

Ignorance Is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment according to Works in Matthew 25:31-46

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Abstract

This paper argues that the righteous in Matt 25:31-46 stand out not only by their works of mercy, but also by their attitudes. Comparable descriptions of judgment emphasize the self-confidence of the righteous, based on their own knowledge of their good deeds. In contrast, those acquitted in Matt 25:31-46 are characterized by their ignorance of their own righteousness and their overall inability to help themselves. The passage therefore serves as a fitting conclusion to the teaching on discipleship in the Gospel of Matthew, contrasting the true disciples with the hypocrites (cf. 7:21-23) and bringing together the twin Matthean emphases on the faith of the helpless and the works of the righteous.

Keywords

Matthew 25; judgment; soteriology; Matthew and Paul

The soteriology of Matthew's Gospel continues to puzzle its interpreters.¹ Many studies have concluded that Matthew's soteriology stands at the

¹ Some of the most recent studies include P. Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew's View of Salvation* (WUNT II/101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); W. Carter, "Evoking Isaiah: Matthean Soteriology and an Intertextual Reading of Isaiah 7-9 and Matthew 1:23 and 4:15-16," *JBL* 119 (2000) 503-520; C.H. Talbert, "Indicative and Imperative in Matthean Soteriology," *Bib* 82 (2001) 515-538; J.A. Barnet, *Not the Righteous but the Sinners: M. M. Bakhtin's Theory of Aesthetics and the Problem of Reader-Character Interaction in Matthew's Gospel* (JSNTSup 246; London: T & T Clark, 2003); R. Deines, *Die Gerechtigkeit der Tora im Reich des Messias: Mt 5,13-20 als Schlüsseltext der matthäischen Theologie* (WUNT 177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); R. Gundry, "Salvation in Matthew," *The Old is Better* (WUNT 178; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 120-128.

opposite end of the spectrum as compared to the apostle Paul.² Jesus' demands to his disciples, his insistence on a higher righteousness, as well as frequent warnings about judgment according to works are difficult to read as the work of a Paulinist, to say the least. Recent studies have also brought to light an inner tension in Matthew's Gospel. On the one hand stands Jesus' demanding teaching; on the other hand his readiness to show mercy toward helpless petitioners.³

In the following I will focus on the passage that may be seen to stand the furthest removed from the apostle Paul, the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46. Read in light of the rhetoric of the whole Gospel, I will argue that this passage brings together Matthew's emphases both on a higher righteousness and on the helplessness of the disciples. I will argue that the two groups in Matt 25:31-46 are distinguished not only by their works, but also by their attitudes, and that their different attitudes explain their different actions. The condemned are surprised at their judgment and question the rationale for it, displaying a defiant, self-confident, and ultimately self-righteous attitude. The vindicated are equally surprised. They do not present any arguments in their own defense. The rationale for their acquittal has to be explained to them by the judge. They stand at the judgment in the same position as all the people who have been the recipients of Jesus' miracles: unable to help themselves. The judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46 thus 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.

Without ignoring the fundamental differences in their understanding of concepts such as righteousness and judgment, I will argue, therefore, that at their core, Pauline and Matthean theology share a basic understanding of the relationship between grace, faith, and works.

My argument for this interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 is four-fold. First, the attitudinal aspects of Matt 25:31-46 stand out by comparison

²) D. Marguerat, *Le jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu* (Le monde de la Bible; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981) 215-235; H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (WUNT 29; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983) 193-194; U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (CC; trans. W.C. Lins; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 87. Other studies find Matthew and Paul to be compatible, despite their differences, e.g. R. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); F. Voss, "Der Lohn der guten Tat: Zur theologischen Bestimmung der Beziehung zwischen Matthäus und Paulus," *ZTK* 103 (2006) 319-343.

³) U. Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (trans. R. Selle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 123-124.

with similar judgment scenes in comparable literature. Second, the connections with the Sermon on the Mount show the importance of a right attitude as a presupposition for right action. Third, the judgment scene can be read in light of the imitation of Jesus theme, a theme that Matt 11:28-30 connects with the invitation to come to Jesus as a needy person. Fourth, Matthew repeatedly emphasizes how outward actions are the manifestations of inward attitudes, and in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16), the importance of the right attitude is brought out with reference to the eschatological reward. Therefore, a reading of Matt 25:31-46 in the literary context of Matthew's Gospel alerts the reader to the significance of the attitudinal aspects that can be detected in the account. Before concluding my article, I will discuss its implications for the identity of "all the nations" (25:32) and "the least" (25:40, 45).

Matthew 25:31-46 and Comparable Judgment Scenes

The works of kindness that serve as criteria for judgment in Matt 25:35-36 are: feeding the poor, giving drink to the thirsty, receiving the strangers, clothing the naked, assisting the sick, and visiting those in prison. The importance of these works is well attested in Jewish sources (Isa 58:7; Ezek 18:7; Tob 1:17; 4:16; *T. Jac.* 2:23; *4 Ezra* 2:20; *2 En.* 9:1; 63:1; *Sib. Or.* 2:89-104; *b. Sabb.* 127a; *b. Sotah* 14a; *Tg. Ps.-J.* Deut 34:6). Only the virtue of visiting those in prison appears to be unique to the Christian tradition.⁴

Matthew's account stands out by revealing that acts of kindness towards the least of his brothers have been acts of kindness towards the Son of Man (25:40). This identification has antecedents in the Hebrew Bible, where God himself identified with the poor and accepted works done to them as if they were done to himself (Prov 19:17).⁵ What is new in Matt 25:40 is that Jesus takes God's place in identifying with the poor.⁶

⁴ W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 428.

⁵ George Foot Moore also quotes *Midrash Tannaim* Deuteronomy on Deut 15:9: "My sons, whenever you give food to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave me food" (*Judaism: In the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim*, vol. 2 [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997] 169).

⁶ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, 430.

This is not the only surprising twist in Matthew's story, however. In Matthew's judgment scene, the judge is the one who presents the evidence in favor of the acquittal of the righteous. Comparable judgment accounts are well aware that acts of kindness are powerful arguments in the divine judgment, and they describe how decisive they can be. But the works are cited by the human beings themselves, when they are making their case for acquittal.

In the lengthy confession in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the dead person denies wrongdoing on specific counts and goes on to cite good deeds, including to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, and to clothe the naked:

Behold I have come to you without falsehood of mine, without crime of mine, without evil of mine, and there is no one who testifies against me, for I have done nothing against him. 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, I have given god's offerings to the spirits. Save me, protect me, without you making report against me in the Presence, for I am pure of mouth and pure of hands, one to whom is said 'Twice welcome!' by those who see him, because I have heard that great word which the noble dead spoke with the Cat in the House of Him whose mouth gapes (Book of the Dead, spell 125).⁷

The Book of the Dead dates to the second millennium BCE, but that does not mean it is irrelevant as a comparison with Matthew. Evidence from the papyri shows that the profession of innocence found in the Book of the Dead continued to inspire religious practices in the Hellenistic period.⁸

The closest Jewish parallel to Matthew 25:31-46 is found in the *Midrash* on Psalm 118, which is usually dated between the sixth and the ninth century CE. The midrash raises the question of entrance into the presence

⁷⁾ Quoted from *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Revised edition; ed. C. Andrews; trans. R.O. Faulkner; London: British Museum Publications, 1985) 32.

⁸⁾ A priestly oath found in a papyrus from the second-century AD shows clear affinities with the profession of innocence from the Book of the Dead. The papyrus was published by Verne B. Schuman in "A Second-Century Treatise on Egyptian Priests and Temples," *HTR* 53 (1960) 159-170. For the parallels between this writing and the Book of the Dead, see R. Merkelbach, "Ein ägyptischer Priestereid," *ZPE* 2 (1968) 20-22; L. Koenen, "Die Unschuldsbeteuerungen des Priestereides und die römische Elegie," *ZPE* 2 (1968) 33-35.

of the Lord, and explains that the gates will be open to the one who has fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and brought up the fatherless:

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 lovingkindness.

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).⁹

In both of these accounts the human being is presenting the evidence, citing their own good deeds. Compared with this self-confident attitude, Matthew's account is quite different in that the justified have nothing to say for themselves, except to question the rationale for their vindication.¹⁰ The condemned also question the argument of the judge. But the purpose of their inquiry is precisely the opposite. Their condemnation appears to be a surprise to them, and they defiantly express their incomprehension of the rationale.

I have quoted these examples because they are so strikingly similar and yet so strikingly different from Matthew's account. They are, however, far removed in time from Matthew's Gospel and cannot be brought directly to bear on its interpretation. But they do give expression to a theme that is well attested in sources that are closer to Matthew, namely the theme of self-confidence before the divine judgment.

In the *Testament of Zebulon*, the fisherman Zebulon reports how he had always fed the hungry and claims that God 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 to each

⁹ Quoted from *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. 2 (Yale Judaica Series 13; trans. W.G. Braude; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 243.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2d edition; trans. S.H. Hooke; New York: Scribner's, 1972) 208.

person according to his need, being either convivial or consoling. Therefore the Lord made my catch to be an abundance of fish; for whoever shares with his neighbor receives multifold from the Lord" (*T. Zeb.* 6:4-6).¹¹

The sources from the pre-Christian period that show the strongest interest in the afterlife are the Zoroastrian writings. In this literature we find detailed descriptions of the soul's post-mortem journey. The *Hadokht Nask* of the *Young Avesta*, which is dated to the first half of the first millennium BCE, explains what happens after death. At the end of the third night, the soul of the faithful is met by a "maiden fair, bright, white-armed, strong, tall-formed, high-standing, thick-breasted, beautiful of body, noble, of a glorious seed, of the size of a maid in her fifteenth year, as fair as the fairest things in the world" (2.9).¹² As it turns out, this wonderful being is none other than the personification of the pure conscience of the faithful. *Hadokht Nask* continues: "And she, being his own conscience, answers him: 'O thou youth of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, of good religion, I am thy own conscience!' Everybody did love thee for that greatness, goodness, fairness, sweet-scentedness, victorious strength and freedom from sorrow, in which thou dost appear to me; 'And so thou, O youth of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, of good religion! didst love me for that greatness, goodness, fairness, sweet-scentedness, victorious strength, and freedom from sorrow, in which I appear to thee" (2.11-12).¹³ In other words, the deceased's own knowledge of good works, their own conscience, will determine their fate after death.

¹¹ Many manuscripts of the *Testament of Zebulon* lack almost the whole section from 6:4-8:3. Scholars are divided as to whether the longer or the shorter version is the original. For the originality of the longer version, see H.W. Hollander and M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (SVTP 8; Leiden: Brill, 1985) 253-254; R.A. Kugler, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 64. For the shorter version, see J. Becker, *Untersuchungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Testamente der zwölf Patriarchen* (AGJU 8; Leiden: Brill, 1970) 208; J.H. Ulrichsen, *Die Grundschrift der Testamente der zwölf Patriarchen: Eine Untersuchung zu Umfang, Inhalt und Eigenart der ursprünglichen Schrift* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Historia Religionum 10; Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1991) 96-97.

¹² All translations from the *Young Avesta* are taken from J. Darmesteter, ed. and trans., L.H. Mills, trans., *The Yasna, Visparad, Afrinagān, Gāhs, and Miscellaneous Fragments* (vol. 3 of *The Zend-Avesta*; The Sacred Books of the East; Oxford: Clarendon, 1895), as rendered on <http://www.avesta.org/fragment/hsbe.htm> (accessed 11/13/2007).

¹³ Similar descriptions are also found in the Pahlavi texts (written down in the 9th century CE but containing older traditions), *Dadistan-i Dinik* 24.1-6 and *Menoy Khrad* 2.114-139.

Self-confident claims before the heavenly judgment are also attested in the mystery religions. In the guide to a heavenly journey that is provided in the so-called “Mithras Liturgy,” the initiates are prepared for their encounter with the Pole Lords, who are responsible for punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous. The initiate is instructed to greet them with these words: “to me, who am pious and god-fearing, you send health and soundness of body and acuteness of hearing and seeing, and calmness in the present good hours of this day” (*PGM* 4:683-686).¹⁴ Faced with otherworldly judgment, the initiates may cite their piety and confidently expect a positive outcome.¹⁵

A similar attitude is in evidence in an epitaph from Bithynia. Although less detailed, an initiate of the Isis cult announces on his gravestone that he did not go to the dismal Acheron, but to the harbor of the blessed. His reputation among the followers of the cult serves to substantiate his claim.¹⁶

These very diverse accounts of attitudes toward divine judgment after death all differ clearly from Matthew’s judgment scene in their focus on the individual’s own knowledge of his righteousness and good works.

The Sermon on the Mount, Eschatological Judgment, and Reward

Nothing indicates that Matthew’s argument is directed specifically against any of these accounts, but the contrast between self-confident claims before God’s judgment and the helpless attitude of the righteous appears to have been of concern to him. The contrast between the blessed and the condemned is introduced in the Sermon on the Mount, which corresponds in important ways to the eschatological discourse in chapters 24-25 and shares its focus

¹⁴ Translation taken from H.D. Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 51.

¹⁵ Apuleius puts his professions of innocence in the mouth of the by-standers. Observing his return to human form, they proclaim: “It is doubtless because of the innocence and faithfulness of his past life that he has earned such remarkable patronage from heaven that he was in a matter reborn and immediately engaged to the service of her cult” (*Metamorphoses* 11.16; quoted from Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, vol. 2 [LCL 453; trans. J.A. Hanson; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989] 323).

¹⁶ S. Şahin, “Griechische Epigramme aus dem südlichen Propontisgebiet,” in *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren: Recueil d’études offert par les auteurs de la série Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain à Maarten J. Vermaseren à l’occasion de son soixantième anniversaire le 7 avril 1978*, vol. 3 (EPRO, eds. M.B. de Boer and T.A. Edridge; Leiden: Brill, 1978) 997-998.

on judgment.¹⁷ The self-confident attitude of the group that is condemned in 25:31-46 is anticipated in 7:21-23, where Jesus refers to the self-confident people who addressed him "Lord, Lord" and were proud of their impressive service.¹⁸ As we have seen, it appears that there was a widespread assumption that everyone needs to present their credentials when facing divine judgment. Matthew seems to be aware of this assumption, but he portrays it in a negative light.

Like the judgment scene in 25:31-46, the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount stresses that eschatological vindication is the result of right action (7:21-27).¹⁹ Even good works done in Jesus' name may be insufficient in the final judgment, as they do not necessarily qualify as doing the will of the Father in heaven (7:21). Not merely action, therefore, but right action is imperative.

The right action that is required in the Sermon on the Mount is an expression of the radical love command that Jesus teaches. By fulfilling this command, the disciples show themselves as children of their heavenly Father (5:45, 48). Fulfilling this commandment is only possible with the right attitude, the attitude that is described in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12).²⁰ These *makarisms* anticipate the eschatological judgment which resurfaces in the eschatological discourse in chapters 24-25. Matt 5:3 proleptically predicates the eschatological blessing, possession of the kingdom of heaven, of those who are poor in spirit.²¹ The Matthean version of this *makarism*

¹⁷ Several scholars have argued for a concentric structure of the Gospel of Matthew. See C.H. Lohr, "Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew," *CBQ* 23 (1961) 427; D.W. Gooding, "Structure littéraire de Matthieu, XIII, 53 à XVIII, 35," *RB* 85 (1978) 235; H.J.B. Combrink, "The Structure of the Gospel of Matthew as a Narrative," *TynBul* 34 (1983) 71. As these proposals are somewhat subjective, they have not commanded the assent of all scholars. The correspondence between the first and last of Matthew's discourses, however, is widely accepted. See G.N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992) 324.

¹⁸ F. Hahn, "Die eschatologische Rede Matthäus 24 und 25," *Studien zum Neuen Testament 1: Grundsatzfragen, Jesusforschung, Evangelien* (WUNT 191; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 490.

¹⁹ Luomanen, *Entering*, 97. Willi Marxsen quotes Matt 7:21 as evidence that a correct Christology is insufficient to ensure right action (*New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics* [trans. O.C. Dean, Jr.; Philadelphia, 1993] 239).

²⁰ Voss observes that the intention behind law observance, not only law observance itself, is critical to Matthew ("Der Lohn der guten Tat," 336).

²¹ H.D. Betz, "The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-12): Observations on Their Literary Form and Theological Significance," *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*

interprets poverty as a spiritual attitude (cf. Luke 6:20). It refers to those who recognize their status as beggars before God.²² Consequently, their attitude is characterized by humility.²³ (Cf. also 18:2-3 where entrance to the

(trans. L. L. Welborn; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 24, 26; J.D. Kingsbury, "The Place, Structure, and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount Within Matthew," *Int* 41 (1987) 138; D.C. Allison, Jr., *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (Companions to the New Testament; New York: Crossroad, 1999) 42.

²² Cf. M. Gourgues, "Sur l'articulation des béatitudes matthéennes (Mt 5:3-12): Une proposition," *NTS* 44 (1998) 346. The Greek πτωχός is a strong word for poverty. It refers to those who need to beg to make a living, as distinguished from those with limited means, the πέννης, who have to work (F. Hauck in F. Hauck and E. Bammel, "πτωχός κτλ," *TDNT* 6:886).

²³ G. Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (trans. P. Scott, eds. G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 123-124; J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, vol. 3 (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1973) 465; R.A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco: Word, 1982) 75; P. Stuhlmacher, "Jesu vollkommenes Gesetz der Freiheit: Zum Verständnis der Bergpredigt," *ZTK* 79 (1982) 289; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 233; J. Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, vol. 1 (HTKNT I/1; Freiburg: Herder, 1986) 121; Kingsbury, "Sermon on the Mount," 137-138; W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 444; Gourgues, "Béatitudes," 343-6. Dan Otto Via Jr. observes that the blessed in the first four *makarisms* are those who are aware of their emptiness and thus in the process of being filled (*Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990] 127).

In the history of interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, a minority interpretation has been to identify the poor in spirit with those who are internally detached from material possessions. Jan Lambrecht is a recent advocate of this view (*The Sermon on the Mount* [Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1985] 64-65). The poverty of Matt 5:3 is, however, contrasted with the attitude of those who are self-confident before the eschatological judgment (7:22; cf. below). A religious interpretation is therefore required.

Mark Allan Powell insists that the first four Beatitudes do not describe any attitudes of the blessed, only their unfortunate circumstances. His point is that the Beatitudes do not promise a reward for humility ("Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom," *CBQ* 58 [1996] 460-479). One gets the impression that the target of Powell's polemic is the modern notion of humility as a moral quality: the pleasant attitude of modesty and absence of cockiness. Powell's antithesis between attitude and circumstance also seems forced. The blessed ones in the Beatitudes are those in undesirable circumstances, and who therefore direct their hope to God, not to themselves. In the context of Matthew's Gospel, the characteristics of the blessed ones include their attitude, as the contrast with the self-confident attitude of the hypocrites shows. It is also unwarranted when Powell refuses to see the Beatitudes as a description of Jesus' disciples, referring to the shift from the third person to the second person in 5:11 and to the fact that Matthew's Jesus declares that some of God's blessings befall the world in general and are not restricted to disciples (5:45). But the blessings in 5:45 do not include entrance into the kingdom, and the shift from third to

eschatological kingdom is conditioned on becoming humble like a child.) The attitude of the blessed ones is further unpacked in the following *makarisms*. They mourn, realizing the state of imperfection in which they find themselves. Eschatological blessing is also predicated of the meek, those whose humble attitude is demonstrated in their lives as kindness.²⁴ Moreover, the blessed ones hunger and thirst for righteousness, pursuing a manifestation of the ethical standard that is required to enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20). Matthew's *makarisms* thus move from describing the fundamental spiritual orientation of the blessed ones to describing how this orientation comes to expression in attitude and action.²⁵

Those condemned in 25:41-46 and those in 7:21-23 both stand as the negative counterpart to the blessed one in 5:3. Those condemned are not beggars before God and the final judgment. They come with a claim and question the basis for the charges brought against them.²⁶ On the other hand, those acquitted in 25:34-40 come empty-handed, without a prepared defense, and their justification catches them by surprise. The good

second person in 5:11 does not merit such a conclusion. Whatever the tradition history of Matthew's Beatitudes, in the context of his Gospel, 5:11 is an elaboration on 5:10 (Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 107-108; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 242; Gnllka, *Matthäusevangelium*, vol. 1, 116; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 1, 460-461; H.D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: Including the Sermon on the Plain [Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49]* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995] 147).

²⁴ Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 82; G. Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1988) 36; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 236; H.B. Green, *Matthew, Poet of the Beatitudes* (JSNTSup 203; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 185.

²⁵ Betz ignores the theological orientation of the poverty in Matt 5:3, but observes that the attitude described is the starting point for ethics (*Sermon on the Mount*, 115). Kingsbury also stresses how the mind-set described in the *makarisms* is fundamental to the behavior described in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount ("Sermon on the Mount," 138).

Realizing one's own neediness is of fundamental significance for Matthew's soteriology. Cf. Barnet, who argues that Matthew intends for his audience to identify with the Pharisees, lacking integrity and wholehearted commitment to Jesus and his commandments. Thereby, the audience can realize their need and emulate the model characters in the Gospel, the Gentiles, who demonstrate faith, necessitated by their utter helplessness (*Not the Righteous*). Cf. also Barth, who points out that the helpless child (18:3-4, 6) serves as the paradigm for the disciple in Matthew ("Matthew's Understanding of the Law," 121-124).

Emphasizing the Beatitudes' character of gift, Allison maintains that the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount describes the difficult task grace enables the hearers to do (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 30-31).

²⁶ Via observes that the false prophets (7:21-22) and those on the left (25:41-44) both think they are in the right (*Self-Deception*, 95).

works that they evidently had done were not done with one eye on the eschatological judgment.²⁷ Rather, they had acted in accordance 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.” Those on the right side have not done their works of kindness to be seen by others, not even to be seen and remembered by themselves.²⁸ They walk confidently with their Lord and do not keep a record of good works, trusting that no such record is necessary, as they put their faith in the Lord.²⁹

Since the condemned manifest such a self-asserting attitude, it is no surprise that the works they cherish are works of power and authority (7:22-23). Jesus explains in Matthew’s Gospel that the nature of discipleship is the exact opposite of authority. Disciples are called to serve, and the first among them shall be the least (20:26-27; 23:11). The works that are commanded in the Sermon on the Mount are acts of love without regard for personal gain or comfort, even to the point of being self-degrading. This love turns the other cheek to the assailant, cooperates when plundered in court, and goes two miles when forced to go one (5:39-41).

Imitation of Jesus

The blessed person of the Beatitudes demonstrates the virtues that are perfectly exemplified by Jesus himself. In Matthew’s context, his last *makarisms* follow as a natural conclusion, therefore. Those who are praised are those who are so conformed to the model of their master that they are persecuted for his sake. Matthew’s Beatitudes thus introduce the important imitation

²⁷ François Vouga argues that inheritance of the kingdom in Matt 25:34 is not described as a reward, but as a result of the gracious blessing of the Father (“Gratuité et poétique du jugement dans l’évangile de Matthieu [Mt 25,31-46],” in *Analyse narrative et Bible: Deuxième Colloque international d’analyse narrative des textes de la Bible, Louvain-la-Neuve, avril 2004* [BETL 191; ed. C. Focant, Wénin; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005] 276-277).

²⁸ Cf. J.M. Court, “Right and Left: The Implications for Matthew 25:31-45,” *NTS* 31 (1985) 230; H. Kvalbein, *Matteusevangeliet*, vol. 2 (Oslo: Luther, 1998) 229. The sheep’s ignorance is thus a reflection of their pure heart, in accordance with the Matthean ideal (see below). Contra Via, who finds the sheep’s ignorance to be evidence of their deficiency (*Self-Deception*, 91).

²⁹ Cf. H.D. Betz, “The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest (Matt 11:28-30),” *JBL* 86 (1967) 24.

theme.³⁰ As Jesus is the light of those who live in darkness (4:15-16), so are the disciples the light of the world (5:14). As Jesus was persecuted, so will the disciples be (10:24-25). As Jesus died on the cross, so must the disciples deny their own self, take up their cross, and follow him (16:24). As Jesus came to serve (20:28), so must the greatest among the disciples serve the others (20:26-27). As the heavenly Father forgives sins, so must the disciples forgive (6:14-15; 18:21-35). This imitation theme is reflected in the judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46 as well.³¹ In their works of kindness towards the marginalized, those on Jesus' right side mirror the compassion Jesus is known to show to all those who suffer.

In Matt 11:28-30, the disciples are called to learn from Jesus' attitude, as he is meek and humble of heart. Through this description, Jesus stands as an example par excellence of the blessed person described in the *makarism* of Matt 5:5.³² To learn from him, one has to come to him with one's heavy burdens and find rest (11:28). Again, realizing one's need is fundamental to discipleship. Paradoxically, the rest that Jesus provides consists in taking his yoke upon oneself. This yoke most probably refers to Jesus' bringing the perfect law, the law that requires wholehearted love.³³ In the Gospel of Matthew, the gift and the task are intertwined.³⁴ There is an inextricable connection between coming to Jesus as a needy person and adopting Jesus' concern for the needy.

³⁰ Cf. W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1964) 98.

³¹ J.P. Heil, "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25.31-46," *JSNT* 69 (1998) 7.

³² Cf. Lambrecht, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 66; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 1, 449; Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 127. Martin Hengel also notes the Christological reference in Matt 5:3-5 ("Zur mathäischen Bergpredigt und ihrem jüdischen Hintergrund," *Kleine Schriften*, vol 2: *Judaica, Hellenistica et Christiana* [WUNT 109; M. Hengel; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999] 246).

³³ Davies, *The Setting*, 94.

³⁴ Many scholars conclude that the imperative presupposes the indicative in the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., Davies, *The Setting*, 98-99; Lambrecht, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 56; Talbert, "Indicative and Imperative," 534-538; Luz, *Studies in Matthew*, 136). Deines observes that it is Jesus who fulfills all righteousness and the law and the prophets. Thereby, the disciples are enabled to glorify their heavenly father (*Die Gerechtigkeit*, 180). Mohrlang finds that grace is presupposed throughout Matthew's Gospel, but it remains unstated. Nowhere does Matthew express the dependence of the imperative on the indicative (*Matthew and Paul*, 80). For a recent discussion, see Luomanen, *Entering*.

Luomanen finds the function of Matthew's Jesus primarily to be that of enabling obedience to the law of God (*Entering*, 285). He notes that this obedience is only possible

Purity from the Heart

Accordingly, the Gospel of Matthew frequently expresses the conviction that the righteousness of the disciples is a result of an internal quality, a pure heart.³⁵ In this respect, the disciples are contrasted with the hypocrites, who look nice on the outside, but whose inside is full of the bones of the dead (23:27). To become clean on the outside, it is necessary first to make sure the inside is clean (23:26). This motif also explains the conflict over purity laws. Impurity is not an external matter, but a matter of the heart. A human being can therefore not become unclean by what comes in through the mouth. Only what goes out of the mouth makes a human being unclean (15:11). The reason is that what comes out of the mouth, comes from the heart (15:18-19). A good tree bears good fruit (7:16-20; 12:33-35).³⁶

The fundamental virtue, essential if other virtues are expected to follow, can also be described as generosity. Jesus insists that a healthy eye—a Jewish idiom for generosity (cf. Sir 14:9-10; 31:13)—is the necessary presupposition for the goodness of a human being.³⁷ An evil eye ruins the whole person (6:22-23).

The warning against the evil eye recurs in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16). Matthew places this parable immediately after

through following Jesus. He also observes the failure of the rich young man to approach Jesus in the right way, as he acknowledges him as teacher and not as Lord (ibid., 145, 155). Perhaps as a result of focusing on select texts rather than the progression of Matthew's narrative, Luomanen ignores the importance of coming to Jesus as the needy one. Cf. the critique of D.J. Versepunt, "Review of Petri Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew's View of Salvation*," *JBL* 119 (2000) 137.

Marxsen goes so far as to contend that the indicative does not inform Matthew's imperative at all. He focuses exclusively on Jesus' teaching, especially the immediate context of Matt 5:20 (vv. 17-19), and concludes that the greater righteousness is quantitatively greater, consisting of more deeds than the Pharisees' (*Ethics*, 237-239). Marxsen neglects the fundamental significance of the Beatitudes for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

For a one-sided emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount as demand, see H. Windisch, *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der richtigen Exegese* (UNT 16; Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1929) 130-132.

³⁵ Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, vol. 3, 271; Green, *Matthew, Poet of the Beatitudes*, 239-240; Talbert, "Indicative and Imperative," 536.

³⁶ Cf. Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul*, 52.

³⁷ D.C. Allison, Jr., "The Eye is the Lamp of the Body (Matthew 6:22-23 = Luke 11:34-36)," *NTS* 33 (1987) 76-77.

Jesus' promise to the disciples that they will receive their reward for the sacrifices they have made in this life (19:28-29). The parable functions as a rejoinder to the question of eschatological reward³⁸ and explains the gracious character of the reward, as the landowner afforded all the workers a full day's pay, even those who only worked for one hour. This principle of compensation makes for a surprise effect in this parable. The parable in *Sifra* to Leviticus 26:9 describes the normal procedure: everyone is compensated according to the amount of work they have done.³⁹ As the concluding warning shows, this unusual compensation principle demonstrates the generosity of the landowner (20:15).⁴⁰

In the parable, those who had worked the whole day are not presented as positive examples.⁴¹ The landowner's generosity caused them to grumble. He therefore asks them the probing question: Is your eye evil because I am good? (20:15b). The disciples' question regarding eschatological reward is thereby answered with a warning: as you look forward to the eschatological reward, be prepared to see it be given to people you feel do not deserve it as well as you. Beware that you do not begrudge them! The implicit exhortation to Matthew's audience is that the eschatological reward must be anticipated with a generous attitude. They must joyfully accept God's generosity and participate in his pleasure in showing his openhandedness to those who do not fully deserve it.⁴²

³⁸) Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, 68; A.J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 41; U. Luz, *Matthew 8-20* (Hermeneia; trans. W.C. Linss; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 525.

³⁹) It has been suggested that Matthew's parable was a conscious alteration of an original Jewish parable preserved in *Sifra* to Leviticus 26:9. More likely, they both relate to a common master-servant theme in Jewish parables. Cf. A.B. Taylor, "The Master-Servant Type Scene in the Parables of Jesus," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1989) 295.

⁴⁰) Similarly, Hultgren, *Parables*, 40, 42-43. Luise Schottroff objects, noting how the parable reflects the oppressive economic practices of the Roman empire. The payment of one whole denarius, not enough money to feed a family for a day, would not be a fitting image of the mercy of the heavenly Father (*The Parables of Jesus* [trans. L.M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005] 210-216). These problems disappear when it is acknowledged that the primary purpose of the parable is not to describe God's grace, but to present the attitude of the grumbling workers as a warning example.

⁴¹) Hultgren points out that the address ἐταῖρε is not used with positive connotations in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 22:12; 26:50) (*Parables*, 39).

⁴²) Davies and Allison take the point of the parable to be that "the promise of reward should not become a ground upon which to stand" (*Matthew*, vol. 3, 68; similarly J. Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, vol. 2 [HTKNT I/2; Freiburg: Herder, 1988] 182; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*,

The parable of the king and the unforgiving slave (18:23-35) makes a similar point. The king shows the servant unlimited mercy in canceling the debt of ten thousand talents. This act of magnanimity makes no impression on the servant, however, and he brutalizes his fellow to make him pay a debt of 100 denarii. Consequently, the king's act of generosity is reversed, and the message is that God's forgiveness will only benefit those who show mercy towards others.

Implications

If the interpretation indicated above is broadly correct, it can now be seen to corroborate the inclusive interpretation of "all the nations" (25:32) and "the least" (25:40, 45). With respect to the scope of judgment, the major question is whether "all the nations" is intended to include the Christian community or not.⁴³ My interpretation has presupposed that

534). Jeremiah thinks the original parable was addressed to the murmurers, the Pharisees, who did not accept the message of good news that Jesus was proclaiming (*Parables*, 38).

⁴³ Some scholars also think that Jews must be excluded when Matthew refers to "all the nations." For an overview of the different views of the scope of judgment, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, 422; U. Luz, *Matthew 21-28* (Hermeneia; trans. J.E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 267-274. The majority interpretation now seems to be that the judgment here described is universal, befalling all humanity. Although ἔθνη typically refers to those outside the community (6:32; 24:9, 14; 28:19), the contextual arguments in favor of an inclusive judgment weigh more heavily.

Stanton has provided a staunch defense for the interpretation that this judgment befalls non-Christians only. His main argument is that the passage is apocalyptic and should therefore be understood as assurance of the final vindication of its audience (*Studies in Matthew*, 212-230). Although the passage clearly contains apocalyptic elements, it is unwarranted to allow this observation exclusively to determine the function of the passage, overruling all the clear, contextual evidence of a paraenetic function. Moreover, Stanton's attempt at reading the passage in the light of Jewish apocalypics is unsuccessful. The judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46 clearly envisions two options for those assembled: vindication or condemnation. Apocalyptic vindication texts typically hold out only one option for those outside its community: damnation. The texts quoted by Stanton confirm this picture (Joel 3:1-3; 4 *Ezra* 7:37-38; 1 *En.* 62:9-12; 104:3-4). In 2 *Bar.* 72:2-73:1 (which is from late 1st century) some of the nations will be spared, not based on their deeds, but after they have become subject to God's people. Jewish apocalyptic texts therefore do not offer a real parallel to Matt 25:31-46, interpreted as concerning those outside the community. Christian apocalyptic writings are arguably not exclusively intended to comfort the believers, but may also contain warning and exhortations to repent. Cf. R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 15-16.

this judgment scene reflects differences within the church, between the true disciples and the hypocrites. "All nations" can therefore not be restricted to non-Christians, but must have a universal reference. Literary arguments favor this view. The theme of judgment is central to the Gospel of Matthew, and the function of the judgment theme is almost always paraenetic, to warn of the coming judgment and to inspire right action.⁴⁴ This function is especially clear in the speeches in Matthew, where the disciples are warned of future judgment in 5:21-30; 7:13-14, 21-27; 13:24-30; 36-43, 47-50; 18:8-9, 23-35; 24:51. Reward in the future judgment is also offered as a source of motivation for Jesus' disciples in 16:27; 19:29. Most significantly, those condemned in 25:41-45 are described as belonging to the church. They address the king as "Lord" (25:44), which is a designation that the Gospel of Matthew only reports on the lips of disciples and individuals aspiring to be disciples.⁴⁵

The account of the last judgment functions as a summary of Jesus' message in chs. 24-25, if not the whole section from 16:21. Part of the purpose of this section is to demonstrate to the readers that discipleship means suffering and servanthood (16:24-25; 20:25-28).⁴⁶ In the eschatological discourse, the disciples are exhorted to be ready for the second coming, a coming that entails a judgment where the true will be separated from the false, as forewarned in 7:21-23; 13:24-30; 36-43. In his account of Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, Matthew has also emphasized how the final judgment directly affects the church. He is the only evangelist that has included the account of the man without wedding clothes who was ejected from the banquet (22:11-13; cf. Luke 14:16-24).⁴⁷

A universal interpretation of "the least" is strengthened when the passage is read in light of the imitation of Jesus theme. The scholarly discussion regarding this term centers around whether it is limited to Christian missionaries or all Christians or whether it includes all marginalized human

⁴⁴ Marguerat, *Jugement*, 487; Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul*, 48-50.

⁴⁵ Cf. Matt 7:21-22; 8:2, 6, 8, 21, 25; 9:28; 14:28, 30; 15:22, 25, 27; 16:22; 17:4, 15; 18:21; 20:30, 31, 33; 25:11; 25:37; 26:22. I am grateful to Dorothy Jean Weaver for this observation.

⁴⁶ J.D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 78.

⁴⁷ It is difficult, however, to limit the judgment in Matt 25:31-46 to the church. Those assembled are πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (v. 32) and the literary context in chs. 24-25 prepares the audience for a universal reference. Cf. Heil, "Universal Judgment," 5.

beings.⁴⁸ Significantly, the acts of the vindicated ones reflect their imitation of Jesus. Jesus was the light that shone beyond the recognized boundaries of the people of God (4:13-16). He pronounced the disciples to be the light of the world (κόσμος) and called them to let their light shine for human beings in general (5:14-16).

Despite the limitations of Jesus' earthly ministry (10:5; 15:24), he frequently demonstrated that his acts of mercy also intended to break the boundaries between Jew and Gentile (8:10-13; 15:28; cf. 4:15; 12:18-21; 21:43; 24:14; 28:19). Since Matthew understands the disciples to continue Jesus' ministry, it is intrinsically likely that he would understand their acts of mercy as boundary-breaking as well, not limiting them to members of the community.

This is all the more so when it is recalled that Matthew's Jesus extends the love command so that it applies to one's enemies (5:43-48). It is in the context of the love command that the use of the term in 25:40 must be understood. True, this word is frequently used with reference to Christians (12:48-50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10). But in the Sermon on the Mount, where the term is used in the context of the love command, the scope is most likely wider. It refers to one's duties to other people in general (5:22-24; 7:3-5).⁴⁹

⁴⁸) For an overview of interpretations and arguments, see S.W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25. 31-46: A History of Interpretation* (SBLDS 114; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 3, 428-429; Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 267-274.

The main argument for a restrictive interpretation is the frequent use of ἀδελφός (12:48-50; 18:15, 21, 35; 23:8; 28:10) and μικρός (10:42; 11:11; 18:6, 10, 14) referring to Christians. This last observation is less than compelling, as the superlative ἐλάχιστος is used here.

Heil sees a progression in the narrative in the use of "little" and "least." From identifying the disciples as his true family in 12:49-50, Jesus now includes even the least as his brothers and sisters in 25:40 ("Universal Judgment," 9).

⁴⁹) Similarly, C. Niemand, "Matthäus 25,31-46 universal oder exklusiv? Rekonstruktion der ursprünglichen Textintention im Spannungsfeld moderner Wertaxiome," in *Patrimonium fidei: Traditionsgeschichtliches Verstehen am Ende? Festschrift für Magnus Löhrer und Pius Ramon Tragan* (Studia Anselmiana 124; eds. M. Perroni and E. Salmann; Rome: Pont Ateneo S Anselmo, 1997) 295. For 5:22-24 as a command regarding love for fellow human beings in general, see W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (THKNT 1; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968) 155-156; E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. D.E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 119; Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 65-66; D.A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Waco: Word, 1993) 116; C.S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 185;

The decisive argument in favor of an inclusive interpretation, however, is the rhetorical function of the judgment scene. In the preceding two parables, the audience of the story is encouraged to identify with the wise bridesmaids (25:1-13) and the wise stewards (25:14-30). In the final judgment scene, the audience is similarly invited to identify with the righteous on the right.⁵⁰ As in the other parables, the implicit exhortation to the church is to be ready for judgment.

The climax of the story is the surprise rationale for judgment: what you did or did not do to one of the least, you did to the Son of Man (25:40, 45). This rationale is phrased as a saying in the second person, directed to those being judged. With such a climax, the story's likely rhetorical effect on the audience is that they hear this second person address as directed to themselves. They have the advantage, however, of hearing this verdict as a forewarning. They are not brought forth to the last judgment yet; they are given a preview of it. The second person address functions as an implicit

Green, *Matthew, Poet of the Beatitudes*, 217. Davies and Allison are undecided as to whether ἀδελφός is intended as a general reference or specifically refers to Christians. They note the references to the Sanhedrin (5:22), the altar (5:23-24), and prison (5:25-26), which do not seem appropriate if the command is intra-communal. The spirit of 5:38-48 would also point beyond a reference to believers. On the other hand, they compare with 1QS 6:24-7:14, where "brother" refers to a member of the community (*Matthew*, vol. 1, 512-513). But the love command in the antitheses clearly extends further than that of the Qumran community, as the sixth antithesis shows: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:43-44). The closest parallel to the idea corrected here is found in 1QS 1:9-11 (cf. *ibid.*, 549-550). A comparison with Qumran can therefore not be an argument for a restrictive interpretation of the term ἀδελφός.

Luz takes ἀδελφός to refer to a fellow Christian (*Matthew 1-7*, 288; similarly R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 84; Gnllka, *Matthäusevangelium*, vol. 1, 154). Betz notes that ἀδελφός may be used both for fellow Christians and fellow Jews, and takes the verses as teaching that love begins with the closest relationships (*Sermon on the Mount*, 219-220; similarly Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount*, 189-190).

⁵⁰ Similarly, U. Wilckens, "Gottes geringste Brüder—zu Mt 25,31-46," in *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70. Geburtstag* (eds. E.E. Ellis and E. Grasser; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 367-372. So also Heil, who goes on to suggest that when Jesus identifies himself with the least ones, the audience is invited to identify with them as well ("Universal Judgment," 7-11). But in light of the paraenetic function of this whole section, it is better to see the identification of Jesus and the poor as an incentive to action. They are encouraged to see—not themselves—but Jesus in those who suffer.

exhortation: do these acts of kindness to the needy, because what you do to them, you do to the Son of Man.

Conclusion

The judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46 is a fitting conclusion to the teaching on judgment throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Those who are completely dependent on Christ for their salvation will come to him and learn from his mind-set of generosity. Their attitudes and works will correspond. Freely receiving their salvation from the grace of Christ, they are not concerned with justifying themselves.⁵¹ Instead, they are preoccupied with emulating the generosity and boundary-breaking acts of mercy that Jesus has modeled.

The Gospel of Matthew seems to be more concerned with good works in the final judgment than any other writing in the New Testament (with the possible exception of the epistle of James). Good works are not merely works, however.⁵² They spring out of an attitude characterized by dependency and generosity. Jesus' true disciples are dependent as beggars upon his grace, and, from the encounter with that grace, they have learned to emulate his generosity.

The judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46 brings together the characteristics of the true disciples in a rhetorically powerful story. The ones on the right hand side of the Son of Man have imitated Christ in his good works towards the needy, knowing no limits to the exercise of their mercy. The righteous are also blissfully ignorant of their own merits. Their ignorance betrays the attitude that Matthew predicates of the righteous throughout his Gospel. They trust in God and they do not do their good works for the purpose of self-justification. Thus, they are distinguished from the false disciples and the hypocrites, who wear their good works on their sleeve.

⁵¹) Jacques Schlosser observes that possession of the kingdom is the result of inheritance, dependent on the gracious initiative of God (*Le règne de Dieu dans les dits de Jésus*, vol. 2 [EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1980] 576).

⁵²) Pace Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 289.