

## "Sheep or Goat?"

The Scripture reading today from Matthew 25 is a parable of Jesus that's familiar to many people. Remember how it goes? When the Son of Man returns in all His glory, and all the nations are before Him, He will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The one group He'll welcome into His kingdom, because when he was hungry, they gave Him food; when He was thirsty they gave Him something to drink; when He was a stranger they welcomed Him; when He needed clothing they clothed Him; when He was sick, or in prison, they visited Him. And in doing so, they did it *to Him!*

The other group didn't make it into His kingdom, because when He was in all of those situations mentioned before, they didn't respond to the person in need.

So, this is a parable that's really not complicated, nor hard to understand, is it? *We will be judged by how we respond to people in need, and in the way we respond, we are doing that to Jesus.* Let's look again at this memorable parable of Jesus. I'd like to examine it around 5 words or categories.

First of all: **Judgment.** This is sometimes called the "parable of the last judgment." Jesus will return, and when He does, He will judge "all the nations" - all of us, everyone! Our American culture is moving away from its Judeo-Christian roots. Fewer people go to church. Atheism and agnosticism are more prominent. And one of the by-products of this is that many are losing the awareness that we will be accountable to God for what we do with our life.

It makes a difference whether or not we believe we must give an account of our lives to God! We live differently if we believe that! I doubt that we humans would do some of the awful things we do if we were convinced that God will ultimately judge our lives!

This parable of the sheep and the goats is not the only Scripture that teaches a final judgment. Many Scriptures do. Other parables of Jesus do: the parables of the fish net, the wheat and weeds, the ten virgins, the wedding feast, the talents, and others. Jesus said, "(The Father) has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). He also said, "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done" (Matthew 16:27). Hebrews 9:27 says, "People are destined to die once, and then face judgment."

It's not that we want to center in on a "hellfire and brimstone" Christianity. Judgment day is also a day of *reward* for the faithful. But a final judgment is part of the whole gospel truth. And, for me, life only makes sense if there is a final balancing of the scales between good and evil.

So, the first word is *judgment*. The Son of Man will return, and will separate and judge all the nations and all the people. The second word: **Belief.** In this parable, what is judgment based upon? *Our actions, our deeds.*

Isn't that kind of a problem! Isn't the message of the gospel that we are saved by trusting Christ for salvation – not by any good works we do? "*Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved*" (Acts 16:31). "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes in Him*

will not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Ephesians 2:8-9 emphasizes salvation by grace through faith, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast." We're not saved by our good works, but by grace – God's mercy and kindness, that we don't deserve.

True. But in the Bible, faith is never just believing the right stuff, believing certain facts about Jesus. It is *following Him* – beginning to do what He did, live as He lived, treat others as He did.

The Book of James eloquently conveys this truth that *faith and good works always go together*. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:14-17). The parable of the sheep and the goats reinforces the truth that faith is demonstrated and our life is judged by how we respond to the needs of people around us.

We've looked at this parable in the light of 2 words: judgment, belief. The third word is: **Surprise!** Both groups of people were surprised on judgment day! Those sent to everlasting punishment cried out, "When did we see *You* in need, Lord, and do nothing to help you? When did *You* come to us?" (I can imagine a sense of panic and terror in their voices). But the people who inherited the kingdom of God were surprised too! "When did we help *You*, Lord, and respond to *You* with compassion?" *They didn't even realize or think about the good they had done. They just reached out in a self-forgetful way, spontaneously!*

Here's a question: If I do a good deed, with the thought of getting some kind of reward, is it still a good deed?

*I don't think so!* Real loving deeds are when we do something that has the interest of the other person at heart, when we do something good without any thought of patting ourselves on the back, or thinking God will reward us, or hoping we'll get some kind of recognition.

Here's something else to think about: How often do we do something good *without any sense of what's in it for us*? If you really examine and analyze the good things you do, I think you'll be surprised to find how there is usually some kind of pay back for us. Just try it sometime!

**Surprise!** Both the condemned, and the blessed, in this parable of Jesus, were surprised – when did we do this, or fail to do this, for You, Lord! I have a feeling there are going to be many surprises on judgment day!

The 4<sup>th</sup> word to focus on as we look at this parable is this: **Practical**. We will be judged not on our interpretation of the Bible, nor by what we said we believed, nor by how religious we are, but by *how we respond in practical ways to the needs of people around us*.

Jesus said, "I was hungry, and you gave me food" (Matthew 25:35). If you don't have food to eat,

if you're chronically hungry, you don't have much in the tank to do much else in life. Thank God for all the humanitarian organizations, and caring individuals, who do their best to provide food for hungry people.

"I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink" (Matthew 25:35). For most of us, water is no problem. We just turn on the faucet and get a drink. Not so in Kenya, for instance. In the little village of Musese, there's no plumbing, no water lines into the house ("house" in many cases being a hut). Where to get safe water to drink is a huge issue. One of the first things we wanted to do as a result of my first visit to Kenya was to provide safe water for the villagers. It took a year, but finally a commercially dug well was dug on the church property, and what a joy it was each trip to see people from the surrounding area come with their jars to fill up with fresh water.

"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). The new family in the neighborhood. The new employee at work. The new student in the classroom. The new people who come into our family circle through marriage. I couldn't help but think of the stranger who walks into our worship service. Friends, most churches do a horrible job of welcoming guests! Remember, *Jesus* is the stranger whom we welcome, or ignore!

"I was naked and you gave me clothing" (Matthew 25:36). Thank God for the wonderful ministries in this area! The clothing banks, and gently used clothing stores. A pastor from the church in Musese was visiting the U.S. some years ago, and he came to our home. I wound up giving him some clothing items – he was about my size -tall and husky! I never missed the jackets and coats. He was thrilled.

"I was sick and you took care of me" (Matthew 25:36). Back in 2003 I had prostate cancer surgery. It was the most serious illness I've ever had, with the longest recuperation period. I was thankful for Nancy, and her support and care. As I was homebound for a while, one of the ladies at church came to the house to visit, with a pie she baked. Another lady, who I wasn't particularly close to, surprised me with a visit. I've never forgotten those visits. Some of you have experienced the care and concern of others in a time of illness. Some of you have unselfishly cared for a family member or friend in a time of illness. You were caring for Jesus, you know!

"I was in prison, and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36).

Ever visited someone in prison? There are some wonderful prison ministries today!

Illust. I'm thinking of a family in a church I served – a prominent family in the church and the community. An older couple, their daughter, and granddaughter were active in the church. I was shocked one day when I learned the granddaughter had taken off with a guy, and they robbed a Shoney's (in Virginia, as I recall). She was in jail. I took her mom, and we visited her.

A close friend of mine did a very bad thing. He was a pastor. He was put in a federal prison, up near State College. Different times I would drive his wife to her weekly visit, and visit Denny. Gave me a different view of prison life, and prisoners. Jesus said, "I was in prison, and you visited me."

We've looked at this parable, around certain words: judgment, belief, surprise, practical. One quick look at another word: **Church**. This parable doesn't just apply to individuals, and how we respond to the needs of people, but churches also.

It's easy for small congregations like ours to get into "survival" mode. How can we survive? But it's so important to be in "mission" mode. How can we, as representatives of Jesus in the world, be there for people, minister to the needs of people? So, let's keep our support for Kenya! Let's continue our Christmas gift ministry! It's good that we responded recently and gave to Milagro House! For in doing this, we are doing these things to Jesus, our Lord!

Two more quick thoughts before we leave this parable. As I was preparing this message, I thought of a young man named Steve. Steve was a member of a church I served in suburban Philadelphia. During my time there he attended, and graduated from an Ivy League school, Brown University. During his college years, Steve made a serious commitment to Christ. Steve's dad owned a construction company, so his family was well off financially. Steve told me that his dad offered him a million dollars if he'd become a medical doctor. But Steve said no, he felt called into some kind of ministry to the poor. One Sunday Steve and I teamed together and preached a sermon on this parable. That sermon, and what Steve said, was extra powerful, because I saw Steve living out and embodying what Jesus was telling us, through this parable. How we respond to people in need is how we treat Jesus.

One of the beautiful things about this parable is that you don't have to be greatly talented, you don't have to be super smart, you don't have to have a lot of money, or have a great job, or be widely known, to be commended on judgment day. You just have to be there for people when you can help.

I close with Jesus' words: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

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