

The Sheep and the Goats – the last word (Matthew 25 v 31-46)

Some of us are notorious for always wanting to have the last word. A colleague once gave me a book with that title and said “To David – knowing how you like to have the last word!”. This passage reminds us however that there is only one who has the last word and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. A little earlier He had uttered the amazing words “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”. (Matthew 24 v 35). Two thousand years or so later we can see that His words have indeed stood the test of time! So, let’s listen and pay attention to Him as He tells us....

Be ready for my coming.

Notice that His very first word in this passage is “when”. It isn’t a case of if or maybe, it is definitely going to happen and when it does it will be sudden, unexpected, decisive and certain and it will involve all the nations, that is everyone. And this time He will come, not in obscurity to go to a cross, but in glory sitting on a throne and He will be clearly recognisable as the King of the Universe. “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and call Him Lord”.

Notice too that His judgment will be decisive and that He will separate the “sheep from the goats”. He goes on to tell us what this means. Sheep and goats in Palestine were not always easy to distinguish but there came a time when their character made it clear which was which. So, He says be ready for my coming.

Cherish my blessing.

He challenges us to base our whole life on the goal of hearing one day those words of the Lord Jesus “come you are blessed by my Father”. He warns us not to fall for short term goals which fade away and to avoid longing praise from men rather than praise from God. We notice the things that the sheep have been doing had been largely unspectacular and unobtrusive. They don’t necessarily get noticed by anyone else but the Lord notices and He says that if we truly love Him we will be found doing those kind of things, always remembering that He calls us to do what we can, not what we can’t and that even a cup of cold water to a disciple does not go unnoticed or unrewarded by the Lord.

We might be tempted to think that the sheep earned their Lord's favour but on closer inspection this is not the case. He says to them that they are receiving their inheritance which was prepared before the creation of the world and you can't get something much more unearned than that! The sheep showed that they belonged to him by the way that they served Him unconsciously. In fact they didn't even realise the good works that they were doing and they knew that they were righteous, not because of what they had done but what He had done for them. By their actions they showed that they loved the Lord, and they cherished His blessing more than anything. But after that we have to look at the other side of the coin which brings us to our final heading...

Heed my warning.

Remember when Jesus gives us a warning He does it so that we can heed it and avoid the fate which He here described. He wants all of us to be sheep and loves us too much to leave us to our fate without warning us to avoid it. If we look closely, we will see that sadly the goats are where they are not because of some arbitrary verdict but because of their choice. The eternal fire to which they are condemned is not one that was prepared for them but for "the Devil and his angels". It seems that sadly they had chosen this fate for themselves. They had, in the words of Jonah "forfeited the grace that could be theirs" (Jonah 2 v 8). The Lord Jesus went to the cross for us to save us from this fate and he desperately wants you and me to avoid it by turning to Him. Nor should we miss the order of the final verse. Yes, sadly there is the reference to the eternal punishment but then the final reference is to eternal life. This is a word of grace; He came to bring us eternal life. He did not come that we might be condemned but that we might be saved by putting our trust in Him.

Friends, these are not easy words, but they challenge us as we currently confront issues of life and death to put our trust in the One who, straight away after these words, went to the cross for you and me that we might be forgiven and that we might go to be with Him forever, not because of what we have done, but because of what He has done for us.

With love from Dave and Mary