

SHEEP AND GOATS IN CONTEXT©

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It was the last days of Jesus' earthly life. According to Matthew it was his last parable of his last teaching and it concerned the last days¹. Yes I am referring to the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. What was the point Jesus was trying to make in this parable? It mentions that the sheep went off into eternal life and the goats into eternal punishment. Is this the central focus of this parable? I don't believe so.

In this paper I would like to suggest the primary meaning of this parable through an examination of its literary and historical context. But given so many Christians get hung up on the words "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment" in this story and therefore sidetracked from its real meaning, I will deal with these issues first and then return to the intent of the parable in its historical context.

The goats and eternal conscious torment. It is maintained that these phrases are the strongest case for eternal conscious torment in the bible. Here's how the argument goes. Jesus sets two fates in parallel: "eternal life" and "eternal punishment". If "eternal life" is endless then, it is argued so is the "eternal punishment". It is reasoned that "eternal" cannot mean one thing when applied to life and another when applied to punishment! Since eternal punishment means endless, then not everyone can or will be saved ... so they say. This sounds very convincing.

The issue is however what does the Greek word translated "eternal" actually mean? Does it mean endless?

Two well-known and acclaimed scholars help us understand the root intent of this word. Dr. J.I. Packer, former editor of Christianity Today, believes in hell as eternal conscious torment. Dr. N.T. Wright holds that hell is instant annihilation by God. But both have come to an agreement about the meaning of eternal.

¹ Matthew is structured around 5 teachings of Jesus which are interspersed with narrative. The first teaching is Matthew 5-7 the sermon on the mount which relates to the ethics and righteousness of the Kingdom; the second is Matthew 10 the commissioning of the disciples to go out and preach the Kingdom to Israel; the third is Matthew 13 where Jesus teaches on the Parables of the Kingdom; the fourth is Matthew 18 that focusses on dealing with problems in the Kingdom; and the fifth is Matthew 24-25 where Jesus deals with end-time ramifications of the Kingdom.

Professor J.I. Packer admits, “Granted that, as is rightly urged, ‘eternal’ (*aionios*) in the New Testament means ‘belonging to the age to come’ rather than expressing any directly chronological notion [as in endlessness].”²

Professor N.T. Wright agrees and says the following:

“*Aionios* relates to the Greek *aion*, which often roughly translates the Hebrew *olam*. Some Jews thought of there being two ‘ages’ – *ha olam ha-zeh*, the present age, and *ha olam ha-ba*, the age to come. *Aionian* punishment and the like would be the punishment in the age to come.”³

So there we have it. The word “eternal” does not relate to endless time whatsoever. Eternal life is the life of the future age to come. Eternal punishment and eternal fire refers to the fire and punishment of the age to come. The fact is that the word translated punishment, *kolasis*, actually means to prune with the view to promoting strong healthy growth.

Renowned Greek scholar Dr. William Barclay has pointed out that “the word Jesus used, *kolasis*, is never used of anything but remedial punishment”⁴; that is correction and pruning. This means that endless damnation is not in view in this parable whatsoever.

If Jesus wanted to say that the goats were damned he should have used the word *timoria*, which means just that! Instead he chose the word *kolasis*, usually harshly translated as punishment, which specifically means to restore through corrective discipline and chastisement.

In “An Analytical Study of Words”, chapter 9, paragraph 7, Louis Abbott tells us the precise difference between the meanings of these two words. He tells us that *kolasis* focuses on correcting the behaviour of the offender whereas *timoria* focuses on satisfying the punisher!

² J.I. Packer, *Reformation & Revival* magazine, Volume 6, Number 2 - Spring 1997. http://www.the-highway.com/annihilationism_Packer.html

³ N.T. Wright, “Your Questions to N.T. Wright,” para 3.

⁴ William Barclay, **New Testament Words**, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974, p.66

George Moulton and James H. Milligan in their famous *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* tell us that *kolasis* actually means to prune dead wood with the view of helping healthy regrowth! Note the way *kolasis* is used in the following passage:

Acts 4:17-22 NRSV

¹⁷ **But to keep it from spreading** further among the people, **let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.**" ¹⁸ So they called them and ordered them **not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.** ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." ¹⁸ So they called them and **ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.** ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." ²¹ After threatening them again, they let them go, **finding no way to punish [KOLASIS] them** because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened.

In this passage Jewish leaders wanted to "punish", *kolasis*, Peter and John with the view to getting them to **change their behaviour** and stop them preaching about Jesus! Correction is in view with this word, not retributive damnation.

Jesus also mentioned "eternal fire" in connection with "eternal punishment" in this parable.

Let's consider if the "eternal fire" is endless or comes to an end as far as biblical usage is concerned. What is interesting is that we have that exact same phrase and idea used in the same way in Jude that explains exactly what this "eternal punishment" and "fire" is about and how it works! In this short letter we are told that the false teachers were going to experience "the punishment of eternal fire" as modelled and experienced by Sodom and Gomorrah. Jude 7. The fate of Sodom serves as a model of what will befall all the lost.

Jude 7

⁷ Likewise, **Sodom and Gomorrah** and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust **serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.**

Peter says the same thing.

2 Peter 2:6 NASB

⁶ and *if* He condemned the cities of **Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example** to those who would live ungodly *livesthereafter*;

Sodom experienced the “punishment of eternal fire” – but it came to ashes! It did not keep burning on and on endlessly. Yes “eternal fire”! But Sodom’s fire came to an end! They were brought to ashes. They are not still burning today. So “eternal” in the bible does not mean what it means today. The fires of Sodom had an end but they were “eternal” in that they were limited to an age, an era, a period of time; they were eternal qualitatively in the sense that they belonged to an activity of God; they were eternal in the sense that they experienced a foretaste of what the lost would experience at the future age to come! And yet for all of this the fires did not burn endlessly! The exact same thing is what awaits the lost at Jesus’ return according to Jude, Peter and also Matthew who say the exact same thing.

This may sound like some kind of eternal annihilation and extinction of the lost but it is not. We are explicitly told that Sodom will be restored at some time in the future. In Matthew 12 Jesus spoke of a more tolerable outcome on Judgment Day for Sodom than for the Jewish towns where he performed most of his miracles. He said that Sodom would have repented had they witnessed them which suggests that the purpose of the Judgment is to supply the Sodomites the same chance that Bethsaida had! Regardless of how we interpret this particular passage we have other clear evidence that indicates that Sodom will come through the final judgment restored and cleansed!

Ezekiel 16:53-55 NRSV

⁵³ **I will restore** their fortunes, the fortunes of **Sodom** and her daughters and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes along with theirs, ⁵⁴in order that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all that you have done, becoming a consolation to them. ⁵⁵ As for your sisters, **Sodom and her daughters shall return** to their former state, Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former state, and you and your daughters shall return to your former state.

So the purpose of the punishment of eternal fire is not to endlessly damn people! What follows the punishment of eternal fire is restoration.

We need to keep in mind that we are dealing with a parable. It is agreed that parables were used in the first century as colourful stories that focussed on one main point. If we are going to take all the details literally then we will run into very serious theological problems.

We could draw all kinds of erroneous conclusions if we push the details of parables too far. For example, in this particular parable the sheep are granted eternal life solely on the basis of their good works! Just as the text includes a parallel between eternal life and eternal punishment, so it also includes a parallel between good works and a lack of them! If we push the story too far we could conclude that those who fail to perform the required works are destined for hell and that those who do carry them out are destined for heaven. So we end up with salvation and damnation based exclusively on works! Now this goes right in the face of the very heart and centre of all the New Testament says about the nature of salvation and grace!

If we use this parable to insist that the fires of this punishment are endless then we need to be consistent and hold that eternal life in heaven comes as a direct result for works of mercy alone.

This parable also says nothing about the sheep coming to faith and repenting. Nothing! All they did was good works and they received eternal life as a reward for good works. If the truth be known there is nothing in the text to even indicate that the sheep actually knew Jesus at all! I will deal with this point later.

The final judgment and the true meaning of the parable.

So what is the purpose and meaning of this story?

I believe that an examination of this story within its literary, structural and historical setting provides us with definite clues in regards the story's *original* intention.

In this parable, Matthew's Jesus is not dealing with the nature of salvation or even suggesting a detailed and exhaustive description of what the final judgment is about. To be sure, Jesus often spoke about judgment in Matthew

but his comments were not comprehensive but only casual and in passing. See Matthew 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36, 41, 43; 23:23. This means that as far as the material in Matthew is concerned it is unsafe to construct a detailed scheme about the judgment from Jesus' teaching. It is too scanty. The reason Jesus did not focus on the nuts and bolts of the final judgment as much as we would have liked him to is simple: in all his teachings Jesus primarily focussed on the present, not the future. He did speak about the future with certainty but only insofar as it had a bearing on the here and now. Jesus was not presenting an end-time chronological scheme of events in his teachings. The future had meaning but only in the context of the present. This is also the main point Jesus is making in this parable. However when we take into account the identity and circumstances of the original hearers of this parable we gain a fresh and contextual understanding of what Jesus was really trying to say. I will come back to this point in detail later.

The only extended passage that deals with the judgment in Matthew is in the parable of the sheep and goats. Now here is my main point: this is a parable and needs to be read as such! Jesus is not presenting us with a systematic, doctrinal teaching about end time events: it is a parable and needs to be read through these lenses. As a parable it is a colourful story with one major practical idea attached to it.

Matthew has elsewhere told us something very important about the function and purpose of parables.

Matthew 13:13

¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'

Matthew and Jesus are alerting us to the fact that sometimes parables are explicitly designed to conceal the real meaning of the story from the hearing (or reading) audience. This means that Jesus' surface meaning can often be misleading to the unenlightened which may leave the deeper meaning open to dispute. We need to take this principle very seriously since we are dealing with a very serious and sensitive issue: the nature of the final judgment!

So then what is the main point of this parable? It is not about hell or heaven for good or bad works. How do I know this for sure? So that we don't miss it, Jesus makes his main point four times in this story. Again and again Jesus says "as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers you did it to me ... as you did not do it to the least of my brothers you did not do it to me". The sheep and the goats make this point as well, "Lord when did we do it ... when did we not do it"? Most of the words of this parable surround this one point: and he says it four times! When we care for the needs of the "least of my brothers" it is as if we did it directly to Jesus! This is the main point Jesus is emphasizing: it is not about going to heaven or hell for works performed!

In this story Jesus tells us that the "nations" will be judged by the way they treated Jesus' "brethren" (25:40). We need to pause here. Jesus goes out of his way to form a direct cause and effect relationship between the brethren and the judgment of the nations. Why does he focus the entire parable around this one point? Who are the brethren of Jesus and why do they receive the spotlight? We need to try and understand what Jesus meant when he first said these words to his initial hearers.

How did the initial hearers understand this parable? And how may their understanding be different to ours? It is only as we consider the identity of the brethren and the nations in this parable and what these terms meant to the original hearers that we will grasp the full intent of Jesus' words.

The clue to the true meaning of the parable is in the identity of the "brethren" and "the nations". So let's consider these issues within the larger literary context of this story and within the Gospel of Matthew as a whole.

The larger context. The parable of the sheep and goats is part of an extended teaching of Jesus which begins back in chapter 24. Both chapters form a unit, constitute the last discourse of Jesus and given they are a unit they need to be studied together. As we will see, the ideas discussed in the sheep and the goats connect back thematically to issues raised earlier on in chapter 24.

For example, in this particular parable Jesus says that "All the nations will be gathered before him" for judgment (25:32). The "nations" are mentioned twice earlier on in chapter 24 and form the lenses through which we are to understand the parable. So why are the nations gathered before Jesus? The

answer is clear enough: they are gathered for judgment. On what basis will the nations be judged? The answer is simple: they will be judged based on the way they have treated “the least of my brethren”. The way they have treated “the brethren” is the way they have treated Jesus. See Matthew 25:34-35.

Why is Jesus focussing his attention on the “nations” treatment of the brethren? Who are the brethren? Who are the sheep? Who are the goats for this matter? What most miss is that three groups are clearly described in this passage: the sheep, the goats and the brethren. Let’s consider these 3 groups. Does Matthew’s Jesus identify who they are?

As we read this parable we need to consider two primary questions:

1. What is meant by “the nations” (25:32)
2. Who does Jesus refer to by “the least of my brethren” (25:40, 45).

Many think that the “nations” refers to all that have ever lived; lost and saved. Others insist that this judgment scene is that of **believers** only given both the sheep and the goats call Jesus “Lord”. This view is not convincing because the word “Lord” is an appropriate word to use in this parable given he is the King and the Judge (25:34, 40).

This idea is supported by Matthew’s specific use of the phrase “the nations” in his Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel the phrase “the nations” always refers to unbelievers (4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 12:18, 21; 20:19, 25). At the close of his book Matthew informs us that the disciples are called to go out to “all the nations” preaching the Gospel to them. The “nations” in Matthew is a catchphrase which denotes the lost that need evangelising. Matthew 28:18-20.

In fact the distinct phrase “all the nations” only occurs in missionary settings where the disciples are called to go out and preach the Gospel to the lost (24:9, 14; 28:19 cf. 10:18).

If “all the nations”, refers to the lost people groups of the world, who then are “the least of my brethren”? Matthew uses the words “the least” and “brethren” right throughout this Gospel with a consistent meaning. The common view is that Jesus refers to the poor, the needy of the world etc. Is this what Matthew means? Again let’s allow Matthew to define his own terms.

Jesus specifically qualified these brothers as “**my** brethren”. These brethren are the brothers of Jesus. Who are the brothers of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel? In 23:8 we are told that those who follow a teacher are called brothers. Jesus’ brothers are clearly defined in 12:46-50 where he contrasts his literal family on earth with those who do the will of his Father in heaven. When Jesus is raised from the dead he sends a message to “my brothers” (28:10) meaning his disciples. Jesus makes the same application when he speaks about his disciples as “the least” or “little ones”.

The idea of “the least” is presented by Matthew right throughout his Gospel with a specific target group in mind. The same Greek root word is behind the words “least” (*mikroteros*) and “little ones” (*mikron*). See Matthew 11:11; 18:6, 10, 14. In each of these examples it becomes clear that disciples of Jesus are referred to as the least or little ones, not the poor masses of the world. In fact Jesus tells us that this phrase refers to the most vulnerable [little child as in Matthew 18:1-4] of his followers. In Matthew 10 these vulnerable disciples of Jesus are in fact his missionaries. The way they treat them is tantamount to the way they treat Jesus. Matthew 18:5.

The “least” are mentioned in 10:40-42 and are set in a very similar context to Matthew 25 where to receive the disciples, the least, is the same as to receive Jesus!

Matthew 10:42

⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these **little ones who is my disciple**, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

Here Jesus clearly identifies his missionaries as “little ones” thus connecting them with the “least” of the brethren in chapter 25. This means that the hungry and imprisoned in Matthew 25 are persecuted Christian missionaries to the nations; the unevangelised of the world.

Consider the further distinct parallels with chapters 10 and 25 which support this conclusion. In chapter 10 Jesus sends the disciples out to preach the Gospel to the Jews (10:1-8). In chapter 24-25, (which climaxes with the story of the response of the nations to the brethren) he sends them out to the Gentiles, the nations (24:14). Because of the parallel nature of these chapters

we find many points of contact which provides us with lenses through which we can better understand the sheep and the goats!

As we have seen, in chapter 10 the disciples are referred to as “the least” as they are in chapter 25. In chapter 10:5, 6, 14-19 Jesus sends the disciples out to preach the Gospel to the Jews and warns them of coming rejection and persecution as he does in chapter 24:9-14. He says near-identical things in both chapters. He tells them that as they preach the Gospel they will be handed over to be brought before trial and persecuted on account of Jesus’ name (10:17-18 cf. 24:9). Betrayal and hatred will follow (10:21-22 cf. 24:10). Both passages speak about standing firm till the end (10:22 cf. 24:13).

It is in this parallel setting that Jesus says “he who receives you receives me” (10:40 cf. 25:40, 45). Then in 10:42 he refers to the disciples specifically as the “little ones” which is similar to the way they are described in 25:40, 45. He concludes by saying that unbelievers who treat his brothers, the least, the little ones with acts of kindness “will certainly not lose his reward.” Matthew 10:42. In the same way Jesus says that the sheep will go off to eternal life, or better as we have already seen, life of the age to come. Matthew 25:46.

Those who receive these preachers and treat them well in reality receive Christ (10:40 cf. 25:40, 45). Those who treat them ill do so because they are rejecting their Gospel message and in doing so reject Christ and so judgment awaits them (10:14-15 cf. 24:14; 25:31ff).

This conclusion is further supported by the same use of the same term “least” in chapter 18 where the disciples are urged to care for one another as “the least”. See Matthew 18:6, 10, 14. Jesus uses the term “least” or “little ones” in 18:1-4 in reference to a child who functions as a model of what true greatness is in the kingdom. Again Jesus makes the same point and says to “receive one such child in my name” (18:5). From 18:2 the literal child is left behind and it is the disciples that become the little ones and become the focus of the chapter.

Matthew uses his terms with a specific definition in mind and we need to be aware of this in order to correctly understand the point that he is trying to make about who is judged in the final assize and on what basis they will be judged.

All this indicates that the “least of these my brothers” in chapter 25 are the disciples. The nations are the unevangelised people groups of the world in distinction to them.

What is very important and relevant in understanding the Sheep and the Goats is Jesus statement in 10:42.

Matthew 10:42

⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these **little ones** who is **my disciple**, truly I tell you, that person **will certainly not lose their reward.**”

Here Jesus clearly identifies his missionaries as “little ones” thus connecting them with the “least” of the brethren in chapter 25. This means that the hungry and imprisoned in Matthew 25 are not the general needy of the world but the persecuted itinerant Christian missionaries to the lost. Such were jailed because of their testimony about Jesus in their preaching of the Gospel. What we have forgotten today is that the missionaries of Jesus were entirely dependent on the hospitality of the townspeople they visited (10:9-14). As they preached to these people they often endured abuse, imprisonment and even death (10:16-23 cf. 24:9-10). Those who came to their rescue were deemed as helping Jesus himself (10:40).

Compare the description of these itinerant preachers of the Gospel with what is said about Paul in 1 Cor 4:11.

All this means that given the nations are the lost, then the “righteous sheep” are those outside the community of faith but are righteous because they welcomed Jesus in the person of his lowly missionaries. They didn’t know Jesus personally but indirectly through his representatives. They are “just” or “righteous” in the same sense that the “just” in Old Testament times were those who practised true justice through acts of mercy to the needy.

Zechariah 7:9

⁹ “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.

The sheep are righteous through their acts of restorative justice.

So let's bring all of this information into sharp focus.

First of all: this passage is NOT speaking about the judgment of believers. There are two groups mentioned: the nations and the brethren. The brethren are the original missionaries of Jesus (his disciples) in the first century and the nations are clearly the unevangelised of that time. This means that when Jesus says that the nations will be judged based on how they treated his "brothers" in need he is not talking about the way people in general treat the needy in general; but the way the unevangelised treat his needy disciples. In other words this passage is not talking about the judgment of all humans of all time and it definitely does not describe the judgment of Christians. If anyone is judged it is only the unevangelised nations and specifically for the way they treated the missionaries of Jesus. This is how it was understood in its original setting: nothing more; nothing less. We move into the area of conjecture if we go beyond this.

Now let's get to the heart and soul of this parable.

The point Jesus is making to the disciples as he sends them out to the world to preach the Gospel to "all the nations" is that some (goats) will ignore them or ill treat them; others will show them mercy. Jesus instructs his missionaries that those who treat them with mercy will not lose their reward: they enter into the life of the age to come at the time of the final judgment.

This is what Matthew meant in his original context. So that you don't miss the real intent of this story let me place you there at the feet of Jesus.

We must remember that the whole discourse of Jesus in Matthew 24-25 is geared directly, specifically and privately to his disciples (24:1-3). The main focus of attention in this discourse is the hostile reception the disciples will face as they preach the Gospel to all the *nations*. He tells them that they will encounter deception in his name as they preach the Good News of the Kingdom (24:4-5). In reaction against their message about Jesus they would face persecution and even death. Jesus tells them plainly:

Matthew 24:9

⁹ “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be ***hated by all nations because of me.***”

These words have been overlooked and set the scene for what is to follow. Jesus is speaking tenderly to his missionaries and warns them that the nations they reach out too will hate them!

We cannot understand how the original missionaries understood the parable of the sheep and goats and the judgment of the nations in that story unless we place ourselves in their shoes and listen to Jesus speak to us all the way through these two chapters. Put yourself in the shoes of these missionaries listening to whole of Jesus’ discourse in chapters 24-25. You are commissioned to go and take the Gospel of Jesus to “all the nations” (24:14). But Jesus warns you: “all the nations will hate you because of me” (24:9). Some will jail you, persecute you and even kill you: because of me!

It is in this specific contextual setting that we read of the nations and the brethren! The way they treat the brethren (the disciples being addressed) is the way they treat Jesus! They will hate you because of me and therefore how they treat you is how they treat me and will be judged accordingly. To reject you is to reject me to accept you is to accept me!

Can you start to see what the parable of the sheep and the goats meant to the original hearers of both these chapters? Remember it was the missionaries of Jesus that were being addressed. They were told that they would face peril, imprisonment, nakedness and even death for his name and the Gospel. The nations that they took the Gospel too would as a rule turn against them.

As we continue to listen to Jesus as his original missionaries he comes to the part of his teaching where he brings up the nations once again, but now in the setting of the final judgment. What Jesus has predicted in chapter 24 has now become a reality in chapter 25. You, the least of his brothers, have been in nakedness, hunger and imprisoned for him. But now it is time for the judgment. The nations to whom you took the Gospel message now face Jesus as Judge.

During the course of human history the nations have heard the Gospel through the brothers of Jesus and have hated them “because of my name”. When they

reject the brothers' testimony they reject Jesus. However by the time we reach the final judgment we read that some amongst the nations, the sheep, have changed their attitude towards the brothers: they treat them with acts of mercy and kindness.

Jesus drives the point home to his hearing missionaries that the way the nations treated them, the brothers of Jesus, revealed how they have responded to Jesus himself and on this basis they will be judged.

In the greater context of Matthew 24-25 Jesus is speaking to his disciples, his brothers and tells them that they have a mission to preach the Gospel to "all the nations" (24:14). In the course of their testimony the nations will hate them because of his name (24:9). Jesus reassures his brothers, the disciples, that they are not alone. The way the nations respond to them, the least of his brothers, will determine their destiny in the final judgment. The way they treat them is the way they have treated Jesus and will determine their fate in the final judgment. The destiny of the nations will be determined by the way they treat the brothers of Jesus.

So was Jesus providing us with an exhaustive doctrinal presentation on the nature of the final judgment? I don't think so. I believe that these words were spoken tender-heartedly by Jesus to his original missionaries possibly facing death and he reassured them that he would be with them in their suffering. As they treat you so they treat me. I feel the pain you feel. Even though I am about to leave you I am with you. This is the main point of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats! Remember that Matthew 24-25 forms the last teaching discourse of Jesus and the sheep and the goats forms the very end of that teaching. In the next chapter we read of the last supper which leads to the crucifixion of Jesus.

My point is this: Jesus is about to depart to his Father in heaven and he speaks to his disciples and encourages them. He tells them that they are about to face persecution for his name and it is in this setting that he says that he will be with them in their suffering. This is the main point Jesus is making in this parable. This is primarily a practical parable intending to encourage Christian missionaries about to face imprisonment and possibly death. The main focus

of this parable is not to provide the Christian world with the specifics and minutiae of the final judgment. It is a practical discourse not a doctrinal one.

The parable is a sobering reminder to the disciples, his poor helpless missionaries just how much Jesus values their selfless work often in the face of death. Jesus is telling his disciples that as they go out to “all the nations” that he is with them in the world through them. The nations’ treatment of them, Jesus transfers to himself. The nations acknowledge Jesus or reject him depending on how they relate to his most insignificant servants. This is the original setting in which this parable is to be understood. The missionaries of Jesus back then were sent out as lambs to the slaughter and Jesus is encouraging them as they go. He is with them, in them and will be talking through them.

And so the Gospel of Matthew ends:

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of ALL NATIONS, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And SURELY I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS TO THE VERY END OF THE AGE.”

Can you see now what the real meaning of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats is? Jesus is simply encouraging his missionaries that as they face rejection, nakedness, hunger and imprisonment under the hands of the nations ... that he identifies with them. He is in them and through them. He carries them close to his heart as his dear “little ones”, his brethren.