

# The Parable of the Sheep, Goats and Brethren

📖 Matthew 25:31-46

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Tonight we come to the conclusion of Matthew's fifth discourse of our Lord. This discourse is popularly known as the Olivet Discourse, based on the location the discourse was given, the Mt of Olives. However, I prefer to refer to it as *The Discourse on Kingdom Coming*, based on the content of the discourse, the events immediately preceding the establishment of the kingdom. The discourse grows out of Jesus' final statements in Matthew 23 the Temple's destruction. As they walked toward the Mt of Olives in Matthew 24:1 they pointed out the beautiful Temple buildings presently under construction according to the plans of Herod the Great. They wondered if Jesus really meant what He said about its coming destruction. In 24:2 Jesus confirmed that the entire Temple proper would be cast down. In 24:3 they asked Him two basic questions, when will these things happen, that is, when will the Temple be destroyed, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age, that is, what will be the sign that the age preceding Messiah's kingdom is ending and the Messianic kingdom is dawning. His reply is in Matt 24:4-31. In this reply Jesus mentions events that will precede and lead up to the sign of His coming. In 24:4-8 He sketches events that will occur during the first half of the tribulation. In 24:9-14 He sketches events that will occur during the second half of the tribulation when Israel is under distress. In 24:15 He sketches the event which will set off the beginning of this distress, the abomination of desolation spoken by Daniel the prophet. 24:16-28 sketches how Jews should respond to that event. The Jews must flee if they are to avoid the destruction of the anti-Christ. The land will be filled with false signs of deception trying to lure them out of the wilderness so they need to remember that He told them in advance that His coming would not be a private affair but like lightning that flashes across the sky from east to west. In 24:29 the backdrop for the second coming is described as a thick darkness and in 24:30 the sign will appear in the sky as a bright light and then the Son of Man will come in great power and glory as the tribes of Israel mourn for Him as a mother and father mourn the loss of an only son. In 24:31 He will send forth His angels to gather the surviving members of the elect nation of Israel to take them to judgment. In that light in 24:32 Jesus takes an aside to explain how the Jewish people should live during the Tribulation time. He uses a parable from the fig tree. Just as a fig tree puts off shoots whenever summer is near so the events of the tribulation indicate His coming is near. However, since no one will know the exact moment of His coming they need to be prepared with salvation and serving others. If they are prepared with salvation they will enter the kingdom. If they are also serving others they will enjoy a rich

entrance. However, if they are not prepared with salvation they will be excluded from the kingdom altogether. In 24:45 Jesus resumes where He left off in 24:31. After the angels have gathered the surviving Jews from around the planet He will take them to judgment. First to be judged will be the leadership of Israel. This is described in 24:45-51. By illustration one Jewish leader is prepared with salvation and serving others; he enjoys a rich entrance into the kingdom. The other Jewish leader is not prepared with salvation or serving others and he is excluded from the kingdom altogether. Second to be judged will be the nation of Israel in general. This is described in two parables; Matthew 25:1-13, the parable of the ten virgins, and Matt 25:14-30, the parable of the talents. The parable of the ten virgins emphasizes the necessity for Jews in general to be prepared with salvation in order to enter the kingdom. The parable of the talents emphasizes the need for Jews in general to be in service to others in order to enjoy a rich entrance. Three facts become crystal clear. First, it is important for Jews living in the Tribulation to recognize the extraordinary nature of the time as heralding the nearness of Christ's coming and to prepare by believing in Him alone. This will ensure entrance into the kingdom. Second, it is important for these believing Jews to be engaged in serving others so that when Christ returns they will be rewarded at the judgment so they can enjoy a rich entrance. Third, if Jews do not recognize the extraordinary nature of the Tribulation and do not prepare by believing in Him alone they will be swept away in judgment, excluded from the kingdom altogether, just as those unprepared with salvation at the time of the flood were swept away. So it really is an all-or-nothing issue.

Matt 25:30 concludes the judgment on living Israel at the Second Coming. Matt 25:31-46 initiates the judgment on living Gentiles at the Second Coming. This is the parable of the sheep-goats. Observe that the judgments at the Second Coming involve only Jews and Gentiles and these judgments occur on earth. None of these judgments involve the Church, which is Jew and Gentile in one body. A satisfactory explanation for why the Church is not judged at this time is they were raptured from the earth over seven years before and have already been judged at the judgment seat of Christ which is in heaven or at least somewhere between earth and heaven. So attempts to find the Church or Christians in Matthew 24-25 confuse God's dealings. The scene is set in 25:31, **But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.** The title **Son of Man** originates in Daniel 7:13-14 when Daniel in the night visions said, "I kept looking...And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the ancient of Days And was presented before Him And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed." The title **Son of Man**, therefore, heavily relates to the kingdom. He commonly used this title of Himself in the Gospels because He was offering the kingdom to Israel. At this time, He will come in His kingdom which is stated here to be coming **in His glory**. The ultimate purpose of God is **His glory** and the kingdom cannot be separated from fulfillment of this purpose since the kingdom is the fullest manifestation of **His glory**. History without a kingdom is history without the fullest manifestation of God's glory. Therefore, history is incomplete without a kingdom. He must come and

reign in history over His creation. **When** He comes **all the angels** will come **with Him**. A mark of the Second Coming that distinguishes it from the Rapture is that at the Rapture He does not come with angels but at the Second Coming He does come with angels. For example, Matt 24:30 described His Second Coming and 24:31 the angels who came with Him. The Second Coming and the Rapture are distinct. Now **when** He **comes in His kingdom, in all His glory, and all the angels with Him, then** we are told **He will sit on His glorious throne**. What **glorious throne**? The throne of David. The throne covenanted to David through Solomon, that one of His descendants would sit on the throne forever. Jesus is not now sitting on the throne of David in heaven. At the ascension He was exalted to the right hand of the Father and sits on the Father's throne. Ps 110:1, "The LORD said to My Lord, sit at My right hand." What the progressive dispensationalists do is equate the Father's throne in heaven with David's throne so that Jesus is already sitting on David's throne in heaven now. But the Davidic covenant is an earthly covenant as we see here. **When He comes in His glory...then He will sit on His glorious throne**, the one that belongs exclusively to Him by the Davidic covenant and it is at this time that the Davidic covenant is fulfilled. This has never happened before and Jesus is not now sitting on David's throne. But He will in the future.

In 25:32, **All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left**. We saw in our study of Joel 3:2 that the location of the nation's judgment is the valley of Jehoshaphat, that there is no valley in Israel by that name and that the basis of the judgment is their treatment of Israel. "I will gather all the nations And bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into judgment with them there On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel Whom they have scattered among the nations; And they have divided up My land. They have also cast lots for My people..." We saw in our study of Zech 14:4 that at the end of the Campaign of Armageddon a great earthquake will cause the Mount of Olives to be split. "In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south." The valley that is created will be the valley of Jehoshaphat and in it Matt 25:32 says **All the nations will be gathered before Him**. The **nations** in Greek are the *εθνη*. In some contexts, this word is inclusive, meaning it refers to all nations including Israel. In other contexts, this word is exclusive, meaning it refers to all nations excluding Israel, that is, Gentiles. In this context living Israel has already been judged in the previous parables so it is implausible that there would be further judgment of Israel. It must be Gentiles. Further, the word **nations** used in 24:9 is used of Gentiles. There we are told, "Then they [the nations] will deliver you [the Jews] to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name." Nations again seem to be Gentiles. Finally, in Zech 14:16 we read that in the kingdom there are some Gentiles left from the nations who went up against Israel. "Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths." Since Gentiles from the Tribulation will enter into the

kingdom it seems only natural that a judgment of those living Gentiles as described in Matt 25 when the kingdom is established. Therefore, the **nations** in 25:32 appear to be Gentile nations and their judgment is based on their treatment of Israel, just as Joel 3:2 suggested. Therefore 25:32 should be translated, **All the Gentiles will be gathered before Him**. When they are gathered **before Him** in the newly created valley of Jehoshaphat, **He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats**. It is individuals who are being separated out. Individual Gentiles will be judged, not national entities. Some individuals are **sheep** and some are **goats**. In the Middle East **sheep** and **goats** have a more similar appearance than they do in some places. It was not always easy to tell the difference. But a **shepherd** would know. He would separate them for a variety of reasons. Here it is the King who **separates them from one another**. For orientation, the King will be sitting on David's throne in the newly constructed Temple on the site of present day Jerusalem. He will be looking east into the new valley created between the north and south halves of the Mount of Olives and there will be all these Gentile survivors.

25:33 tells us the **sheep will be on His right**, which is the south side of the valley, and the **goats will be on the left**, which is the north side of the valley. The **right** is always the favored position in the Bible and so the **sheep** are in the favored position.

In 25:34 **Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world**. This is one of the most important verses in Scripture. It tells us the purpose of history and where this is all going. What is God trying to accomplish and it gets into the incarnation. What's going on? Man is to rule a kingdom. Note, this is the purpose of history **from the foundation of the world**, meaning from the very start, and this has never gone away. Toussaint says, "...it shows that the establishment of God's kingdom on earth has been God's purpose since the creation of the world." To Adam He said, "Let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth..." and "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." This is what God wanted from the start. Adam was to rule God's kingdom on earth...but Adam failed to rule God's kingdom when he fell into sin. What happened to the kingdom? Its rule was usurped by Satan. Is this ever going to get fixed? There's the dispensations. Every dispensation is showing that man as sinful is incapable of overcoming temptation and defeating Satan so as to recapture the rule of God's kingdom on earth. So what is the incarnation all about? God becoming man to overcome temptation and defeat Satan so as to qualify to rule God's kingdom on earth. Why isn't He ruling it now? Why is it obvious He is not ruling it now? Why is it obvious there is no kingdom now at all? Because Satan is still loose. It's chaos and all this has to be judged before the kingdom can come. So this is still to come. The original purpose of God of man to rule a kingdom is going to be fulfilled by the Son of Man. And people will be a part of this or they won't. Here are the sheep, living Gentiles who believe in Him, and notice they are invited to come and **inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world**. It's very interesting what people do with this. Dillow preferred to translate this "inherit

the kingship" prepared from the foundation of the world, stating that these Gentiles will be kings and reign in the kingdom. What's the problem with that? These are living Gentiles. They still reside in mortal bodies. They still have the sinful disposition. They're not being resurrected here. So how are they going to reign with Christ? They're not. They're not qualified to reign as kings in the kingdom. But they are believers and they do qualify to share in the joys of the kingdom and they will.

The reason they qualify is stated in 25:35, and this is where people struggle. **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; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'**

What does that make you think salvation is by? By works. I mean, doesn't Jesus say that if you do good works of feeding the hungry, showing hospitality to strangers, visiting prisoners and so forth that will get you into the kingdom? What is going on here? Let's see if we can unravel it. In 25:37, **Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in. or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'** What's their point? We had no direct contact with you during the Tribulation time, so how could we have done these things for **You**? In verse 40 **The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'** So here we are introduced to the key of the entire thing, a third group; **these brothers of Mine**. Who are they? Toussaint says, "It is important to note that three groups of people are spoken of in this passage—the sheep, the goats, and the group designated by Christ as "brothers of Mine" (verse 40). The key to the identification of all three is the interpretation of "brothers of Mine."<sup>1</sup> Some people want these to be Christians. But if these are Christians who are the sheep? It's strange. But if we look at the context who has already been judged in the previous parables? The Jews. **These brothers of Mine** are the Jewish remnant. And what's the principle? If they did good to the Jewish remnant they did good to the King. They didn't have direct contact with the King but they did have indirect contact with Him through the Jewish remnant and by doing good to them they were doing good to Him. Wow!

But how do we keep from saying that salvation and kingdom entrance is by good works? Easy. When we put together all that is said in the context and the extraordinary nature of the Tribulation we come to understand. We know that the Bible teaches salvation is by grace alone through faith alone apart from any works. That is not hard. But aren't some things different in the Tribulation time? If it's not, then this discourse is complete nonsense because it describes an extraordinary time on the planet unlike any other period of history and unparalleled in judgments and anti-Semitism. If you back up to 24:14, what is the gospel that is going to be preached in this time? The gospel of the kingdom. What is that? It's the message of the cross of Christ as the only way to enter into the kingdom. And if you believe that gospel what happens? You are justified, credited as **righteous**. And what are the sheep called in verse 37? **the righteous**. Someone might try to claim that they are called **the righteous** because of the good works but one may equally claim that they are called **the righteous** because

they believed the gospel of the kingdom. Justification has always been by faith in both the Old and New Testament. No one has ever been justified by works! So it is best to say that they are **the righteous** because they believed the gospel of the kingdom. And verse 46 confirms this because it says **the righteous go into eternal life**, which in this context is the joys of the kingdom. But there's more, so let's think about it. The Tribulation is an extraordinary time. The gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world as a testimony. The gospel of the kingdom relates the cross work of Christ to the re-establishment of the kingdom and this kingdom is very Jewish. So if a Gentile believes the gospel of the kingdom does He believe in the Jewish Messiah? Does He believe the Jewish people have a special place in the plan of God? Absolutely. What do you think he's going to think about the Jewish people in that time? The Jewish people are going to be facing the greatest period of persecution and hatred in their entire history. Most of them will be killed. Is it hard to imagine that a Gentile who believed in the Jewish Messiah and believed the kingdom that was coming was the re-establishment of the Jewish kingdom would help a Jewish believer? Putting these facts together I think we can conclude that because the Tribulation is a unique period of persecution on the Jewish people then a Gentile helping a Jewish believer is the mark of a genuine believer in that time. Some may accuse this of being Lordship Salvation but that just shows the person can only think theologically and not exegetically. If you put all this together this is a unique period of history. Pentecost said something similar when he wrote, Jewish believers "will be under a death sentence by the beast. They will refuse to carry the beast's mark, and so they will not be able to buy and sell...they will have to depend on those to whom they minister for hospitality, food and support. Only those who receive the message [*the gospel of the kingdom*] will jeopardize their lives by extending hospitality." Walvoord agreed, "Those described here are people who have lived through the great tribulation, a time of unparalleled anti-Semitism, when the majority of Jews in the land will be killed. Under these circumstances, if a Gentile befriends a Jew to the extent of feeding and clothing and visiting him, it could only mean that he is a believer in Jesus Christ and recognizes the Jews as the chosen people."<sup>2</sup> But all that said, I still think an important element to bring into the picture is the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus mentioned it in 24:14 and so it was definitely a subject in the discourse. Kelly mentioned it when he said, "The King's messengers, immediately before He appears in glory, will go forth preaching the gospel of the kingdom everywhere; and when the King takes His throne, those that received the gospel of the kingdom among the nations are recognized as 'sheep,' and the despisers perish as 'goats.'"<sup>3</sup> The point is that every Gentile that believes in Christ in that time also believes that Christ is a Jew and that He is returning soon to establish a very Jewish kingdom. In that light, no Gentile believer would risk his life to help Jews but every Gentile believer would. In conclusion, the **sheep** are living Gentiles who are righteous by faith, helped the Jewish remnant, blessed by the Father and will enter the joys of the kingdom.

As for the **goats**, in 25:41, **Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;** far from entering the kingdom the goats are cast into **eternal fire**. This can be none other than some form of eternal punishment. Verse 46 agrees

saying **these will go away into eternal punishment**. There are really only two ultimate destinies here; separation from God forever in the lake of fire and the kingdom, which once established continues forever.

It is important to take note of the fact that Jesus said **the eternal fire** was prepared **for the devil and his angels** and not humans. God did not prepare the lake of fire for humans. There is no doctrine of predestination to the lake of fire. Wiersbe said, "The kingdom was prepared for these saved individuals, but Matthew 25:41 does not state that the everlasting fire was prepared for the goats. It was prepared for the devil and his angels (Rev. 20:10). God never prepared hell for people. There is no evidence from Scripture that God predestines people to go to hell."<sup>4</sup> The reason some people go to hell is because they sinned in Adam and so have a sinful nature and stand condemned. The fact that they see God through His creation and yet continue to deny Him and give alternative explanations of the data is adding personal sin and only manifests that they are following their leader, **the devil and his angels**. Since the **devil and his angels** end up in the lake of fire, they do too, but it was not constructed for them. We should never think that God decided before the creation of the world to send specific people to the lake of fire. That is not true and to think that is to have a false view of God. There is an asymmetry to the sovereignty of God such that He is credited with saving the saved but He is not credited with damning the damned but that falls on their own shoulders. And at the same time He is sovereign over both.

In 25:42 we come to Jesus' explanation of why the **goats** end up in the eternal lake of fire and it's the opposite of what He said to the sheep; **for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.**' They, in response, basically say they never had the opportunity to. Verse 44, **Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?'** In effect, they say that because they had no direct opportunity to help Him they are excused from not helping Him.

But in 24:45 the King **will answer then, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these,** referring to His Jewish brethren, **you did not do it to Me.** Jesus is directly connected to the Jewish remnant. To not help the Jewish remnant in that time is to not help Him. Pentecost said, "Christ will view what was withheld from the messengers as withheld from Him."<sup>5</sup> This will be the mark of all unbelieving Gentiles. The lines will be drawn in this time like they have never been drawn and you are either on one side or the other. So when the anti-Christ rises to power and requires the world to take his mark, these will side with Him. When they hear the gospel of the kingdom they will reject it. When the anti-Christ sets out to destroy the Jewish people they will side with Him against the Jews. By not helping them they make manifest that they are not for Him but against Him. Again, this is a unique time in history. The lines will be drawn and you will have to take sides; either for Christ and therefore for the Jewish people or against Christ and therefore against the Jewish people. A sheep or a goat!

As such there are only two destinies in 25:46, **these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.** The goats will go to eternal punishment, which is the same as **eternal fire** in 25:41 that was prepared for the devil and his angels. In the end all unbelievers end up with the devil and his angels in the lake of fire. **But** the sheep are **the righteous** and will go **into eternal life**, which is the same as the kingdom in 25:34. Only **the righteous** can enter the kingdom to enjoy its blessings.

In conclusion, Matthew 24-25 is Jesus' most extensive teaching on prophecy. Known popularly as the Olivet Discourse it is better described as the Discourse on Kingdom Coming. In 23:38 Jesus announced that the Temple would be left to them desolate. In 24:3 this prompted His disciples to ask Him when this judgment would come and what the sign of the end of the age and His coming would be. In 24:4-8 Jesus described events of the first half of the Tribulation. In 24:9-14 He described events of the second half of the Tribulation. In 24:15-26 He described the abomination of desolation as the sign that would indicate the second half of the Tribulation had begun and the need for the Jews to escape Judea in order to survive. In 24:27-31 He described the sign of His second coming which would occur like lightning when the angels would gather dispersed Israel. In 24:32-51 Jesus gave parenthetical exhortations to the Jews living in the Tribulation to be watchful and prepared since the exact time of His coming was unknown. In 24:45-25:30 He resumed the description of events by teaching that when Israel is regathered He judges them beginning with the leadership. Entrance will be granted to all who are prepared with salvation and a rich entrance granted to those are prepared with additional acts of faithful service. In 25:31-46 He concluded with the description of His judgment on the surviving Gentiles. Those who blessed Israel will serve as the sign of their righteous standing and those cursing Israel will serve as the sign of their unrighteousness. The righteous will then be ushered into the kingdom in their natural bodies to enjoy its blessings and repopulate their peoples while the unrighteous will be cast in eternal punishment.

This passage does not add other details such as the resurrection of OT saints at this time to enter in resurrection bodies, the resurrection of Tribulation saints to enter in resurrection bodies and the return of Church age saints in their resurrection bodies to enter and reign with Him, but these facts should not be overlooked in building the prophetic picture.

Further, the exegesis does not deal specifically with postmillennialism or amillennialism but the results of the exegesis show both of these views to be faulty eschatology's. Postmillennialism views this age as progressing and eventually becoming Christianized to the point that we hand a Christianized kingdom over to Jesus. However, the picture here is that the world is plunged in darkness ruled by the anti-Christ leading a campaign of extermination of the Jewish people that has to be judged before the kingdom comes. Amillennialism is not consistent with the exegesis either. Amillennialism views the end of this age ending in a general resurrection and judgment of all the living and the dead at the great white throne. However, the picture here does not involve resurrection of anyone and the judgment is only of the living. So postmillennialism and amillennialism are not consistent with this passage, only premillennialism is.



Lastly, the exegesis does not deal with posttribulationism but the results of the exegesis show these to be faulty views of the timing of the rapture. Posttribulationism views the rapture as occurring as Christ returns at the Second Coming. However, if that were the case no believers would be left on earth to separate from unbelievers. But in our picture when He returns to earth he has to enter into judgment and separate believers from unbelievers. So posttribulationism is not consistent with this passage but pretribulationism is. Thus we see that the pretribulational rapture and premillennialism are consistent with the details of Jesus' discourse but not consistent with these other views.

In Matthew 26:1 we read **When Jesus had finished all these words**, the oft repeated words signaling the end of a narrative followed by discourse in the Gospel of Matthew. Next year we will begin to look at the events leading up to the crucifixion, which event shows that the positive result of salvation by the cross grew out of the negative response of Israel to Jesus' Messiahship so that salvation would go to the Gentiles and God would be all in all.

Matthew has at this point accomplished his main purpose and many see this as the climax. He has presented Jesus as having all the credentials of the King and the course of His kingdom program as having taken a tortuous path. He demonstrated His credentials by His words and His works. He is the Messiah of Israel. But Israel rejected Him as the King. Therefore, the kingdom offer was withdrawn from that generation and will be given to a future repentant Israel. When that nation comes, the Son of Man will return in all His glory and power, judge Israel and the nations, establish His kingdom over the face of the whole earth and sit to reign on David's throne.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 290.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 25:35.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 25:41.

<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 93.

<sup>5</sup> Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 410.