

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 25 (PART 3)

Jesus now brings this section of teaching to a climax. The previous parables emphasized being prepared for the bridegroom and being faithful with what the master has entrusted. This final section shows what that preparedness and faithfulness look like when the King returns.

Matthew 25:31–46 – The Sheep and the Goats

This passage is not introduced as a parable in the same way as the first two, but as a description of the Son of Man coming in glory and sitting on His throne to judge the nations.

What is happening? All nations are gathered before Him. He separates people “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” In the ancient world, sheep and goats often grazed together during the day but were separated at night. From a distance they could look similar, but the shepherd knew the difference.

What Do The Sheep Do?

“I was hungry and you gave me food” - This reflects responding to basic physical need. In the ancient world, hunger was common and daily provision was not guaranteed. Feeding someone was a tangible expression of care and provision.

“I was thirsty and you gave me drink” - Access to water required effort. Offering water was an act of hospitality and kindness, meeting a simple but essential need.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” - Strangers had no protection, status, or place of belonging. Welcoming someone meant opening your life, home, and resources. It required trust and intentionality.

“I was naked and you clothed me” - This refers to lacking adequate clothing. Providing clothing restores dignity and meets a practical need, showing care for the person as a whole.

“I was sick and you visited me” - Sickness often led to isolation. Visiting someone required time, presence, and compassion. It meant entering into someone else’s suffering rather than avoiding it.

“I was in prison and you came to me” - Prisoners depended on others for care and provision. Visiting them carried social cost and required intentional love toward those others might overlook or avoid.

Q - What does it look like to do some of these things today?

I don’t think Jesus is mentioning these 6 things because they are the only things he wants us to do. Instead, they summarize a broader kind of life of love. Each of these acts notices a need, moves towards people, is willing to be inconvenienced and acts with compassion.

Q - Who is Jesus calling us to love?

v. 40 - to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mind, even the least of them..."

v. 45 - to the extent you did not do it to one of the least of these..."

There are two main interpretations on this:

1. A narrower view (disciples/believers). Some understand "the least of these my brothers" to refer specifically to Jesus' followers, possibly those sent out in ministry, the vulnerable among the community of believers. Others will argue that we certainly should love everyone but that Jesus here called the disciples to care for each other by specifically using the term "my brothers" ("brothers" can refer to disciples (Matthew 12:49-50). They also may cite John 13:34-35 in that Jesus says the world will know we are his followers specifically by our "love for one another."

There is an extreme version of this take that argues that we can't fix all the world's problems or feed every hungry person, but we need to take care of our brothers and sisters in Christ, the members of the body of Christ - and thus that's how we are ultimately caring for Jesus.

2. A broader view (all who are in need) - Others understand "the least of these" more broadly as: anyone who is vulnerable, the poor, weak, overlooked, and marginalized and that Jesus' use of "brothers" is his way of identifying with the vulnerable.

I think that we certainly should show love to the Christian family, perhaps with a brotherly priority, but I also think that Jesus is not excluding the love and care for non-Christians with this parable. Two quick reasons why I think why:

1 - While we may care for those closest to us first, we also are called to love everyone:

Galatians 6:10 - So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

2 - The question "who should I love?" (and the natural other side of that coin "who don't I have to love") is very similar to the question asked by the lawyer in Luke 10. The discussion is about the greatest commandments to love God and neighbor, and he asks the following:

Luke 10:29 (NLT) - The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus' does not answer this question but instead gives the parable of the good samaritan and asks his own question and changes the focus:

Luke 10:36-37 (NLT) - "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. 37 The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

What Jesus describes here is not new. It reflects a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. Again and again, when God confronts His people for drifting from Him, one of the clearest evidences is how they have treated the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable.

Isaiah 1:16-17 - "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, 17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.

Jeremiah 22:3 - 'Thus says the LORD, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

Ezekiel 16:49 - "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom (*talking about the Northern kingdom Israel*): she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy.

Amos 5:11-12, 14-15 (NLT) - You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent. Therefore, though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them. Though you plant lush vineyards, you will never drink wine from them. 12 For I know the vast number of your sins and the depth of your rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts... 14 Do what is good and run from evil so that you may live! Then the LORD God of Heaven's Armies will be your helper, just as you have claimed. 15 Hate evil and love what is good; turn your courts into true halls of justice. Perhaps even yet the LORD God of Heaven's Armies will have mercy on the remnant of his people.

Zechariah 7:9-12 (NLT) - "This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Judge fairly, and show mercy and kindness to one another. 10 Do not oppress widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor. And do not scheme against each other. 11 "Your ancestors refused to listen to this message. They stubbornly turned away and put their fingers in their ears to keep from hearing. 12 They made their hearts as hard as stone, so they could not hear the instructions or the messages that the LORD of Heaven's Armies had sent them by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. That is why the LORD of Heaven's Armies was so angry with them.

In many of these passages, the people of God continued in religious activity while neglecting justice and mercy. And God makes it clear that this disconnect is not acceptable. The call to repentance was not only about returning to right belief, but returning to a life that reflects His heart.

This gives important context to Matthew 25. When Jesus speaks about feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and caring for those in need, he is not introducing a new command. He is revealing what has always mattered to God. To ignore the vulnerable is not just a failure in compassion, but a sign that something is off in the heart. And to care for them is not simply a good work, but evidence of a life that knows and reflects the King.

A few final observations:

The separation reveals what was already true. The sheep and goats are separated based on their response to people in need. The sheep fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned. The goats did not. Both groups are surprised: "*Lord, when did we see you...?*" Their actions were not calculated or performative. Their lives revealed what was already true in their hearts.

The issue is not just wrongdoing, but neglect. The goats are not condemned for extreme evil in this passage, but for what they failed to do. They saw needs and did nothing. This connects with the previous parables. In the parable of the virgins and the bridegroom, the foolish virgins were unprepared. In the parable of the talents, the unfaithful servant did not act and was called “wicked and lazy”. Here, the goats fail to love. It wasn’t so much that they were intentionally doing bad things, it’s that they were intentionally not doing the right thing.

Conclusion: Living in Light of His Return

Perhaps the most important thing to remember as we consider this topic is that this is how Jesus ends his two chapter teaching on the signs of the end of the age and how his disciples should prepare for his return.

Across these chapters, Jesus gives us a consistent picture. His return will be certain, but its timing will be unexpected. Some will be prepared, others will not. Some will be faithful with what they were given, others will shrink back. Some will have lives marked by love and compassion, others will be revealed to have lived for themselves. The difference is not found in what people say, but in how they live.

This is what makes these chapters both sobering and clarifying. They call us to a life of active, ongoing discipleship. A life that responds quickly to obedience. A life that stewards what has been entrusted. A life that reflects the mercy and compassion of Christ.

The call of Jesus is not to fear His return, but to be ready for it. And the kind of readiness he is describing here is not complicated. It is a life that continues to say “yes” to God over time, not perfectly but faithfully. We don’t wonder if Jesus is coming back or not. That’s not the question we need to answer. Instead it is more *“if He returned today, what would my life reveal?”*

The King so closely identifies Himself with the hungry, the weak, and the overlooked that our response to them becomes our response to Him. This means loving Jesus is not just something we say, but something we live. And in the people and faces that might be hard to love, we can think of the one who has loved us with all of himself. Every act of compassion is ultimately an act of love toward Christ himself, giving eternal significance to even the smallest moments.

The bridegroom is also the master and the master is also the king and the king is also the judge. Everyone will be gathered before Him. No one is excluded from this moment. This chapter reveals what the judge is going to say on the last day. Like a teacher telling you what’s going to be on the final exam - Now that we know what will matter then, the question is whether we will live like it matters now.