



VOL. I. NO. 7. "  
New Boston, KS  
FEBRUARY 16, 2015"  
WHOLE NO. 7.

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L.D. BLISS, Printer

# SPECIAL EDITION:" Heaven Undertakes a Revision of Evangelism" A Parable"

Text of Matthew 25:31-46 "  
included for reference on final page."  
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*The year 2015 would seem to be a late start for unveiling their "Evangelism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," but the editors of the all the English-language evangelism programs were meeting together for the sake of revising their curriculums. Heaven chose to send a literary agent, and the following dialogue ensued:*

**Editor:** You're from where?

**Agent:** Heaven.

**Editor:** I thought your last publishing project was the Bible. Why would you be interested in our evangelism curriculum?

**Agent:** I'll let you answer that for yourself.

**Editor:** Well, we'll be revising for the sake of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, so please be careful with the First Century Hebrew context stuff.

**Agent:** Actually I guarantee that I'll be more modern than you. My particular revision notes for you are from what you call "The End Times." We want your evangelism curriculum to incorporate Jesus's End Times discussion, the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 25:31-46 in particular.

**Editor:** The separation of the Sheep and the Goats?

**Agent:** Yes, it does speak to your current curriculum, right? There's Jesus on the throne rendering judgment between some who receive God's inheritance and others who are cast into eternal fire. Verse 46: "Then they will go away to eternal pun-

ishment, but the righteous to eternal life." That's your framework too, right? (Getting a nod, he proceeds:) so where shall we start?

**Editor:** Well, we were going to ask for a vote of affirmation on what we've begun to call the classic first question about "the inheritance of eternal life." Question #1 is: "If you were to die today, do you know for certain that you would go to Heaven?"

**Agent:** Okay, stop there. If you consult with your own actuaries, the overwhelming majority of the people you are talking to are NOT going to die today, and the young people you are talking to think that they are NEVER going to die. (The editor begins to object—"well, they might"—but the agent stops him.) Besides Heaven isn't interested in anyone dying today; we want people to live today, and to live in a certain way."

**Editor:** It's just a hypothetical.

**Agent:** And that's the problem. You've even treated Heaven hypothetically. You've placed it off in the distance, either in the future or spatially "out there somewhere."

**Editor:** What are you talking about? You are the one who brought up the "End Times," not me. I can assure you that many of our curriculums include reference to the Rapture. We have found that there are many people who don't want to get left behind.

**Agent:** And that's another thing. We want you to stop being so obsessed with the Rapture. The main point of the End Times is not that believers *escape*, but that Jesus *comes*. Even according to your own dispensational eschatology, the Rapture lasts no more than the length of a trumpet blast or the

twinkling of an eye, and even then the Raptured are absent from earth for only seven years. That's not even a bleep on the timeline of eternity.

**Editor:** But it's true that we believers escape the Tribulation.

**Agent:** Again with the escapism! Since when has the Christian life been about escape! When Jesus comes again, it will be to restore all things, to in fact bring Heaven to Earth. People don't go to Heaven (except apparently as some intermediary state); instead, Heaven comes to them.

**Editor:** So how would you reword the classic question?

**Agent:** I'm not sure I would, but for the sake of helping you understand Heaven's perspective it might sound something like this: "Since you are going to live today, do you know for certain that Jesus came, has come, and is coming?"

**Editor:** (Knowing that the agent's revised question violates all rules of marketing, he simply says:) Harumph.

**Agent:** (Ignoring him, the agent takes over the agenda.) Okay, as per Matthew 25:31-46, we want you to stop using the division of "Christians and non-Christians" or "Believers and Unbelievers" or "Saved and Lost." The terminology, until you editors come to grips with it, should be "Sheep and Goats."

**Editor:** What?

**Agent:** Take it up with Jesus; that's his terminology. Why I was sent with that terminology to this particular meeting is because the terms "Christian" and "Believer" have come to mean something set and standard to you. You *think* you know what Jesus means by those categories, and you may be right, but to use the words Sheep and Goats might open a new perspective. It might even give you new insight into Jesus's perspective. So, follow me on this: In this passage, is Jesus on the throne rendering the very judgment (the separation of the saved and the unsaved) that you talk about in your evangelism curriculum?

**Editor:** Yes.

**Agent:** And what are the two categories into which Jesus separates people?

**Editor:** (Leery of where this is going, he nonetheless says:) Sheep and Goats.

**Agent:** And now the crucial question: by what criteria does Jesus declare someone to be a Sheep or a Goat? (When the editor hesitates, he proceeds:) Think of it as a revision of what I know to be your second classical question which is "If God were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into My Heaven?' what would you say?" Instead, we could say it: "If God were to ask you, 'Why did I just call you a sheep, instead of a goat?' what would you say?"

**Editor:** I guess the Sheep would have to respond, "Because I believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal savior."

**Agent:** And that's not the wrong answer, but it is so woefully incomplete, that for many people it will be revealed as the

wrong answer. Regardless, you are not interacting with the text, or more importantly, you are not listening to the words of the Lord Jesus as he is wording them. What does Jesus say is his criteria for separating Sheep from Goats? (The Editor can't bring himself to answer, so the agent answers for him:) The Sheep, according to Jesus, are those who fed the hungry, slaked the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, looked after the sick, and visited the prisoner. The Goats, according to Jesus, are those who didn't.

**Editor:** But that's Works Salvation!

**Agent:** No, it's not. It's not even works salvation in this passage. The Sheep were surprised that Jesus even noticed those acts of service, let alone ascribed spiritual merit to them. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?" they ask him. The Sheep aren't doing these things in order to *become* righteous; they do them because they *are* righteous. Jesus even gives them that name in this passage: "the Righteous."

**Editor:** Oh, I see. You're talking about discipleship and sanctification. We do cover that in the final chapter of our curriculum.

**Agent:** Please, enough with your categories and terminology which only incidentally, if that, appear in the words of Scriptures. If I accept what you just said, are you saying, according to this passage, that only the Adequately-Disciplined and the Sufficiently-Sanctified make it into heaven?

**Editor:** No of course not, even the repentant thief on the cross was immediately saved because he believed.

**Agent:** And let's say that that thief did not "die today," but was somehow spared by the Roman soldiers, brought down from the cross, and then allowed to live. What if he appeared in the scene of Matthew 25, as in fact he surely will, how would Jesus divide him, in what category?

**Editor:** He would be among the believers. (It's the agent's turn to "harumph," which he does with a raised eyebrow. The editor submits.) He would be called a Sheep.

**Agent:** And he would be called a Sheep because Jesus saw him. . . ?

**Editor:** . . . feeding the hungry, slaking the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, looking after the sick, and visiting the prisoner. Still seems like works.

**Agent:** He feeds the hungry because that's something that the righteous do.

**Editor:** (He thinks for a while and then answers:) You are right: the righteous *should* feed the hungry.

**Agent:** Now it's you who are talking about works and law. No, the righteous feed the hungry because that's what the righteous have become in Christ Jesus. If we go back to your not-wrong-but-incomplete answer, it could be reworded to sound like this: "The Sheep (or the thief on the cross) who believed on the Lord Jesus was transformed into the type of person who feeds the hungry, even though it is not yet revealed to them that it is Jesus they are feeding." (The editor

ponders this. The agent continues:) And so you see, our salvation has nothing to do with escape. The word salvation, *soteria*, means “rescue, deliverance, the state of not being in grave danger and so being safe.” Imagine yourself with shackles on your feet and wrists, shackled to the wrath of God, and shackled to your own sin and death. Suddenly, those shackles are broken and you are free, but you still wander through the same landscape of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. You’ve been redeemed, rescued in place. You are a citizen of heaven NOW, and when Jesus returns bodily, Heaven is going to come back to you (and to hunger, thirst, alienation, nakedness, sickness, and justice.)

**Editor:** Comes. (The editor is still pondering this.)

**Agent:** Yes, Jesus *came*. He died on the cross and rose again. Jesus *is coming*, just as he promises in the Olivet Discourse. But Jesus *has also come*.

**Editor:** That I don’t understand.

**Agent:** And neither did the Sheep and the Goats. None of us have the eyes to see it, but he was there to receive the food they gave them, the water they poured into his cups, etc. ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

**Editor:** Did it “for” me. That means that you did it in Jesus name, for his glory, not literally to him.

**Agent:** That’s not what Mother Teresa believed. She believed that when she touched a poor person, she was touching Jesus. (The editor gives a dismissive smile, so the agent switches tactics.) Compare translations other than the NIV, Mr. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Man. For example, the New Living Translation renders the Lord’s words as “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’”

**Editor:** Well, prepositions are typically tricky in the Greek and Aramaic languages.

**Agent:** Sure, take your prepositions to the Throne and the separation of the Sheep and the Goats.

**Editor:** I’m not saying that what you say is wrong, but frankly it’s a little clunky for an evangelism curriculum.

**Agent:** That’s because we first want you to use it as a re-evangelism project.

**Editor:** What do you mean?

**Agent:** We want you go to your fellow editors and to all the people who use your curriculum and say to them, “Don’t call yourself a Christian or a believer or one of the Righteous unless you also call yourself a Sheep. And don’t call yourself a Sheep, unless Jesus would call you one. And Jesus, according to his revelation, looks for Sheep among those feeding the hungry, slaking the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, looking after the sick, and visiting the prisoner.”

**Editor:** Okay, I think I get it.

**Agent:** You sure? Because I’ve also been sent to raise the heat on this. You ready? (The editor isn’t sure, but the agent asks him anyway:) So what do you think about food stamp programs? What do you think about the commodification of bottled water that industry polluted in the first place? What about immigration reform? What about Fit Closet, that provides clothing for the poor? What about making sure that the poor have affordable health insurance? What about the mass incarceration of young black males?

**Editor:** No way! That’s politics.

**Agent:** That’s right, Mr. Category/Terminology Man: “politics” from the Greek *politikos* meaning “of, for, or relating to citizens,” people, people for whom Jesus died.

**Editor:** There’s no way that Obamacare is Christian.

**Agent:** I’m not saying that it is. But you see, that’s the big mistake of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Goats. They dismiss things out of hand, primarily because their media outlets have given them the categories and terminology to do so. They never imagine that Jesus might be there in the immigrant stranger crossing the Sonoran desert in the middle of the night.

**Editor:** Well if Jesus was that immigrant, surely he would have his papers properly documented.

**Agent:** Sure, you take that with your prepositions to the Throne. Jesus never said that the poor are “the deserving poor,” nor that the prisoners you visit are all innocent.

**Editor:** Actually I was taught that the prisoners mentioned in Matthew 25 were innocent Christians persecuted for their faith—something different than mass incarcerated black men.

**Agent:** Sure, you take that hermeneutic to the Throne.

**Editor:** You are overly free with that snide phrase.

**Agent:** Because there is so much at stake. “Then [the Goats] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” If you want to be safe with your salvation, wouldn’t you at least be interested in what might help, or might not help, those sick who don’t have access to affordable health care.

**Editor:** But I’d still rather the Righteous provide that, not the government.

**Agent:** Go for it! But you see, that’s what makes the lives of the Sheep so free, so delivered from their shackles. They neither get riled up or fired up by MSNBC nor Fox News, by the Republican Party nor the Democrats, by the Government nor Libertarianism. They just love. It’s who they are. But nothing is off limits to that love. Does your evangelism curriculum have a mission statement?

**Editor:** Yes, it’s one we borrowed from our church: “Helping others come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life.” I’d say it’s a good mission statement for evangelism and discipleship, but I’ve grown weary of your semantic nit-picking.

**Agent:** Fair enough. And actually it's a good statement, but let me leave you with two questions: 1) what does it mean to come to Christ who came, has come, and is coming to you? and, 2) is anything in life off-limits to how you understand "all of life" in which we experience God?

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**Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV)"**

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me:'"

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'" 40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me:'"

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'" 45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."