

Matthew 25:31–46—The Corporal Works of Mercy

Augustine (354–430) listed fourteen “works of mercy” divided into two categories: *the corporal works of mercy*, which benefit or respect the physical well-being of persons, and *the spiritual works of mercy*, which attend to nonphysical needs.¹ All are incumbent on Christians to perform as they are able.

Corporal Works of Mercy	Spiritual Works of Mercy
1. feed the hungry	1. instruct the ignorant
2. give drink to the thirsty	2. counsel the doubtful
3. clothe the naked	3. admonish sinners
4. house the homeless	4. bear wrongs patiently
5. visit the sick	5. forgive offenses willingly
6. ransom the captive	5. comfort the afflicted
7. bury the dead	7. pray for others' needs

The “works of mercy” became a standard part of catechetical instruction in the Roman Catholic Church and continue to be taught (and practiced) in many communities today.

Many historians say that Augustine derived the first six corporal works of mercy from Matthew 25:31–46, where Jesus indicates that similar deeds will determine one’s fate at the Final Judgment:

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

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food [1st], I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink [2nd], I was a stranger and you welcomed me [4th], I was naked and you gave me clothing [3rd], I was sick and you took care of me [5th], I was in prison and you visited me [6th].' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food [1st], or thirsty and gave you something to drink [2nd]? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you [4th], or naked and gave you clothing [3rd]? And when was it that we saw you sick [5th] or in prison [6th] and visited you?' And the king will answer them, '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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food [1st], I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink [2nd], I was a stranger and you did not welcome me [4th], naked and you did not give me clothing [3rd], sick [5th] and in prison [6th] and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry [1st] or thirsty [2nd] or a stranger [4th] or naked [3rd] or sick [5th] or in prison [6th], and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Admittedly, the equation is not precise (visiting someone in prison is not quite the same as ransoming someone who has been taken captive). Augustine added the seventh corporal work of mercy, inspired by the example of Joseph of Arimathea in Matthew 27:57–60 and by the instruction of Tobit 1:17–19.

Support for the “spiritual works of mercy” can be found in numerous scriptural texts though they were not apparently derived from as singular a source as were the corporal ones from the text of Matthew 25.

1. See Augustine, *Confessions* 10.38,39.