

Sheep or Goat? Matthew 25:31-46

Now I am not a shepherd, but I hear in some countries sheep and goats look a great deal alike. They graze together, they drink together, they may even sleep together. They are about the same size and about the same color, so from a distance they are difficult to tell apart. But there are some things that are not the same, otherwise we would not call some sheep and others goats. Which of you think that you can tell from a distance which is a flock of sheep and which is a herd of goats? This section of scripture explains to us how Jesus Christ will judge the Gentile nations, not as groups, (Egyptians, Congolese, Americans, Canadians, Nigerians, Argentines, Dominicans, Germans, Italians, Japanese, etc.) but of individuals within these nations when he returns.

Jesus talked about three groups in this account. There were sheep, goats, and the least of these in my family. Who are these people that the King dares to call “Members of My Family”? These are people who will hear the message and trust Jesus Christ. Some will go through hard time and they will be unable to buy or sell, like our high unemployment rate now where many who want to work are unable to find jobs and many will lose their savings and homes. Many will only survive through the loving care of the others who have trusted Christ and who care for members of Christ’s family.

The basis of sheep’s entrance into eternal life is seen in their actions, because they provided food, drink, clothing, and care for the King (verses 35-36). The King’s statement surprised the sheep and will prompt them to respond that they do not recall ever having ministered directly to the King (vv. 37-39). The King will answer that they lovingly ministered and performed these services for the least of these members of my family, and by so doing were ministering to Christ the King

(v. 40). Their motive was not reward, but sacrificial love. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me," Jesus said to His disciples (Matt. 10:40); and surely this would also apply to members of Christ's family. The believing Gentile's works will not save him or her; but the works will reveal that they are redeemed.

The individuals designated goats were judged because they did not trust Jesus Christ and give evidence of that faith by caring for members of His family, or extending mercy to others. They took care of themselves and their own, but they had no time for the suffering believers (Rev. 12:17). There are sins of omission as well as sins of commission (James 4:17). Not doing good is the moral equivalent of doing evil. Their lack of righteous works will evidence their unconcern (vv. 42-44; cf. vv. 35-36).

When we compare the two judicial sentences (Matt. 25:34, 41), we discover some interesting truths. To begin with, the sheep were blessed of the Father; but it does not say that the goats were "cursed of the Father." The sheep inherit the kingdom, and inheritance is based on birth. Because they had been born again through faith, they inherited the kingdom.

Note Matthew 25:41 does not state that the everlasting fire was prepared for the goats. It was prepared for the devil and his angels (Rev. 20:10). God never prepared hell for people. There is no evidence from Scripture that God predestines people to go to hell. There are only two eternal destinies: everlasting punishment for those who reject Christ or eternal life for those who trust Him.

The sheep will be ushered into the kingdom to share in Christ's glory. All of creation will share in the glorious liberty of God's children (Rom. 8:19-21). Jesus Christ will rule from David's throne in Jerusalem (Luke 1:30-33), and peace will reign (Isa. 11).

In Matthew 24 and 25 Jesus talked a great deal of what will happen when he returns at the end of the Age. Religious scholars put themselves in camps: Millennialism, or Pre-millennialism, or Post-Millennialism. What they are really saying this some believe Jesus' judgment will come before, during or after a 1000 year earthly reign. But, no matter what view of prophecy we take, we know that Jesus is coming again. As Christians, we must be faithful, we must be watchful, we must be prepared, we must be alert and ready. We must not waste our opportunities. We may not have a great deal of ability or a great many gifts, but we can still be faithful in the calling God has given us.^{1 2}

God will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need. His judgment does not depend on the knowledge we have amassed, or the fame that we have acquired, or the fortune that we have gained, but on the help that we have given.

Our help must be help in simple things. The things which Jesus picks out - giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner—are things which anyone can do. It is not a question of giving away thousands of dollars, or of writing our names in the annals of history; it is a case of giving simple help to the people we meet every day.

Our help must be help which brings no earthly glory to ourselves. Those who helped did not think that they were helping Christ or piling up eternal merit; they helped because they could not stop themselves. It was the natural, instinctive, reaction of the loving heart. Whereas, on the other hand, the attitude of those who failed to help was; 'If we had known it was you we would gladly have helped; but we thought it was only some common person who was not worth helping.' It is still true that there are those who will help if they are given praise and thanks and

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 25:31

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:80

publicity; but to help like that is not to help, it is to pander to self-esteem. Such help is not generosity; it is selfishness. The help which wins the approval of God is that which is given for nothing but the sake of helping.

Jesus confronts us with the wonderful truth that all such help given is given to himself, and all such help withheld is withheld from himself. God is the great Father; and the way to delight the heart of God is to help God's children, those made in the image of God.

There were those who found this parable true in their lives. The one was Francis of Assisi; he was wealthy and high-born and high-spirited. But he was not happy. He felt that life was incomplete. Then one day he was out riding and met a leper, loathsome and repulsive in the ugliness of his disease. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this wretched sufferer; and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

Another was Martin of Tours. He was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?" And Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

The third was Ruth:

Ruth went to her mail box and there was only one letter. She picked it up and looked at it before opening, but then she looked at the envelope again. There was no stamp, no postmark, only her name and address. She read the letter:

Dear Ruth:

I'm going to be in your neighborhood Saturday afternoon and I would like to visit.

Love Always,
Jesus

Her hands were shaking as she placed the letter on the table. "Why would the Lord want to visit me? I'm nobody special. I don't have anything to offer." With that thought, Ruth remembered her empty kitchen cabinets.

"Oh my goodness, I really don't have anything to offer. I'll have to run down to the store and buy something for dinner." She reached for her purse and counted out its contents. Five dollars and forty cents. "Well, I can get some bread and cold cuts, at least." She threw on her coat and hurried out the door. She bought a loaf of French bread, a half-pound of sliced turkey, and a carton of milk...leaving Ruth with grand total of twelve cents to last her until Monday. Nonetheless, she felt good as she headed home, her meager offerings tucked under her arm.

"Hey lady, can you help us, lady?" Ruth had been so absorbed in her dinner plans, she hadn't even noticed two figures huddled in the alleyway. A man and a woman, both of them dressed in little more than rags. "Look lady, I ain't got a job, ya know, and my wife and I have been living out here on the street, and, well, now it's getting cold and we're getting kinda hungry and, well, if you could help us, lady, we'd really appreciate it."

Ruth looked at them both. They were dirty, they smelled bad and frankly, she was certain that they could get some kind of work if they really wanted to.

"Sir, I'd like to help you, but I'm a poor woman myself. All I have is a few cold cuts and some bread, and I'm having an important guest for dinner tonight and I was planning on serving that to Him."

"Yeah, well, okay lady, I understand. Thanks anyway."

The man put his arm around the woman's shoulders, turned and they headed back into the alley. As she watched them leave, Ruth felt a familiar twinge in her heart.

"Sir, wait!" The couple stopped and turned as she ran down the alley after them. "Look, why don't you take this food. I'll figure out something else to serve my guest." She handed the man her grocery bag.

"Thank you lady. Thank you very much!" "Yes, thank you!" It was the man's wife, and Ruth could see now that she was shivering. "You know, I've got another coat at home. Here, why don't you take this one." Ruth unbuttoned her jacket and slipped it over the woman's shoulders. Then smiling, she turned and walked back to the street... without her coat and with nothing to serve her guest.

"Thank you lady! Thank you very much!" the man called after her.

Ruth was chilled by the time she reached her front door, and worried too. The Lord was coming to visit and she didn't have anything to offer Him. She fumbled through her purse for the door key. But as she did, she noticed another envelope in her mailbox. "That's odd. The mailman doesn't usually come twice in one day." She took the envelope out of the box and opened it.

Dear Ruth:

It was so good to see you again. Thank you for the lovely meal. And Oh, thank you, too, for the beautiful coat.

Love Always,
Jesus

The air was still cold, but even without her coat, Ruth no longer noticed.

When we examine Jesus' teaching there is an error we must avoid. We must think this passage teaches salvation by good works. You might think this message was about helping one's neighbor is sufficient to earn salvation and go to heaven. But this is not the message of this passage. Nobody at any time in the history of the world was ever saved by good works.

The Old Testament saints were saved by faith (Heb. 11); the New Testament saints were saved by faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8–10). People today are saved the same way. The gospel of "do good" is not a scriptural message. It is right for believers to do good (Gal. 6:10; Heb. 13:16), but this is not the way unbelievers can be saved.

When we learn the generosity which without calculation helps others in the simplest things, we too will know the joy of helping Jesus Christ himself.³

The question remains, are you a sheep or a goat? You know the real difference comes down to whether you have received him as your Lord and Savior, then service to others will come naturally!

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 324