

What does it mean to be a Christian? One definition might include inviting people to walk the aisle and make a profession of faith. Then, we would baptize them, and that is what it takes to *make* a Christian. Except, the Bible says something different. Romans 10:9 sets forth this pattern of profession followed by salvation. Yet, in Matthew 7:21, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” In James 1:29, true religion is taking care of widows and orphans. Micah 6:8 answers the question about what God requires of us, saying God requires us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.”

Matthew 25:31-46 presents another version of this basis for salvation. John A. T. Robinson writes, “The vision of the Last Judgment with which St Matthew concludes so magnificently the teaching ministry of Jesus stands out from the Gospel pages with a unique and snow-capped majesty.”¹ This is a passage with some power, like snow-capped mountains rising above a vista. This is a passage about salvation. It does not contradict other salvation passages, but it presents a clear notion of God and humanity.

Jesus entered Jerusalem back in Matthew 21, and he spent the last four chapters irritating the Pharisees and everyone else in positions of power. In many ways, he is careening toward his betrayal, mock trial, crucifixion and resurrection. This is the climax of his final discourse. “It is not a parable, but an apocalyptic drama.”² Parables begin with something familiar. This passage starts at the final judgment.

So, what is our awareness of our own actions and how God views them? When we do something how do our actions reflect our belief? To go back to the question of being a Christian, does this mean that we believe in our salvation as a one-time event, i.e. making a profession of faith? Or, is it something we continue to do? Do our lives reflect our faith? What is our awareness of our salvation and how each one of our actions reflect it? Jean-Paul Sartre writes, “All consciousness is consciousness of something.”³ We are conscious of being a follower of Christ. According to this passage, following Christ includes concrete behavior.

Here, Jesus sits on the throne in a high Christology, fitting for Christ the King Sunday, even though the concept did not yet exist. This passage is unique to Matthew, and it begs some questions. Who are all the nations? Does he mean all nations on earth? Does he mean people groups who have never heard of him? Does he mean people from other religions? Or, does he have a smaller group in mind? Maybe, he Jewish and Gentile Christ-followers. The grammatical shift from the neuter *ἐθνῆ* (*nation* or *people*) to the masculine pronoun *αυτους* (*them*) in 25:32 show that the judgment is about individual human beings, not nations as political entities.⁴ Jesus is talking about our judgment, not the judgment of a nation. This is personal.

Who are the “least of these”? Did Jesus just mean his poorer followers? Or, did he means something more universal? Eugene Boring writes, “The fundamental thrust of this

scene is that when people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ."⁵ When we feed the hungry, welcome strangers, visit the prisons, take care of the sick, and give clothes to those who do not have any, we do it for Jesus, although he could be in disguise. When we do not do these things, when we ignore people's needs, we ignore Jesus. We may not know because he might be disguised.

The righteous stand out not only by their actions, but by their attitudes. Matthew de-emphasizes the self-confidence of the righteous. They do not know they have been righteous. They have not done anything to earn their salvation. The inner working of God, their consciousness of themselves and God's expectations led them to take certain actions in their lives (e.g. feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, etc.). These actions, taken not to earn their salvation but because their consciousness of Christ leads them take the action, lead to their divine acquittal.⁶

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests of a literary-phenomenological analysis to apocalyptic passages like this one. Like others, it follows five motif-clusters: "(a) an increase in sinful and corrupt behavior and climactic catastrophes marking the last times; (b) divine intervention, whether by God or by a redeemer figure like the Son of Man; (c) a resultant judgment with (d) punishment for the wicked and (e) salvation for the faithful."⁷ There were whiffs of these motif-clusters in the parable (allegory) of the ten bridesmaids and the parable of the talents. Here, in this judgment of the nations, we see the pattern play out. The coming of the Son of Man is apocalyptic.

Where are we in this passage? We constantly make plans for the future. If we are going on a trip, we must make reservations or check out the car. When we have a consciousness of God's expectations of us and presence in the world, we can look ahead to the future. We can make divine plans. We can ask ourselves, how does my life reflect the salvation described in this passage?

We must resist putting things in the Bible that are not there. In this passage, Jesus does not talk about when this will happen. He does not talk about salvation in terms of making a profession of faith or baptism. These are responses to something God is already doing. What Jesus does talk about is our actions here in this life. He uses a common reference for his listeners: sheep and goats.

Has anyone done something good? *You are a sheep. Well done good and faithful servant.* Now, the hard question: has anyone, ever ignored a need? *You are a goat. You are accursed and have an eternal pit of fire waiting for you.* The truth is: there are times when we are all sheep, and there are times when we are all goats. The decision we have to make each day is whether we want to have a sheep day or a goat day. Both the sheep and the goats were surprised on judgment day.

Years ago, I spent some time in Camden, NJ, with a former Catholic priest named Larry DiPaul. Larry was the type of person who became an old friend, minutes after meeting him. Camden is one of the poorest cities, and a homeless guy walked up to us and asked for some money to buy some food. Larry said, *I can give you a peanut butter sandwich*. The guy agreed and Larry told him to wait while he went inside to make the guy a sandwich. I said, "Larry, how do you know the guy isn't taking advantage of you?"

He said, "How do I know he's not? I can't afford to risk denying Christ a sandwich when he's hungry."

Let us maintain our consciousness of God's expectations on our lives. Maybe we will do some good someday for someone who does not deserve it. Maybe we will do something for Christ in disguise. We can stop worrying about who is a Christian and who is not, and leave that to God. Let us keep our focus on Christ. He is king of our lives and ruler of our world.

¹ John A. T. Robinson, "The 'Parable' of the Sheep and the Goats," *New Testament Studies* 2, no. 4 (2009): 225.

² M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 455.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge Classics, 2008), Section V. The Ontological Proof.

⁴ Boring, 456.

⁵ Boring, 456.

⁶ Sigurd Grindheim, "Ignorance Is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment According to Works in Matthew 25:31-46," *Novum Testamentum* 50, no. 4 (2008).

⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Phenomenon of Early Christian Apocalypse," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the near East*, ed. David Hellholm (Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 298-300. Cited in Dan O. Via, "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46," *The Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 1 (1987): 81.