

### 350 Just a(nother) thought arising

Last week, *two* of you sent me really helpful feedback – thanks! Here, a very striking sermon<sup>1</sup> from the recent Greenbelt festival, a radical look at a very familiar parable. It's as radical as that of 'the Sower' by one of our own beloved leaders, way back in 2018: 'eye-opening and eye-watering', I said.<sup>[12]</sup>

But this sermon was about my much-referenced<sup>[60,63,106,137,344]</sup> sheep-and-goats.<sup>Mt 25:31-46</sup> Let me remind you of Jesus' very graphic description of the goats: 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' I think Jesus wanted to catch our attention!

As I've pointed out repeatedly in my 'stick-poking' articles using this parable, the teaching seems to be that we get to heaven (or go to hell) according to whether we have cared for the poor and marginalised: 'salvation by works'? The preacher pointed out that 'some of the early reformers ... didn't like this passage' – an understatement, surely!

I think (though this wasn't the preacher's point) that the mistake we make is to analyse spiritual things as mechanisms – and then we argue about exactly how such-and-such works. In my student days it was whether 'filling with the Holy Spirit' was a separate and distinct stage in salvation, e.g. David Pawson vs. John Stott.

One issue the preacher did refer to was the 'presence' of Jesus at the communion/mass/breaking of bread, what that actually meant, and whether only special people could say the special prayers.

And another was that it's not *whether* we 'help the poor', but our attitude and motivation when we do so – it's way too easy to be paternalistic and 'us-centred'.

But what first struck me about the passage is how long and laboured it is – 16 verses, and almost as many words as here. And repetitious: he says '*I was* <hungry/thirsty/a stranger>' nine times! Anyway, what did he mean by, '*I was*'? So maybe this isn't actually about the *mechanism* of salvation; could it be more about *relationship*?

And the preacher's main point? Maybe, when we 'do good' to someone, that person in front of us *is* Jesus ('*I was* hungry'). How different our attitude to that person would be! And could showing mercy be a form of worship? And in *not* recognising the presence of Jesus are we being goat-like? Ouch!

Paul Bev. 3.9.24

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mailchi.mp/urc/sunday-worship-25-august-2024?e=7977427534>