

# **DRAFT**

## **Short Bible Study**

# **Is Matthew 25:31-46 a Spiritual or Literal Parable?**

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Version 1.0**

## **Introductory Comments**

Matthew 25 contains three parables of which the third contains concepts obviously central to Christian behaviours, spiritual growth and salvation.

In the first instance, let us have a read of this Scriptural lesson prior to the discussion:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.  
Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.  
And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.  
Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.  
For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'  
Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?  
And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?  
And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'  
And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'  
"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.  
For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'  
Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'  
Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'  
And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Secondly, I am not going to go through the parable to explain every aspect of it – there are many fine works that have been published about the parable over the decades and a duplication of these academic efforts is not needed.

What provoked by recent study on this aspect of the parable is the assertion I have heard several times over the years that it is chiefly metaphorical. Such thinking is devoid of understanding.

Multi-layering or duality or pertaining to more than one time period is the Hebraic way of expression.

The narrative, often labelled as a "parable" due to its shepherding terminology, presents a scenario that appears quite tangible. Jesus employs two additional parables to emphasize the necessity of being prepared for His return after His departure in this chapter. His disciples are encouraged to actively serve Him during their period of waiting.

So, in Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus articulates a profound judgment that will occur upon His return as King, accompanied by His angels, when He assumes His throne. He will categorise those being judged into two distinct groups: "sheep" and "goats." The sheep will be received with approval for their service to those in need, while the goats will be cast away into the terrifying lake of fire, condemned for their failure to assist the needy both physically and spiritually.

The good deeds referenced in the parable are not the basis for salvation but rather the manifestation of it, after all, salvation is a free gift and not something that can be earned. As Christians, we are transformed to reflect Christ (refer to Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and Colossians 2:6-7) and to become like God Himself – that is to put on His characteristics as summarised by the Law, Beatitudes, Fruit of the Spirit, Gifts of the spirit and other Godly aspects.

Galatians 5:22 indicates that the fruit of the Spirit encompasses love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. The good works evident in a Christian's life stem directly from these qualities and are deemed acceptable to God due to the relationship between the servant and the Master and Savior, the sheep and their Shepherd (see Ephesians 2:10). The fundamental message of the Parable of the Sheep and Goats is that God's people will exhibit love towards others and that good works will naturally arise from our connection to the Shepherd. Followers of Christ will engage with others compassionately, serving them as though they were serving Christ Himself. In contrast, those who are not exhibiting these qualities -with empathy - behave oppositely. Although "goats" may perform acts of kindness and charity, their hearts remain estranged from God.

It is therefore self-evident from this passage that Christians are collectively and individually called to assist those who are in need. The collective must be organised at congregational level by the elders and deacons/deaconesses. On an individual level should feel compelled to acknowledge the suffering of individuals facing hunger, thirst, lack of clothing, homelessness, illness, or in jail (whether legitimately or due to false arrest).

Of course, there is a spiritual aspect to this. Hunger is used as a metaphor for something only God Himself can fill via His Word (Matt 5:6); thirst can be a metaphor for needing the water of the holy spirit; lack of clothing can refer to lacking righteous standing before God; homelessness refers to being without a spiritual home and spiritually fatherless; illness to spiritual sicknesses; and being in jail has reference to constraints placed on people by Satan and his demons such as 'strongholds' some people suffer in their lives.

## Charitable Works

Many non-Church of God groups undertake a vast amount of good works in education, visiting those in need, publishing and distributing Bibles, welfare, food distribution, housing and such like. Without them, the world would be a worse place. Their function is admirable but is not the Gospel.

The Church of God is so small (Luke 12:32) and consequently its good works program is tiny in comparison to non-Church of God groups and organisations, but this does not mean it should be abandoned or watered-down. However, its primary focus is to proclaim the True Gospel that the Messiah will solve all the problems and usher in a world of peace and security; and to feed and train His flock.

Our labor is not solely for our own sustenance and that of our dependents; it is also intended to enable us to provide for those who are less fortunate, as highlighted in Hebrews 13:1-3. We collaborate with others to identify ways to support those who lack the essential resources of life that many of us often take for granted. If we take Jesus' teachings in this context seriously, we may find that the impact of our charitable actions is greater than we initially perceive. While Jesus does not specify the exact means by which the sheep assisted those in need, it is likely that their contributions such as everyday tasks and acts of kindness such as cultivating and preparing food and beverages, aiding new colleagues in acclimating to their roles, and engaging in the design, production, and sale of clothing. All forms of legitimate work ultimately serve individuals who require the goods and services produced, thereby fulfilling a service to Jesus as well.

[NB: those who interpret Matt 25 to be mainly metaphorical, are not saying that Christians should not practice charitable works, but that they downplay this, in particular with regard to these passages. The question is *Why?*]

In this context, the argument is that Isaiah 61 somehow proves their point. But does it?

Isaiah 61 has application to both literal and metaphorical.

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me **to bring good news to the poor;** he has sent me to **bind up the brokenhearted**, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the **opening of the prison** to those who are bound; to **proclaim the year of the Lord's favor**, and the day of vengeance of our God; to **comfort all who mourn**; to grant to those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, **the garment of praise** instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks; foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers ...” (Is 61:1-5 only, ESV)

The context presented in Isaiah 61 bears a remarkable resemblance to the theme of a future Second Exodus, as it pertains to the return from the Babylonian Captivity. This event holds considerable importance in the history of the Israelites, comparable to that of the original Exodus. Isaiah addressed a populace that had endured significant hardship during the Babylonian exile, a period marked by suffering. He brings a message of hope, announcing the arrival of the Messiah, who will deliver the blessings of God – the proclamation of the The Gospel.

Like so much of Scripture (and the Hebrew way of expression – like so many languages), literal and metaphorical are intertwined. Dual application is possible. This is Theology 101!

It is also a type of our spiritual Exodus as well as Christ's future rescuing of Israel in the Second Exodus, at His coming.

Thus, to say or imply very strongly that this passage is spiritual or metaphorical only, is simply not correct. It is a prophecy for the Second Exodus and the restitution granted Israel upon repentance which includes global rulership under the Messiah and His saints.

What many do not realise, is that Christ's First Coming contained many typologies of His Second Coming. See the chart [First Century Fulfilment of Prophecy as a Type of the End Time](#) for further information.

### **What Commentaries Reveal**

There are plenty of research materials that can assist with understanding and interpreting this passage, with aligns with traditional Church of God understanding.

Below is a selection of such research by people who specialise in these areas of Scripture. These assist us to understand the meaning of this passage and they show it is both literal and metaphorical as is the case with much of Scripture – in other words it is multi-layered.

#### **Benson Commentary**

**Matthew 25:35-36.** *I was a hungered, and ye gave me meat, &c.* — All the works of outward mercy here mentioned suppose faith and love, and must needs be accompanied with works of spiritual mercy, such as instructing the ignorant, alarming the careless, encouraging the disconsolate, comforting the distressed, strengthening the weak, confirming the wavering, reclaiming the wicked, edifying the righteous. But works of this kind could not be mentioned by the Judge in the same manner: he could not say, I was ignorant, and you instructed me; I was in error, and you recalled me to the truth; I was in sin, and you brought me to repentance. But how astonishing is it to hear the great Judge declaring, that all the good offices which men have ever performed, supposing they performed them in obedience to his will, and with a single eye to his glory, were done to him! It is as if he had said, "In the whole of your conduct you have imitated the goodness and benevolence of my Father, and therefore I now declare you blessed and beloved of him, and appoint you to inherit this kingdom. Moreover, that you may know how acceptable acts of kindness and charity are to me, I assure you that I reckon every thing of this kind as done to myself. It was I who was a hungered and athirst, and a stranger and naked, and sick and in prison. It was I whom you clothed and lodged, and visited and comforted in prison." The word **επεσκεψασθε**, rendered, *ye visited*, properly signifies to *take the oversight and care* of any thing that requires diligent inspection and attendance; (compare [James 1:27](#);) and it strongly intimates that such an attendance on the poor in their illness is a very acceptable charity: and this is what many may have an opportunity of doing, who have very little money to spare.

#### **Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers**

(35) **I was an hungred.**—The passage furnishes six out of the list of the seven corporal works of mercy in Christian ethics, the seventh being found in the care and nurture of the fatherless.

#### **Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary**

25:31-46 This is a description of the last judgment. It is as an explanation of the former parables. There is a judgment to come, in which every man shall be sentenced to a state of everlasting

happiness, or misery. Christ shall come, not only in the glory of his Father, but in his own glory, as Mediator. The wicked and godly here dwell together, in the same cities, churches, families, and are not always to be known the one from the other; such are the weaknesses of saints, such the hypocrisies of sinners; and death takes both: but in that day they will be parted for ever. Jesus Christ is the great Shepherd; he will shortly distinguish between those that are his, and those that are not. All other distinctions will be done away; but the great one between saints and sinners, holy and unholy, will remain for ever. The happiness the saints shall possess is very great. It is a kingdom; the most valuable possession on earth; ... It is a kingdom prepared. The Father provided it for them in the greatness of his wisdom and power; the Son purchased it for them; and the blessed Spirit, in preparing them for the kingdom, is preparing it for them. It is prepared for them: it is in all points adapted to the new nature of a sanctified soul. It is prepared from the foundation of the world. This happiness was for the saints, and they for it, from all eternity. They shall come and inherit it. What we inherit is not got by ourselves. It is God that makes heirs of heaven. We are not to suppose that acts of bounty will entitle to eternal happiness. Good works done for God's sake, through Jesus Christ, are here noticed as marking the character of believers made holy by the Spirit of Christ, and as the effects of grace bestowed on those who do them. The wicked in this world were often called to come to Christ for life and rest, but they turned from his calls; and justly are those bid to depart from Christ, that would not come to him. Condemned sinners will in vain offer excuses. The punishment of the wicked will be an everlasting punishment; their state cannot be altered. Thus life and death, good and evil, the blessing and the curse, are set before us, that we may choose our way, and as our way so shall our end be.

#### **Barnes' Notes on the Bible**

I was an hungered - The union between Christ and his people is the most tender and endearing of all connections. It is represented by the closest unions of which we have knowledge, [John 15:4-6](#); [Ephesians 5:23-32](#); [1 Corinthians 6:15](#). This is a union - not physical, but moral; a union of feelings, interests, plans, destiny; or, in other words, he and his people have similar feelings, love the same objects, share the same trials, and inherit the same blessedness, [John 14:19](#); [Revelation 3:5](#), [Revelation 3:21](#); [Romans 8:17](#). Hence, he considers favors shown to his people as shown to himself, and will reward them accordingly, [Matthew 10:40](#), [Matthew 10:42](#). They show attachment to him, and love to his cause. By showing kindness to the poor, the needy, and the sick, they show that they possess his spirit, for he did it when on earth; they evince attachment to him, for he was poor and needy; and they show that they have the proper spirit to outfit them for heaven, [1 John 3:14](#), [1 John 3:17](#); [James 2:1-5](#); [Mark 9:41](#).

Was a stranger - The word "stranger" means a foreigner or traveler; in our language, one unknown to us. To receive such to the rites of hospitality was, in Eastern countries, where there were few or no public houses, a great virtue. See [Genesis 18:1-8](#); [Hebrews 8:2](#).

Took me in - Into your house. Received me kindly.

Naked - Poorly clothed. Among the Jews they were called "naked" who were clad in poor raiment, or who had on only the "tunic" or inner garment, without any outer garment. See the [Matthew 5:40](#) note; also [Acts 19:16](#) note; [Mark 14:51-52](#) notes; [Job 22:6](#) note; [Isaiah 58:7](#) note.

#### **Expositor's Greek Testament**

[Matthew 25:35](#). **ἐπείνασα, ἐδίψησα, ξένος ἦμην**: hungry, thirsty, a stranger. The claims created by these situations are universally recognised though often neglected; to respond to them is a duty of "common humanity".—**συνηγάγετέ με**, ye received me (into your house) (*cf.* [Jdg 19:18](#),—**οὐκ ἔστιν ἀνὴρ συνάγων με εἰς οἰκίαν**) Meyer, Weiss, and others, with stricter adherence to the literal meaning of the word, render: ye gathered me into the bosom of your family; Fritzsche: ye admitted me to your table ("simul convivio adhibuistis").

I was an hungred, equivalent to "very hungry" (Matthew 12:1). Christ enumerates the chief of what are called the corporal works of mercy, omitting burial of the dead (see on ver. 36). We may note here an argument **a fortiori**: if such simple acts (comp. Matthew 10:42) meet with so great a reward, what shall be the portion of those who are enabled to rise to more perfect obedience and higher degrees of devotion and self-sacrifice? Ye took me in (συνηγάγεσε με) **i.e.** into your houses, received me with hospitality, or as one of your own family. We have instances of such hospitality in Genesis 18:3; Judges 19:20, 21; and of this use of the verb συνάγειν in 2 Samuel 11:27, Septuagint. Why Christ speaks of himself as receiving these ministrations is explained in ver. 40. Matthew 25:35

### **Similar Scriptures or Concepts**

A good Bible student would be humble enough to seek expert 'advice' by reviewing at least some of what the specialists publish; understand Biblical duality; and cross-reference with similar Scriptures.

Below are certain concepts distributed throughout God's Word that we can draw upon to understand Matthew 25 plus using exegesis. The interpretation is therefore self-evident.

#### **Vincent's Word Studies**

Ye took me in (συνηγαγετέ με)

Tynd., I was harbourless and ye lodged me. The preposition and implies along with. Ye took me with you into the household circle.

#### **Job 31:32**

but no stranger had to lodge on the street, for my door has been open to the traveler—

#### **Isaiah 58:7**

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your home, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

#### **Ezekiel 18:7**

He does not oppress another, but returns his pledge to the debtor. He does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing.

#### **Ezekiel 18:16**

He does not oppress another, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery. He gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing.

#### **Romans 12:13**

Share with the saints who are in need. Practice hospitality.

#### **Hebrews 13:2**

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

#### **James 2:15**

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

#### **James 2:16**

If one of you tells him, "Go in peace; stay warm and well fed," but does not provide for his physical needs, what good is that?

### **Treasury of Scripture Knowledge**

#### ***I was an.***

Matthew 25:40 And the King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.'

Matthew 10:40-42 He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives the One who sent Me. . . .

Matthew 26:11 The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have Me.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 If there is a poor man among your brothers within any of the gates in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you are not to harden your heart or shut your hand from your poor brother. . . .

Job 29:13-16 The dying man blessed me, and I made the widow's heart sing for joy. . . .

Job 31:16-21 If I have denied the desires of the poor or allowed the widow's eyes to fail, . . .

Psalms 112:5-10 It is well with the man who is generous and lends freely, whose affairs are guided by justice. . . .

Proverbs 3:9, 10 Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your harvest; . . .

Proverbs 11:24, 25 One gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds what is right, only to become poor. . . .

Proverbs 14:21, 31 He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who shows kindness to the poor. . . .

Proverbs 19:17 Kindness to the poor is a loan to the LORD, and He will repay the lender.

Proverbs 22:9 A generous man will be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.

Ecclesiastes 11:1, 2 Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. . . .

Isaiah 58:7-11 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your home, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? . . .

Ezekiel 18:7, 16 He does not oppress another, but returns his pledge to the debtor. He does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing. . . .

Daniel 4:27 Therefore, may my advice be pleasing to you, O king. Break away from your sins by doing what is right, and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed. Perhaps there will be an extension of your prosperity."

Micah 6:8 He has shown you, O mankind, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Mark 14:7 The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them whenever you want. But you will not always have Me.

Luke 11:41 But give as alms the things that are within you, and you will see that everything is clean for you.

Luke 14:12-14 Then Jesus said to the man who had invited Him, "When you host a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or brothers or relatives or rich neighbors. Otherwise, they may invite you in return, and you will be repaid. . . .

John 13:29 Since Judas kept the money bag, some thought that Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the feast, or to give something to the poor.

Acts 4:32 The congregation of believers was one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they owned.

Acts 9:36-39 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which is translated as Dorcas), who was always occupied with works of kindness and charity. . . .

Acts 10:31 and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been remembered before God.'

Acts 11:29 So the disciples, each according to his ability, decided to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 7-9 Now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace God has given the churches of Macedonia. . . .

2 Corinthians 9:7-14 Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not out of regret or compulsion. For God loves a cheerful giver. . . .

Ephesians 4:28 He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing good with his own hands, that he may have something to share with the one in need.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be conceited and not to put their hope in the uncertainty of wealth, but in God, who richly provides all things for us to enjoy. . . .

Philemon 1:7 I take great joy and encouragement in your love, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Hebrews 6:10 God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown for His name as you have ministered to the saints and continue to do so.

Hebrews 13:16 And do not neglect to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

James 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

1 Peter 4:9, 10 Show hospitality to one another without complaining. . . .

1 John 3:16-19 By this we know what love is: Jesus laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. . . .

***thirsty.***

Matthew 25:42 For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink,

Proverbs 25:21 If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

Romans 12:20 On the contrary, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head."

***I was a.***

Matthew 25:43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, I was naked and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'

Genesis 18:2-8 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. . . .

Genesis 19:1-3 The two angels entered Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When Lot saw them, he got up to meet them, bowed with his face to the ground, . . .

Acts 16:15 And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Romans 12:13 Share with the saints who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Romans 16:23 Gaius, who has hosted me and all the church, sends you greetings. Erastus, the city treasurer, sends you greetings, as does our brother Quartus.

1 Timothy 5:10 and well known for good deeds such as bringing up children, entertaining strangers, washing the feet of the saints, imparting relief to the afflicted, and devoting herself to every good work.

Hebrews 13:1-3 Continue in brotherly love. . . .

1 Peter 4:9 Show hospitality to one another without complaining.

3 John 1:5-8 Beloved, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, and especially since they are strangers to you. . . .



## **Final Comments**

The problem we all have is an eisegesis rather than exegesis approach.

Eisegesis refers to the interpretation of a text that is influenced by personal biases rather than an objective analysis. The term itself translates to "to lead into," indicating that the interpreter imposes their own concepts onto the text, thereby distorting its intended meaning.

Exegesis is a technique employed to interpret pertinent passage, focusing on extracting the meaning directly from the text. This interpretative approach entails a thorough examination of the immediate context and also the historical, cultural, linguistic, and literary contexts surrounding the Scripture to grasp the original intent of the author.

The Church of God has always understood these passages correctly and their dual application. Here are one example: <https://www.ucg.org/watch/beyond-today/lessons-matthew-25-34>

None of us have special inspiration that overrules basic Scriptural interpretation methodology. Eisegesis, in contrast, emphasizes the validation of a specific argument, frequently overlooking the true meaning of the words employed.