

The Least of These



Matthew 25:31-46

Year A Proper 29

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲		
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲		▲
■	Jesus	■		
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	▲	
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲		
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts		▲	
●	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past		●	
●	Chuzza - the open-minded, intellectually curious manager of Herod's household			●

Scene 1

Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew

Matthew Rabbi, you've been talking about the rewards we'll receive in this life for being good servants, and about the End Times to come, but what about after that? What will the Day of Judgment be like? What will happen to the righteous and the wicked?

Judas *[incredulously]* You want to look ahead? To the end of the world?

Matthew I'm curious.

Judas *[impatiently]* Rabbi, we have far more important matters to discuss. Such as: what are we going to do in the next few weeks? How are we going to regain our momentum toward the kingdom?

Jesus The Kingdom is within you. Or not.

Joanna *[a little offended]* "Or not"?

John *[peacemaking]* I think what the rabbi is saying is that the final judgment is always relevant to the present, because the latter affects the former. *[to Jesus]* Isn't that right?

Matthew But we can't take our destinies for granted just because we follow the rabbi. Any one of us - all of us - could still fall short on that day. *[to Jesus]* Isn't *that* right?

Joanna It's not my own goodness, but God's I'm taking for granted. Or trying to, anyway. Shouldn't we be able to do that? Haven't we been teaching that the Kingdom is open to anyone, even tax collectors and prostitutes? That God is a God of forgiveness? That the Light shines in every soul?

Jesus *[solemnly in his 'sermon' voice, as if ignoring all the questions]* When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

Matthew There's your answer!

Judas *[with interest]* "All the *nations*"? Is this an individual judgment or a national one?

John How could there be a judgment of whole nations at a time?

Judas That's what I'm interested in hearing. It *is* what the rabbi just said. The nations will be gathered at the End, and they will be separated into, I assume, the saved and the damned.

Joanna *[distressed]* All this talk of damnation lately!

Matthew Not just lately. Were you here when the rabbi said that the way of salvation was narrow, and would be found by few?

John Rabbi, is that the case in this parable, too? Are there many more goats than sheep?

Jesus In this parable, there are the sheep and there are the goats.

Matthew How does a person make sure he'll be one of the sheep?

Jesus "What must I do to be saved?" What would your answer be?

Matthew Belief! To believe in you: the Son of God.

Joanna It can't be just that. What about people who never meet or hear about the rabbi? But even someone in darkness can wish to see the light. You can't condemn those who search for the light just because they never find it.

Matthew What about those who may have wished to board the Ark but weren't able to reach it in time? Or those who would have boarded if they had been given a chance, but never heard about it? They were still destroyed.

John I agree with Joanna. It can't be about some physical accident like happening to live in the town the rabbi visits so you can hear him preach and then decide whether to follow him. Somehow, every person must be given some kind of chance.

Jesus Any other thoughts? What about you, Judas?

Judas I can't really answer, because it depends on whether you were talking about the judgment of nations or individuals, and *you* haven't answered *that* question.

Jesus Does it really depend on that?

Judas Hmmm! Okay, let's assume not. Then here's my answer: Like Matthew, I have no problem with circumstantial accidents, but I differ with him on faith. What is faith, anyway? Just a feeling, an attitude. Something that exists inside you and may do you some good, but does nobody else any. So I'd say this: the saved are those two make their own salvation: people or nations who do good, who strive for the common good. Who make the world a better place. Like we supposedly came to Jerusalem to do.

Jesus *[after a pause]* Well said! You are not far from the Kingdom. For on that Day, the Son of Man shall say to the sheep, "Come, you blessed of 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 took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."

Joanna Then it *does* depend on circumstances!

Jesus Then the righteous will say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see

you a stranger and take you in, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?" And the King will reply, "Truly I tell you: inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Joanna *[cautiously]* Okay. That's a good teaching.

Matthew Does belief play no part at all, then? What about some of those towns that drove you out and even tried to stone you? I'm sure that many of those men in their normal lives were very kind to the poor and oppressed, and properly hospitable to other strangers who passed through their town. Will they be saved on the last day despite rejecting their Savior?

John I think it's sublime that God might be so forgiving that he could pardon even disbelief in Him.

Jesus These are all good thoughts. But Judas, did you have nothing to say?

Judas *[carefully]* I like the phrase, "the least of these". It's not mere kindness that makes the difference, but kindness to the weakest, the smallest, the poorest. And what I'm wondering is this: how do you think the Romans rate by that criterion?

Jesus *[resuming his 'sermon' tone as if ignoring the question]* Then the Son of Man will say to the goats on his left hand: "Depart from me, you cursed ones, into the everlasting 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 take me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I say to you, inasmuch 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 everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Scene 2

Joanna , Mary , Thomas

{Joanna reports on the conversation to Thomas and Mary.}

Thomas So it was an encouraging sermon?

Joanna You know, I thought at first that it was, but now I'm not so sure.

Mary Everything he's said since we entered the city has been comforting *and* terrifying.

Joanna Yeah, that's kind of how it was.

Thomas But I thought you said it reassured you by teaching that anybody can be saved, based on how they treat people.

Joanna Yes. Matthew was talking about how people had to believe specifically in the rabbi, and I was glad he knocked that theory down.

Mary *[in distress]* But all the goats who'll be condemned! All the people who won't find salvation even though it's so easy.

Thomas Is it? Maybe for saints like you, but I'm not so sure about us mere mortals. To treat every human soul you encounter as if it were the messiah's? I worry sometimes that I'll never come to believe, and yet, this sounds like it could be harder. *[to Joanna]* Is that the terrifying part you referred to?

Joanna No, I hadn't even thought of that, but you're right: it's a little daunting. If that's the threshold, then maybe it really is just a few who will be saved. But no, I was just distressed at how often the rabbi's been talking about, well, essentially taking vengeance on an Enemy.

Thomas Yeah. The scribes and priests, the underdressed wedding guest, the servant who failed to double the money, and now the poor goats who didn't help him when he was in disguise.

Mary I didn't understand why the wedding guest should be punished for not being dressed well enough, or the servant for being too timid.

Joanna And not just punished, but punished with Hell. Have you noticed that? The rabbi's been abandoning the fictional worlds of the parables and sending people straight to "outer darkness".

Thomas *[grimly]* Where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Mary I'm sure there must be a reason for it. He's preparing us - for...hard times.

Joanna Well, at least Judas was happy.

Mary Really?

Joanna Yeah, he liked that in the parable, salvation was about what you do, and not what you believe or feel. He's been trying to urge the rabbi to action.

Thomas Still, he can't have been happy that the parable was ultimately about personal conduct, and not politics.

Joanna Actually, in the parable, it's the nations that are gathered and then separated and sent to their two possible fates.

Thomas Hmmm! But Judas was just assuming that our nation would do okay in that judgment.

Joanna True. At least compared to the Romans.

Mary I hope he's right. But most of all, I'm just glad he's happy for once.

Scene 3

Chuza , Judas

{Judas discusses the parable with Chuza.}

Chuza You don't look happy.

Judas I'm not.

Chuza Is he still teaching about the end of the world?

Judas *[half joking]* Yeah. I keep expecting him to start passing out the poison or the suicide daggers any day.

Chuza *[in alarm]* Are you serious?

Judas *[suddenly serious]* Well, it's possible. He keeps preaching about the end of the world; he's no longer engaged with the present at all. I can imagine him doing something...*final* at some point.

Chuza Dear God! Joanna! We've got to get her out of there!

Judas I know. I'm keeping an eye on her, and I'll try talking to her the next chance I get. But frankly, I have bigger worries.

Chuza I know, I know: the nation.

Judas If the rabbi goes down, he goes down, and I'll do what I can to prevent him from dragging anyone else down with him. But the most important thing is that he not drag the nation down.

Chuza *[with difficulty]* I know. It's hard.

Judas I'm sure Joanna knows, too. It's probably why she's still there.

Chuza *[sighing]* We decided long ago that if the opportunity arose, we'd give our lives to achieve liberty for the nation. We never thought we might have to do it just to save the nation from destruction.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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