
The Implications of the Judgement Discourse of Matthew 25:31-46 for Christian Social Welfare Provision

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the implications of Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus presents the final judgment through the metaphor of "sheep" and "goats." In this article, we discuss the centrality of Christ's role as Judge and the place providing acts of mercy or social welfare for others play in getting people to the right side of God on the last day. We explore the basis for the division of people into the left and right side of God on the last day of judgment. The article shows that acts of compassion toward "the least of these" is the key action that places men in acceptance of God. Righteousness, which earns the sheep a place of favor in God's kingdom, is defined by the six phrases of acts of mercy catalogued in verse 35. The article suggests to us that genuine service to others is inseparable from true discipleship. Even as we explore the distinct reactions of each group, their reactions after the passing of their respective sentence suggests that the sheep has acquired their reward by a deeper layer of humility and selflessness. Each action of theirs were taken in response to a social welfare need of others they encountered, and Christ rewarded them on the basis that their little kindness to others, done in honor of Christ. Those who fell in the "goat" or the non-favorable group had the opportunity to minister to Christ in their own small way but ignored the opportunity. The article invites readers to reflect on the significance of compassionate living and selfless action as essential expressions of faith.

1. Introduction

This article delves into Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus presents the parable of the sheep and the goats, painting a picture of the final judgment. The passage paints an eschatological picture of the final judgment, one that has resonated through centuries as both a powerful warning and a call to compassion. This article will delve into the profound meaning behind Jesus' depiction of the "sheep" and "goats"—a metaphor that reveals what it means to truly serve God. The article will illuminate the gravity of Christ's role as Judge, who divides people based on their actions toward "the least of these," pointing to the often-overlooked acts of kindness that mirror God's own love for humanity. It further uncovers the surprising reactions of both groups, revealing the humility and selflessness that distinguish true followers from those who act out of pride or self-interest. By examining these contrasts, this article invites readers to reflect deeply on their faith, urging them to look beyond appearances and embrace a life of genuine compassion and service. Through this passage, readers are invited to explore profound questions about faith, humility, and the nature of true service. The article encourages believers to seek to join other believers to unpack the theological depth of this parable and its call to live out faith with humility and kindness.

The gospel of Matthew holds an important place in the canon and has been described as “the perfect bridge between the new and the old testaments (MacDonald 1995:1201). The material of the text in this section is found exclusively in the Gospel of Matthew (Allison 2001:74). It describes the grand judgment scene of nations. The text is reminiscent of the earlier parables of separation (13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50) and has led some scholars to see it as another parable (Garland 2001:247). Such designation is based on a brief parabolic saying in verses 32–33, where the process of judgment is compared to separating a flock into two groups (Gardner 1991:357). This imagery is, however, short-lived as it quickly gives way to a description of the scene of the judgment itself. The unit should thus more accurately be labelled as an apocalyptic vision of judgment akin to the judgment scenes depicted in the similitude of Enoch (cf. 1 Enoch 38; 62) (1991:357). Other scholars have also suggested that the section can be described as a “word-picture of the last Judgment” (Allison 2001:74, Manson 1949:249), while others see it as an apocalyptic prophecy with some parabolic elements (Witherington 2006:465). It is not clear if this judgment of nations is distinguished from what occurs at the Great White Throne (Rev. 20:11-15), which takes place after the millennium (Macdonald 1995:1209).

2. The Last Judgment and Social Welfare (V 31-32)

The judgment scene is introduced in verse 31: “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He shall sit on the throne of His glory”. The grand judgment presents us with a judgment scene on earth, in which the Son of Man comes with his angels from heaven (Daniel 7:14 and Zechariah 14:5) and sits on a glorious throne to execute justice. The identity of the judge is stated as the “Son of Man”, a special title for Jesus that denotes, among other things, His true humanity. Matthew had introduced Jesus as the son of David and Abraham (Mt. 1:1). He is, therefore, the true son of man (*o hios tou anthrōpos*) (SGHD). In Matthew, He is not only the son of man but also King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2). Jesus viewed himself in the Gospels as Son of David but at the “end of his ministry, having ridden into town on a donkey like Zechariah’s King of Peace, it would not be surprising if Jesus taught about his future role as King, judging human beings” (Witherington 2006:465). The kingdom of God, a favorite Matthean theme, will be manifested on earth in the last days, when the Son of man comes with the holy angels here on earth to judge the world. The judge is not only the Son of Man and a King, but also a Shepherd, all rolled into one. Two of those images in the Old Testament refer normally to God, who performs the task of being the final judge. In other words, we have Jesus portrayed as a plenipotentiary fulfilling the role of God, which comports with earlier material in this Gospel that portrays Jesus as both human and God (Witherington 2006:465). The judgment scene is then set with Jesus as the King-Judge, and the holy angels ready to assist the judge with His trial. Matthew’s introduction of Jesus as the Son of David (Matt. 1:1) underscores his identity as a true human, who shares in the suffering of Israel and hence their welfare. Images of the Son of man coming to reign for God also abound in Jewish (Old Testament) apocalyptic literature (Daniel 7:13-14; Is. 58:7; Ezekiel 18:7). The absolute authority figure assigned to Jesus here fits the standard Jewish picture of Yahweh judging the nations in the day of judgement (Keener 2014:112). In 1 Enoch 69:27, it is the Son of Man who is portrayed as the final judge, as is also suggested by Daniel chapter 7 (Witherington 2006:465). Now the question asked is the identity of the people who gather to be judged at the last judgment scene.

Verse 32 says, “And all nations shall be gathered before Him. And He shall separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats”. The people on trial are made up of people from “all nations” who “shall be gathered before Him”. How are we to determine the identity of those who are gathered to be judged? This question has become the source of disagreements among scholars (Garland 2001:247-248; Allison 2001:74). For instance, Garland (2001:247) has asked the question that seeks to clarify if the “all the nations” who gather to be judged represents only non-Christians, only Christians or all the people of the earth – Gentiles, Jews and Christians.

It is clear from the preceding chapter that the narrative here plainly speaks about the *Parousia* (Matthew 24:30). In the *Parousia*, those that are gathered are “the elect.” Nothing is said concerning the rest of mankind. It appears the text’s reference to the righteous and unrighteous receiving their sentence, here suggests that all of creation will be gathered for judgment on the final day. Allison, therefore, asserts that there is a strong probability that those gathered for judgment are probably all humanity (Allison 2001:74). Similarly, since there is no evidence to suggest

a separate judgment for the Jew and Gentile, it appears, on the whole, to be safe to consider "all the nations" as meaning the whole race of human beings; made up of both dead and living, small and great, Jew and Gentile. These will stand before the Son of Man to be judged according to their works. This, in all probability, is the same judgment as the one that takes place at the Great White Throne of Revelation 20:11-13.

However, Garland (2001:247) states that evidence from the Gospel of Matthew points out the fact that "all the nations" is never used to refer to the church but is to the surrounding nations. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had assigned the task of evangelization among the nations to his disciples (24:9, 14, 28:19). Garland concludes that the people who gather for judgment are from the surrounding nations. This conclusion follows the observation from the text, which stretches the work of evangelization to the surrounding nations (24:4, 26:12, 28:19). Nevertheless, Macdonald (1995:1209) says that if the cue in the opening verse, "when the Son of man comes in his glory" is taken to mean an event that will happen here on earth, then we will be right to identify this with the event described in Joel 3:1-12. Joel had spoken, prophetically, of a time when Yahweh will judge the nations according to their treatment of the Jewish brethren during their tribulation.

The judgment uses an everyday image of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. The second half of verse 32 again says, "And He shall separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats". The Son of Man, who is also the final Judge, "can easily tell the true nature of those gathered before the throne as easily as the shepherd can tell the difference between the sheep and the goat" (Garland 2001:247). However, scholars have often questioned if there was anything inherently evil or good about the sheep and goats to make their eschatological condemnation proper (Knorr 2017:151; Rhodes 2003: 2-5; Weber 1997:657; Gundry 1982:50).

Few attempts have been made to elucidate the image of the sheep and goat. This is partly because a very limited role has been assigned to its significance in the overall judgment scene. Some scholars are of the view that the only reason for the imagery of sheep and goats was to highlight the accuracy of the eschatological judge's division (Weber 1997:657). Nonetheless, Weber says Matthew probably intended a larger role beyond the use of the image as a simple simile because he could have equally used more neutral expressions that have already been used in the gospel (1997:660). He could have used more neutral expressions like the improper mixtures, which could easily assign good and bad images, such as wheat and chaff (3:12) or wheat and weeds (13:24-30). Again, Weber (1997:660) continued to argue that there is evidence to suggest that socio-historically, sheep and goats have respectively positive and negative connotations for the Gospel's authorial audience. Such positive and negative connotations have been reported among the "twentieth-century Greece and Sicily, the ancient Greco-Roman world, twentieth-century Palestine, and ancient Syria and Palestine" (1997:661). For instance, he points out that in both "ancient and modern times, sheep and goats in Syria and Palestine have been pastured in mixed flocks" (1997:661). The task of performing a routine separation between sheep and short-coated goats by shepherds is a familiar activity on chilly nights (1997:661). It means that readers of the Gospel who are familiar with animal husbandry in Palestine and Syria would clearly identify with the judgment scene of Matthew 25:31-46. In addition, there exists a cultural contrast of positive sheep with negative goats among the "Greek Sarakatsan transhumant pastoralists" (1997:662). Campbell writes, "Sheep and goats, men and women, are important and related oppositions with a moral reference. Sheep are peculiarly God's animals, and their shepherds, made in his image, are essentially noble beings. Goats were originally the animals of the Devil". Similarly, since in the Jewish law, goats are always offered for sin (Exodus 12:5), it is likely that Matthew's authorial audience had a good idea of the appropriateness of the simile of sheep and goats.

3. Righteousness and Social Welfare Practice (V 33-34)

The king then "shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left" (verse 33). The right and the left hand were used to suggest acceptance and rejection, respectively. Even though there is no evidence to suggest that there is something intrinsically evil or good with either the left or right side of someone. Jerome and Thomas (2008:29) have suggested that the words of Ecclesiastes 10:2; "A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left," is not intended to mean as it reads, but points to a familiar way of distinguishing between good and evil. Again, this familiar judicial distinction, where the left hand is associated with rejection and the right hand is associated with acceptance, is also found in classical writings. Thus, Plato relates the story of a man who revived after a cataleptic attack. In the revived man's account, when his soul left his body, he came to a mysterious place where there were two chasms in the earth and two openings in the heavens opposite. And when the Judges gave judgment, "they commanded the just to go on the right hand, and upwards through the heavens; but the unjust

they sent to the left, and downwards; and both the just and unjust had upon them the marks of what they had done in the body” (*De Republica* 10.13). However, among the Greek, the left hand does not necessarily denote rejection but in contrast, *euōnumos* (the left side) was the lucky side. In the New Testament (KJV), the term *euōnumos* (left), occurring ten (10) times is used eight times to refer to prime place or side of a king (e.g., Matthew 20:21,23, 27:38, Mark 10:37). It is only used 2 times to figuratively denote rejection as in (Matthew 25:33, 41) (SHGD G2176).

Once “the entire nation” is gathered and the trial has commenced with the separation of goats from sheep, it will be time for the king to pass final judgment on the two groups. The purpose of the trial is to decide who will go on to eternal punishment and who will go on to eternal life (Witherington 2006:465). However, the basis of the judgment of the nations will be what the subjects did about the social welfare needs of those they lived with. He calls those on the right the “blessed of My Father”. This is reminiscent of the blessing pronounced on people with noble character in the beatitudes. The conclusion of the beatitudes (Matthew 5:12) says the blessed of the father will inherit the kingdom of God. In verse 34, the blessed of the father, the sheep, are invited to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from *the* foundation of *the* world”, just like those with noble works in the Beatitudes (Gardner 1991:358). Gardner again writes that “just as Israel was given an inheritance in the Promised Land, so the blessed of the Lord are given a place in the kingdom in the end time” (1991:358).

Similarly, just as the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46 stressed the importance of actions that relieved social welfare needs, so the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount stresses that being vindicated on the last day is the result of right social action (7:21-27). Even miraculous works (like prophesying, casting out demons) done in Jesus' name may not be sufficient in the final judgment, as they do not necessarily qualify as doing the will of the Father in heaven (7:21). Withal, those who become the sons of God and are rewarded in the last days are those who obey the teaching of Jesus to undertake social works of radical love (Matt. 5:44-46). Those who fulfill this command of radical love demonstrate that they are the sons of God (5:45, 48). Matthew, therefore, appears to be propagating a practical expression of faith as the means to the eschatological blessings. Per contra, does that suggest that Matthew propagated the doctrine of salvation by works?

This teaching aligns with James 2:17, where the apostle says that “if it does not have works, faith is dead, being by itself.” Any faith without works is not real faith; it is only a matter of words. By this, James did not affirm the doctrine of synergism (the doctrine that we are saved by faith plus works). If synergism was to be true, it means “we would have two saviours; Jesus and ourselves” (MacDonald 1995:2228). The emphasis here is that “we are not saved by the faith of words, but by the kind of faith which results in life of good works” (1995:2228). Works, accordingly, should be seen not as the root of salvation but as the fruits of salvation.

4. Provision of Social Welfare Needs for Others as the Basis for Judgment (V 35-36)

The judge's basis for passing his final judgment is based on the works of mercy those coming into judgment have performed. “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you took Me in; I was naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me”. In these verses, what distinguishes the sheep from the goat is that the sheep is described as righteous (Gardner 1991:358). Righteousness, which earns them a place in God's kingdom, is defined by the six phrases of acts of mercy catalogued in verse 35 as (a) feeding the hungry, (b) providing water to the thirsty, (c) taking care of strangers, (d) clothing the naked, (e) visiting the sick, and (f) visiting the imprisoned. The text describes the full range of social welfare services that every faithful follower of Jesus is expected to make their pre-occupation to provide for those who need them. Those who qualified as faithful followers of Jesus had become so on the account that they satisfied the social welfare needs of others. He commends them particularly because “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you took Me in; I was naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me” (Matt 25:35-36). “Structurally, what is striking about this passage is the fourfold repetition of the list of needs, always in this order: hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and in prison” (Witherington 2006:466). In verse 37, those on the right who are given a place in the kingdom of God are also said to be “the righteous”. Could this mean that Jesus equates hospitality with righteousness? Does this imply that the King is indicating here that hospitality is a *sin*

qua non of the presence of righteousness? Would God grant eternal life in His kingdom to someone on the grounds of that person being hospitable?

One important thing that needs to be realized is that although the message is presented in a poetic manner and some of the eschatological images are set out in prophetic language, it is intended to be referential (Witherington 2006:467). While Jesus does not envision a literal division of humans into sheep and goats, the message is intended to give guidance to the concrete social welfare conditions that all followers of Jesus must concern themselves with relieving. For instance, the King commended the sheep on the right hand for helping him when he was hungry (*peinaō*). People are hungry when they toil for daily subsistence or are literally starving, indigent, and poor (SHGD). The “thirsty”, as translated from *dipsaō*, are all people in dire need of water. The sick, as in *astheneō*, may mean any circumstances that cause one “to be feeble in any sense, to be diseased, impotent or be made weak” (SHGD). The King rewarded those who provided support for such concrete social welfare needs and punished those who turned a blind eye to such difficulties.

The King’s commendation of the hospitable for inheritance in His kingdom should not be taken to mean that Jesus affirmed synergism. Instead, it shows that there is a positive relationship between true religion and faith, and meeting social welfare needs of the needy (Patte 2004:897). True or pure religion, undefiled before God, is defined by James as constituting meeting social welfare needs of others (James 1:27). In other words, pure religion is verified by hospitality; consisting of assistance provided to destitute in society (2004:897). As James again shows, Abraham is the ultimate example of faith and works (James 2:21-23). In one breath, Abraham is said to have been justified by works when he obeyed God (2:21) and in another he believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness (2:23). It means, as Riesner insists, ‘Having works’, is fulfilling the elementary claims of human behavior (2001:1259). Therefore, those who claim to be righteous without helping meet the basic social welfare needs of others would be unmerciful and sin against the teachings of Jesus (Matt 25:35-36).

The deeds cited as constituting deeds of righteousness have their parallel in ancient Jewish literature as deeds that exemplify hospitality. Hospitality is, for example, mentioned as a commendable action that brings a person closer to Yahweh, for which all followers of God must aspire to (Cf Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7; Job 22:67; Sir. 7:35; Jos.1:6; 2 Enoch 9; Gardner 1991: 358). Traditional Jewish teachings make the fulfillment of these needs one of the most important conditions for inheriting a place in the “gate of Yahweh”. The closest Jewish parallel to Matthew 25:31-46 is found in the Midrash on Psalm 118 (Grindheim 2008:317; Allison and Davies 2004:418). The Midrash raises the question of entrance into the presence of the Lord and explains that the gates will be opened to the one who had fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and brought up the fatherless among several others. In the Midrash on Ps 118:19 it is written:

Open to me the gates of righteousness (Ps. 118:19). When a man is asked in the world-to-come: ‘What was thy work?’ and he answers: ‘I fed the hungry,’ it will be said to him: ‘This is the gate of the Lord (Ps. 118:20). Enter into it, O thou that didst feed the hungry.’ When a man answers: ‘I gave drink to the thirsty,’ it will be said to him: ‘This is the gate of the Lord. Enter into it, O thou that didst give a drink to the thirsty.’ When a man answers: ‘I clothed the naked,’ it will be said to him: ‘This is the gate of the Lord. Enter into it, O thou that didst clothe the naked’. This will also be said to him that brought up the fatherless, and to them that gave alms or performed deeds of loving kindness. And David said: I have done all these things. Therefore let all the gates be opened for me. Hence, it is said Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will enter into them, I will give thanks unto the Lord (Ps. 118:19) (*Midrash on Psalms 118*, Translated by Grindheim 2008:317)

There are also several other parallels in Jewish literature that seem to suggest that good works are a necessary precondition to receiving the blessings of Yahweh not only in the last days but also here on earth. In the Testament of Zebulon, for example, the fisherman Zebulon reports how he had always fed the hungry and claims that Yahweh rewarded him: “Being compassionate, I gave some of my catch to every stranger. If anyone were a traveler, or sick, or aged, I cooked the fish, prepared it well, and offered it to each person according to his need.... Therefore, the Lord made my catch to be an abundance of fish; for whoever shares with his neighbor receives multifold from the Lord” (*Testament of Zebulon 6:4-6*).

Could this then represent a shortlist of tasks that the true disciple of Jesus should concern himself with until the Son of Man returns? Does this seem to suggest that salvation or reward on the last day solely depends on good

works? Macdonald (1995:1300) argues that “the uniform testimony of the Bible is that salvation is by faith and not by works” (Eph. 2:8-9). He also adds that the Bible is also emphatic that true faith produces good works. The absence of good works is an indication of the lack of faith (James 2:4). This is also consistent with the teachings of the Old Testament, where instances of such hospitality in Gen. 18:3 and Judges 19:20-21 were favourably rewarded. As Allison has suggested, the “Son of Man does not demand supernatural feats but simple, unobtrusive charity” (Allison 2001:74).

5. Responses of those Declared Righteous and Unrighteous (V 37-39)

The righteous in verse 37 express surprise at the commendation of their master thus: “Then the righteous shall answer Him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry, and fed you? Or thirsty, and gave you drink?” Their entire response is contained in three verses (37-39), which recapitulate the deeds specified by the Lord, with some slight variation in the wording. Both the vindicated and the rejected expressed surprise at the verdict of the King. The two groups can effectively be distinguished one from another, not only by their works, but also by their attitudes; and their different attitudes explain their different actions (Grindheim 2008:314). The righteous express surprise because they did not anticipate that the recipient of their good deeds was the master himself (Gardner 1991:258). The vindicated are surprised, but they do not present any arguments in their own defense. The rationale for their acquittal has to be explained to them by the Judge (Grindheim 2008:314).

The surprised reaction of the vindicated should again be considered as expressive of their humility. This attitude of humility identifies the vindicated with the poor in the spirit in Matthew 5:3, who Jesus said will receive the eschatological blessings of entry into the kingdom of God. Poverty in this context is described as a spiritual attitude. The poor in the spirit recognize themselves as beggars before God, and consequently, their attitude is characterized by humility (Grindheim 2008:314). This orientation is displayed in their attitude to the King when judgment is passed. The acquitted came empty handed with no defense. Even their justification by the King takes them by surprise (Via 1990:92).

On the other hand, the condemned in verse 44 did not come into the final judgment with the attitude of beggars before God. They challenge the verdict of the Judge as follows: “When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister to you?” They came up with a claim and even dared to question the basis for the charges brought against them (Grindheim 2008:323). They display a defiant, self-confident, and ultimately self-righteous attitude, for in their estimation, they have obeyed all the commandments of the master and deserve to be positively rewarded. They had not acted in compliance with the commandment in Matt 6:3-4: “When you do your work of mercy, do not let your left hand know what the right hand does, so that your work of mercy may be in secret, so that your father who sees in secret may compensate you.” Their reaction shows that they expected a reward based on their assessment of the value of their work.

Matthew’s description of the judgment scene, in comparison with other contemporary Jewish judgment literature, is unique in that it points out that the “acts of kindness towards the least of his brothers have been acts of kindness towards the Son of Man.” However, except for “visiting the imprisoned, the deeds Jesus lists are standard righteous deeds in Jewish ethics” (Keener 2014:113). This identification of the poor with God has antecedents in the Hebrew Bible and other comparative literature on the judgment scene (e.g., Proverbs 19:17). What is unique is that in the Matthean account, “the Judge is the one who presents the evidence in favor or against the subject standing trial” (2014:113). In comparative judgment scene accounts, it is the people standing trial who argue out their case for acquittal. For instance, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, it is the dead person who denies wrongdoing on specific counts and goes on to cite good deeds, including feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked as his defense as follows: “I live on truth, I gulp down truth, I have done what men say and with which the gods are pleased. I have propitiated God with what he desires; I have given bread to the hungry; water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, and a boat to him who is boatless” (Quoted from Hays 2014:351)

The righteous judge, reading out the charges in the Matthean account, creates the impression that the author of the Gospel considered the verdict of the judgment scene as final. The surprised verdict passed on both the acquitted and condemned further suggests that the judge has a complete and accurate record of all acts of kindness, and their value cannot be renegotiated at the final judgment. Read in light of the rhetoric of the whole Gospel of Matthew,

Grindheim argues that “this passage brings together Matthew’s emphases both on a higher righteousness and on the helplessness of the disciples” (2008:323). He also concludes that the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46 brings the two aspects of Matthew’s soteriology together and shows the connection between the faith of the helpless and the works of the righteous.

6. The Judge’s Final Verdict (V. 40, 45)

The King responds to the surprise of both the vindicated and the condemned in verses 40 and 45 with the reasons for His verdict. Verse 40: “And the King shall answer and say to them, truly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to Me”. The question that has often been asked is the identity of the beneficiaries of hospitality that qualifies one to enter into God’s kingdom. They are identified as “one of the least of these my brothers”. Closely tied with the identity of those who gather for judgment is the identity of the “least of one of these brethren”. Often, the identity of ‘the least of these my brethren’ in v. 40 (cf. v. 45) has been linked with the needy in general (Allison 2001:74). Given the fact that in the Bible, God judged people for how they treated the poor (Prov. 19:17), it is probable that Jesus was giving a hint that people will be judged on how they treated the poor in general (Keener 2014:113).

It has also been argued that Christ did not encourage His disciples to make distinctions between insiders and outsiders and also demanded that His followers showed love to all they encountered (5:43, cf Luke 10:25-37). His injunction to love all even includes one’s enemies (Westerholm 2010: Witherington 2006:467). It would, therefore, be inconsistent with His own teaching if Jesus had expected a different treatment to be given to different groups or classes of the poor. For this reason, the “least of these My brothers” who needed social welfare assistance could possibly be identified with all poor people in general. However, while Jerome agrees that any action taken to support the poor is an action on behalf of God, he doubts that Matthew’s intention includes all poor people (Jerome 2008:290). He concludes: “It does not seem to me that he said this generally of the poor but of those who are poor in spirit” (2008:290). He is of this view because it was to them that he reached out His hand and said: “My brothers and my mother are those who do the will of my Father” (Matthew 5:3). Similarly, Garland (2001:249) says that this passage has been erroneously used to emphasize the Christian obligation to the down-and-out of society. While he concedes that this passage does not negate the imperative to attend to the needs of the hungry, naked, and imprisoned poor people in our midst, he calls into question the reading of “humanitarian ethics” or “salvation based on kindness to all in need”. He concludes that, instead, the passage functions primarily as a word of consolation to a persecuted community sent out on a mission fraught with danger.

Gardner (1991:358) also contends that there seems to be considerable evidence in the Gospel of Matthew to suggest that the author had a specific group of people in mind rather than the general poor. He provides us with four (4) major internal pieces of evidence in the Gospel of Matthew that suggest that the identity of the least of these cannot be that of the general poor. He explains that 1) the phrase “least of one of these brethren” recalls passages in which Jesus referred to His disciples as the little ones (10:42, 18:6, 10). 2) In the only other text where Jesus speaks of His family members, the term describes the disciples of Jesus who do His father’s will (12:46-50, 23:8-9). 3) Jesus announces in the mission discourse in chapter 10 that those who receive His disciples receive Him (10:40), and those who offer a drink to the disciples who are thirsty will be rewarded (10:42). 4) It is with His disciples that Jesus promised to be present with until the end of the age (28:20, 18:20).

For Gardner (1991:358), all the conversation focused on the way humankind will respond to the disciples from the greatest to the least. Similarly, Michaels (1965) argues that the text of both Matthew 25 and Matthew 10 identify certain people with Jesus; in the former case, they are called “the least ones,” and in the latter, they are referred to as the “little ones”. In addition, the good works of Matthew 25:35-39 are paralleled in Matthew 10:42 by the cup of water given in the name of the Lord. Matthew 10:40-42 distinguishes between two groups of the redeemed just as 25:31-46. The “little ones” are specifically defined as “disciples” in (10:42), presumably the twelve Apostles to whom Jesus has been speaking (cf. 10:2-5). The other group that will be rewarded is made up of those who received the sent-out ones (vs. 40). This parallel material in Matthew would suggest that in Matthew 25, “the least of these” are Jesus’ disciples (specifically the twelve) who stand in their Lord’s place and proclaim the gospel, while the righteous “sheep” are those who gladly receive from those who have been sent by Jesus (Michael 1965).

However, given the use of my “brothers” (12:50; 28:10) and the “least” (5:19; 11:11; cf. 18:4; 20:26; 23:11) elsewhere in Matthew, scholars like Keener and Gardner have argued that this passage refers to those who received the messengers of Christ (Keener 2014:13; Gardner 1991:358). Since the need of the missionaries had been

occasioned by their obedience to the commands of Jesus, assisting them with food, shelter and visiting them when they are imprisoned would be like providing the services to Christ. The text, therefore, is a reference to all Christians, including Christian missionaries and leaders (Allison 2001:74). The blessed also include those who have opened themselves to Jesus by welcoming his messengers and offering them hospitality. The accursed are those who have rejected Jesus' messengers and denied them hospitality (Gardner 1991:358).

In this passage, Jesus underlined the practice of social welfare as evidence of righteousness, a primary feature of the kingdom. What is certain is that the concept of service to Jesus through service to others goes back to Proverbs 19:17: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full". What is new in Matthew is the Son of Man's identification with the needy (Allison 2001:74). The question that has often been asked is what kind of poor is worth receiving attention on behalf of Christ? St. Jerome suggests that the "hungering Christ was fed in each of the poor; thirsting, he received drink; a guest, he was invited in under the roof; naked, he was clothed; weak, he was visited; shut up in prison, he had the solace of a visitor" (Jerome 2008:290). As Witherington (2006:46) contends, any action taken to provide the poor with their needs is an action done on behalf of Jesus and would be dully rewarded.

7. Summary and Implications

We have shown, so far, that meeting the social welfare needs of humanity is a major expectation of all followers of Christ. What distinguishes true believers from those who make empty profession of faith, according to Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46, is the practical exhibition of brotherly love for one another. The passage highlights this fact and states that it is going to be the basis of the separation between the sheep and goats in the last days. While the text did not endorse salvation by works, it agrees with other passages of the scripture that those who will inherit the eschatological kingdom will be revealed by their rendering of service to God through human agency. The crux of Jesus' teachings in this text is that services rendered to man are services rendered to God.

While the notion that, service to the poor is service to God may not be in doubt among the Christians, the question of whose poor is it our responsibility to relieve becomes a legitimate one. I do not think that God gives us responsibility for all poor people on this earth. Granted, we accept that we have a responsibility to relieve one another; the other legitimate question has to deal with the extent of our responsibility. Again, I will turn my attention to our earlier text in Leviticus for guidance. In Leviticus 25:25, 35, God places the task of relieving the poor on neighbours or relatives. They need not always be biological relatives, but the first line of responsibility falls on "neighbours who are beside thee" (Lev. 25:35). In addition, since such services are to be rendered to God through human agency, it is the human being one sees that God gives the responsibility to relieve (1John 3:17, 4:12, 20). The above implies that God gives each local Christian congregation the responsibility to relieve human suffering around them. However, they have more responsibility towards their members as they are the "neighbours who are beside thee". This responsibility must be seen as a collective responsibility of all church members. Individual members must be encouraged to be one another's keepers by helping to relieve the social welfare needs of other church members in their private capacities. As 1 John 3:17 aptly says, "But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother having need, and shuts up his bowels from him, how does the love of God dwell in him"

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