

On actually following a beloved passage

By [Christian Coon](#)

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In the marketing world, a high "Q score" means that an item or brand is well known and regarded. I'm not aware that anyone rates biblical passages in this way, but if you did, Matthew 25 would have to have one of the highest Q scores—not far behind Psalm 23 at the top. A cursory Google search gives us, among other things, the [Matthew 25 Network](#) (which has been very visible during this election season), the [Matthew 25 Health & Dental Clinic in Indiana](#), [Matthew 25 AIDS Services](#) in Kentucky, the [Matthew 25 House Ghana](#) and even the [Matthew 25 mutual fund](#).

I heard [Tony Campolo](#) speak at a seminar a couple weeks ago. For \$1, he offered attendees white rubber bracelets that said "Red Letter Christians" on the outside and "Matthew 25:40" on the inside. People couldn't wait to buy them. There was a kind of peer pressure present in the room: Are you wearing the bracelet? Why aren't you wearing the bracelet? (I was reminded of the Seinfeld [episode](#) in which fellow walkers demand that Kramer wear an AIDS ribbon during an AIDS walk.)

Folks from all theological backgrounds are embracing Matthew 25, and for that we should give thanks. But are we simply nodding and agreeing with this passage, or do we actually follow its instructions? I spent a lot of uncomfortable time this week thinking about how I talk about how great this passage is: how I've become a fan of the Matthew 25 Network on my Facebook page, how I feel morally superior because I think I've fed the hungry, quenched the thirsty, clothed the naked, taken care of the sick. But when I'm honest with myself, I have to think hard to remember the last time I actually did any of these things. And then this passage haunts me.

A couple other notes on this passage:

- Daniel Harrington [argues](#) that the Greek phrase in verse 32 usually translated "all the nations" is used elsewhere in Matthew to refer specifically to nations other than Israel—that is, "all the Gentiles." He characterizes "the issue at the judgment scene" as follows: "By what criterion are Gentiles to be declared just

or condemned by the Son of Man? The answer is: By their deeds of mercy done to the disciples of Jesus (missionaries or ordinary Christians), because such deeds have been done to the Son of Man." According to this reading, Israel and Gentiles have separate judgments. (Leon Morris, among others, [disagrees](#), noting that this translation seems to "contradict the meaning of the Greek.")

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- There are thousands of illustrations of this passage. One book that has more than its share is Sara Miles's wonderful spiritual memoir [Take This Bread](#), about her journey from being raised as an atheist to becoming a Christian and starting a food pantry at her church.