

Sermons on Matthew

Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31-46

With Study Questions

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When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ⁻³²⁻ All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats. ⁻³³⁻ And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ⁻³⁴⁻ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ⁻³⁵⁻ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ⁻³⁶⁻ *I was* naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ⁻³⁷⁻ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed *You*, or thirsty and give *You* drink? ⁻³⁸⁻ When did we see You a stranger and take *You* in, or naked and clothe *You*? ⁻³⁹⁻ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁻⁴⁰⁻ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me.’ ⁻⁴¹⁻ Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: ⁻⁴²⁻ for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁻⁴³⁻ I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ ⁻⁴⁴⁻ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁻⁴⁵⁻ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me.’ ⁻⁴⁶⁻ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46).

Introduction

I had, what might be considered by some, a misspent youth. My foul deeds were more petty and mischievous than criminal, yet I do remember getting caught red-handed. I knew what I had done was wrong, but I remember the rush and fear of actually being caught by a person in authority. It was horrifying! Thankfully I was given a second-chance. God is gracious. He is a God who forgives.

_Who is a God like You, _Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of __the remnant of His heritage? _He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in _mercy (Micah 7:18)._

But there does come a time when the offer mercy ends. Had I continued down that road of mischievousness and solidified a conviction for evil, it would have been the responsibility of the authorities to bring justice. There is a distinction between those who, in their sin and weakness, seek to repent and cry out for the mercy and forgiveness found in the cross of Christ, and those thinking they can hide from death through the refuge of lies.

Because you have said, “_We have made a covenant with death, And with Sheol we are in agreement. When the overflowing scourge passes through, It will not come to us, _For we have made lies our refuge, And under falsehood we have hidden ourselves_” (Isaiah 28:15).

The passage before us is not a parable (except for the utilization of sheep and goats) but a foretelling of the judgment of God. Jesus is no longer telling His listeners what they should do. He is now speaking from the perspective of what they had done. There is a world of difference between knowing you're guilty and having your guilt exposed. But even more dreadful is to have your guilt exposed when the opportunity for repentance has passed. It is through this instruction that Jesus delivers His sheep from that dreadful judgment.

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the _holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory (Matthew 25:31).

What/When is This?

What event is this? It is a repetition of what Jesus taught earlier:

-For _the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father __with His angels, __and then He will reward each according to his works. ⁻²⁸⁻ Assuredly, I say to you, __there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom_” (Matthew 16:27).

Well this seems confusing! Has this already taken place? Unless there are some 2000 year old people around we've got ourselves a bit of a problem. Some believe the above refers to the Transfiguration, but the statement about "**some**" not tasting death hardly fits in a one week time frame—certainly they would all still be alive next week (and the parallel passage before us is after the Transfiguration). Others say it was seen in His resurrection and ascension. Although that may be true in a certain sense, the parallel passage before us equates this coming with judgment.

There have been two tiers of judgment taught of throughout all of Matthew. First is the physical and historical judgment of Israel due to their rebellion against God, culminating with the destruction of the temple. Secondly we see the eternal judgment, which, from the perspective of the listener would immediately follow (Hebrews 9:27).

The Olivet Discourse unveils nightmarish activities. What the rebellious Israelite was hearing from Jesus was that the sword of the Roman soldier, which was a judgment ending their life on earth, would be followed by an eternal judgment where the fullness of their evil deeds would be exposed and met with God's divine justice in eternity.

Let it not escape our notice that Jesus places Himself on the throne of judgment, which according to Scripture is a seat that belongs to God alone (Joel 3:2).

All the nations will be gathered before Him, and __He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats .⁻³³⁻ And He will set the __sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.⁻³⁴⁻ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ' _Come, you blessed of My Father, __inherit the kingdom _prepared for you from the foundation of the world:⁻³⁵⁻ __for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; __I was a stranger and you took Me in;⁻³⁶⁻ I *was* __naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; _I was in prison and you came to Me._ ' ⁻³⁷⁻ " _Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ' _Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed *You*, or thirsty and give *You* drink? ⁻³⁸⁻ When did we see You a stranger and take *You* in, or naked and clothe *You*? ⁻³⁹⁻ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? ' ⁻⁴⁰⁻ And the King will answer and say to them, ' _Assuredly, I say to you, __inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me._ ' ⁻⁴¹⁻ " _Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ' _Depart from Me, you cursed, _into the everlasting fire prepared for __the devil and his angels: ⁻⁴²⁻ for I was

hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁻⁴³⁻ I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me. ⁻⁴⁴⁻ “ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘ Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You? ’ ⁻⁴⁵⁻ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘ Assuredly, I say to you, __inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me. ’ ⁻⁴⁶⁻ And __these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life_” (Matthew 25:32-46).

Sheep and Goats

Jesus utilizes creatures recorded in Ezekiel 34:17-19 where the goats are said to ruin the pasture and pollute the water for the sheep.

This provides a source of comfort for the persecuted sheep to know they will not have to endure the goats forever. All injustice comes to an end and there is the settling of accounts, as we read of earlier. The sheep, of course, are the objects of Christ’s special affection and protection.

Jesus answered them, “ I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they __bear witness of Me. ⁻²⁶⁻ But __you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, __as I said to you. ⁻²⁷⁻ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ⁻²⁸⁻ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ⁻²⁹⁻ My Father, __who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father’s hand. ⁻³⁰⁻ I and My Father are one ” (John 10:25-30).

Note that the reason they (the Jews) did not believe was because they were not His sheep and not vice-versa. The character trait of the true sheep is that they—because they belong to Christ—“**hear**” Christ’s voice (not audibly, but recognize as true). We also see the protection granted by both Father and Son.

The Judgment Seat

But the instruction before us poses some very interesting questions. First we must take note that all are brought before Christ. Paul writes that all must **“stand before the judgment seat of __Christ...(and) give account of himself to God (Romans 14:10, 12).** Furthermore Paul tells us our motivation for living a life **“well pleasing to Him...(is because) we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, _that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:9, 10).**

So everyone must give account! I’ve always taken great comfort from Christ’s words, where speaking of Himself explains:

_He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18).

But the passage before doesn’t seem to speak of saving faith at all. The judgment (or exoneration in the case of the sheep) seems to be connected to their works. And not just the avoidance of sin, but relief work: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. And the indictment against the goats is not the depth of their sin but simple neglect—sins of omission.

This particular passage emboldens those who wish to weave our works right into our justification (our declaration of pardon—our very salvation) before God. And certainly, at a glance, it doesn’t seem unreasonable. But frankly, if this is the case, there is going to be a serious sheep shortage on Judgment Day.

Being judged according to our works is not a game anyone wants to play with God.

Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, _For in Your sight no one living is righteous (Psalm 143:2).

But how can a _man be _righteous before God? ³ If one wished to __contend with Him, He could not answer Him one time out of a thousand (Job 9:2, 3).

When the Psalmist writes, **“If You, Lord, should __mark iniquities, O Lord, who could __stand?” (Psalm 130:3)** the implied answer to the

question is 'no one'. Which is why he follows up with **"But *there is* __forgiveness with You, That __You may be feared"** (Psalm 130:3, 4).

Purgatory?

It may be of interest to know where the Roman Catholics take this passage. Realizing that very few people (none, in reality) live such sanctified lives that they are delivered directly to heaven; the righteousness requisite to live in the presence of God is obtained in purgatory. Roman Catholics believe:

Purgatory makes sense because there is a requirement that a soul not just be declared to be clean, but actually be clean, before a man may enter into eternal life. After all, if a guilty soul is merely "covered," if its sinful state still exists but is officially ignored, then it is still a guilty soul. It is still unclean.

Catholic theology takes seriously the notion that "nothing unclean shall enter heaven." From this it is inferred that a less than cleansed soul, even if "covered," remains a dirty soul and isn't fit for heaven. It needs to be cleansed or "purged" of its remaining imperfections. The cleansing occurs in purgatory.¹

But the Protestant and, I believe Biblical position is that there is no purgatory. And if there were a purgatory, where sin was purged to the point of acceptance before God, we would be there forever since the payment for sin is eternal (Romans 6:23). The Scriptures also indicate that **"cover"** is synonymous with forgiveness and payment for sin.

"_Blessed _are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; ⁸ Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin_" (Romans 4:7, 8).

"Cover" can be understood in our common vernacular, not to hide, but to pay. The way it might be understood when you can't afford something and a friend says "I've got you covered."

¹ <http://www.catholic.com/library/purgatory.asp>

If the terminology of 'covering' is insufficient to convey what God does when He removes our guilt and sin by the cross of Christ, the Psalmist expresses it in perhaps clearer terms:

For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He _removed our transgressions from us.¹³ _As a father pities *his* children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him.¹⁴ For He __knows our frame; He remembers that we *are* dust (Psalm 103:11-14).

East is pretty far away from west.

Some Questions

That works-righteousness (that we can stand approved before God based on our own goodness) and purgatory are both wrong doesn't solve the problem. So here are some questions:

When Jesus says to the sheep, "**Come, you blessed of my Father...**" were they blessed due to their goodness or vice-versa...was their goodness a result of being blessed? I say the latter.

And when Jesus says "**inherit,**" is an inheritance earned or merited by good deeds or freely given through the death of a loved one? I say the latter.

And when Jesus speaks of a kingdom prepared from the "**foundation of the world**", is He merely speaking of His plans for a kingdom or, like Paul is He speaking of its inhabitation being chosen "**before the foundation of the world**" (Ephesians 1:4)? I say the latter.

So, in one sense, if the good works are somehow present on the Day of Judgment, they certainly aren't present to somehow acquit the sinner. They, like all other things, are a testimony to the goodness of God who has granted a saving faith which subsequently produces good works. And these good works are acceptable in God's sight only because they, like the sinner, are covered by the blood of Christ.

The Primary Message

But upon further examination, though the above is true, I don't believe this is what Jesus had primarily in view here—I don't think the primary message is the impossible 'Do good deeds and make it to heaven'

or even reasonable, 'Good deeds evidence true saving faith' (which was certainly a message that needed to be heard in a climate of intense religious hypocrisy). But if the issue is good works, one way or the other, why such benign examples?

Not that Christians should take lightly the relief work of Christian love! We certainly should not and one who is devoid of any desire to serve Christ by loving his neighbor ought to examine whether or not he is in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). But in a climate where evil was at a fever pitch and hostility to Christians manifested itself in beheadings and scourging and betrayal and burnings, why is the testimony against the goat that he side-stepped the visitation committee?

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You Did it To Me

I think the answer is found in verses 40 and 45 where Jesus informs the workers that what they did or didn't do pertained to Him: ***Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me (Matthew 25:40, 45).*** -

There is a theme in Scripture where a man's disposition toward another man is viewed by God as that man's disposition toward God Himself.

He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, But he who honors Him has mercy on the needy (Proverbs 14:31).

For thus says the LORD of hosts: He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8).

After the ascension, when Saul (later the Apostle Paul) was ***breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*** (Acts 9:1) Jesus shined to the ground with a bright light from heaven. And even though Jesus had long ascended, His words to Saul were

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Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? -5- And he said, Who are You, Lord? Then the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting... (Acts 9:4, 5).

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus spoke of this union between His followers and Himself. In chapter 10 He told the twelve to **“preach...the kingdom”** (verse 7) to **“greet”** households and grant peace to those who receive them and their words (verses 12, 13) to **“flee”** from city to city (verse 23), to **“speak the light”** (verse 27) and then He spoke the word: **“ _ He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (Matthew 10:40).**

I find myself in agreement with D. A. Carson who explains,

the criterion of judgment is not mere philanthropy (good as that is), but people’s response to the kingdom of heaven as they have met it in the person of Jesus’ ‘brothers’.²

The kind actions in this passage do not represent a to-do list which must be met for salvation, if such were the case the to-do list would be **“all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them” (Galatians 3:10)**. No, these kind actions characterize a person’s response to the message of Christ’s brothers (even the least of His brothers). For in bringing the message they are bringing Christ Himself. And Jesus views with such supreme intimacy those who are His that to reject them is to reject Him.

Fearing Punishment

One last thing: The word Jesus uses for “punishment” in verse 45 *kolasin* is found in only one other place in the New Testament. Those who trust in Christ need not fear the fate of the goats. The Apostle John, the apostle whom Jesus loved did not want his “little children” in the faith to fear judgment. He therefore wrote:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that _we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.⁻¹⁸⁻ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment (*kolasin*). But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.⁻¹⁹⁻ _We love __Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:17-19).

²Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition*. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) (Mt 25:31). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

Our boldness in the day of judgment is not found in our good deeds. Nor is it found in our love for Christ. First and only, our boldness is found in Christ's love for us.

Questions for Study

1. Does the offer of mercy ever end? Explain (pages 2, 3).
2. What and when is the event of Matthew 25:31-46 (pages 3, 4)?
3. What does Jesus tell us about His sheep in John 10:25-30 (pages 5, 6)?
4. What does the message of the sheep and goats embolden people to teach? Is this accurate (pages 6, 7)?
5. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of purgatory (pages 7, 8)?
6. Discuss the "some questions" portion of the sermon notes (pages 8, 9).
7. What are the implications of the "you did it to me" statements of Jesus in this passage (pages 9-11)?
8. Does God want us to fear eternal punishment (page 11)?