschatological orientation, represents the climax of Jesus’ teaching in the First Gospel,⁶ then the logical flow within this discourse suggests that the Final Judgment pericope forms the apex

Anders Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) and D. Marguerat, *Le Jugement dans l’Evangile de Matthieu* (2nd ed., Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1996).

³ U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, trans. J. Crouch, ed. H. Koester, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 290–93. Luz, however, overplays his hand regarding the role of this inclusio for Matthew. For a brief critique of Luz’s position, see Andrew Angel, “Inquiring into an Inclusio—On Judgment and Love in Matthew,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 60, no. 2 (October 2009): 527–30.

⁴ E.g., Matt 5:21–26, 7:1–6, 21–23, 13:24–30.

⁵ For a detailed history of interpretation of Matt 25:31–46, see S. Gray, *The Least The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46: A History of Interpretation*, SBLDS 114 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

⁶ Whereas the other major discourses deal primarily with ethics, Torah interpretation, mission, and God’s kingdom, the Olivet Discourse deals with Jesus’ Second Coming and the Final Judgment.

to this climax.⁷ Finally, from an ideological point of view, the cataclysmic day of God’s judgment remains a central motif in the works of many O.T., Second Temple, and N.T. authors.⁸

Although Matthew’s messianic depiction of Jesus in the Final Judgment pericope is an important feature to this text,⁹ the exegesis of Matthew 25:31–46 in this study will focus specifically on the recipients of Jesus’ judgment and the criterion for his judgment, which will help to shed significant light on the question of Jesus’ ability to deal graciously with sin. The study will then conclude by offering some pastoral reflections on judgment and grace in light of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25:31–46.

A. The Matthean Final Judgment: Who?

The identity of the recipients of judgment in Matthew 25:31–46, i.e., “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη), has been hotly debated. W. D. Davies and D. Allison list the most serious positions as all non-Christ-believers (Jews and Gentiles), all non-Christ-believing Gentiles, and all of humanity.¹⁰ There is some commonality between these major views. All agree, on the one hand, that the eschatological judgment in view is not limited to one locale: it involves people from many geographical locations;¹¹ and, on the other hand, each position acknowledges that individuals are judged.¹² But key to the present study is the identity of “all the nations.”

⁷ The first part of the Olivet Discourse treats the Second Coming (Matt 24:1–41); the next section deals with how to wait for Jesus’ return (Matt 24:42–25:30); the final section discusses what happens when he does return (Matt 25:31–46).

⁸ In the O.T., see, for example, Isa 66; Joel 2:1–11; Zeph 1:14–2:3; and Mal 4; among Second Temple works, see, for example, *1 Enoch* 100–108; *Testament of Abraham* A 10–14; and 1QWar Scroll. N.T. texts that speak of Final Judgment include 2 Cor 5:10–11, 2 Pet 3:3–9, Jude 6, and Rev 20:11–15.

⁹ For an examination of this particular issue, see W. Baxter, *Israel’s Only Shepherd: Matthew’s Shepherd Motif and His Social Setting*, LNTS 457 (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 150–51.

¹⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988–97), 3:422.

¹¹ Cf. the survey of U. Luz, “The Final Judgment (Matt 25:31–46): An Exercise in ‘History of Influence’ Exegesis” in *Treasures New and Old: Recent Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. D. Bauer and M. A. Powell (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 271–310.

¹² S. Brown suggests that πάντα τὰ ἔθνη represents Matthean redaction of a parable taken up by Matthew that originally dealt with the judgment of individuals (Brown, “Faith, the Poor and the Gentiles: A Tradition-Historical Reflection on Matthew 25:31–46,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 6, no. 2 (1990), 174–75). Both Brown and J. Michaels assert that the grammatical peculiarity of a masculine pronoun (αὐτούς) used to refer to a neuter noun (ἔθνη) supports the contention of the nations being judged as individuals (Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31–46,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 1 (1965), 28, n. 6.

Besides 25:32, Matthew uses “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) in 24:9, 14, and 28:19. In the similarly eschatologically oriented chapter 24, “all nations” explicitly refers to “the whole world” (ὅλη τῆ οἰκουμένη).¹³ “All” in 24:9 and 14 probably refers to Gentiles, but in an inclusive way: “every nation without exception” (including Israel),¹⁴ rather than exclusively, i.e., “every other nation” (every nation except Israel). The subsequent discourse points in this direction: according to 24:16–20, the disciples continue to live and evangelize in the land of Israel—since it is from there that they must flee—when all of the signs of the End transpire.

In the other occurrence of “all the nations” in the final chapter of the Gospel, the disciples are commanded after the resurrection to make disciples of “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). Some scholars try to exclude Israel from 28:19; but 10:23 and 23:39 do not allow for this exclusion: according to the former text the mission to Israel will continue until the Parousia, while the latter logion clearly presupposes that Jerusalem will eventually see Jesus again—because of the continuing mission to Israel by some Christ-believers.¹⁵ It seems most probable, then, that “all the nations” in 25:32 would possess this same inclusivity that appears in the Evangelist’s other deployments of the phrase: every nation including Israel will be judged.¹⁶

¹³ In 24:14b, “all the nations” (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) is grammatically parallel with “the whole world” (ὅλη τῆ οἰκουμένη).

¹⁴ While Matthew can use ἔθνη as a point of contrast with Israel (e.g., Matt 10:5–6), he can equally use it in close association with Israel (e.g., Matt 4:12–15).

¹⁵ The basis for their exclusion, according to many of these scholars, would be Matt 21:43: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken from you [the nation of Israel] and given to a nation (ἔθνος [i.e., the Gentiles]) producing the fruit of it”; see, for example, G. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 151–52, and U. Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 119–20. Matthew 10:23b reads: “For truly I tell you, you will surely not complete the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.” Matthew 23:39 reads: “For I tell you, you [= Jerusalem] will not see me from now on until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

¹⁶ G. Buchanan in his *Matthew, Mellen Biblical Commentary*, 2 vols. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996–97) suggests that Gentiles are not in view here, as they are in the Missionary Discourse, but rather, Diaspora Jews. There are, however, a number of weaknesses with his position. Because Buchanan perceives a close parallel with *1 Enoch* 62–63, where the ruling class (i.e., kings, governors and the like) are punished before the Son of Man, he believes that Matthew probably has rulers in mind with “nations.” This, however, is unlikely because in *1 Enoch* unlike in Matthew sheep-goat imagery is never invoked. Furthermore, it is doubtful that “nations” represent the ruling class because this is not the usual reading for τὰ ἔθνη. When Matthew refers to the Gentile ruling class, he always differentiates between them and τὰ ἔθνη (10:18; 24:9). If Matthew had the ruling class in mind he probably would have used ἡγεμῶν as he does elsewhere (2:6; 10:18; 27:2, 11, 14, 15, 21, 27; 28:14). While Buchanan correctly links πάντα τὰ ἔθνη of 25:32 with πάντα τὰ ἔθνη of 28:19, he incorrectly limits the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

J. Donahue argues that the linguistic context supports the notion that Jesus' disciples be identified with those judged (i.e., the sheep and the goats), like in the parable of the virgins (25:1–13) and the parable of the talents (25:14–30).¹⁷ In other words, in Donahue's view Christ-believers are being judged. If the Final Judgment pericope was purely a parable—like 25:1–13 and 25:14–30—this assertion would hold. But as numerous scholars rightly maintain, 25:31–46 is technically not a true parable,¹⁸ and is more likely an apocalyptic discourse.¹⁹ As apocalyptic discourse 25:31–46 would function less as parenthesis and more as consolation for persecuted people.²⁰ L. Cope's comment on the passage bears repeating:

Perhaps it is impossible to say conclusively who 'all nations' are, but it is possible to say who they are *not*. From the pronouncements of vss. 40 and 45 it is clear that those who have been given or refused hospitality are not a part of the judgment proceeding and that they are 'the least of these my brethren.' . . . 'All the nations' are those *other than the brothers of the Son of Man*.²¹

All of these observations, then, suggest that “all the nations” excludes Christ-believers but includes non-Christ-believing Gentiles and non-Christ-believing Jews. Thus, according to this Matthean pericope, in the day of Final Judgment Jesus the eschatological king will judge all unbelievers—Jews and Gentiles.²² But what is his criterion for judgment?

recipients of the apostolic commission in 28:18–20 to “Judaized Gentiles” (i.e., Palestinian Gentiles) to the exclusion of non-Judaized (non-Palestinian) Gentiles. Yet, would post-70 CE Jewish messianic communities recognize this sort of distinction among non-Christ-believing Gentiles? Buchanan also seems to ignore the apocalyptic elements of 25:31–46, which would support a more grandiose scene of judgment involving “all the nations” of the world.

¹⁷ John R. Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 47 (1986), 9–13.

¹⁸ Davies and Allison, for example, call Matt 25:31–46 an “eschatological testament” because of the many features it shares with Jewish and Christian apocalypses (*Matthew*, 3:326); cf. J. Court (“Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31–46,” *N.T. Studies* 31 [1985]: 223–33) who also acknowledges the importance of recognizing the “apocalyptic revelation-discourse” character of the pericope for interpretative purposes.

¹⁹ Cf. G. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 221–30, who discusses the common thrust between Matt 25:31–46 and texts with similar social settings like *4 Ezra*, *1 Enoch* and *2 Baruch*.

²⁰ See G. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 228.

²¹ Lane Cope, “Matthew XXV:31–46: ‘The Sheep and the Goats’ Reinterpreted,” *Novum Testamentum* 11 (1969), 37 (his emphasis).

²² While Christ-believers are not judged in this scene, this does not imply that there is no final judgment for them. Since belief in multiple judgments is common in Second Temple Judaism and first-century Christ-belief (e.g., *L.A.B.*; *4 Ezra*; *Testament of Abraham*; *Revelation*), Matthew probably would have also affirmed multiple judgments (judgment of Christ-believers appears elsewhere in his Gospel, [Footnote continued on next page ...])

B. The Matthean Final Judgment: How?

“All the nations” will be judged according to their deeds of mercy or lack thereof: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you gathered together with me; naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (vv. 35–36). These acts of charity commonly appear in early Jewish writings.²³ The Evangelist may be drawing upon Isaiah 58:7, where the prophet chastises his people for practicing their religion without any regard for social compassion: “[You should] share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.” But these deeds apply equally to Gentiles, as evidenced by the penitent confessor in the pre-Second-Temple era text, the Egyptian Book of Dead: “I have appeased God by [doing] his will. I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, and a boat to the shipwrecked” (chapter 125, Plate 32).²⁴ The criterion for judgment described in 25:31–46, then, applies to both Jews and Gentiles.²⁵

According to Matthew, Jesus’ Final Judgment is based upon performing deeds of mercy, specifically, to “one of these brothers and sisters of mine, the least of them” (ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων). The “relative superlative,”²⁶ τῶν ἐλαχίστων, functions adjectivally, describing the extent or scope of ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου, thus yielding the meaning, “one of these brothers and sisters of mine, *even* the least of them.” Similarly, Brown understands the second genitive as functioning in apposition to the first giving the sense, “these brothers and sisters of mine, the least,” or

albeit with less elaboration); but only one is envisioned in 25:31–46: unbelievers. Thus, while 25:31–46 is popularly called the “Final” Judgment, it should not be considered the only judgment.

²³ Cf. the survey in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:425–28, of early Jewish texts that include similar lists of deeds of mercy.

²⁴ See E. A. W. Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani Egyptian Text Transliteration and Translation* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 205.

²⁵ Further, the language of patriarchal blessing (“you who are blessed of my Father”) and of inheriting a foreordained kingdom (v. 34) refers to the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Matt 1:1c), and can apply equally to Jews and Gentiles: see, for example, Paul’s appeal for Gentile inclusion in the Abrahamic Covenant in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

²⁶ N. Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3, in J. Moulton, *A Grammar of N.T. Greek* (repr., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 31.

“these brothers and sisters of mine, that is to say, the least.” Thus, “the two expressions, ‘my brothers’ and ‘the least,’ refer to the same group, rather than the latter being a subset of the former.”²⁷

The composition of this particular group has received various interpretations. Davies and Allison summarize the possibilities as: everyone in need—whether Christ-believer or not; all Christ-believers; Jewish Christ-believers; Christ-believing missionaries; or Christ-believers who are not missionaries.²⁸ To identify this assembly, two things must be considered. First, of its 31 occurrences in the Gospel, Matthew typically deploys ἀδελφός (“brother”) to denote either a biological relationship²⁹ or discipleship.³⁰ Given this tight correlation, it would be a mistake to understand “brother” here as simply anyone “down on their luck,” since Matthew plainly deploys the term only for people who relate to Jesus in a direct and specific way. Second, Matthew employs ἐλάχιστος (“least”) only two other times: once referring to Bethlehem (2:6) and once referring to the commandments of the Law (5:19). In both of these instances the term is used to convey the smallness of a particular subject in order to show the overall significance of either the subject or the object to which it is related.³¹ Here in 25:40, ἐλάχιστος, then, would convey the overall significance of Christ-believers: even the slightest one has immense worth in God’s eyes.³² Thus, it would seem best to identify this group with Christ-believers generally,³³ and not, as some argue, to those serving specifically as missionaries or prophets.³⁴ In other words, for Matthew, the ultimate criterion for Final Judgment will be

²⁷ Cf. Brown, “Faith,” 173.

²⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:428–29.

²⁹ See Matt 1:2, 11; 4:18, 21; 10:2, 21; 12:46–48; 13:55; 14:3; 17:1; 19:29; 20:24; 22:24–25.

³⁰ See Matt 12:49–50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10; and probably 5:22–24, 47; 7:3–5.

³¹ Hence, in the case of the former, Bethlehem cannot be considered the “least” among the rulers of Judah anymore because of the renown it will receive as the birthplace of the messiah. In the latter, those who teach others to break even the “least” of the Law’s commandments cannot expect to receive favour because of the overwhelming significance of the Law—“not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law until all is accomplished.”

³² Cf. the lost sheep logion in Matt 18:12–14. The saying is similar to Matt 11:11, where the “least” (μικρότερος) in the kingdom of heaven is greater than the greatest of the prophets, viz., John the Baptist.

³³ Whereas ἐλάχιστος conveys the significance of the disciples, the related term, μικρός, seems to be no more than a synonym for “followers of Jesus” (cf. Matt 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14).

³⁴ So, for example, Luz, “Final Judgment,” 301–305, Donahue, “Sheep and Goats,” 25, and Brown, “Faith,” 172–73.

based on how people (“the nations”) have treated any of Jesus’ followers, whether great or small.

Two questions follow from this interpretation. First, why would Matthew cast Final Judgment in such a disciple-centric way? His phrasing of the criterion for judgment would provide a greater sense of vindication for the Mattheans. Because 25:31–46 is an apocalyptic discourse, it functions as encouragement to persevere in the face of opposition.³⁵ In discussing the relevance of the genre of apocalyptic discourse for the interpretation of 25:31–46, Stanton writes,

Apocalyptic regularly functions as consolation for groups which perceive themselves to be under duress. Apocalyptic language is also often used to reinforce attitudes of group solidarity amongst minority groups at odds with society at large; clear lines are drawn between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ ... [it] provides hope of ultimate vindication for the powerless and oppressed people of God.³⁶

Matthew’s disciple-centric description of the criterion for Final Judgment would offer hope in their persecution.

The second question is similar: Can “how Christ-believers are treated” serve adequately as the decisive factor at the Parousia? The criterion’s sufficiency rests in the central belief that Christ’s presence resides with his followers. Christ’s abiding presence with his disciples is evidenced by the phrase, “inasmuch as you did it to these brothers and sisters of mine, the least of them, you did it to me” (v. 40, cf. v. 45). This idea is stated more explicitly in 18:20: “For where there are two or three who assemble in my name, there I am in their midst.” This notion of Christ’s presence manifesting with his followers finds its parallel in the Book of Acts. When Jesus confronts Saul for persecuting the church (Acts 9:1–2), he asks him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4b), followed by his declaration, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (9:5b). That followers of Jesus—and not just Jesus—can form the criterion of judgment in the Eschaton should not be unexpected. Within Matthew’s own narrative this principle has already been anticipated by the Missionary

³⁵ Scholars have long recognized the persecution Matthew’s community experienced: e.g., R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) and Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Vol. 6 of Monograph Series of the Society for N.T. Studies. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

³⁶ G. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 228.

Discourse, where the rationale for this criterion for judgment appears explicitly: “The one who receives you receives me, and the one who receives me receives the one who sent me” (10:40). Cope calls this the “halakhic principle of agency,” whereby the commissioned agent is considered the equivalent of the person being represented.³⁷ Acceptance of the messenger—evidenced by hospitality—presupposes prior acceptance of the sender, viz., Jesus. Conversely, rejection of the messenger, demonstrated by a lack of hospitality, presupposes prior rejection of the sender. Clearly for Matthew, hospitality towards Christ-believers bears Christological significance.

Because the presence of Christ resides with his disciples, whoever accepts and shows hospitality towards them is rewarded, but whoever rejects and fails to show hospitality to them receives divine punishment. Does that then mean that the more common measure of faith in Christ does not factor into the Final Judgment? Brown argues that within the context of Matthew and in a post-Easter setting, faith in Christ would surely be presupposed.³⁸ The reaction of the sheep and goats (vv. 37–38, 44) seems to move the audience in this direction of presupposed faith. When the king acknowledges their deeds (or their lack thereof), each group is astonished, completely unaware of the true significance of their works. Their incognizance precludes salvation by works: people who seek to earn divine reward would only be too aware of their deeds; they would quite self-consciously feed the hungry, refresh the thirsty, clothe the naked, and the like. The king’s pronouncement would not have caught them off guard—they would have expected the king to know of their charity. Furthermore, their lack of awareness suggests that they performed these deeds without any specific intentionality—they did what came natural for them. Final judgment merely represents the outworking of Jesus’ words regarding the heart:

The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your

³⁷ Lane Cope, “Matthew XXV,” 40. Buchanan refers to the messengers as “ambassadors” (*Matthew*, 2:52–53). This principle of agency appears most frequently in the fourth gospel (e.g., John 10:30; 12:44–45; 14:9, 24).

³⁸ S. Brown, “Faith”; cf. J. Ramsey Michaels, “Apostolic Hardships,” 28.

words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matt 12:35–37).

But just as words accurately signify the heart, so also does a person's deeds. Thus, the king judges the deeds of the nations in regard to the Matthean community, because their deeds offer a clear reflection of the heart in regards to Jesus: deeds of mercy towards Christ-believers demonstrate a prior acceptance of Jesus, while the absence of deeds reveals an antecedent rejection of Jesus.

Conclusion

The apocalyptic discourse of Matthew 25:31–46 teaches that Jesus will judge all non-Christ-believing Jews and Gentiles based on the extent to which they, prior to his Parousia, demonstrated hospitality to his followers—deeds which signify their de facto acceptance or rejection of Jesus. But does this narrow interpretation of 25:31–46 preclude any present-day application? While Donahue argues that the “least of my brothers” refers strictly speaking to Matthean missionaries, he nonetheless insists that “this does not make the pericope into a sectarian ethic with little relevance for contemporary ethics or homiletics. Rather, engagement with Matthew's understanding of discipleship gives the pericope a richer dimension than its contemporary generalized use allows.”³⁹ Given the task of the present volume to make pastoral theology relevant in the modern world, there are a number of important implications of the Final Judgment pericope as it relates to the question of the relationship between divine grace and human sin.

First, while the Final Judgment speaks explicitly of unbelievers being sent away to “eternal punishment,” not all are condemned: the righteous enter “eternal life.” In other words, while the scope of Christ's judgment is universal, not all are universally condemned. That some will be saved in the Day of Judgment does offer some hope. Second, while the risen Christ resides in heaven, presently separated from earthly, human experience and thereby vulnerable to the charge of being an unsuitable judge for humanity—i.e., of being unfair—because of this detachment, this pericope teaches that people encounter Christ directly through his followers. Thus, God has given

³⁹ John R. Donahue, “Sheep and Goats,” 25.

people the opportunity to face their accuser (so to speak) directly through his people. How they treat Jesus' followers closely correlates to their beliefs about Jesus: a life reflecting deeds of mercy towards Jesus' followers demonstrates acceptance of Jesus, while the absence of charity reveals rejection of him.

Third, many moderns protest, "What about people who have never heard the gospel?" The Final Judgement pericope responds twofold to this complaint. On the one hand, people will not be judged according to what they do not know but according to what they do know—which is a direct manifestation of their beliefs about Jesus, or more broadly, God. On the other hand, clearly, not everyone who has never heard the gospel will face eternal condemnation: only the "goats," but not the "sheep." All are not outright universally condemned.

Fourth, Jesus deals graciously with human sin through the agency of his disciples. Despite the narrow interpretation offered here, as John Donahue comments, Matthew's audience is not absolved from care for the poor and needy of the world:

According to the rabbinic mode of argument from the 'lesser to the greater,' Matthew speaks of pagan virtues in such a way that Christians should surpass them (5:43–48). If the pagans are to be concerned for the hungry, etc., how much more Christian disciples?⁴⁰

The devout reader in any era, then, would surely seek to apply this text on a personal and practical level; and as they performed these deeds of mercy to society's less fortunate, Christ, through his abiding presence among his people, extends his grace to people, treating them graciously and not as their sins deserve.

Therefore, is Jesus' language of judgment and sin too condemnatory to deal graciously with human sin? While a comprehensive answer to this question would need to take into account the rest of the Gospel witnesses, and while a cursory glance at the scene of Final Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 might suggest a negative response, upon closer examination, despite his stern view of judgment, Jesus does indeed deal graciously with sin.

⁴⁰ John R. Donahue, "Sheep and Goats," 28; cf. M.-A. Chevallier, "Note à propos de l'exégèse de Matt 25:31–46," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 48 (1974): 398–400.



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