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The Servant-Christ:

Matthew's Answer to Legalism

Allan J. McNicol

Few passages of scripture focus attention more on important matters than Matthew's powerful description of the final differentiation of humankind into two separate groups at the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). The powerful metaphor of the Lord separating the nations as a shepherd separates sheep from goats grips our attention. Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? On what grounds does the shepherd make the final separation? Is there a clearly definable way of following certain rules so that we can pre-determine at the last day we will be numbered among the sheep? How does the following of "right doctrine" fit into this synthesis?

The Universalistic Interpretation

Almost as familiar as these images is the popular interpretation of the passage within the church and in contemporary culture. It goes something like this. At the end of the age all peoples will be gathered before the Son of Man. Then the final separation of the just and the unjust will take place. Those (including church members) who have performed a large number of humane acts in this life, and who have gone out of their way to do various deeds of beneficence, will be ushered into the kingdom. When it is said that actions such as clothing the naked and feeding the hungry are done "to the least of the brethren" this is understood as a reference to those who practice random acts of kindness to the poor (Mt 25:35-40). The belief is widespread that somewhere someone is keeping an account of these things. No one

knows for sure how many of these acts are needed for us to be finally acceptable; but it does not hurt us from time to time to receive some exhortation on the matter as we go about our daily lives.

Clearly, we have major precedents in the Bible to warrant a commission to minister to the needy of this world. These stretch from the denunciations of Israel by the Old Testament prophets for displaying covenant unfaithfulness in its lack of care for the poor down to the book of James. These mandates are a given for the people of God. One may grant all of this, however, and yet one may question whether Matthew had anything like this in mind when he portrayed the great Final Judgment at the culminating point of Jesus' ministry immediately preceding the Passion Narrative. Indeed, just a moment's reflection should give us considerable pause. Do we really mean to say that despite all the New Testament teaches about the atoning work of Christ for our sins, it comes down to being justified by our works? Even if we argue that Matthew presumes that faith in Christ is a pre-requisite for entrance into the kingdom (and Matthew 25 is silent here), it still amounts to the same thing.¹ Whether it be the liberal who finds a warrant in this text for his or her call to common humanness, or the conservative who claims that obedience to God's demand can only be factored in the context of right doctrine, if we follow this interpretation, it appears to come down to a matter of our sheer performance. Under the conventional interpretation we seem to have before us a particularly clear appeal to *works*

1 The sub-title of this essay, "Matthew's answer to legalism," will, no doubt, raise questions in some minds. There is a widespread perception that Matthew, with his strong emphasis on the abiding significance of the law and his constant stress on performance, comes dangerously close to a particular version of legalism (cf. Mt 5:17-20). This explains why F. W. Beare, in the preface of his commentary, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) vii, could say, "Matthew has given us a grim book, singularly lacking in those notes of joy that sound through the writings of Luke. The Christ that he presents on the whole is a terrifying figure. . . . There is little trace here of a gospel of grace abounding to the chief of sinners." Needless to say, we believe that such comments represent a major distortion of Matthew's perspective. On the contrary, we intend to argue in this essay that Matthew, properly understood, unmasks legalism and gives an appropriate description of the relationship of grace to God's demand. The matter has about been discussed to death. But M. Mu>ller, "The Gospel of St. Matthew and the Mosaic Law," *Studia Theologica* 46 (1992) 118-119 is not far from the truth when he claims that the author of Matthew transfers the Mosaic Law to a Christian context. Christ is not viewed as the giver of a new law but by accepting his Lordship and the redemption that is in him one is able to keep joyously these demands as differentiated by Jesus.

righteousness. Is the Gospel of Matthew this far out of line with the gospel of grace in the rest of the New Testament?

Our Argument

In this essay we will assert that the conventional interpretation of the text is mistaken. It is mistaken because for Matthew the follower of Jesus is not pictured as a solitary individual at the Last Judgment waiting among “all the nations” to see how it all is going to turn out. Rather, for Matthew the believer is identified under the cipher “one of the least of the brethren.” It will be the response to his or her conduct and lifestyle that will be the basis for the determination of the destiny of humankind at the end of time. For Matthew, among the great throngs at the Last Judgment are the ones who showed hospitality to “the brethren.” Indeed, to be precise, “the least of the brethren.” These people will be rewarded. Because they were hospitable we are told that by such actions they “did it to me.” That is to say, in the welcoming of the brethren and their mission they welcomed Jesus. Matthew 25:31-46 is not a literal description of every detail at the end, but a vignette which anticipates the outcome of the mission of the disciples to the nations in Matthew 28:16-20. In short, the vignette focuses upon the outcome of the Christian Mission. Those among the nations who welcome the disciples ultimately welcome Christ and his claim to universal authority. By acknowledging and acting upon this claim they will be rewarded. Those who do not will be separated from him.

Therefore, Matthew 25:31-46 is not a text calling for the church to start more soup kitchens and out-do the world in benevolent work. Neither is it saying that “anonymous disciples” who have nothing to do with the church but do good works will be saved. Instead, it is an anticipatory glimpse of the outcome of the mission of the church to bring the world under the Lordship of Christ. It indicates that a welcome reception of that message is what will count as the ultimate reality on that day. If there is any mandate for the church at all in this text it is a mandate to be the very embodiment of the obedient disciples of Jesus symbolized by what the first Gospel calls “the least of the brethren” or “the little ones.” The “least” or the “little ones” are those who live their lives in conformity with the example shown by the Teacher himself in his earthly ministry. By conforming to the model of Christ the disciple is not one who is to live in fear of the Last Judgment. Rather, as the very

embodiment of the power of the Servant-Christ, the witness of that disciple will be the standard for the judgment of others.

The Least of These My Brethren

Now, let us begin to show how this argument is congruent with the total thrust of the book of Matthew. As already noted, a critical issue in interpretation of this text is understanding to whom Matthew is referring when he speaks about “the least of these” (Mt 25:40, 45).² Under the conventional universalistic interpretation “the least of these” is supposed to be a reference to the poor and needy of this world. It is argued that the final outcome at the judgment depends on the level of one’s concern for the needy.³ The obvious appeal to a sense of our common humanness accounts for the widespread attractiveness of the conventional interpretation.

But, as we have noted, almost certainly this was not what Matthew intended to say. The reference to the “least of the brethren” goes back to an earlier mission charge to the disciples to evangelize the lost sheep of the house of Israel in Matthew 10:5-42. The phrase “one of these least” (25:40, 45) is almost the same as the phrase “one of these little ones” that occurs at the conclusion of this charge in 10:42.⁴ There, in context, it refers to the disciples. The connection between Matthew 25:31-46 and the mission charge in 10:5-42 warrants close scrutiny.

Up until the mission charge Matthew has carefully arranged his account of Jesus’ instructions to a circle of followers to fall between two great summarizing passages (Mt 4:23/9:35). In both these passages Jesus emerges as the Proclaimer of God’s new saving power and as Teacher, and Healer. In between Matthew 4:23 and 9:25 Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount and performs ten great acts of power. Thereupon, Jesus selects the Twelve (Mt 10:1-4) from the circle of his followers and

² Mt 25:40 reads in most ancient manuscript traditions, “the least of these my brothers.” There is a small body of manuscript evidence that omits “my brothers.” But it is not sufficient to cause us to discount the accepted reading. Throughout Matthew the term “brother,” outside of references to blood relationships, always refers to fellow believers.

³ Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 129, attests to the widespread popularity of this view.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria (circa 200 A. D.) seems to understand the Matthean terminology of the “least of these” and “the little ones” as co-terminous (*Quis Dives Salvetur* 30:2-4; *Protrepticus Paedagogus* iii, 9:35).

sends them on a mission to announce the arrival of God's Kingdom to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:5, 6 and 10:23).

The mission of the twelve to the lost sheep of Israel is characterized by instructions to the disciples not to be dependent upon their own resources (Mt 10:9-10) but to rely upon the hospitality of those who are the recipients of their message. Toward the end of this charge the disciples are told, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me" (Mt 10:40). And in Matthew 10:41 we learn that "Whoever welcomes God's prophetic messengers . . . will share in the messenger's reward." Finally, in Matthew 10:42 we are told that, "Whoever will give a cup of cold water to the prophetic messengers" described as "one of these little ones," will receive a reward. Here "the little ones," without question, refer to the Twelve (Mt 10:1; 11:1). But in both these verses the Twelve are also called disciples; and in Matthew 18:6, 10, 14, similar terminology on "the little ones" is expanded to function as a transparency for those who are vulnerable in the social world of the first-century Christian-Jewish community founded by Jesus (i.e. the Church). Thus the instructions to the disciples in Matthew 10 are an anticipation of the self-understanding of the church as it will go about the conduct of its life and mission to Israel in obedience to its Sovereign Lord. As noted by Ulrich Luz, for Matthew, the essence of what it means to conduct this mission is to live a faithful life in conscious imitation of *the pattern* of Christ's life.⁵ And the core of his life was centered in a process of absolute dependence characterized by his asking and receiving from the heavenly Father (Mt 6:8; 7:7-11; 21:22; 26:39). This has an analogue in the way in which the disciples were to conduct themselves in daily life. A disciple is not above his teacher (Mt 10:9-25). Thus Matthew 10 is a manual on Christian discipleship.

When one looks at the specifics of this model it is clear that Matthew 10 has many echoes in Matthew 25. In 10:9-14 Jesus exhorts his disciples to rely for their food and drink upon those with whom they share the word (cf. Mt 10:43). In 25:33

⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 48.

those vindicated at the last day are those who freely offered the hospitality of food and drink. In 10:17-18 Jesus prepares the disciples for the grim reality of rejection and imprisonment. In Matthew 25 those vindicated at the last day are those who made visits to the prisons to see the little ones (Mt 25:36, 39). Indeed, Paul's description of his hardships sounds like a repetition of circumstances faced by "the little ones" in Matthew 25:34, 36. Paul suffers hunger and thirst and was often homeless and without adequate clothing (1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 11:27). He was sick (1 Cor 4:10) and often imprisoned (2 Cor 11:23).⁶ The point is that for both Matthew and Paul these marks of the life of the "little ones" are the marks of true discipleship. Those, among the nations who will welcome and respond to this witness are those who will be vindicated at the last day.

Indeed, as noted earlier, at the last day, those among the nations who are vindicated because they received and welcomed the "little ones" will be surprised to learn that by these actions they welcomed Christ himself (Mt 25:37-40). This is the real "shocker." The very hidden power of God initially exemplified in the servant ministry of Jesus (cf. Mt 12:17-21) and instantiated in the life and mission of the disciples to the nation of Israel (Mt 10:23) will be shown to all the nations. Simply put, Matthew 25:31-46, is a highly symbolic representation of *the ultimate outcome of the impact of this Jesus mission to the nations*. The passage is saying that what will determine the destiny of the nations at the last day is the nature of their response to those who embodied the way of Christ. Those who respond favorably will be ushered into the heavenly kingdom. Those among the nations who treat this mission either with indifference or with overt hostility will be refused entrance.

The perspective that we all will be held accountable for our lives is a consistent theme of Matthew's theology. Matthew tells us that accountability applies both to the life of the Christian in the church and to the reception of the church's mission among all of the nations of the world. With respect to the church, Matthew

⁶ The parallels between Paul's description of his ministry and Matthew 25 are well noted by John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 122. Earlier J. R. Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Mt 25:31-46," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965) 27-37 made some similar points.

understands it is a *corpus mixtum* (“a mixture of good and bad”) who live and exist in one community until the genuine disciples who lived their lives in imitation of the pattern of Christ’s life will finally be separated from the unfaithful at the Last Judgment (Mt 13:36-43;47-49; 24:36-25:30). Matthew 25:31-46 has a similar theology of accountability but a different focus. Anticipating the great mission to the nations in 28:16-20, this text is simply shifting the focus from a description of the evaluation of the church itself in Matthew 24:36-25:30 to an image of the accountability that will be demanded of the nations when the Gospel is taken to them. They will be judged on whether they received Christ in the witness of those who followed the model of his life.

Matthew and Legalism

As already indicated, a pursuit of the popular interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 can often degenerate into an unhealthy involvement with legalism. This can be true for either liberal or conservative interpreters. For the liberal the danger is to take the passage out of its particular setting and to assert that the universal impetus to do good and show kindness is all that is needed. The good-hearted person, no matter his profession, will be saved. We are justified by our performance. But it is not this version of legalism on which we wish to concentrate our attention in this essay. With the exception of a few who have acted as though the church or the government should be nothing more than a social-service agency, this perspective has not proved especially troublesome to Churches of Christ. Matthew confronts another kind of legalism that does pose a problem for conservative fellowships. Matthew has strong things to say to those who have the arrogance to claim that since they understand fully the commands of God, they therefore know exactly both what is needed, and who will and will not make “the cut” on the last day. This is the legalism of doctrinal sectarianism.

With the release of Richard Hughes’ book on the history of Churches of Christ in America the debate about the role of legalism in our theological tradition is again about to be revived. Hughes is no friend of legalism.⁷ He argues that our flirtations with it started early when Alexander Campbell made some too subtle

⁷Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

distinctions in his descriptions of grace.⁸ According to Hughes, Campbell taught that salvation is only possible as a result of God's gracious purposes shown in his self-revelation in scripture, the capstone of which culminated in the commands of the New Covenant. But the reception of that salvation was also totally dependent upon a free human response to this originating grace present in the giving of the commands.⁹ However, as Hughes points out, this delicate tension between God's sovereign purposeful grace and human response, envisioned by Campbell, was quickly distorted.¹⁰ For many, the focus shifted to an emphasis on obedience to the commands themselves. And in its wake came a pre-occupation with both determining the precise number, structure, and form of the divine commands, and what is entailed in obeying them. Thus we arrived at the gates of legalism.

Regardless of whether Hughes' explanation is correct in its details, one cannot deny that there is an entrenched position among certain interpreters in Churches of Christ which has as its basic *raison d'être* an attempt to extract from the New Testament scriptures a certain pattern of commands deemed necessary to follow in order to obtain salvation. Furthermore, once the pattern was determined, a monumental effort has continued to be extended in sectarian discussion to refine the particularities of the pattern especially with respect to who is following it and who is not.¹¹

Interestingly enough, the Gospel of Matthew has often been drawn into this orbit. Within the heritage of Churches of Christ one of the most frequently quoted verses from Matthew has been 15:9:

In vain do they worship me teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.

The connection with the issue at hand is very clear. This verse has been

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28, 171-172.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Even the terminology of certain publications can be indicative of such a mind-set. The recent book, in excess of six hundred pages, by Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern* (Pensacola, Florida: Austin McGary and Company, 1991), is a case in point.

understood as part of a wider discrimen that presumes that there are certain scriptures which outline with great specificity God's commands and which warrant the view that there is a clear and unfailing blueprint for all aspects of the Christian life including the worship and the organization of the church. It is alleged that the Pharisees were scored by Jesus because, within Israel, they had substituted their own opinions and rulings on Torah in place of pure obedience to the letter of the law. By analogy, under the New Covenant, those who deviate in the slightest way from the perceived pattern of God's commands, will surely receive the same disapprobation that Jesus extended towards the Pharisees.¹² Indeed, given this pre-understanding, it is then possible to extend this hermeneutical gambit to many more texts in Matthew. So, for example, the ending of the Sermon on the Mount with its emphasis on hearing and doing the teaching of Christ (Mt 7:24-25) is now interpreted not so much as a general call to good works in imitation of Christ, as it is an emphasis on whether one is following the prescribed conditions of salvation and is observant of the purported blueprint for the New Testament church.¹³ The call for the twelve to be leaders in the proclamation of the kingdom in the face of relentless opposition in Matthew 10:32, 33 is cited as a warrant to demand the good confession before baptism.¹⁴

Although the respect for the authority of Scripture which undergirds this viewpoint is commendable the end result of this legalistic outlook is spiritual malnourishment. This is so because such a system of religion inevitably leads many of its adherents to the position that what is primarily determinative for being faithful is a resolution to meet a set of pre-determined requirements. Once one knows the rules (i.e. in the case of the church: where the boundaries are, and the conditions for entrance and maintenance within the boundaries) it is practically inevitable that the central religious obligation is not to live faithfully upon the dependability of the Father but simply to keep the commands. And once one has kept the commands what

¹² L. E. Ellis, *The Church that Jesus Built* (Chula Vista, California: Ellis Publications, 1981) 42, 58.

¹³ Cf. W. Terry Varner, "The Wonderful Harmony of Titus 2:11 and Matthew 7:13-27," *Spiritual Sword* 17, 4 (July, 1984) 26.

¹⁴ Ellis, *The Church that Jesus Built*, 53.

further need is there for spiritual development.¹⁵ Indeed, “spiritual growth” equals “keeping commandments.”

Ironically, although the legalist presumes that the Matthean Jesus is on his side it may well be that, in fact, the opposite is the case. For indeed, much of what Jesus found objectionable in Pharisaism is analogous with contemporary versions of legalism we have outlined above.

The Pharisaic party of the first century era was, above all, a community intent upon drawing power into its own hands.¹⁶ Procedurally, this was done through the inculcation of a world-view that claimed that they (i.e. the Pharisees) were the guardians of a legacy of an authoritative scribal tradition reaching back to Moses. This perspective was regularly validated in the legal process operative amongst the Jews in this period. The Gospel of Matthew provides ample evidence of its pervasiveness. The Pharisees maintained an authoritative interpretative tradition for such varied areas of life as observance of the Sabbath law (Mt 12:1-14); oaths and vows (Mt 5:33-37; 23:16-23); taxes (22:15-22); divorce (19:3), and countless others. In short, the Pharisees as described in Matthew had developed a way of viewing the world very similar to patterns followed by many contemporary legalists. It was presumed that God had provided a comprehensive pattern for all areas of life for which he demanded strict adherence and complete obedience. And it is assumed that he appointed certain elites who had the power to administer and refine the system. It is interesting to note the response of the Matthean Jesus to this kind of legalism.

Servanthood Not Legalism

Emerging in the middle of Matthew 11:28-30 is a word from Jesus that has for centuries been a treasure of the church:

Come to me all who labor and are burdened down and I will provide rest for you
Put my yoke on you and learn from me because I am meek and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

¹⁵ Such a position may even breed a certain kind of arrogance and contempt for others who have not met the requirements. That is hardly becoming of the qualities of discipleship outlined in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5:3-11.

¹⁶ A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982) 58.

These words, above all, constitute a paradox. Up until this time everything we have learned from Matthew is that the prospect of following Jesus appears to be a stern and demanding duty (cf. Mt 5:20; 10:34-39). And yet we are told in Matthew 10:30 that Jesus' yoke is easy and light!¹⁷ In contrast to the Pharisaic system (Mt 12:1-14, 23:4), the taking up of Jesus' yoke holds out the promise of refreshment and rest.

What is equally startling is that the ones to whom these words are spoken (more than likely disciples) are pictured as people who labor and are burdened down.¹⁸ Here we notice that the description of the disciples corresponds with similar terminology ("the little ones" and "the least of the brethren") given to Jesus' followers elsewhere in Matthew. Paradoxically, it is these bedraggled ones who find relief. What has Matthew in mind?

Surely, it is nothing more or less than the claim that the situation and destiny of the disciples mirror the situation and destiny of Jesus himself (cf. Mt 10:24-25). As Jesus will pass through the crucible of a life tested in every degree, ultimately to be vindicated, his followers must do the same. But they do not journey alone. They are assisted by divine power. Indeed, at the end of time, the lifestyle of the disciples themselves, as the embodiment of Jesus' own ministry, will be the very standard whereby the world will be judged (Mt 25:40)! Matthew's story of Jesus constitutes a manual whereby prospective disciples will come to the dawning realization that though they may appear often bedraggled and beaten down on the journey, the hidden power of the crucified Christ will be shown in them; and, in the end, they will share his victory.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the passage the reader is referred to the author's earlier article, "Jesus of Nazareth: A Liberal and a Legalist," *Institute for Christian Studies Faculty Bulletin* 5 (1984) 42-49.

¹⁸ As noted by Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992) 374, the verb *kopia'n* ("to labor") found in Mt 11:28 is used by Paul (see above) to speak of his Christian service (cf. 1 Cor 4:12; 15:10; Gal 4:11; Philipp 2:16; 1 Thess 5:12).

Thus Matthew has gone out of his way to view the life of a disciple as a mirror of Jesus' fulfillment of the hope of Israel's deliverance by the Messianic Servant given in Isaiah 42-53.¹⁹

Already in the account of Jesus' baptism Matthew connects Jesus' ministry with that of the Servant (Mt 3:13-17). We learn that Jesus' baptism is to fulfill all righteousness (Mt 3:15). This seems to echo Isaiah 53:11 where we learn that the Servant will make many to be accounted righteous.²⁰ In the first words spoken by Jesus in Matthew there is the promise that his mission will bring righteousness. In the episode of the description of the Final Judgment (at the end of the mission outside of Jerusalem), those who respond to Jesus in the work of his followers are designated in Matthew 25:37, 46 as οἱ δίκαιοι ("the righteous ones"). In between Jesus emerges as the Servant who fulfills the Isainic hopes (Is 42:1/Mt 3:17) and commissions his followers to carry on in his steps after he is gone.

This theme continues in 8:17 after the initial cycle of Jesus' deeds. Matthew identifies Jesus as the fulfiller of the hopes of healing in the coming restoration of Israel. The actual configuration of that restoration prefigured in Isaiah 25:8; 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:7; 43:8; 61:1-3 is recounted in response to John the Baptist in Jesus' own recital as the ambassador of relief to those who suffer (Mt 11:4-6).²¹

After Jesus and the disciples carry out the mission of preaching, healing, and teaching in chapters 11-12, Matthew gives a lengthy fulfillment quotation from Isaiah 42:1-4 that summarizes the impact of Jesus' work. The culminating point of the passage is that the Servant is the one who is destined to bring justice to all the nations (Gentiles). In his name they will find hope.

As Donahue notes, this is a rather odd statement, since at this period Jesus had restricted his mission only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 10:5-6,

¹⁹ Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, 80.

²⁰ Adrian M. Leske, "The Influence of Isaiah on Christology in Matthew and Luke," *Crises in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*, William R. Farmer ed. (Livonia, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 1995) 248, also sees echoed here Is 59:16-17; 60:17, 21; 61:11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 252-254. As Leske notes, this theme is continued in Mt 11:28-30 where the servant, as one who is meek and lowly in heart fulfills the call for relief by the faint and weary in Is 40:28-31.

23).²² Apparently Matthew envisioned the limited commission to go only to Israel to extend later to the Gentiles whom the earthly Jesus never visited (Mt 28:16-20).²³ But not only that, Matthew claims that Jesus will be present in that mission as the "Servant." When the church goes about its task of proclaiming, teaching, and healing encountering both acceptance and rejection by the nations Jesus, hidden in the work of his disciples, is accomplishing his mission.²⁴ Thus, Jesus as Servant, in the work of the "least of the brothers," is God's agent and is the one destined to bring the restoration of God's order and claim (justice) over humankind. As the Servant who was prepared not to quit even to the point of his life becoming a sacrifice (Mt 16:21-28; 17:22-23; 20:18-19) so his followers must mirror his defenselessness and brokenness as they go forth among the nations.²⁵ Being the very image of Jesus himself they will constitute the very criterion by which all men will be judged (Mt 25:37-40, 44-45). Thus, the model of servanthood, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, and embedded in the church (Mt 10:5-42 et al.) is the dynamic discipleship that overcomes the legalism of the Pharisees and their contemporary analogues.

Conclusion

We began this essay by directing attention to the powerful metaphor of the Lord separating the nations at the Last Judgment as a shepherd separates the flock of sheep from the goats. We asked the obvious question, "How can one be reckoned as one of the sheep? Is it primarily a matter of teaching "right doctrine?" Our analysis has brought us to the following conclusion. The vignette in Matthew 25:31-46 is an image of the outcome of the mission of the Servant-Messiah in the person of his disciples (the church) to the nations of the world. Matthew was addressed to Christian believers. But in Matthew 25:31-46 the believer is not a lone individual among the nations waiting to hear a pronouncement on the final destiny of his soul

²² Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 117.

²³ For a fuller analysis of the nature of mission among Jews and Gentiles in Matthew, see Allan McNicol, "Discipleship as Mission: A Missing Dimension in Contemporary Discussion on Matthew 28:18-20," *Christian Studies* 10 (1989) 27-47.

²⁴ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 117.

²⁵ Luz, *Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, 79-80.

but one of the "least of the brethren" whose work and mission constitute the standard by which the nations will be judged.

Of course, this does not mean that the believer will not be held accountable at the end (cf. 2 Cor 5:10). As we noted, Matthew clearly indicates that the church in the present age is a *corpus mixtum* and that at the end one will be taken for judgment and the other left to enjoy the blessings of the messianic kingdom (Mt 24:40-42 which occurs in the larger context of what constitutes the accountability for disciples in Mt 24:36-25:30).

Well, if the disciples of Jesus are going to be held strictly accountable, despite all that we have said, do we have any basis for understanding what will count on our behalf at the Last Judgment? Manifestly so! Our study of Matthew has shown that the static righteousness of passing of a checklist will be inadequate. This spells doom for the legalist. The demands of God can never be reduced to mere calculation. God's demand still stands. But it can only be differentiated and fulfilled by following dynamically in the way of life pioneered by the Servant-Messiah. It is only in taking up this way that the weightier matters (justice, mercy, and faith) will be accomplished and we will be found to be in good standing before the Divine One at the last day.

Contributors

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