

The Sheep and the Goats

By Brad Allison on 3/28/2004

Scripture Reference *Matthew 25:31-46*

There is some dispute over whether this is a parable or a discourse. Some claim it to be a parable and would point to this scene of the separating of the sheep and the goats. Others would say that it is clearly a discourse, and the sheep and goats discussion is only a metaphor. While I tend to agree with those who say it is a discourse instead of a parable, we're going to look at it today anyway. I want to do this not primarily because we're in the middle of a series on the parables, but because we are one week from Palm Sunday and two weeks from Easter. It seems that Jesus spoke the words of our text just before his crucifixion. They are words about the judgment Jesus will bring. As we enter into this time of year when we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is appropriate to begin with a text that focuses us squarely on Jesus' authority as King and Judge. The one who died for us and was raised again was no mere man who was victimized by circumstances getting out of control. He is the King and Ruler of the universe, and the scene before us today clearly features Jesus in that way.

I believe that the editors of our Bible were correct in titling this section "The Final Judgment." If you put together the Bible's teaching in this area of the future, it teaches that when we die, our bodies remain in the ground while our spirits go immediately either into the presence of the Lord or into torment. Then, at the Second Coming of Jesus, he will raise up the bodies both of the saved and the unsaved. Jesus taught that in John 5:28-29. "An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." Those words imply a final judgment, and it is this judgment to which our passage refers. It is a judgment, to quote the Apostle's Creed, of the living and the dead. That means that when Jesus returns, some will be alive, while everyone from the beginning of the world who has died will be raised again, and both groups will then appear before him in bodily form. It is of this final judgment that our passage speaks. As we look at it today, I want us to notice two simple truths: the reality of judgment and the basis of judgment.

I. The Reality of Judgment

Our passage is speaking about the Second Coming of Jesus and says that he will come in glory with all the angels. This is in contrast to his first coming, when he came in humility, in the weakness of a baby who couldn't speak or control his own bodily functions. But at this Second Coming, he will sit on a throne of judgment and authority. He will summon all the nations to appear before him, and they will come, both the living and the dead. He will sit on a throne of judgment and authority, and unlike his first coming when his kingship was challenged by Herod and later by both Jews and Gentiles, no one will challenge his kingship now. Did you notice that even those who will be assigned to eternal torment call him "Lord" (v. 44)? During his first coming, the angels came as far as they could, but were not allowed to go any further than the appearance to the shepherds. But in this scene, all the angels, not just part of them, come with Jesus to the earth. It is a scene of staggering glory, with all the angels and all the people who have ever lived on the earth. Everyone in this room today and everyone you will see today will be there. And in the middle of it all will be Jesus, undisputed king of the universe.

What Jesus will do is to separate people into two groups, just like a shepherd separates his animals into sheep and goats. On his right will be all who will be invited to come and live with Jesus for eternity, while on his left will be all who will be commanded to depart from him.

Let me point out three features of this judgment as it is described in our text. First, it will be universal. Every person who has ever lived, from every nation, will be present there. Second, it will be individual. Notice the wording of verse 32: “he will separate people one from another.” There will be no sneaking through in a group; each person will appear by himself or herself before Jesus. Finally, it will be public. It is this public aspect of judgment I believe that is primarily in view here. Those who have previously died, whether in the Lord or outside, already know their eternal destiny. No new information will be forthcoming at this judgment. But that was a private judgment, and this one will be public.

Let me mention two applications of this before moving to our next point. First, we all need to pause and realize that judgment is real, as are both heaven and hell. While most people in America (about 73% according to the Harris poll) say they believe in hell, when defined as an actual location which is a place of torment where people will be sent, only 31% said they believed in hell as defined in that way. There are many people who are certain that there is no such thing as the kind of hell Jesus portrayed here, and a judgment that precedes it. They are a little like Muammar Qaddafi’s attitude to Britain. I saw in the news this week that Britain’s Prime Minister paid a visit to Libya, which was the first time in decades that such a visit had been made. Years ago, England closed its Libyan Embassy, and it so angered Qaddafi that he ordered England to be removed from all maps in Libya. But such an action does not mean that England ceased to exist, any more than people not believing in hell means that it doesn’t exist. Jesus believed in judgment and hell, and that fact ought to rivet our attention.

A second application stems from this public aspect of the final judgment. All will see the outcome of this judgment. Those who are approved by Jesus will not only be right, they will be seen to be right. Those who are disapproved will be seen to be disapproved. The application is this: our zeal to be seen as right by other people is unnecessary. Do you know what I mean by this effort to be seen as right? A teacher criticizes your child in a way that calls into question your parenting, and you respond with anger and defensiveness. A church member makes a suggestion to you about a better way to handle a situation at work, and you feel the need to defend yourself. Most of us would rather be right than good, but this passage exposes the foolishness of that. If you are right and others don’t recognize it, it’s not life-shattering because the opinion of Jesus is the one of ultimate worth. If you are not right, but manage to convince everyone else that you are, your efforts are wasted because their opinions are not the ones that count in an ultimate sense. We are called to live in light of this great judgment, and doing so will deliver us from this constant defensiveness.

If the judgment that counts in an ultimate sense is the one portrayed in our passage, then knowing the basis of this judgment becomes a very important question. On what basis will Jesus make his judgment on this day? That’s our next point.

II. The Basis of Judgment

Jesus’ words here about the basis of judgment have puzzled many people. Why doesn’t he give a more evangelical answer, saying that the sheep on his right are those who have trusted Jesus as their Savior? Why instead does he give what appears to be a works answer, saying that those who go to heaven are the ones who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned? Let me mention two things in answer to that question before we move on to look at these verses in greater detail. First, I want to point out that the first thing said to these sheep is not that they have been kind to the needy, but that they have been blessed by the Father by having a kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world (v. 34). If this was done before the foundation of the world, then it had to have been

of grace rather than works simply because no works could be done by us before the foundation of the world.

There is one other point to be made in a preliminary way about this question of why Jesus judges people based on works rather than faith. He is applying the truth he stated elsewhere when he said that we will know people by their fruits (Matt. 7:20). The root is faith and the fruit is works. Since this is a public judgment, Jesus focuses on what is seen rather than on what is unseen. Just as the roots of a plant are hidden from view, so the faith in the heart is also hidden from plain view. But the fruit is obvious to all, and that is what Jesus focuses on in this public judgment. If the root of true faith is present, the result will be the fruit of love and kindness to the needy.

Illustration: Suppose a wealthy woman has no children of her own, and her only heir is a twenty-five year old nephew. He always seems so kind to her, but she has the nagging sense that he is only being nice because he wants her money when she dies. So she decides on a test that will tell her what she needs to know. She disguises herself as a poor woman and goes to his house to ask for help. When he treats her rudely and tells her to go away and never come back again, she discovers what she wanted to know. His true nature has been revealed. That's exactly what Jesus does here. He disguises himself as a needy person. Did you notice in our text that both the sheep and goats are surprised when Jesus says, "I was hungry and you fed me?" They are surprised because Jesus has come to them in disguise. But he knows that our response to such neediness is a true indication of what's in our hearts.

So Jesus is here describing what supernatural love looks like, the kind of love that only comes from a heart of faith. He is describing living works instead of dead works. Let's notice some of the qualities of such living works, and then use this description to diagnose our spiritual condition. The first quality I notice in this list is that the person doing these works is willing to love people instead of fix them. Did you notice that he visits the prisoner rather than working for his release? He visits the sick rather than healing the sick. In order to understand my point here, I need to introduce you to the distinction between two biblical terms: justice and mercy. Justice has in view the big issues of oppression that make people's lives miserable, while mercy deals with the individual response to hurting people. For example, suppose people in a community are getting sick because the biggest factory in town is polluting the water they drink. Mercy would visit the sick person and wash their clothes and clean their house, while justice would try to persuade the factory owners to stop polluting the water or pay for clean water to be trucked in to the residents. Justice tries to fix the problem at its root, where mercy seeks to alleviate the suffering in the life of the individual. Which is in view in this passage? It's mercy, isn't it? While God calls us both to justice and mercy, there are many times when we just can't fix the problem. It's too deep and out of our control. But we are always able to apply mercy, and that is what Jesus is referring to here. We draw near to hurting people and minister to them even if we can't fix the problem. You may not be able to cure cancer, but you can visit the lonely cancer patient in the hospital. You may not be able to solve the marital problems of someone in your small group Bible study, but you can meet with him to pray with him.

The second thing I notice here is that Jesus gives us permission to ignore the needs of the masses and minister to the one or two he brings into our lives. Notice that he uses the singular throughout. "I was a stranger." Very often, we let the size of the need keep us from doing anything. We become paralyzed to do anything by our assessment of the bigness of the problem. We are like the man who came up to a little boy who was on the beach throwing back starfish who had been washed ashore and were dying in the hot sun. The man said to the boy that he could make no real difference because there were too many starfish. The problem was

simply too big. As the boy picked up a starfish and threw it back he replied, "I made a difference for that starfish."

A third feature of the items in this list is that they require relational involvement rather than a handout. That's obvious with the visiting of those who are sick and in prison. It is also present in the giving of food, since sharing a meal together was a highly relational event in this culture. We often want to fool ourselves into thinking that we are being faithful to the Bible's call to mercy by visiting a nursing home with our church group at Christmas each year. That's not a bad thing to do, but Jesus is asking far more of us here. He is asking that we get involved relationally, finding out the real needs of the needy rather than making a one-time project out of them.

Another feature of these deeds is that they require varying degrees of sacrifice. It doesn't cost much to give a cup of cold water. But clothing in Jesus' day would have been quite costly—about as costly as the last two would be for us. Giving of one's time to visit the sick and imprisoned is a costly sacrifice for us. As I think about my own life and why it is that I find it difficult to show the mercy Jesus speaks of here, I think it is chiefly that it costs me my agenda. Like many of you, I usually have more to do each day than I have time. So I plan my agenda and begin working through it at high speed in an attempt to faithfully perform all I think I need to do. In the process, it is easy to miss the most important thing Jesus has for me. If Jesus came to my office and asked for help, I would drop everything on my "to-do" list in order to help him. He teaches us here that Jesus does come to us in just that way. He comes to us through the needy who are around us all the time. All we need to do is open our eyes to see them. But we often don't see them, because we are too preoccupied with our own agendas. So it cost us something to take time to see and to give of ourselves to help another person in need.

CONCLUSION:

This passage teaches us the same thing that we are taught over and over again in the New Testament: the essence of following Christ is a dependence and trust in Jesus that leads to loving others. That's what Jesus asks of us.

During World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal if it was going to have any hope of winning the war. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill called together the labor leaders to ask for their help. He asked them to imagine the grand parade that would march through Piccadilly Circus after the war. He described all who would be in that parade, including the sailors who had fought to keep the sea-lanes open. Then there would be the brave pilots who cleared the skies of the Luftwaffe planes. There would be all the brave soldiers who had toiled to win on the ground. Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would ask where they were in the war. From thousands of voices would come the answer: "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal." This is a scene not unlike that one. It is a scene of glory, and Jesus will give his glory to those who labored in the coalmines of loving people.

Do you have such a love for people that is willing to labor quietly and without recognition on the earth? Such a love does not come from human effort. It only comes from divine blessing. Remember that the first thing Jesus said about this group of sheep is that they are blessed by the Father. They are blessed by receiving faith that expresses itself through the kind of love portrayed here. Where do you get such faith? You get it from Jesus. What he is doing here is humbling us with the mercy he requires in order to open our hearts to the mercy he offers. Did you know that you can't generate this kind of love? You need God's help to

forgive you and to empower you. Let's celebrate that love as we go now to the Lord's Supper.