

Separating Sheep and Goats • Matthew 25:31-46

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

What a wonderful portrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ in his first coming. So human! So simple! So sweet! He came as a baby . . . grew up as a carpenter . . . communicated as a teacher . . . died like a lamb . . . rose again as a friend . . . ascended to heaven as our advocate.

Then comes the next line of the Apostles Creed: “. . . from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.” What a very different picture of Jesus. No longer sweet and lowly. No longer meek and mild. No longer hiding the splendor of his deity. In his second coming Jesus is the judge! Listen to the way it will be as Jesus explains it in Matthew 25:31-46:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will

be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 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, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.

They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not look after you?’

He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

The message is simple and scary . . . Jesus will judge. To describe what it will be like, Jesus uses a very short parable. Unlike many of his other parables that are long on story and short on explanation, this parable is short on story and long on explanation. The whole parable is in verses 32 and 33 where Jesus says:

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

The scene is simple and easy to understand. In Palestine sheep and goats grazed together. Sheep preferred the open air and were often left to graze

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alone at night. Goats were more susceptible to the cold so the shepherds tried to bring them into a shelter at night. Also, sheep were more valuable in the ancient Palestinian economy. So, near the end of each day the shepherd would sort them out . . . goats to the left and sheep to the right. They weren't hard to tell apart.

Jesus says that is what it will be like on judgment day. He will be there and he will judge. It won't be hard. The righteous will go to the right; the unrighteous will go to the left. Eternal destiny will finally be settled. It will be a very different role for Jesus. He will not relate to us as he did in his first coming or even now. He did not come to judge the first time but the next time he will come to judge.

There is a story set in Scotland of a man accused of certain crimes who called his lawyer friend. It so happened that the very day he called him was the day he was elevated to the bench. He replied to the accused man saying, "Yesterday I might have been your advocate. Today I can only be your judge."

So it will be that the Jesus who today offers his friendship and his advocacy will someday sit on heaven's throne to be the judge who separates the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous.

Jesus explains all that in this final paragraph of Matthew 25 talking first about the sheep to the right and explaining it in verses 34 to 40. But as we read it there is an immediate problem with the teaching surrounding this parable. Does it teach salvation by works? It certainly sounds that way. It sounds like we acquire heaven by doing good. There is no mention about accepting Jesus Christ as Savior, receiving forgiveness of sin and being granted eternal life. How then does that square with the teaching in Ephesians 2:8-9? There it says, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*"

To understand that we must take a more careful look at Matthew 25:34 where it says, "*Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'*"

Inheritance is based on family relationship. According to John 1:12, ". . . *to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the*

right to become children of God." Therefore, becoming a child of God is based on receiving Jesus Christ as Savior. So, the criteria in this parable for determining whether one goes to the right or to the left is not the works they have done but it is the inheritance relationship.

This parable and surrounding teaching does not contradict the rest of the New Testament teaching on salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. But it does speak to a very practical question I hear often concerning those who claim to be Christians but don't behave like Christians. People tell me, "He says he accepted Christ. He's a church member. But he sure treats people rotten. He's so greedy and selfish. How can he be a Christian and not act like a Christian?"

According to this parable, he can't. According to this parable, the validity of one's response to Jesus Christ is measured by behavior toward his brethren. In verses 35 and 36 Jesus lists six examples of Christian behavior when he says:

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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

These are not terribly difficult things to do. They are all very practical and very do-able. It doesn't take great wealth, intelligence, education or even faith. Anybody can do any of them, although many people do none of them. Jesus is here saying that those who are true Christians will act accordingly. He says it simply and straightforward. It's easy to understand. No talk about denominations or complicated creeds. True faith will be measured in terms of food, water, invitations, clothes and visits.

Those judged to be righteous respond to Jesus' judgment with a question when they say:

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?

There are two fascinating dimensions to these questions. First, those that are judged righteous don't readily recall doing the good they have done. Obviously, they were not depending on these good works getting them into heaven; they don't even remember doing the good works. These acts had

just naturally flowed out of them as Christians.

Another interesting dimension is that these who are judged righteous do not understand how they had done these things to Jesus. They hadn't given Jesus a hamburger, a Coke or a sweater. They hadn't invited him into their homes for an evening or visited him in jail or the hospital. They hadn't physically seen Jesus at all! How had they done these things?

It is then that Jesus renders an extraordinary teaching! He says in verse 40, *"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* So Jesus says that he counts treatment of other people as treatment of himself. This is then the basis of judging true Christianity. So if we see someone with needs and act to help them then Jesus says, "Of course that person is a Christian. You can tell it by the way that person behaves!"

Now we come back to this and say, "Wait a minute! Who are Jesus' brothers that he is referring to here?" In the broadest sense they are any other Christians. So, treatment of other Christians is considered as treatment of Jesus. But in a narrower sense, it is those disciples who proclaim the gospel—specifically apostles, evangelists, preachers and missionaries.

Let's look at Jesus' words in Matthew 10:40-42 to help us understand Matthew 25:40:

"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will not lose his reward."

Jesus says that he counts treatment of other people as treatment of himself.

Let's try to summarize and simplify all of this. Jesus will judge. His judgment will settle our eternal destiny. Those called "sheep" are the ones who inherit the kingdom. They inherit it by accepting Jesus as Savior and then behaving accordingly. That behavior is measured by how we treat other Chris-

tians, especially those who give us the gospel.

A great example of all that Jesus is talking about here is in Acts 16. Paul and Silas are in the city of Philippi where they are arrested, beaten and imprisoned. They tell their guard to *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."* He believes, is baptized and in Acts 16:34 we read, *"The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family."*

When that jailer stands before Jesus on the judgment day Jesus will say to him, "You are in. Take a right." The jailer will ask why. Jesus will say, "You took me into your house and gave me dinner." The jailer won't remember and will ask for an explanation. Jesus will say, "When you took care of Paul and Silas you were taking care of me."

Because judgment is based on our response to Jesus Christ, what goes for the sheep goes for the goats. Only those sent to the left are doomed because of their lack of relationship to God through Jesus Christ. So there is that sad 41st verse where Jesus says, *"Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* The reason they are so judged is because of their lack of an inheritance. There is no inheritance because there is no relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Bible clearly teaches that faith and works go hand-in-hand. We read in Romans 2:13, *"For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous."* You have to become a Christian through faith in Jesus, but you also have to behave like the Christian you have become!

You must have a heartbeat to be alive. But if

your heart won't beat, your only hope is surgery to fix it. So, the surgery saves you. But the proof of successful surgery is for your heart to beat after the surgery is over. And so

it is with salvation. If you can't do it yourself the only way is through faith in Christ. But that faith has to beat or you are dead.

So then, how can Jesus tell if someone really has faith in him as Savior or not? By the response of that person to Christ—and that response is mea-

sured by the person's behavior toward other Christians. It's the same six-fold test that was applied to the sheep, only the goats all flunk. So Jesus said to them:

"Depart from me 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, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

Just as the sheep-types didn't recall what they had done, the goat-types also didn't know what they had done. So they asked, "*Lord, when we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, did not help you?*" They were so full of themselves they never did anything for Jesus. It is because they had no relationship to God that they didn't do these things. They never thought to do these things because they were not Christians.

Jesus the King replies to the goats in Matthew 25:45, "*I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.*"

Parables are interesting analogies but they always address serious issues and always call for us to make decisions. This parable forces us to look ahead to judgment day and decide if we want to be sheep on the right or goats on the left. Now is the time to decide and act. Then it will be too late.

The answer is not to *try* to do good. The answer is to give our life to Jesus Christ and let him do his good through us. Today's decision and behavior will determine tomorrow's destiny!

Francis of Assisi was a medieval saint who founded the Franciscan Order of monks. He was wealthy, bright and vigorous, but he was unhappy. A turning point came one day when he met a leper while he was out riding his horse. The leper was repulsive, disgusting but Francis was attracted to him nonetheless. He got off his horse, walked to the leper and threw his arms around him. Francis says that as he held him the leper's face turned into the face of Jesus Christ.

A similar story is that of Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who was a Christian. As he entered a city one cold winter day a beggar asked him for money. Martin had no money to give the hungry shivering man so he took off his soldier's coat and cut it in half. He gave half of the coat to the beggar. That night he had a dream in which he saw Jesus and the angels in heaven. Jesus was wearing half a Roman soldier's coat. One of the angels asked, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old coat? Who gave it to you?" Jesus replied, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

Francis, Martin, you and I—on that great day of division may we all hear Judge Jesus say:

" . . . I was I 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

"*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*" Amen.

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