

Scholars say 'least of these' may not be the poor

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(RNS) When asked to describe the essence of the Christian message, Mother Teresa would often hold up a child's hand and recite Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40: "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." She would then jiggle the child's fingers one by one and repeat: "You. Did. It. To. Me."

Mother Teresa saw Jesus in the face of every needy person she ministered to because she understood "the least of these" to refer generally to the poor.

She is just one example. Many poverty advocates have successfully invoked the phrase to motivate the masses and raise millions of dollars. Jesus himself said divine judgment in the afterlife would be doled out based upon how one treats the least of these. No wonder the phrase is one of the most frequently cited in the New Testament.

But could Mother Teresa and so many others have gotten it wrong? According to a growing chorus of prominent Bible scholars, Jesus was speaking about persecuted Christians rather than the poor. They claim their interpretation is consistent with the way the phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible and the majority view among Christians throughout history. But not everyone is buying it.

"'The least of these' were missionaries of Jesus—the apostles and others—who had been persecuted and then suffered imprisonment for following and preaching," says Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. "Mother Teresa, social justice advocates, and liberation theologians have all colonized this term to their own agenda and made it about anyone poor."

McKnight first encountered this way of understanding the phrase 30 years ago in a German dissertation while studying for his own doctorate. When you look at the New

Testament Gospels where this phrase is used, McKnight wrote in his book *Kingdom Conspiracy*, it usually refers to followers of Jesus. To support this notion, McKnight notes that in this passage Jesus adds the phrase “brothers and sisters of mine.” (The Greek only says “brothers,” but it is generic.)

“No matter how many times I’ve said this, it seems not everyone cares how the terms are used in the New Testament,” he said. “They have followed Mother Teresa, and that’s that.”

McKnight said that in the 21st century, “the least of these” might be the Egyptian Coptic Christians who were beheaded by ISIS radicals in Libya or Saeed Abedini, the Iranian-American pastor imprisoned by the Iranian government for hosting illegal Christian gatherings.

Craig Keener, professor of biblical studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and author of *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, agrees with McKnight’s view and said the predominant Christian interpretation has been divided between two options: the poor or Christian missionaries.

McKnight and Keener are not alone. Craig Blomberg, a professor at Denver Seminary and expert on Jesus’ parables, says he believes this passage is speaking about Christians. Calvinist theologian D. A. Carson has argued similarly. Even *Christianity Today* published an article in March calling this “a more biblically accurate understanding of Jesus’ words in Matthew 25.”

Finding consensus among such a wide swath of Christian scholars is impressive, but when Southern Baptist college professor Denny Burk argued this view in a blog post last week, it created uproar online.

Klyne Snodgrass, author of *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, is a scholar who said Mother Teresa and others have interpreted this passage appropriately. He said that Matthew’s Gospel is clearly referring to the poor because the context of the passage is about obedience, not mission. He said that opposing scholars are wrong about the phrase’s usage in the New Testament and wrong about how Christians have understood the phrase throughout history.

“When we read [‘the least’] in other places in the Gospels, it is not the exact same expression,” he says. “And for that matter, it is not a common enough word or set phrase that is used frequently enough to infer one meaning from its usage.”

He acknowledges that more than 50 percent of Christians have not understood this phrase to mean the poor in general, but he adds, “The real problem here is that people want to avoid accepting that judgment is according to works—a fact that is the consistent teaching of the Bible in both the Old Testament and New Testament.”

Though disagreement over this important Christian text abounds, scholars on all sides concur that the Bible provides ample support for caring for those in need.

“The principle that people who care about poverty want to promote—caring for the needy—is a good one and a biblical one,” Keener said. “But it just isn’t a principle that’s found in this passage.”