

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Matthew 25:31-46

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book): Year A - Proper 29, Christ the King, Text: Matthew 25:31-46
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary): Year A - Proper 29, Christ the King, Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 24:43 refers to the unexpected arrival of a thief in the night (24:45–51 and 25:14–30) to the sudden return of absentee masters, and 25:1–13 to the rather late arrival of a bridegroom.

Matthew 25:31–46 contains less of a parable style, and is more straightforward. Its vision of the nations, separated like sheep and goats, is the apt climax to the discourse and the series of scenes beginning at 24:1 and to all of Jesus' teaching contained in Matthew.

The passage reflects Jesus' Farewell Discourse in John 13:31–16:33. It defines the life that God's people are to pursue between Jesus' earthly ministry and His glorious Final Appearing. It focuses on the theme of the coming of Jesus as the Son of Man to bring the present age to a close (ch. 24; note vv. 27, 30, 37, 39, 44. Note also 25:31). the theme of separation found in relation to:

- those who go astray contrasted with those who endure (24:11–13),
- tribes of earth full of regret contrasted with those who endure (24:11–13),
- Noah rescued but others swept away (24:37–39),
- one taken and the other left (24:40–41),
- blessed and wicked servants (24:45–51),
- wise and foolish maidens (25:1–13), and
- faithful and slothful servants (25:14–30).

Chapters 24 and 25 focus on issues such as the meaning of watchfulness and being prepared. In relation to the issue of “when?” the parable states that the Son of Man has in a sense already come, in that He is present in the poor and needy — who are odd, and sometimes unwelcome, signs of His presence.

Verses 25: 31–33: Although no human knows when the Son of Man will come, He will finally reappear in His glory, bring all the angels with Him, and demonstrate His power over every enemy. The passage

makes no reference to the “where” of this final event in earthly history. Rather, it states that Jesus will sit on His glorious throne, gather before Him all the nations, and demonstrate that He is not merely a witness to the events of history but rather the Judge of all humanity.

When He comes, He will separate the sheep from the goats and place the sheep at His right hand but the goats at His left. Sheep and goats mingle and graze together each day. However, when they are moved to fresh pasture, or when sheep are due for shearing or goats for milking, or when evening falls and the goats must be provided with shelter to cope with the cold of night, they are separated.

Verse 25:34: Consider the contrast ... the lowly Speaker, sitting unknown and unnoticed on the Mount of Olives (v. 24:3), on His way to lonely crucifixion, will in the end be Universal King (*Gk: basileus*), and will invite those at His right hand, “Come, O blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom (*Gk: basileia*) prepared from the foundation of the world.”

The welcome is all about forgiving, welcoming grace. “Come, O blessed of My Father”: “My Father has done it all.” Inherit has to do with gift, not merit; prepared for you, not by you; from the foundation of the world — when we were not around to help or offer our services.

Verses 25:35–36: Who are the “blessed” ones, and why do they receive this word of eternal welcome? The answer is expounded in six simple sentences which, with only the slightest variation, ring out four times in the next ten verses:

- 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.
- 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.

Verses 25:37–39: The sheep at the right hand are now called “the righteous.” Their lifestyle reflects the righteousness that Jesus urges everywhere in Matthew’s Gospel (1:19; 3:15; 5:6; 10:41; 13:17; 23:29, 34), and is brought about by his own Spirit at work in us. This is the spontaneous fruit of faith. (Note the righteous will be surprised: “Lord, when was it that we saw You?” Three times they ask, “When did we ...?”)

Verse 25:40: The focus of when is now somewhat transformed. God’s people are not merely to focus on the when of the Final Day, but on the fact that God’s Eternal Kingdom has already broken into history and that while they wait for the Final Day, they are to seek to live now as they will then — in eternity after that Final Day.

In responding to the question “when?” Jesus identifies Himself with the lowly and responds, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of My family, you did it to Me.”

During her ministry, Mother Theresa pointed out that Jesus is all around us in disguise. We might go a little further and point out that there are really only two people on Planet Earth: Jesus and me. Jesus is all around us in “distressing disguise” as the One who is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. The needy are Jesus’ representatives in the world. Love for God must never be separated from love for neighbor.

Verse 25:41: The second half of the narrative mirrors the first half, but in a dark manner. Those at Jesus’ left hand are not blessed but cursed. In addressing them, Jesus will not say “come” and “blessed” but “depart” and “cursed.” They do not enter the eternal kingdom but the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Verses 25:42–43: The reason for their dismissal is no longer a surprise. Jesus was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison — and they simply did nothing to meet His needs!

Verses 25:44–45: “When (they ask, v. 38) was it that we saw You?” The answer is devastating: “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.”

Verse 25:46: The final verse is something of a thunderclap: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Matthew’s fifth discourse (chs. 24 and 25) draws to a close with a vision that focuses on righteous deeds. It makes no mention of golden streets, jeweled foundations, gates of pearl, high honors bestowed on miracle workers, exorcists, visionaries, prophets, speakers in tongues, or rank and place within hierarchy. Rather, it reflects Paul’s hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

What follows? The narrative about Jesus’ own betrayal, arrest, torture, and execution. As the vision ends, everything is ready for the Passion Narrative to begin.

In 25:31–46, Jesus speaks about being identified with the world’s outcasts, and in His passion He actually identifies with them. The Son of God stands deliberately and voluntarily in the shoes of the powerless, the weak, the defenseless, the hated, the tortured. He begins as a refugee and He ends as a condemned criminal. However, His Father gave the “vindicating vote” when He raised His Son from the dead!