

## The Parable of the Sheep and Goats Matthew 25

### Introduction

1. A couple weeks ago I shared about an opportunity I had to minister to one of my co-workers and share the Gospel with her
2. I also shared that when I first mentioned my relationship with Jesus to her, she remarked on how she knew there was something different about me, in part because of the way I treated my co-workers
3. I didn't share that to brag, but instead to reveal how moved by what she said
4. As Christians, that's what we should hope—even strive—for
5. We should want them to see Jesus reflected in us, and our parable today is a lesson in this principle

### A. The Context

1. The context in which we find this parable is the Olivet Discourse where Jesus used six different parables, all related to His second coming
2. The first half of the Olivet Discourse describes the events leading up to Jesus' return, while the second half is all about being ready for His return, and this is where He used the parables
3. We looked at the first five parables last week and we saw how they covered three primary themes:
  - a. Being ready for Jesus' return by being **EXPECTANT**
  - b. Being ready for His return by being **FAITHFUL**, not just to Him but to the task He's given to us
  - c. Being ready for His return by being **PREPARED**
4. The difference between the first five parables and the last one we'll look at today is that the first five focused on being ready **PRIOR** to Jesus' return, while this last one refers to an event that happens **AFTER** He returns:
  - a. There is disagreement over whether the judgement between the sheep and goats is the same as the Great White Throne judgment at the end of time (Revelation 20:11-15) or a different judgment that occurs at Jesus' return prior to His 1000-year reign age
  - b. While there are similarities, I believe the weight of the Scriptural evidence indicates that they are two separate events, and that the separation of the sheep and goats takes place at Jesus' return prior to the millennial kingdom as we'll see in a moment

### B. The Parable (READ Matthew 25:31-46)

1. There are some who say this technically isn't a parable, in part because it describes a real event with real people, where most parables use fictitious events and people to make a spiritual point
  - a. However, it's often included in Jesus' list of parables because it relies on analogy or similitude (a comparison between two things)
  - b. In his commentary on the parables, Klyne Snodgrass says, "One could say that we have a two-verse analogy and that the rest is explanation" (p. 543)
  - c. Whether it's technically a parable, or simply an analogy, we've included it in our series because it's similar in style and purpose to Jesus' other parables
2. There are four main characters or groups of characters in this parable:
  - a. A king who judges the nations
  - b. Sheep who represent people who are blessed and rewarded by the king
  - c. Goats who represent people who are cursed and banished by the king
  - d. And the king's family

C. The Lesson
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1. There have been at least four different approaches to or interpretations of this parable throughout church history:
  - a. The most prevalent interpretation up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that it refers to the judgment of Christians for how they treat or mistreat the needy in culture and society; the problem with this view is that it suggests Christians can be cursed, condemned, and sent into the lake of fire
  - b. A second view is that it relates to the final judgement of all people—Jews, Christians and non-Christians—at the end of time based on how they treat the poor and needy; this is popular among those who preach a social gospel; the problem with this view is that it runs contrary to the True Gospel which teaches that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ
  - c. A third view has been popular in dispensational circles which interprets the passage as the judgment of nations and individuals for their treatment of the Jews during the end times (Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week); there's little to no support for this view in the rest of the Scriptures
  - d. A final view, which I believe to be the most accurate, understands the event as the judgment of people and nations at Jesus' return in regard to how they've responded to the body of Christ and the Gospel, and whether or not they are allowed into the millennial kingdom
2. Jesus begins the parable by describing His return and taking His place on His glorious throne (RE-READ 31):
  - a. The language here is an allusion to Daniel's prophecy when God would come down in the form of man and rule an earthly kingdom made up of people from every nation and tongue (READ Daniel 7:13-14)

- b. We refer to this as the thousand-year reign of Christ or the Millenium which is described in Revelation 20, when Jesus returns and takes His rightful place as King on the throne of David
  - c. The Bible refers to it as an unparalleled time of peace and prosperity for not only Israel, but the world (READ Isaiah 11:1-10)
- 3. However, not everyone will be invited to participate in this millennial kingdom:
  - a. When Jesus returns, there will be a time of judgment for the nations:
    - 1) Old Testament prophets like Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Zechariah all prophesied a time when God would gather the nations together and judge them prior to returning Israel to their land and fulfilling His promises to them (Joel 3, Isaiah 66, Jeremiah 49, Zephania 3, Zecharia 14)
    - 2) Most of the events we see in this parable—Jesus coming in His glory, with all His angels, sitting on His throne, judging the nations—are all described elsewhere as happening at His return (READ Matthew 16:27; 19:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)
  - b. When Jesus returns and takes His throne, He will separate the nations into two groups like a shepherd does his sheep and goats (RE-READ 32-33):
    - 1) In the ANE, shepherds often raised both sheep and goats and that is often true today
    - 2) While they are similar, sheep and goats have different nutritional needs, have different social behaviors, and are prone to different diseases.
    - 3) So, shepherds generally separate the two to prevent conflict, ensure proper nutritional needs, and prevent illness (for instance, there are some parasites that are common and relatively harmless to goats but deadly if they are passed on to sheep)
    - 4) In a similar fashion, Jesus will divide the people of the earth into two groups: sheep on the right, goats on the left (we shouldn't draw too much meaning from the significance of sheep vs. goats)
  - c. It's only the sheep who are invited by Christ into His kingdom:
    - 1) Look at what He will say to the sheep (RE-READ 34):
      - a. Jesus refers to them as **"blessed of My Father"** and invites them to accept their inheritance which is **"the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"**
      - b. There is likely some double meaning in the word **"kingdom"** here:
        - The immediate context of the parable is Christ's return which begins His 1000-year earthly kingdom so we can't ignore this
        - We should recognize this as an invitation to enter into this earthly kingdom (think about this in terms of the Jewish disciples and God's promise of inheriting the land)
        - However, Christ will also reign over God's eternal kingdom so we can't ignore this either

- It's likely kingdom here is a dual reference to both Christ's earthly kingdom and God's eternal kingdom that follows it
- 2) Now, look at what He will say to the goats (RE-READ 41):
    - a) Rather than being blessed by God the Father, they are **"accursed"**
    - b) Rather than be invited into Christ's kingdom, they are banished, told to **"depart"**
    - c) Rather than entering into a kingdom which had been prepared for them from the foundations of the world, their destiny is a fire which **"has been prepared for the devil and his angels"**
    - d) As we did with the sheep, there is likely some double or extended meaning here: not only are they denied entrance into Christ's earthly kingdom, but they are also denied entrance into the eternal kingdom
  4. One of the challenges presented by this parable is the criteria by which the sheep and goats will be judged: their care and concern for Jesus as demonstrated toward those He refers to as **"the least of these brothers of Mine"**:
    - a. The Bible makes it clear that salvation (entrance into the kingdom) is purely by grace through faith and not by works, but faith is never mentioned in this parable
    - b. Rather, Jesus judged them on their response toward a certain group of people:
      - 1) He praised the sheep for their hospitality toward Him and those He called **"the least of these brothers of Mine"** (RE-READ 35-40):
        - In the ANE, hospitality was considered the highest of moral virtues
        - To express hospitality by inviting strangers into your home, providing for their needs, caring for them when sick, etc. was a demonstration of acceptance and service
        - That's what we see here in the actions of the sheep—they accepted and served Jesus by accepting and serving the least of His brothers
      - 2) On the other hand, He rebuked the goats for their lack of hospitality toward Him and His brothers (RE-READ 42-45)
    - c. So, who are **"the least of these brothers of Mine"**?
      - 1) Some interpret this as a generic reference to the poor, needy, downtrodden members of society, and suggest that by caring for such people the sheep are simply demonstrating genuine faith (e.g. loving others as themselves as Jesus commanded)
      - 2) This is certainly a viable interpretation, but there is another option that I believe better fits the context and it's us, the followers of Jesus, the body of Christ:
        - a) Notice that Jesus used the word **"these"** which indicates He is referring to those in His presence which at this time only included His disciples (SEE Matthew 24:3)

- b) On other occasions Jesus referred to those who follow Him and do His will as His true family, e.g. **“mothers and sisters and brothers”** (READ Matthew 12:47-50)
  - c) In fact, after His resurrection Jesus referred to His followers as His brothers (John 20:17): **“...go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”**
- 5. So, the over-arching lesson of the parable of the sheep and goats is this: entrance into the Millennial Kingdom, and subsequently God’s eternal kingdom, is dependent upon one’s response to Jesus **BUT** this will be evidenced by their response to His disciples:
  - a. That’s you and me because we are the body of Christ
  - b. When one despises and persecutes the Body of Christ, he despises and persecutes Christ:
    - 1) We see this in the example of Saul (READ ACTS 9:1-5)
    - 2) When they reject us, they reject Christ
    - 3) When they despise us, they despise the message we preach, the Gospel
    - 4) And because they reject Christ and despise the Gospel, they cannot be saved and cannot enter into the kingdom
  - c. Likewise, when one welcomes and accepts the Body of Christ and the Gospel we preach, it is evidence of their reception of Christ (Matthew 10:40): **“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent me.”**

D. The Takeaway: it is critical that as the Body of Christ, we not only preach the Gospel but reflect Jesus Christ because we truly are the means through which He brings salvation to the world

1. There was a popular song by the Christian band The Imperials when I was in college called, **“You’re the Only Jesus”** and it started like this:
 

If not in You, I wonder where will they ever see the One who really cares. If not from You, How will they find there's One who heals the broken heart, Gives sight to the blind? 'Cause You're the only Jesus some will ever see, And You're the only words of life some will ever read. So let them see in You the One in whom is all they'll ever need. 'Cause You're the only Jesus some will ever see
2. My question to each of us is this: when people see and hear us, do they see Jesus and the Gospel?
  - a. Matthew 5:13-16 (READ)
  - b. 1 Peter 2:9-12 (READ)
  - c. 1 Peter 3:15 (READ)