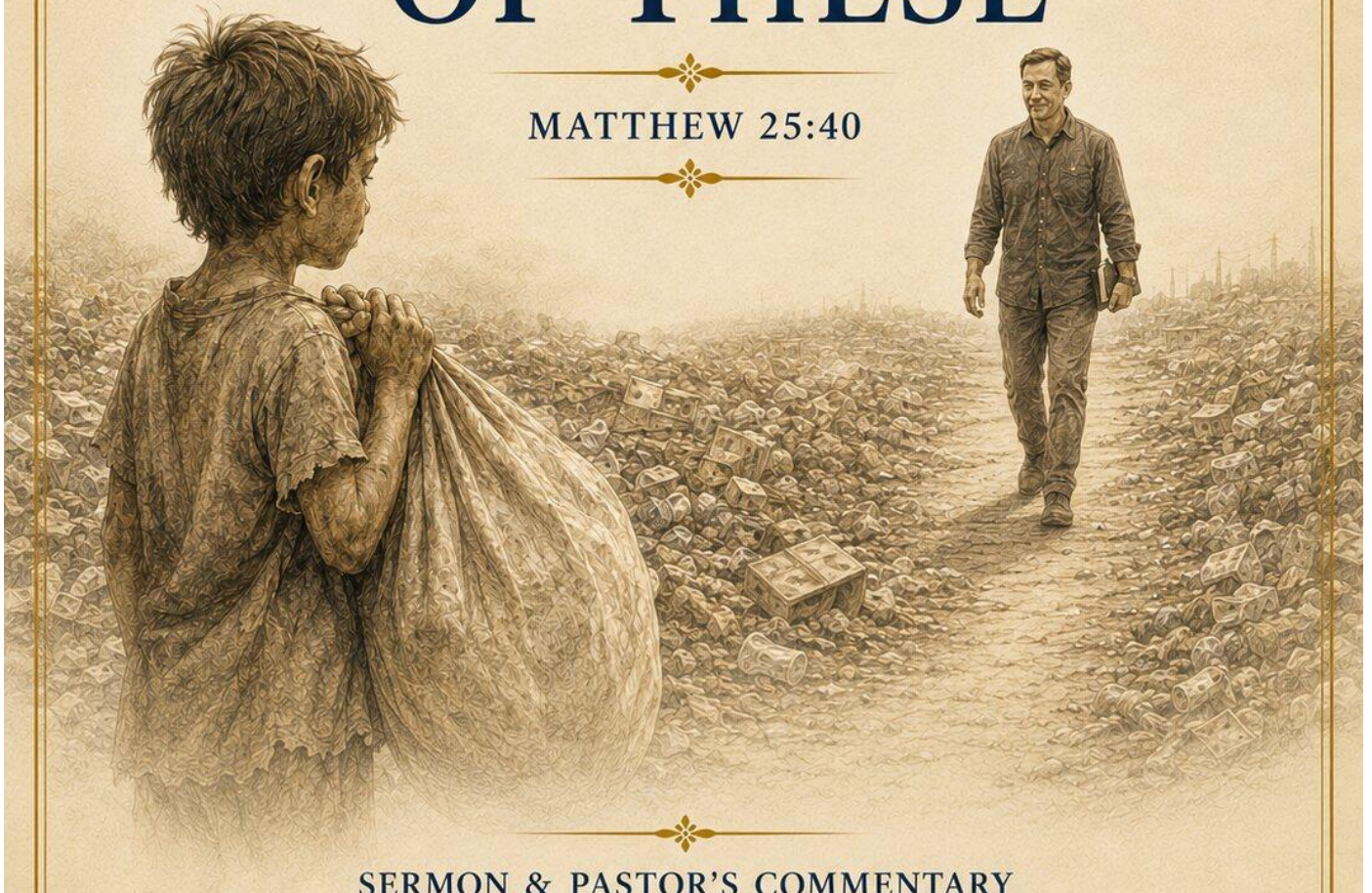


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

WHEN I MET THE LEAST OF THESE

MATTHEW 25:40



SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

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REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

When I Met the Least of These

Matthew 25:31-46

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Bring your questions. Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you are with us every week or whether this is your first time walking through these doors, we are grateful that God brought you here today.

If you are visiting, please relax.

We will not ask you to stand.

We will not put you on the spot.

We simply want you to feel welcome as we open the Bible and Reason Together the Word of God.

We are also grateful for every honored guest who has joined us today.

There is a guest card available if you would like to stay connected with us.

It asks only for your first name and email address.

After the service, I hope you will join us at the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free.

The refills are free.

And the refills on conversations are free too.

Our Keiki Kids Center is also available for our younger guests and their families.

Before we begin, let us pray.

Father, thank You for bringing us together today. Open our eyes to what Your Word actually says. Correct the assumptions we have carried without examination. Give us wisdom to understand a familiar passage, courage to receive its warning and compassion that becomes more than a passing emotion. Help us recognize the people whom the world overlooks. Help us receive Your servants faithfully and help us respond when suffering comes within our reach. Most of all, let anyone who does not know Jesus Christ come to know Him today as Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Our primary passage is Matthew chapter 25, beginning in verse 31.

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

We will return to the remainder of that passage shortly.

First, let me mention something we believe about giving.

We do not pass an offering plate at Reason Together Church.

Guests are never expected to give.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

If this is your church, you may give as the Lord leads you.

God loves a cheerful giver, not a pressured giver.

There is a giving box in the back for anyone who chooses to use it.

We never want anyone to give because they were pressured, embarrassed or manipulated.

Christian generosity must come from the heart.

But freedom from pressure is not freedom from love.

Today Jesus asks what a heart touched by grace does when hunger, danger and loneliness stand within reach.

Years ago, I was walking through an area in the Philippines where families lived beside a dump site.

It is difficult to describe such a place to someone who has never stood inside one.

The smoke does not remain neatly above the rubbish.

It settles into your clothing.

It catches in your throat.

The smell follows you even after you leave.

Families lived among burning garbage, broken glass, dead animals, medical waste, rats and toxic smoke.

Children searched through what other people had thrown away.

They looked for scraps of food.

They looked for plastic, metal or anything that might be sold for a few coins.

Some of the children working in places like that were only two or three years old.

On one of my visits, I saw four children chasing something through the rubbish.

At first, I thought they were chasing a cat.

I watched them pursue it until I realized that I was one letter off.

It was not a cat.

It was a rat.

And that rat appeared to be almost as large as a cat.

The children caught it.

They killed it.

It appeared that one of the boys may have been bitten in the struggle.

Then they carried the dead animal away.

The person guiding me explained that the children intended to cook it over an open fire and eat it.

But they could not cook it where everyone could see them.

They had to hide.

If larger children or adults saw what they had, someone might steal their meal.

The most disturbing thing was not merely that hungry children would eat a rat.

The most disturbing thing was that they had to hide because even a dead rat could be stolen from them.

If I had ever met “the least of these,” surely I had met them that day.

That is what I believed.

It seemed so obvious that I never thought to question it.

But years later, when I read the words of Jesus more carefully, I discovered that I had assumed the meaning of a phrase I had never truly investigated.

Jesus did not simply say, “Whatever you did for the least, you did for me.”

He said something more precise.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Those two words matter.

“My brethren.”

So let us Reason Together.

When Jesus said, “the least of these my brethren,” who was He actually talking about?

Before we identify the least, we need to recognize the King.

Matthew 25 is often treated as though it were merely a gentle lesson about becoming kinder people.

But look at the scene again.

The Son of Man comes in glory.

All the holy angels come with Him.

He sits upon the throne of His glory.

All nations are gathered before Him.

He separates people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

He announces who will inherit the kingdom.

He announces who will depart into everlasting punishment.

This is not merely a teacher offering friendly advice.

This is the returning King judging humanity.

Daniel saw something like this centuries earlier.

Daniel 7:13 and 14 says:

“I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven... And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him.”

Ezekiel chapter 34 presents God as the Shepherd who judges between members of the flock.

Now Jesus places Himself in that position.

He is the Son of Man.

He is the King.

He is the Shepherd.

He is the Judge.

Before we ask who the least are, we must recognize who the King is.

And the King says they are “my brethren.”

Who does Jesus call His brethren in Matthew’s Gospel?

In Matthew chapter 12, someone told Jesus that His mother and His physical brothers were waiting outside.

Jesus answered in verses 48 through 50:

“Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?”

And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!

For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

Jesus identified His spiritual family as those who belong to Him and do His Father’s will.

In Matthew 23:8, He told His disciples:

“One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.”

After the resurrection, Jesus told the women in Matthew 28:10:

“Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, Christ’s brethren are most naturally His followers.

That observation has led Christians to several different interpretations of Matthew 25.

The most familiar interpretation says the least are all poor and suffering people.

There is much to appreciate in that understanding.

Jesus lists hunger, thirst, homelessness, nakedness, sickness and imprisonment.

Those are universal forms of human suffering.

Scripture repeatedly commands us to care for the poor.

Many faithful Christians throughout history have read the passage that way.

But that interpretation must still explain why Jesus specifically said, “my brethren.”

Another interpretation says the least are poor and suffering Christians.

That takes the words “my brethren” seriously.

It recognizes the church as the spiritual family of Christ.

A third interpretation says Jesus was speaking particularly about His persecuted disciples and Gospel messengers.

They traveled without normal financial security.

They depended upon the hospitality of others.

They experienced hunger, exposure, sickness and imprisonment because they carried the Gospel.

Receiving them was counted as receiving Christ.

A fourth interpretation, common in some prophetic teaching, identifies the brethren as Jewish people suffering during a future Tribulation.

That view deserves to be mentioned respectfully.

Jesus was Jewish and Matthew 25 concerns the end of the age.

But the passage never explicitly says Israel, Jews or Tribulation.

Matthew ordinarily identifies Christ's brethren as His followers.

And there is another chapter in Matthew that provides a much closer explanation.

Matthew chapter 10 may be the key that unlocks Matthew chapter 25.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sent His disciples out to preach.

He told them not to carry gold or silver.

They were not to depend upon a travel bag filled with provisions or extra clothing.

They were to enter towns and look for a household willing to receive them.

They would depend upon the kindness of others for shelter, food and water.

Jesus also warned them about what could happen.

They might be rejected.

They might be betrayed.

They might be arrested.

They might be beaten.

They might be hated because they carried His name.

Then Jesus said in Matthew 10:40:

“He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me.”

That sounds remarkably similar to Matthew 25.

“He that receiveth you receiveth me.”

“Ye have done it unto me.”

Then Jesus continued in Matthew 10:42:

“And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple... verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.”

Notice the parallels.

A cup of water.

One of Christ’s little ones.

The person is helped because he is a disciple.

And Christ promises a reward.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends vulnerable messengers into the world and says that receiving them is receiving Him.

In Matthew 25, the nations are judged by how they received Christ’s vulnerable brethren.

Matthew 24 strengthens the connection.

Jesus tells His disciples that they will be hated by all nations for His name’s sake.

He says that the Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.

Then, in Matthew 25, all nations are gathered before the King.

The strongest immediate interpretation is that “the least of these my brethren” refers first to Christ’s humble, vulnerable and suffering followers, particularly those carrying His Gospel into the nations.

The word “least” does not mean that Jesus considered them less valuable.

It describes their position in the world.

They had little power.

They received little recognition.

They possessed little ability to repay anyone who helped them.

The world regarded them as insignificant.

Society treated them as disposable.

Powerful people passed them without noticing.

But Jesus pointed to them and said, “These are my brethren.”

The world called them least.

The King called them family.

We must be careful here.

If Matthew 25 primarily refers to Christ’s disciples, does that mean we have no responsibility toward poor people who do not believe?

Absolutely not.

A narrower interpretation of one passage must never produce a narrower compassion than the whole Bible commands.

Proverbs 19:17 says:

“He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.”

Even if Matthew 25 speaks particularly about Christ’s brethren, Proverbs still tells us that God receives compassion toward the poor as something lent to Him.

Isaiah 58 calls God’s people to deal their bread to the hungry, bring the poor into their homes and cover the naked.

In Luke 10, the Samaritan did not ask whether the wounded man shared his theology before he stopped.

He saw suffering.

He drew near.

He bound the wounds.

He paid for continuing care.

Jesus said, “Go, and do thou likewise.”

Galatians 6:10 gives us the balance:

“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”

Especially establishes a priority.

It does not establish an exclusion.

Matthew 25 gives a particular warning about how we receive Christ’s brethren.

The rest of Scripture gives an unmistakable command to care for every suffering neighbor.

That realization caused me to look again at what happened at the dump.

Perhaps I had encountered two groups that day.

The children were suffering neighbors.

They needed food.

They needed clean water.

They needed protection and medical care.

They needed dignity, hope and the Gospel.

They did not need to prove that they were Christians before their hunger mattered.

But there was another group present.

There were local pastors and church members who repeatedly entered communities that other people avoided.

They fed children from their limited resources.

They sat with families whom society had forgotten.

They shared Christ in places where most people refused even to walk.

They returned after visiting missionaries went home.

They continued the relationships.

They risked their health and safety.

They received little recognition.

Perhaps those pastors fit Matthew 25 more closely than I had realized.

They were vulnerable messengers carrying Christ into the nations.

I believed I had traveled there to help them serve Jesus.

Matthew 25 suggests that by receiving and supporting His messengers, I was serving Jesus too.

Third John speaks about believers who faithfully helped traveling servants of Christ.

Verse 8 says:

“We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth.”

Not everyone can travel halfway around the world.

Not everyone can preach in another language.

Not everyone can enter every dangerous community.

But we can pray.

We can encourage.

We can provide hospitality.

We can send resources.

We can strengthen trustworthy pastors and missionaries already doing the work.

When we do, we become fellowhelpers to the truth.

There is another scene from those years that I cannot forget.

When I was a boy, my family took a camping trip from Maine to New Hampshire.

My parents brought my brother, my sister and several of our friends.

My father had recently purchased an RV, so there was room for a whole group of us.

We planned to visit theme parks, sleep in tents, fish and swim.

One day, heavy rain fell for several hours.

Being children, we played games in the tents and motor home until the rain stopped.

The weather remained warm, so we wanted to go swimming.

When we reached the lake, the water was muddy from the storm.

My mother said we could not go in.

We complained for about a minute.

Then someone called us over to roast marshmallows.

Our great childhood tragedy ended with marshmallows beside a fire.

Years later, I stood beside a body of water near another dump site.

Children were playing and swimming in it.

Garbage floated on the surface.

People used that water for bathing and other daily needs.

Then I noticed that some children were diving beneath the rubbish.

They were retrieving scrap metal from the bottom.

They exposed their eyes and skin to disease every day.

They risked being cut, infected, blinded or killed.

My first thought was, “How could their parents permit this?”

Then I learned that their parents knew the danger.

Children in the area had lost their eyesight.

Others had died.

Knowledge was not the problem.

The problem was that hunger had removed the safer alternatives.

My mother protected me from muddy water because our family had another choice.

Those parents watched their children enter poisoned water because poverty had taken nearly every choice away.

One family remained especially heavy on my heart.

Their youngest girl was about five years old.

She had already lost sight in one eye.

Yet she still walked through the debris from morning until evening collecting plastic bottles.

Her brothers collected scrap metal.

One of them was younger than she was and already dove into the contaminated water with his eyes open.

Together, the children brought home approximately one dollar a day.

The entire problem was far beyond my ability to correct.

I could not clean the waterway.

I could not remove the dump.

I could not provide safe homes and employment for every family.

I could not rescue every child.

The size of the problem made me feel helpless.

And sometimes helplessness becomes a comfortable excuse.

We tell ourselves that because we cannot do everything, we are responsible for nothing.

But God had not placed the entire dump within my ability.

He had placed one family within my reach.

I increased the amount of support I sent to the local pastor by \$30 each month.

That was approximately what the children earned by risking their health.

The pastor agreed to provide the money to the family as long as the children stayed out of the contaminated water.

He knew the community.

He could maintain the relationship.

He could monitor what happened after I left.

That assistance provided relief because the family could eat.

It provided rescue because the children could stop entering the water.

It offered a measure of restoration because a trusted local pastor continued walking with them.

I could not use the size of the problem to excuse the smallness of my response.

We should also be careful about how feeding and evangelism are connected.

The ministries we supported provided meals while pastors shared the Gospel.

But food must never become payment for listening to a sermon.

We do not say, “Listen to us and then we will feed you.”

We feed people because they are hungry.

We tell them about Jesus because they need Him.

Both actions come from love.

The Gospel explains the mercy.

Mercy demonstrates the Gospel.

Neither should be used to manipulate the other.

The King James Version says, “I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat.”

In that older English usage, “meat” means food or nourishment, not only animal flesh.

The command is wonderfully ordinary.

Jesus did not say they provided an expensive banquet.

They gave food to someone who was hungry.

They gave water to someone who was thirsty.

They welcomed someone who needed shelter.

They provided clothing.

They visited the sick.

They went to the prisoner.

John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage many centuries ago, observed how reachable these actions were.

Jesus did not say, “I was in prison and you broke open the door.”

He said, “Ye came unto me.”

He did not say, “I was sick and you cured every disease.”

He said, “Ye visited me.”

He does not condemn people merely for failing to accomplish the impossible.

He confronts us for refusing to do what was within reach.

That brings us to the goats.

Listen to the remainder of Jesus’ words in Matthew 25, beginning in verse 41.

“Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

Notice what Jesus does not accuse them of doing.

He does not say they created the famine.

He does not say they poisoned the water.

He does not say they made someone homeless.

He does not say they spread the sickness.

He does not say they arrested the prisoner.

Their guilt concerned what they did not do.

They did not feed.

They did not welcome.

They did not clothe.

They did not visit.

They did not respond.

James 4:17 says:

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

The goats did not strike Jesus.

They did not curse Jesus.

They did not publicly deny Jesus.

They simply kept walking.

The goats never said they hated Jesus.

They simply became skilled at passing Him without recognizing Him.

And both groups were surprised.

The sheep asked, “Lord, when saw we thee?”

The goats asked essentially the same question.

The goats seemed to be saying, “Lord, if we had known it was You, we would have acted differently.”

But Jesus rejected the idea that He should be honored only when He appears recognizable and powerful.

Anyone might serve a king wearing a crown.

Anyone might welcome a celebrity surrounded by cameras.

Anyone might help a wealthy person able to repay the favor.

The question is what we do when someone appears unable to advance our interests.

Anyone might serve the King when He arrives wearing a crown.

The question is whether we will serve when the King sends someone wearing prison clothes, missionary sandals or the smoke of a garbage dump.

This identification between Jesus and His people appears elsewhere in Scripture.

Before Saul became the Apostle Paul, he persecuted Christians.

On the road to Damascus, the risen Christ confronted him.

Acts 9:4 and 5 says:

“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”

“And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.”

Saul had been arresting Christians.

Yet Jesus said Saul was persecuting Him.

Christ does not remain emotionally distant from His suffering church.

What touches His body touches Him.

What is done to His people reaches Him.

Receiving His messengers is receiving Him.

Rejecting them is rejecting Him.

That leaves us with a personal question.

If Jesus receives my treatment of His people as treatment directed toward Himself, what have I been doing to Jesus?

Perhaps another question is already forming.

Does Matthew 25 teach that good works save us?

Can we earn eternal life by feeding enough people, making enough visits or supporting enough ministries?

No.

Look carefully at what the King says to the sheep.

“Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

They inherit the kingdom.

They do not purchase it.

The kingdom was prepared before they completed any charitable act.

They are already called blessed by the Father.

They do not arrive carrying a list and demanding payment.

They are surprised that their ordinary acts held such significance.

Their mercy did not buy their identity.

Their mercy revealed it.

Ephesians 2:8 through 10 says:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

Not of works, lest any man should boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.”

We are not saved by good works.

We are saved unto good works.

Works are not the root of salvation.

They are its fruit.

We are not saved because we fed enough hungry people.

But a heart untouched by another person’s suffering gives us reason to ask whether it has ever been touched by Christ.

So let me ask a few questions today.

Is there a suffering person whom I have trained myself not to see?

Is there a faithful servant of Christ whom I could encourage or support?

Have I used the size of a problem as permission to do nothing?

Have I confused feeling compassion with practicing compassion?

What do my ordinary responses reveal about my relationship with the King?

And have I received salvation by grace, or have I merely tried to appear like a good person?

Before we ask what we have done for Christ, we must ask what Christ has done for us.

The Bible says that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

That includes the selfish.

It includes the charitable.

It includes the person who walked past.

It includes the person who stopped.

No amount of generosity can erase our sin.

No number of meals can purchase forgiveness.

No mission trip can earn eternal life.

But God loved us when we had nothing with which to repay Him.

Jesus Christ came into this world.

He lived without sin.

He died upon the cross in our place.

He was buried.

On the third day, He rose again.

Salvation is offered as a gift to everyone who will repent and place their faith in Him.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can do that today.

You do not need to clean yourself up before coming to Him.

You come because you cannot save yourself.

If it is the sincere desire of your heart, you may pray with me now.

The words alone do not save you.

Jesus saves you when you sincerely place your trust in Him.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. I cannot save myself and I cannot earn eternal life through good works. I believe that You died upon the cross for my sins and that You rose again. Please forgive me. Come into my life. Be my Lord and Savior. I turn from my sin and place my trust in You alone. Thank You for saving me and giving me eternal life. Help

me now to follow You and to love others with the love You have shown me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When we leave today, we will not be able to meet every need.

God has not asked us to pretend that we can.

But somewhere within the reach of our time, our resources and our influence, there may be one person, one family or one servant of Christ whom we can receive.

I once thought meeting “the least of these” required traveling halfway around the world to a burning dump.

But Jesus was teaching me that the test was not how far I traveled.

The test was what I did after suffering came close enough for me to see it.

I went to that dump believing I was bringing Jesus to the least of these.

But perhaps Jesus was already there.

He was represented by faithful pastors who entered that place when others would not.

He was calling hungry children our neighbors.

He was asking whether I would strengthen His servants, help the family within my reach and refuse to keep walking after I had seen.

We may never recognize how close the King was standing until the day He tells us Himself.

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

When I Met the Least of These

Matthew 25:31-46

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Introduction

Matthew 25:31-46 is among the most familiar and most frequently abbreviated teachings of Jesus. The phrase ‘the least of these’ appears in sermons, charitable appeals, political arguments and discussions of Christian social responsibility. Yet the familiar shortened expression omits the words that create the passage’s principal interpretive question: ‘the least of these my brethren.’

The scene is often called the parable of the sheep and goats. That title is convenient, but it can obscure the character of the passage. Jesus does not begin with the customary formula that the kingdom is like something. He moves directly into the coming of the Son of Man, the throne of glory, the gathering of the nations and the announcement of eternal destinies. The shepherd’s separation supplies an analogy within a prophetic judgment scene.

The commentary’s recommended conclusion is that Jesus’ ‘brethren’ most likely refers primarily to His vulnerable followers, particularly disciples and Gospel messengers exposed to hunger, displacement, persecution and imprisonment. Matthew 10 supplies the closest verbal and thematic parallel. Nevertheless, this interpretation must not be used to reduce Christian concern for poor unbelievers. The wider Biblical witness commands mercy toward every suffering neighbor.

The interpretation should make the passage more precise without making Christian compassion smaller.

Literary Setting

The Olivet Discourse

Matthew 25:31-46 concludes the discourse that began when Jesus departed from the temple in Matthew 24. The disciples asked about the temple’s destruction, His coming and the end of the age. Jesus warned against deception, described suffering and persecution, announced that the Gospel of the kingdom would reach all nations and repeatedly commanded readiness.

The latter portion of the discourse develops what faithful waiting looks like. The faithful and evil servants contrast responsible and abusive stewardship. The wise and foolish virgins contrast preparedness and presumption. The servants entrusted with talents contrast fruitful stewardship and fearful inactivity. The final judgment scene then reveals that readiness for the King is visible in the treatment of those identified with Him.

The Nations and the Mission

Matthew 24:9 says Christ’s followers will be hated by all nations for His name’s sake. Matthew 24:14 declares that the Gospel will be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations. Matthew 25:32 then gathers all nations before the Son of Man. This progression is significant. The same nations among whom the disciples suffer and witness are summoned for judgment.

The Greek expression *panta ta ethnē* can denote all nations or all peoples and, in some settings, the Gentiles. The scene is universal in scope, but the shepherd separates one from another. The language should not be pressed into a doctrine that modern nation-states are saved or condemned as undivided political entities.

Matthew 25:31-33: The King Arrives

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory.

The Son of Man in Glory

Jesus' preferred self-designation, 'Son of man,' carries both humility and authority. In the present ministry He is rejected and approaches the cross. In the judgment scene He comes in glory with the angels. The contrast is deliberate. The One about to be mocked and condemned will return as the Judge before whom all humanity stands.

Daniel 7:13-14 provides important background. One like the Son of Man comes with the clouds and receives dominion, glory and a kingdom in which all peoples, nations and languages serve Him. Matthew presents Jesus occupying that royal and eschatological position.

The Throne of His Glory

The throne is not borrowed ceremonial language. Jesus claims authority to issue the final verdict and determine eternal destiny. The passage therefore contributes to Matthew's high Christology. The teacher from Galilee speaks as the universal King and Judge.

The Shepherd's Separation

The comparison with a shepherd evokes Ezekiel 34, where God judges between members of the flock and opposes the strong who mistreat the weak. Sheep and goats commonly grazed together and could be separated when needed. Jesus uses the familiar act to picture decisive and accurate judgment.

Interpreters should resist building theology from speculative differences between sheep and goat personalities. Matthew emphasizes separation, placement and verdict. The animals signify the two groups after judgment rather than supplying an extended allegory of zoological behavior.

Matthew 25:34: Inheriting the Prepared Kingdom

Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Come

The King's first word to the sheep is invitation. They are brought near rather than driven away. Their destiny is communion with the King and participation in His kingdom.

Blessed of My Father

The sheep are already described as recipients of the Father's blessing before their acts are listed. Their deeds do not compel an unwilling God to admit them. The verdict discloses what grace has produced in them.

Inherit

An inheritance is received as an heir, not purchased as a commercial transaction. The verb supports the distinction between works as evidence and works as merit. The kingdom was prepared from the foundation of the world, before any sheep fed, clothed or visited anyone.

The passage does not deny the necessity of visible obedience. It denies the proud interpretation that charitable achievement places God in humanity's debt. Ephesians 2:8-10 supplies the proper order: salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, and those saved are created in Christ Jesus unto good works.

Matthew 25:35-36: Six Expressions of Mercy

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Hunger and Thirst

The KJV expression 'an hungred' means hungry. 'Meat' uses the older broad sense of food. Jesus describes the provision of basic nourishment, not an elaborate banquet. The simplicity makes the omission less defensible. A person did not need great wealth to share bread or a cup of water.

The Stranger Received

The stranger is not merely an unknown person encountered casually. Xenos can describe a foreigner, guest or displaced traveler. The expression translated 'took me in' conveys gathering or receiving. In the ancient world, hospitality supplied shelter, food, protection and social connection to a person without local security.

In Matthew 10 the traveling disciples depend upon worthy households. Welcoming them means more than offering polite words. The host becomes publicly associated with the messenger and may share the risk created by the messenger's proclamation.

Naked and Clothed

Nakedness can indicate complete exposure or inadequate clothing. A disciple traveling without extra garments could experience both poverty and shame. Clothing restores protection and public dignity.

The Sick Visited

The verb translated ‘visited’ can carry the sense of looking after or caring for. Jesus does not say the sheep cured every illness. They refused to let sickness make a brother invisible. Their presence and care acknowledged continuing belonging.

The Prisoner Remembered

Ancient imprisonment often depended upon outside support. Prisoners might rely upon visitors for food and clothing. Visiting a believer imprisoned for witness could also identify the visitor with the prisoner’s supposedly dangerous faith. Hebrews 10:32-34 recalls believers who became companions of the afflicted and accepted the loss of property. Hebrews 13:3 commands remembrance of prisoners as though bound with them.

Jesus did not say, ‘I was in prison and you opened the door.’ He said, ‘Ye came unto me.’

Mercy Within Reach

The list is strikingly ordinary. Food, water, shelter, clothing, care and presence are not spectacular achievements. The King remembers acts that many people could perform. John Chrysostom emphasized this accessibility: the condemned were not asked to accomplish miracles but to respond to plainly visible need.

Matthew 25:37-39: The Surprise of the Righteous

Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

The sheep do not deny their deeds. They are surprised that they served the King personally. Their question shows that they did not perform mercy as a calculated strategy for earning eternal reward. They saw hungry, displaced and imprisoned people, not a visibly enthroned Christ.

Their surprise also corrects the tendency to relocate ‘least’ from people to actions. The astonishment is not merely that God noticed small deeds. It is that Jesus so completely identifies with people of low status that service to them reaches Him.

The sheep’s humility contrasts with self-advertising religion. They do not present a charitable résumé. They ask when the encounter occurred. Grace had formed a response that was genuine enough to operate without an audience.

Matthew 25:40: The Least of These My Brethren

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

The Complete Expression

Verse 40 does not merely say ‘the least of these.’ It adds ‘my brethren.’ Verse 45 later uses the shorter expression, but the fuller first statement should define the group. Any interpretation must therefore account for Jesus’ family language.

The Least

The Greek term *elachistos* denotes the least, smallest or lowest in importance. It is status language, not a declaration of lesser human value. These are people whom society can disregard because they lack power, recognition and the ability to repay assistance.

The world called them least. The King called them family.

My Brethren in Matthew

Matthew 12:46-50 offers the Gospel’s clearest definition. Jesus stretches His hand toward the disciples and says that whoever does His Father’s will is His brother, sister and mother. Matthew 23:8 calls the disciples brethren under one Master. Matthew 28:10 uses ‘my brethren’ for the disciples after the resurrection.

This usage creates a strong presumption that Matthew 25 refers to followers of Jesus. The term can have other meanings in different contexts, but the universal-poor interpretation must explain why Matthew’s established disciple language is expanded to all humanity here.

Four Principal Interpretations

The universal interpretation identifies the least with all suffering people. Its strength is the plain material character of the needs and the Bible’s broad concern for the poor. Its difficulty is the phrase ‘my brethren.’

The Christian interpretation identifies the least as suffering believers. It fits Matthew’s spiritual-family language and New Testament commands to care for needy saints. John Chrysostom represents an early form of this reading, emphasizing poor and outcast believers.

The missionary interpretation identifies the least particularly with vulnerable Gospel messengers. It explains why the brethren are strangers dependent upon hospitality and why they experience persecution and imprisonment. This reading receives its strongest support from Matthew 10.

The Tribulation interpretation identifies the brethren as Jewish people persecuted near the end of the age. It takes the eschatological setting and Jesus’ Jewish identity seriously. Its principal difficulty is

that the passage does not name Israel or the Tribulation, while Matthew's nearest parallels identify disciples.

Recommended Interpretation

The vulnerable-disciple or missionary interpretation best explains the complete pattern. It should not be stated so narrowly that poor believers disappear or only ordained ministers qualify. The brethren are followers of Christ whose low status and suffering are especially visible in the cost of witness.

Matthew 10 as the Closest Parallel

Dependence

Jesus sends disciples without gold, silver, extra provisions or ordinary travel security. They must depend upon receptive households for food and lodging. This explains why obedient servants can appear in Matthew 25 as hungry, thirsty, underclothed and strangers.

Persecution

Matthew 10 warns of councils, scourging, betrayal, hatred and flight. Matthew 25 includes sickness and imprisonment. The condition of the brethren is not necessarily evidence of poor planning or divine abandonment. It may be the worldly cost of faithful witness.

Identification With Jesus

He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me.
Matthew 10:40

The logic is nearly identical to Matthew 25:40. Reception of the messenger is reception of Jesus. A cup of cold water given to a little one because he is a disciple receives reward. Rejection of the messengers brings judgment more severe than that of Sodom. Matthew 25 expands the missionary principle into the final judgment scene.

The Didache and Early Missionary Hospitality

The Didache's instructions concerning itinerant apostles, prophets and teachers demonstrate that missionary hospitality remained a practical early-church issue. Genuine teachers were to be received as the Lord, while exploitative claimants required discernment. This historical evidence does not prove the interpretation, but it shows that receiving Christ through His traveling representatives was not an artificial modern concern.

Matthew 25:41: The King's Terrible Command

Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Depart From Me

The central horror of judgment is separation from the King. The sheep hear 'Come.' The goats hear 'Depart.' Eternal destiny is relational before it is described spatially.

Prepared for the Devil and His Angels

The kingdom is expressly prepared for the blessed, while the fire is described as prepared for the devil and his angels. Chrysostom observed that humanity was not the original object named in the fire's preparation. The goats align themselves with rebellion and enter the consequence of that allegiance.

Everlasting

The same adjective governs punishment in verse 46 that governs life. The parallel construction makes attempts to weaken only the duration of punishment exegetically difficult. The passage should be preached with grief and sobriety, never satisfaction at the condemnation of others.

Matthew 25:42-45: The Sin of Omission

Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

What the Goats Did Not Do

Jesus does not accuse the goats of creating famine, causing homelessness, spreading disease or arresting the brethren. The indictment concerns withheld mercy. They had opportunity to feed, welcome, clothe, care and visit but did not respond.

This does not mean structural injustice or active cruelty are unimportant. It means innocence cannot be established merely by claiming, 'I did not cause the problem.' James 4:17 describes knowledge of good without action as sin.

Their Surprise

The goats also ask when they saw the Lord. Their implied defense is that they would have acted had Jesus appeared recognizable. They did not understand that the King was represented by people without status or obvious ability to reward them.

The goats never said they hated Jesus. They simply became skilled at passing Him without recognizing Him.

The Hidden King

Anyone might honor a king wearing a crown. Matthew 25 asks whether allegiance remains visible when the King's representative appears hungry, displaced, ill or imprisoned. The hiddenness of Christ tests whether service is directed toward status or toward Him.

Matthew 25:46: Eternal Outcomes

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

The final sentence is intentionally balanced. The same Judge announces both destinies. The same scene that reveals Christ's compassion also reveals His authority to condemn. A reading that preserves mercy while eliminating judgment fails to hear the whole passage.

The righteous are not sinless people who achieved salvation by charity. They are people whose relationship to the King has become visible in faithful reception and mercy. The goats' lack of mercy exposes their lack of allegiance.

Christ's Identification With His People

Saul on the Damascus Road

Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? ... I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. Acts 9:4-5

Saul attacked Christians, yet the risen Christ described the persecution as directed toward Himself. This provides a theological confirmation of Matthew 25's identification principle. Jesus does not merely observe what happens to His people. He receives their treatment as His own.

The Body of Christ

First Corinthians 12 describes believers as one body in Christ. When one member suffers, the members suffer together. The doctrine provides comfort to overlooked believers and warning to those who mistreat them.

A Necessary Limitation

Christ's identification with believers must not be misused to shield Christian leaders from examination. Disagreeing with a pastor, reporting misconduct or correcting error is not automatically persecution of Jesus. Matthew 25 concerns the reception or neglect of vulnerable brethren identified with Christ, not immunity from accountability.

The Poor Beyond the Immediate Referent

A Narrower Exegesis Does Not Permit Narrower Mercy

Some fear that identifying the least as disciples removes the poor from Christian responsibility. That conclusion would contradict the rest of Scripture. Correct interpretation of Matthew 25 should relocate the argument for universal mercy to passages that teach it directly, not erase the obligation.

Proverbs 19:17

He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.

This proverb independently establishes that God receives mercy toward the poor as service related to Himself. Concern for poor unbelievers therefore does not depend upon expanding ‘my brethren’ beyond Matthew’s normal usage.

The Samaritan

Luke 10 defines neighbor through merciful action across ethnic and religious boundaries. The Samaritan does not ask whether the wounded man belongs to the covenant community before drawing near, binding wounds and paying for continuing care.

Galatians 6:10

Let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

The verse provides a useful synthesis. ‘Especially’ creates a particular responsibility toward believers without turning that responsibility into exclusion of everyone else.

The Dump-Site Experiences as Commentary in Life

The Children and the Rat

Children chased what first appeared to be a cat but proved to be a rat nearly as large as a cat. They killed it and intended to cook it. They hid because larger children or adults might steal the meal. The story’s interpretive force lies not in disgust but desperation. Even possessing something edible created danger.

The Poisoned Water

The childhood memory of being forbidden to swim in a temporarily muddy lake contrasts with children diving into water contaminated by garbage and disease. The difference was not greater

parental love in America. The difference was the availability of alternatives. Poverty can force a family to choose between immediate hunger and long-term danger.

The Five-Year-Old Girl

A five-year-old girl who had already lost sight in one eye continued collecting bottles. Her brothers retrieved scrap metal, with a younger brother diving into contaminated water. Together they earned approximately one dollar per day.

One Family Within Reach

Additional monthly support sent through a trusted local pastor replaced the children's dangerous income. The response did not repair the whole dump or end the family's poverty. It addressed a specific danger through local relationship and accountability.

God had not placed the entire dump within my ability. But He had placed one family within my reach.

Who Were the Least in the Story?

The children were suffering neighbors who deserved mercy whether or not they were believers. The local pastors entering the community, feeding families and carrying the Gospel may provide the closer Matthew 25 parallel as vulnerable messengers of Christ. The experience therefore joins the universal duty of neighbor love with the particular duty of supporting Christ's servants.

Mercy, Mission and Ethical Practice

Food Is Not Payment for Attention

Feeding ministries may proclaim the Gospel while serving meals, but assistance should not be conditioned upon a profession of faith. Vulnerability must not be exploited to manufacture decisions or attendance statistics.

We feed people because they are hungry. We tell them about Jesus because they need Him. Both actions come from love.

Relief, Rescue and Restoration

Relief addresses immediate hunger. Rescue removes a person from immediate danger when possible. Restoration pursues a safer future through relationship, dignity and local participation. The three should not be treated as competitors. A hungry child may need relief today even while a church pursues restoration tomorrow.

Local Partnership

A trusted local pastor possesses language, cultural knowledge and continuing presence that a visiting missionary usually lacks. Supporting local leadership can extend care beyond a brief visit, but accountability remains necessary. Compassion without discernment can be exploited, while discernment without compassion becomes an excuse for hardness.

Pastoral and Theological Conclusions

The Passage Is First About the King

Matthew 25 should not be reduced to a humanitarian slogan. The center is Jesus, the Son of Man who comes in glory, identifies with His brethren and judges the nations. Mercy matters because of relationship to Him.

The Passage Honors Hidden Faithfulness

The King remembers ordinary acts performed without public recognition. Food, water, welcome, clothing, care and presence become evidence of allegiance when offered to people unable to advance the giver's status.

The Passage Condemns Passive Indifference

The goats demonstrate that avoiding active cruelty is not the whole of righteousness. Love can be violated by omission. Awareness creates responsibility to consider what faithful action is genuinely within reach.

The Passage Does Not Teach Salvation by Charity

The sheep inherit a prepared kingdom as people already blessed by the Father. Their deeds reveal grace rather than replacing it. The Gospel invitation must therefore direct listeners away from confidence in generosity and toward repentance and faith in Christ.

The Passage Creates Two Obligations

- Receive, protect and support Christ's vulnerable people and Gospel servants.
- Show mercy toward every suffering neighbor because each person bears God's image and Scripture commands neighbor love.
- Refuse to use the size of a problem as permission to do nothing.
- Join mercy and evangelism without manipulating vulnerable people.
- Let good works reveal gratitude for grace rather than an attempt to purchase it.

Final Commentary Summary

Matthew 25:31-46 presents Jesus as the returning Son of Man, enthroned King and divine Shepherd. He separates humanity and reveals that response to Him has been displayed in response to those He calls His brethren. Matthew's family language and the close parallels with Matthew 10 make vulnerable disciples and Gospel messengers the most probable primary referent.

The interpretation does not remove poor people from the church's concern. Proverbs 19:17, Isaiah 58, Luke 10, Luke 14, Galatians 6:10, James 2 and First John 3 establish a broad and unavoidable duty of mercy. Scripture gives no permission to protect accurate exegesis with an unmerciful heart.

The dump-site story embodies both truths. Hungry children were neighbors whose need demanded action. Faithful local pastors were Christ's servants whose support extended Gospel ministry into a place others avoided. One family could be helped even when an entire system could not be repaired.

I went to that dump believing I was bringing Jesus to the least of these. But perhaps Jesus was already there. He was represented by faithful pastors who entered that place when others would not. He was calling hungry children our neighbors. He was asking whether I would strengthen His servants, help the family within my reach and refuse to keep walking after I had seen.

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