

# Transformation in the borderlands

## A study of Matthew 15:21–28

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**T**hroughout the centuries Christians have interpreted and used the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician/Canaanite woman in many ways. In recent years writings from a variety of perspectives reflect renewed interest in this fascinating story.<sup>1</sup> This essay reports my own work with this Gospel narrative in Bible study and in conversation and collaboration with others. My objective is to respond practically to the pertinent question my friend and colleague Mary Schertz often poses: How does this text minister to us, so that we can minister with the text? In other words, I will address the question: How may this biblical text become foundational for faith and ministry?<sup>2</sup>

I will follow the familiar movements of an inductive study process, in popularized Latin American terms: seeing, judging, and acting. I assume that study of any biblical text should happen within the context of a Spirit-led faith community that prayerfully seeks to become wiser in the light of God in formative and transformative ways. And I also assume that one always brings perspectives, agendas, biases, and other sensitivities to any Bible study, while needing to welcome others' readings and contributions critically as well as creatively.<sup>3</sup>

First, we will take a close look at the biblical passage, trying to grasp its meaning afresh. Second, we will ponder its significance, keeping in mind the social and cultural context. Finally, we will draw implications for our embodiment of the message in truthful and fruitful ways.

### **On the meaning of the text: Seeing**

This story appears only in the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew, and we note some significant differences between the

two accounts.<sup>4</sup> These dissimilarities suggest that Matthew has an interest in underscoring and intensifying some features of the story. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on its narrative.

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21–28, NRSV)*

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24–30, NRSV)*

I will succinctly highlight four variations in the two accounts. We recognize first a puzzling ambiguity about the location of the encounter, especially in Matthew's account: Had Jesus entered the

region of Sidon and Tyre, or simply approached it—as suggested in many scholarly interpretations? Had the woman left that area for Jewish territory and only then encountered Jesus?<sup>5</sup>

Second, while Mark identifies the woman as a Gentile (a Greek), of Syrophenician origin (or, by race a Phoenician from Syria), in Matthew the woman is “a Canaanite woman from that region.” The latter account implies that she is unclean and pagan, and possibly poor, perhaps a peasant. According to Matthew’s version, a demon possessed and tormented the woman’s daughter;

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this characterization suggests great evil and danger. Further, “Canaanite” evokes an adversarial relationship, dating from the divinely sanctioned conquest of the Canaanites’ land by the Israelites, who were taught to view themselves as “chosen...out of all the peoples on earth to be God’s people and treasured possession” (Deut. 7:1–6).

Third, Matthew’s account includes not just Tyre but Sidon. “Tyre and Sidon,” cities located on the Mediterranean coast, traditionally designated the Gentile/pagan region northwest of Jewish territory. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus characterized Tyre and Sidon as more open to the gospel than the Galilean cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida: “If

the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago” (11:20–21).

Fourth, in Matthew’s version of the story, the conversation is more involved and the disciples take part. In verse 23, they ambiguously advise Jesus to “dismiss her.” Surprisingly, the woman addresses Jesus in the language of Israel’s faith, “Lord, Son of David,” and lays her need at his feet. In Matthew, not only does she address Jesus directly, but she is the first woman to speak in the Gospel. Correspondingly, in the end Jesus praises the Canaanite woman for her faith, and the whole incident thus becomes a special instance of “praying faith.”

A plain reading of the story presents a clear and unique instance in which Jesus yields. One could argue that here he is bested in an argument! The most striking and problematic part of

the story is, of course, Jesus' initial response to the request of the woman: First a deafening silence, then an uncharacteristic affirmation of boundaries, followed by parabolic refusal. At that moment he appears to regard the woman's request as inappropriate, even as outrageously *out of place!* Only in this gospel story does Jesus clearly ignore a supplicant, place the barrier of ethnicity before a plea for help, and then use offensive language to reiterate the barrier. Without question, "dog" is a disdainful metaphor, though Jesus uses a diminutive form ("puppy," "little bitch"). The implication, of course, is that the Gentiles/dogs have no place at the table. The woman, however, appears to play along with that harsh image and simply urges Jesus to take it one step further. She appeals to him as "Lord," asserts her claim, and demonstrates her faith by arguing that at the very least both children (Jews) and dogs (Gentiles) are under the same caring, compassionate authority.

One need not infer that the woman agrees with the Gentile/dog analogy. Nor do we need to conclude that she considers herself unworthy and less than human, or that she identifies herself

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as a dog. On the contrary, we may assume that she is requesting that she and her daughter be included, that she hopes for a place at the table and challenges Israel's excluding ideology. When she says, "Yes, Lord...," she agrees with Jesus that it would be wrong to throw the children's bread to the dogs. But she also reminds Jesus that if even dogs may eat what their masters waste, she and her daughter should receive bread, too. The Canaanite woman understands the grave meaning and implications of Jesus' initial response, but she proceeds wisely and daringly to reframe and recast it. Jesus' original challenge to the woman merely restates the status quo of gender, ethnic,

cultural, religious, and political division. Her counter-challenge calls him to look to the place of new possibilities across and beyond the established boundaries. Instead of accepting the dichotomy of children (insiders/receive food) versus dogs

(outsiders/no food), she imagines that both the children and the dogs can be graciously fed inside, within the same household and from the same table.<sup>6</sup>

The dramatic import of this encounter in the borderlands is heightened as we recall its historical and textual background. “Show them no mercy,” Moses had said to the people of Israel (Deut. 7:2). “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David,” the Canaanite woman implores the New Moses of Israel. This Canaanite woman thus shatters the lingering image of wicked Canaanites, who presumably offer their children in sacrifice to their gods; she pleads on behalf of her daughter, who cannot speak for herself.<sup>7</sup> Well aware of his people’s position and privilege as “chosen,” Jesus initially reasserts the exclusiveness of his mission. But in the end, he welcomes the woman, and she receives what she had sought with passion, courage, and determination.

Finally, this story parallels that of the Roman centurion, in Matt. 8:5–13. These are the only two healings in this Gospel explicitly involving Gentiles and accomplished from a distance. In both cases Jesus deems the people worthy of the gift of healing. In fascinating reversals, both Gentiles even become exemplar figures. Most commentators indicate that although Matthew’s final word on mission to the Gentiles does not come until the last chapter of the Gospel (28:16–20), in these and related episodes the theme emerges that ethnicity does not define the people of God. Intertextual comparative studies indicate that Matthew’s positive portrait of Jesus’ response to the Gentiles constitutes a partial reversal of the Exodus tradition by focusing on the missional goal of bringing outsiders to the knowledge of the God of Israel.<sup>8</sup> God’s purposes include Gentiles, and Jesus the Jew is the agent of divine grace on their behalf.<sup>9</sup> Transformation is happening in the borderlands!

### **On the significance of the text: Judging**

The text before us suggests and calls for several kinds of stretching. Geographic, ethnic, gender, religious, theological, socio-cultural, moral, and political dimensions are involved. No wonder, then, that the intrusion of the woman into his life and sense of vocation and ministry stunned Jesus. Because this narrative has much spatial and contextual import, it is fitting that

our interpretation underscores that this marginal Canaanite woman emerges as the center of the story! In fact, the story is primarily her story. We observe a surprising, transforming reversal: Jesus comes to acknowledge that she has great faith. This Gospel uses that adjective to describe faith only once. The woman's faith encompasses her persistent demand for inclusion in the face of Jesus' resistance; her challenge to the gender, ethnic, religious, political, and economic barriers; her recognition of Jesus' authority over demons; and her reliance on his power.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Jesus' praise includes a realization we can appreciate today as well: In that encounter in the borderlands, the Canaanite woman became a prophetic and wise teacher. Out of her desire for healing for her daughter, she acted and spoke counter-culturally and counter-politically as she reminded Jesus of the larger vision of the reign of God. And she did so in a way consistent with the converging prophetic and wisdom traditions with which Jesus/Wisdom (Sophia) is interpreted in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>11</sup>

The most vexing question for us is, of course, why Jesus would act as he did in this encounter. An answer requires that we

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maintain the tension between two historical realities. On the one hand, we must assume that Jesus had been socialized into the conventional wisdom of his time and dominant culture. According to such socialization, prudence involved keeping clear boundaries; adhering to certain criteria of what is proper, clean, normal, and

appropriate; and holding to right categories and patterns of perception, thought, relationships. This socialization was undoubtedly part of Jesus' identity as a first-century Jew. From a human science perspective, we do not expect that Jesus would have been exempt from dealing with prejudice. Neither do we expect that he would have spontaneously developed the kind of understanding enabling him to readily appreciate and communicate with the woman across vast social and cultural differences. On the other hand, we must also recognize that Jesus of Nazareth was himself a marginal person.<sup>12</sup> He was rejected by the dominant groups and became a friend of marginalized people—tax-collectors, outcasts, women, the poor and oppressed,

“sinners,” and Gentiles. In other words, Jesus related abnormally well to those people, and was accepted by them, because he was himself an outsider, a homeless person (Matt. 8:20) living in two worlds without fully belonging to either.<sup>13</sup> In sum, from a theological perspective, whenever we look at Jesus the Christ we should see that the historical and existential reality of the incarnation is not only about “body” (*sōma*), but is also about “soul” (*psychē*) and “spirit” (*pneuma*).

An outsider, a multiply marginal person, challenged Jesus to relate and minister across and beyond those boundaries. She gave him an opportunity to respond in tune with God’s alternative wisdom expressed in an ethic and politics of compassion and radical inclusiveness. It is fitting to conclude that Jesus faced a major conflict and temptation, indeed a temptation from within, and that eventually he chose wisely. This conclusion need not compromise our christological conviction about the nature and work of Jesus Christ. As Heb. 4:15 puts it, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” If we accept this interpretation, we must reject three other interpretations: (a) that Jesus was testing (playing games with) the woman while knowing all along what he should and would do, (b) that he wanted to teach the disciples a dramatic lesson about loving enemies, or (c) that he had to be converted (repent from sin). The biblical text supports none of these interpretations.

The story as it unfolds makes clear that both the woman and Jesus became boundary walkers and boundary breakers. By eventually choosing to relate and to minister “out of place,” Jesus and the woman pointed the way to God’s utopia. “Utopia” means literally “no place,” not in the sense of never-never land, illusion, or fantasy, but as the stuff of prophetic dreams. From a biblical perspective, utopias are places that are not yet, not because they are mere ideals beyond reach, but because evil and sinful structures and behaviors resist and contradict God’s will for ethnic and racial justice and reconciliation.

Finally, as we judge this text, we must realize its significance in light of the social and existential realities of the Matthean community. On the one hand, we recognize that the Gospel

according to Matthew was written from the perspective of the chosen people of Israel, beginning with “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). The author writes from the center of the tradition, and from a typically “centralist” point of view.<sup>14</sup> Within this framework Jesus instructs the disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles..., but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5–6). The latter expression is unique to Matthew and repeated in our text. The author leaves no doubt about Israel’s priority in salvation history. On the other hand, the story of the Canaanite woman can help undermine and even dismantle chosenness as ideology, as justification for excluding and discriminating against the other, the stranger, the foreigner. A powerful paradox is at work here!

We surmise that the early readers of Matthew were Jewish Christians separated from the synagogue and relating both to a largely Gentile Christian movement and to the Jewish community. The story must have aided them to understand their new place and role in God’s plan and reign. This story may also have helped free them from the ideology of chosenness so they could be transformed into a more liberating and inclusive faith community. Perhaps they were already beginning to experience such a community, but were unsure about how to cope with, legitimate, and reflect on it.<sup>15</sup> This transition and transformation of the Matthean community would have been crucial for their sense of identity as well as for the mission to the Gentiles. The new community—where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28)—is thus called to celebrate, embody, and be an agent of the coming reign of God, the future in which God is making all things new. Transformation is indeed happening in the borderlands!

### **On embodying the text: Acting**

We may realize the creative and liberating potential of this story in many ways on personal and communal levels. The following interrelated guidelines illustrate how this text has become foundational for me and other Bible study partners, how the text has ministered to us so that we can minister to others. Without trivializing the import of this wonderful story, one can think of ways our text foundationally illumines specific principles—

dependable guides to practice—for faith and ministry. For example, much could be said about multicultural communication and hermeneutics, evangelization and mission, education for peace and justice, care and counseling, among others.<sup>16</sup> I have chosen to highlight just three general guidelines in the following paragraphs.

First, contrary to what dominant cultures hold, the borderlands can become privileged places for the blessings of transformative learning, and for personal and communal growth and creativity. Conventional and pragmatic wisdom favors the safe havens of familiar territory, the shrewd and sensible stance of “playing it safe.” The story of the Canaanite woman who confronts Jesus helps us realize that we can see reality better at places of

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marginality and vulnerability, and from the vantage point available to us at the borders. Our vision may thus be transformed. Hence, we are called to creative “willful contextual dislocations.” This story asks us to move deliberately beyond our comfort zones, either by going out or by welcoming into our midst the stranger, the alien, or the different other.<sup>17</sup> By moving from the center to the margins, we will find our perspectives significantly changed: we will become aware of the lenses through which we view the world, and our cultural and ideological captivities will be

unveiled. We will be open to see better how God wants us to live and act in creative, redeeming, and empowering ways wherever we are.

A second guideline suggested by our study is that situations of conflict and suffering can become opportunities for transformation, for renewal and healing, and for witnessing God’s amazing grace. People who hunger and thirst for wholeness, justice, freedom, and peace are especially close to the heart of God, because their desire reflects God’s own longing for all people. For this reason they are blessed (Matt. 5:3–11). For this reason the Canaanite woman was blessed. That is the meaning of the claim of liberation theologies, that God has a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, for the victim and the weak.

Jesus not only taught about this preference, he also showed concretely what it involves. In our story, the demonstration happened in a context of conflict and against his human inclinations! The church is sent to continue his ministry and to embrace the suffering neighbor seeking healing and hope. As we respond, our hearts will be nurtured and transformed. Places of pain become places of grace as we are led and empowered to practice the virtues essential for caring as representatives of Christ: humility, hospitality, love, compassion, patience, hope, generosity, and courage.

Third, as Jesus himself may have experienced, ministry at its best is a two-way street, a mutual practice and process. For us in North America, the center of the center in the ongoing globalization process, this kind of ministry poses special challenges. To become missional churches our faith communities will need to undergo a conversion to the margins. Many of us Mennonites need to shed our own ideology of chosenness to better attend to our deepest yearnings, limitations, and needs, as well as to the potential of others. We bless and we are in turn blessed, sometimes the hard way, in spite of our blinders and shortcomings. Often we will unexpectedly find ourselves being ministered to. In fact, we cannot truly participate in other people's liberation and healing without allowing them to participate in our own liberation and healing. In this process our common human vocation in the light of God is reconfirmed and sustained. And for us today, this blessing includes an additional realization: Serving and being served in the borderlands, across and against boundaries, again and again becomes the sacred experience of encountering Christ and loving him anew. In due time, it will be revealed to us, as in the eschatological parable of Matt. 25:31–46:<sup>18</sup> “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza took the title of her book, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1992), from the story of the Syrophenician-Canaanite woman. In her view, the story “represents the biblical-theological voice of women, which has been excluded, repressed, or marginalized in Christian discourse” (11).

<sup>2</sup> As a practical theologian, I use the term “foundational” deliberately and precisely. For me, the Bible is foundational in at least four interrelated ways: (a) It informs my

normative framework and perspective for practice and reflection, especially regarding wisdom (knowing how to live in the light of God); (b) it offers key content disclosed in the teachings, narratives, and other materials (poetic, prophetic, apocalyptic, etc.) which express the written Word in ways that illumine and address our human condition; (c) it calls for engagement in an interpretive process for the sake of discernment and wise living; and (d) it grounds my own spirituality as a man of faith and as a ministering person (teacher and pastoral counselor), theological educator, and theologian.

<sup>3</sup> My personal story includes growing up in Argentina right before Vatican II, when the Roman Catholic Church was the official state church and discrimination against Protestants was widespread. My parents were active members of the local Mennonite church, so I developed a strong separate religious identity. I learned to read the Bible and to live out and reflect on the Christian faith as a member of a marginal community. As an immigrant in the United States I find myself not fully belonging in this country and being reminded frequently of my “otherness” because of my accent, appearance, and certain social and cultural characteristics. I now feel that I no longer fully belong in Argentina either, though I keep close contact and collaborative ties in my country as well as in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. In sum, I have become one of the millions of “hybrid” people living in the United States, and my unique way of being Latin American conditions the way I read the Bible today. Finally, I am blessed with opportunities to teach and work in several contexts, including Europe. I increasingly appreciate perspectives and contributions of countless others with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from a variety of Christian traditions—especially Reformed and Roman Catholic—even as my own Anabaptist convictions have been shared, tested, and enriched.

<sup>4</sup> One is inclined to think that the narrative would also fit well in Luke’s Gospel, given what we know about Luke, a Gentile writing to Gentiles, who gives women a significant place in his telling of the gospel (see Reta Halteman Finger, “How Jesus Learned about Ethnic Discrimination,” *The Mennonite* [26 December 2000]: 6–7). According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, however, Luke does not include the story because he puts Paul and Peter at the center of the debate about the mission to the Gentiles: “This Lukan historical model has no room for a story about an educated Greek woman, who as a religious and ethnic outsider argues with Jesus for the Gentiles’ share in the power of well-being” (Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 97).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Daniel J. Harrington: “It is possible to envision the Matthean episode as having taken place on Jewish soil, with the pagan woman coming forth from her own land to meet Jesus who was travelling in the direction of Tyre and Sidon. This scenario involves translating *eis* in Matt 15:21 as ‘to’ or ‘toward,’ not ‘into,’ and subordinating the prepositional phrase ‘from those regions’ (15:22) to the participle ‘came forth.’ The scenario would be consistent with Jesus’ directive to his disciples to confine their mission to the lost sheep of Israel (see Matt 10:5–6)” (Daniel J. Harrington: *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1. [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1991], 235).

<sup>6</sup> Elaine M. Wainwright lucidly argues this point in *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1998), 86–92.

<sup>7</sup> For this way of restating the meaning of the encounter, I am indebted to my former student Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, who shared with me a paper written during her doctoral work at Vanderbilt University (summer 1998), “Jesus’ Encounter with the Canaanite Woman: The ‘Hybrid Moment’ of the Matthean Community.”

<sup>8</sup> Willard M. Swartley makes this point in *Israel’s Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic*

*Gospels: Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pubs., Inc., 1994), 70.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the fine new commentary by Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2000), 320ff. Other recent biblical studies done with a “decolonizing” interest and perspective present a different picture as they attempt to unveil and deconstruct certain perceived biases in the biblical text. See, for example, Musa W. Dube, “A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Matthew 15:21–28,” pt. 3 of *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Pr., 2000). For this African scholar, “the divergent receptions accorded to the centurion and the Canaanite woman reflect the imperial and patriarchal currents at work in Matthew.... No doubt, the implied author, writing in the post–70 C.E. period, wishes to present the Matthean community as a nonsubversive community” (132–3). Dube’s work includes serious critiques of the work of several white, western, middle-class feminist writers on this text (169–84). Her thesis and overall discussion are provocative; nevertheless, my appraisal is that she and other authors with similar perspectives often neglect to acknowledge inherent tensions and dialectical import within biblical texts, and thus fail to appreciate one key aspect of their liberating and transformative potential.

<sup>10</sup> Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 324–5.

<sup>11</sup> Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another?*, 88.

<sup>12</sup> For a scholarly treatment of the marginality of Jesus, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Jung Young Lee has insightfully discussed the question of Jesus and marginality in *Marginality: The Key to a Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 1995). Writing from an Asian (Korean) American perspective, Lee proposes “a new theology based on marginality, which serves not only as a hermeneutical paradigm but as a key to the substance of the Christian faith” (1).

<sup>14</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 116.

<sup>15</sup> See Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz’s helpful discussion of this question in “Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21–28,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 69–81.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, in multicultural and anti-racism education we might focus on the reality of our perspectives, ideological captivities, and incomplete personal visions; dynamics of openness to the stranger and hospitality; embracing and dealing creatively with conflict on different levels; affirmation and transformation of identities; reconciliation and community building.

<sup>17</sup> I have described the notion of willful (or voluntary) dislocation in several places; see, for instance, Daniel S. Schipani, “Liberation Theology and Religious Education,” in *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. Randolph Crump Miller (Birmingham: Religious Education Pr., Inc., 1995), 308–10; and “Educating for Social Transformation,” in *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning*, ed. Jack L. Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1997), 37–8.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew’s judgment scene in 25:31–46 is the culmination of a two-chapter eschatological discourse, and it has been interpreted in diverse ways. In any event, two things should be kept in mind. First, for Matthew, Jesus is identified with the (marginalized) community of disciples, and he is present with them as they engage in mission to communicate the gospel (18:20, 28:20). Second, in this text Jesus praises the actions of the righteous from “all the nations” (presumably Gentiles as well as Jews and Christians) because they have lived out the gospel by caring for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized; the actions of these “sheep” blessed by the Father are the practices of service expected of gospel bearers, followers of Jesus Christ.