

Introduction

When I was in sophomore in college I took an Economics class. The class was okay, I guess. I was learning lots of fancy terms like GNP, demand, supply and my favorite, the marginal propensity to consume. It sounded complex, I think that's why I liked it. I learned a lot in the class, of which I remember very little today. I think I was getting a solid "B." Maybe that doesn't sound that good to you young guys who get mostly "A's" today. Grades were tougher to get back then. The teachers worked us more and it seemed that their high expectations of us students in the 70's resulted in lower grades than are given out today. (Isn't that right Mr Timm or Mr Ostrander!)

Anyway this Econ professor surprised us. He said that our final exam for the quarter would be made up of test questions that had been on one of our 3 exams during that quarter. You wouldn't have to review all the material of the class, like lectures and the readings in our textbook. You would just know all the correct answers to the quarterly exams and memorize those answers. This would be a snap! With very minimal study for this exam, I took it, aced it, got a perfect paper. But I only raised my grade to a B+, but hey one final down only four more to go! The others were Chemistry, Physics, Microbiology and Anatomy now those would be tough.

But this professor was great He realized what we students already knew, **If you know the answers to the final test then you are home free!!** Learning and studying are great but there is nothing like knowing the answers to the final exam.

Now I am not talking cheating, as in some low down way finding out the answers to the exam. No, this professor set up the test this way.

But do you know something this passage is a lot like my story of the Econ test.

Wouldn't you like to know that question, the one question, that the King of Heaven would ask us as the basis for allowing you to enter into heaven? This passage tells us what that question is and even gives us the answer.

Now if you live out the answer to that question you will be a secret weapon that God will use.

Here in this passage the Bible is telling us exactly what God's purpose is for his people.

If our lives are in line with his purpose. We will be fulfilled and contented in life.

It has been stated that

“a futile life is one lived on an agenda that has no connection with God's purposes.”¹

The Big Idea

The text of Matt 25 is a very clear statement of the King's expectations of us. If we live out those expectations he will use us as **His Secret Weapon** to accomplish his ultimate purpose.

Lets dig in to this passage to see what it is intended to teach us.

The context of Matt 25

This passage is the last section of the teaching called The Olivet Discourse. Matthew tells us in (26:1-2) that Jesus spoke these words on the Wednesday of Holy Week. Just 3 days before Good Friday. He

is speaking privately to his Disciples in chapters 24 and 25. The Olivet Discourse took place at the Mount of Olives, thus the name, Olivet. The Mount of Olives is located just to the east of the wall of the city of Jerusalem. This green garden of trees rose was 200-300 feet above the city, and the Temple was directly across from it. It was close enough to the city walls that the Romans could lob catapulted objects across the Kidron Valley from the Mount of Olives and hit the city's walls. This happened the siege of Jerusalem which destroyed the city in 70 AD.

Here in chapters 24 and 25 Jesus gave his disciples information about the end of the age. This would be vital teaching for the disciples. The spreading of the gospel soon would depend greatly upon them.

In this passage beginning at vs 31 of chpt 25 Jesus speaks of the breathtaking scene picturing the judgment at the end of the age. The Son of man is seen as the King of Heaven. He appears on the Earth with all the angels of heaven. One cannot even imagine the magnificence of this scene.

This is not a parable. It is a poetic description given as a prophetic view of what was to come. It speaks of the Son of Man's return. It identifies that this "Son of Man" is the King who is coming in heavenly glory. He will be the judge all mankind.

Understanding the text

In this passage there are many views of what is meant by the picture Christ paints. The scene opens as I said, with the Son of Man, as the King sitting on his throne. Clearly the Son of man is Jesus as he has referred to himself this way before, and now he says this Son of Man is "the King." This is the only time Jesus identifies that he is the King of the ages, The King of Heaven" This is plausible since Daniel in Daniel 7 refers the Son of Man as one approaching the "Ancient of Days to receive a kingdom. (the Ancient of Days is an OT name for God the Father.) This scene would be the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. Previously Jesus has hinted at his kingship but never so clearly stated it as in this verse.

The King is seated on his throne as the judge. The power to judge all people has been given to him by God (Mt 16:27, 28:18).

²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done

We also can say that the son of man is qualified to be the judge because as:

¹⁸ Jesus said, (in Matt 28) "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

The text says "all nations will be gathered before him"(v.32). Commentators have had much discussion on this point. Asking who are these people whom are assembled before the King. After considering these discussions, I submit to you that it is the same group that we see as the target of the great commission of Matt 28:19, 20. It makes sense that the common term "all nations" used in both passages in Matthew 25 and 28 would refer to all people from every nation of the Earth.

Within this group of all peoples we see three other groups mentioned, the sheep and the goats, and those Jesus calls, "my brethren". Again much discussion can be made about who these specific groups are. Here is my summary of their identity.

The term referring to Jesus' brothers or brethren is seen in v. 40. He calls them "the least of these brothers of mine." Over the centuries people have thought it referred to the the poor of the Earth both

Jew and Gentile. This may be too general of a grouping saying that it refers to the poor whoever they were, with no distinction. Other commentators say Jesus' brothers were the apostles and other missionaries, but this view seems to be too narrow in its scope. While one description goes to far and the other is too narrow. The reasonable description of who "Jesus' brothers" are, is that they are Jesus' disciples. The larger group than just the 12 who heard him speaking here at the Mount of Olives.. These were given the job of spreading the gospel while facing hunger, thirst, illness, and imprisonment.

Mt 12:48 ... "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

Mt 12:49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers.

Jesus says that kindness to these his followers was equivalent to kindness to him personally. The treatment of his Disciples would be a reflection of where people stand in relation to his Kingdom and to Jesus himself.

As we read the passage we next run into the sheep and the goats. Who do each of them represent? The sheep represent the people who were righteous in Jesus' eyes. And the goats are the unrighteous people.

Our passage reads,

³¹"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

In the hills of Israel, goats and sheep mingle together all day long as the flocks grazed. But at night it would be common for the shepherd to separate them. Goats needed to be herded together to stay warm on a cold night. The sheep could stand the cold air and need not be herded together. The shepherd had no trouble telling a sheep from a goat as he separated them. Likewise Jesus the King will have no problem judging the fates of the people of all nations as they stood before him.

Our text suggests that just one criteria would decide it.

³⁴"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

The test of the righteous

The righteous are granted life in the kingdom. The reason they are invited in to this eternal kingdom is because of the way they have served the King's brothers. **It is not what they have said, but it is what they did, that proved that they were of the sheep and not of the goats.**

Their actions were evidence of their salvation, not the means of that salvation. Their works didn't gain their salvation rather it was evidence of their identification with the King; as sheep of his pasture.

They are given an inheritance which by definition implies that they have relationship to the giver of the inheritance who is God. Notice they are surprised by the fact that the deeds done to the brethren were equivalent to doing it to the King himself. The evidence of how they treated Jesus brothers is proof of how they valued the King. As you did it to them, it was like you were doing it to me. (v.40) Calvin in commenting on this passage said that the implication is, to refuse to help the King's brothers would be sacrilegious.

There seems to be no separation between the sheep (the righteous) and the “the least of these brothers of mine” in this scene. They would both would be standing in the midst of each other at the favored right hand of the King.

The failure of the wicked

Now for the goats,

⁴¹"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

⁴⁴"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

⁴⁵"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

⁴⁶"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

The judgment upon the goats (the unrighteous) is as harsh as possible. Nowhere in Matthew has the judgment of the unrighteous been a curse. The King who is the judge says they are banished, cursed and sent into the eternal punishment of Hell. Which is prepared for Devil and his angels.

They are “cursed” instead of “blessed.” They have no place in God's family. They have only self interest as a motivation for their actions. The unrighteous are sent to Hell because they had no compassion for the “least of his brothers” and therefore no compassion for the King.

In a false sort of innocence they seem to excuse themselves for not serving. Asking when did we fail to serve you Lord? (v.44) They will ask, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

The difference between the righteous and the unrighteous turns on the word “not” v.45 the King says

I tell you the truth, whatever you did **not** do for one of the least of these, you did **not** do for me.'

remember that the King's reply to the sheep was;

I tell you the truth, whatever you **did** for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you **did** for me.'

Though the structure of these statements parallel each other, their outcomes are worlds apart. They are cursed for failing to notice their many opportunities to show kindness that have been presented to them.

Neither the sheep nor the goats are surprised by the place the king assigns to them, but they are surprised by **the reason** they are assigned there. It is solely based on their compassion or lack of it for “the least of the brethren”

How have you treated the least of my brothers? This passage asks. The context shows that this is

spoken of the disciples of Christ. But how did this other throng of righteous people get here, you know, the Sheep. It isn't likely that they all had contact with the first disciples of Jesus. I think the sheep are all the righteous ones. All people who are born again, who would be made righteous by Jesus sacrificial death on the cross .

Who did they treat with love and compassion evidencing their regard for the King? I think it is no stretch of the passage to imagine that these are those who regarded the “least of Christ's brothers” throughout the ages. This refers to us, if you are a true disciple of Christ. I am saying that you and I will be judged by how we treat the least of or Jesus brethren whom we rub shoulders with in our lives.

This parable is a test of our hearts. If the unrighteous would have known that the treatment of the “least of the brethren” would have won them a better eternal existence. Then we could assume they would have shown compassion to Jesus' followers. But without a changed heart, this would not be truly righteous response.

Jesus expects his followers to be righteous from the heart. Only with a true conversion is it possible that we can get a new heart. Then we could have compassion for all, driven by a changed heart and demonstrating the actions of a changed life. So the true follower of Christ would align himself with Jesus followers, even the least of the brethren. In doing so they are aligning themselves with Messiah King. Who is aligned with these “ least of the brothers.” If we are true disciples we should love and assist the least of the brothers. In doing so, we will serve Christ without knowing it.

our application

Now, how does this passage apply to you and me?

When I have looked at this passage before I have thought it merely spoke of the final judgment of Christ at the end of the age. I think I looked at it and thought boy I am sure glad I am not a goat. Those guys are really in trouble. I pitied them, but I felt relieved. I thought because of Christ's sacrifice I was free from sin and bound for heaven.

But I wonder if there is a bit of “goat” still in me, because honestly I can't say that I always have acted like a sheep. I cannot say that my actions consistently showed that I always regarded the “least of the brethren” with Christian charity as Christ expects from this chapter. I know I need to do better and be more consistent from the heart, having compassion for all of Christ's brothers.

What about you? Are you a sheep or a goat? This is a very important question, no that isn't strong enough. **This is a life changing question that will establish your eternal destiny.** You need to answer that one yourself!

There is another thought I recently had about this passage that is just as challenging to apply. I thought why is it that we should show this kindness as this passage requires, and even to the “least of these our brothers?” What is the reason Jesus makes such a big deal of this? What are the reasons Jesus stresses this so much about his followers showing compassion?

Obviously... Jesus also believed in doing good Acts 10: Peter says

³⁸...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and ... **he went around doing good**

Think of John 3:16 God shows his love for us by giving us his one and only Son, what an act of

compassion.

I believe Jesus knew this powerful love and compassion would be the strongest and most effective witness to the world. So he told his disciples John 13:34,35

³⁴"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you **must** love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

And it could be said from our passage that what God expects is that we love one another right down to the least of the brethren. The King is not pleased if we don't show compassion. On the other hand he will give us the kingdom if we show compassion to others..

The witness of the love of the brothers is a powerful force God uses to reach the throng of the righteous that we see standing before the King in our passage. And all men knew and saw how much the disciples loved one another. And then they knew that we were truly Christ's disciples. Can we say that that is true of us here, in this body?

Have you ever noticed how God uses the small things. Many times what he is doing is pictured as some little thing. Jesus says we Christians are like salt on a plate used as a seasoning. A small amount flavors the whole. Or his kingdom is like seeds spread across a field hardly being noticed. We are like one candle on a dark hillside. The point is these things appear small and often are unnoticed in the whole picture that each example paints.

Like that you are God's secret weapon because you are often hidden. What you do may barely be seen. But your loving deeds to another will have a surprising effect. Just like the salt, or the seeds sown in good soil, and that light on a hill that will shine forth the truth. Small things with amazing effects, that is what the Kingdom of God is like.

In our big world it is hard to imagine that one person can make a difference. In our world, big is good and bigger is better. We measure everything by volume either money, houses, businesses or people. We don't pay attention to people until there is a huge crowd in one place.

God spoke to Elijah but not in the earthquake, or the fire, nor the mighty wind that shattered the rocks. He spoke in a still small voice. A quiet whisper was the voice of God almighty.

We just were reminded that Jesus came in the most quiet and unremarkable way at Christmas. Few even noticed that anything had happened.

If we realize that God works this way, in the small things. Then it shouldn't surprise us that a thing like how you treat the "least of the brethren" would be the way that you truly testify to your love for the King, Jesus. And when people see it they will be affected for the kingdom!

Now how effective is this when it comes to the world seeing a demonstration of true Christian compassion through care for the least of these brothers?

Jim Petersen in the book *The Insider* writes: "The witness of a single life lived under Christ's rule is powerful. But the skeptic will discount it. He or she will explain it away as being a mutation. 'She was born a caring person. That can happen' But as kingdom citizens live their lives together, actually loving one another, it becomes a different matter. Such a community—whether a family, a few believers in a neighborhood, a network of business people, or a church congregation—makes a persuasive statement to an onlooking world that the kingdom indeed is among them. The message of

the kingdom is amplified as its citizens live out their unique calling in community. As they do the kingdom grows.”²

God's secret weapon is you! As you love people around you. You will be a vital witness to them of God's love. He has showed you what he expects. God's criteria for judging the world is how we love the brethren. It is also the way that he will change the world.

As I mentioned at the beginning today. We all need to believe that our lives count for something. It is part of our nature to seek a purpose greater than ourselves. In the final analysis, we will never be satisfied with only material earthly achievements. God has made us to desire to find his purposes for our living and being here. If we do not understand his purpose for our life eventually we will face futility and not satisfaction in life. God wants us to love the people around us. That is how you will be his secret weapon to quietly change this world. Then you will live a fulfilling meaningful life as you live out God's purpose for you. He wants you to be his secret weapon!

Please pray with me...

Eph 1: God's Purpose for us.

⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he^[a] predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. ⁹And he^[a] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

1. The Insider by Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy pg.19 Navpress 2003
2. The Insider by Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy pg.33-34 Navpress 2003