

Sheep and Goats
Matthew 25:31-46

Well, it's taken us exactly two years to finish our study of Matthew's gospel, starting as we did on the third week of July in 2020. And it's certainly an appropriate place to conclude, for even though this passage isn't found in the last chapter of the gospel, it discusses the very last events that will take place in human history: the return of Christ and the Day of Judgment.

Now, it is true that Jesus has been discussing this topic since the beginning of chapter 24. And He's given us several analogies explaining different characteristics of that day. He says that its signs will be as unmistakable as a fig tree leafing out in the summer. He says it will come as unexpectedly as the Great Flood did, and that it will be just as much of a surprise as a thief breaking into a house at night.

And right before today's passage, Jesus has told us three of His parables, three stories which illustrate how we should get ready for His coming. The end of chapter 24 compares the attitudes of two servants, one of whom takes advantage of his master's absence for his own personal gain, and the other who takes care of the master's servants who were entrusted to his care. Chapter 25 begins with the story of ten virgins awaiting the coming of a bridegroom, only five of which were adequately prepared to welcome him.

And just before today's passage, we hear the tale of the master who entrusted three of his servants with his wealth: one with five talents, one with two talents, and one with one talent. We rejoiced with the faithful servants who worked hard to improve their master's financial position, and who were richly rewarded for their efforts. And we shuddered at the fate of the servant who, because he thought his master was hard and unfair, hid his Lord's money in the ground: he was cast out into the outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (25:30).

And because today's passage begins with the very next verse, we are prepared to hear one final parable, one final illustrative story of what Judgment Day will be like. But nowhere in this passage does Jesus compare the day of judgment to anything. He doesn't say, "That day will be like a man going on a journey," or "That day will be like ten virgins waiting for a bridegroom." For this is not a parable – this is a simple, if sobering, statement of events that will take place in the future.

Yes, verse 31 makes it quite plain that the Son of Man, Jesus' favorite title for Himself throughout His ministry, will come again in glory, just as Daniel predicted in Old Testament times, and just as Jesus already promised back in 24:30. And the Son of Man will in fact sit on a glorious throne, displaying both His power and His undeniable authority by dividing the wicked and the righteous. No, this is no parable. Judgment Day is coming, and this is what will happen on that day.

But that's not to say that the analogy Jesus uses in verses 32 and 33 can't help us in understanding this passage. For Jesus says the way the King will separate the nations on Judgment Day will be similar to the way that an ancient shepherd would divide the sheep from the goats in his flock.

Now, Jesus' disciples would doubtless have been familiar with such a process. They would have known that sheep and goats were quite often gathered into one flock and pastured together during the day – for since sheep graze on grass and goats browse on shrubs, they don't compete with one another for food. The disciples would also have known that flocks had to be divided at night if they were to get a good night's sleep, since the thinner-haired goats tended to cluster together for warmth while the thicker-haired sheep prefer a bit more space. All those who fight the war of the covers and the thermostat can doubtless understand the problems involved.

But Jesus' disciples also would have known that ancient flocks could be easily divided because of the different ways that sheep and goats interact with their shepherds. As Jesus points out in our responsive reading from John chapter 10, shepherds could simply call to their sheep, and the sheep would follow the one whose voice they know, the one whom they trust. Goats, being a bit more independent, would not tend to respond as promptly. In short, the analogy of the sheep and the goats hints that it is both our relationship to our King and the way we react to His leadership that defines our status in His kingdom.

And the rest of the passage confirms these suspicions. For what does the King say to the sheep, to those who are on His right? He says that they are blessed of the Father. He says they inherit a kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. In short, the King roots their eternal destiny in their relationship to God, saved as they are by His free grace and through His eternal decrees.

And in our responsive reading from John chapter 10, Jesus makes the same comforting point, doesn't He? "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

Yes, that's the great good news: nothing we can possibly do or leave undone can thwart God's purposes or somehow overcome the perfect, complete sacrifice Christ has made for all His people. It is the Father's good pleasure from all eternity to save those who belong to Him by His grace alone, by sending the Good Shepherd to lay down His life for His sheep.

But how can we know who are God's people and who are not? How can we tell the sheep from the goats? Well, today's passage goes on to explain that our relationship with Christ will always be revealed by the way we behave. After all, the King points to the way those on His right have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, have welcomed the strangers and clothed the naked, and have visited those who are sick or in prison. Just so, in John chapter 10, Jesus reminds us that His sheep respond to His voice, following Him. He goes on to say that if He knows His sheep, it is also the case that they know Him. And so it naturally follows that they freely and joyfully choose to do the things He does.

So if we are saved by God's grace alone, that salvation comes through faith alone – through trusting Christ not only to be our Savior, but bowing the knee to Him as our Lord and King in every aspect of our lives. In short, it is the sheep who stick close to their shepherd who are saved – not the goats who wander off, doing whatever they want to.

And that only makes sense, doesn't it? For how can we say that we love and trust Jesus if we don't follow Him? And let's face it: He told us to love one another in the same unconditional, self-sacrificial sort of way that He has loved us. So how can we possibly expect to demonstrate our love for Christ unless we do the sorts of deeds of love and mercy for which the King praises those on His right, those who have been the recipients of God's gracious blessing of salvation?

And we might want to stop there, as so many of those who practice what has become known as the "social gospel" do. We might think that this passage is simply urging us to ease the human suffering that we see all around us. In fact, how many times has this very passage been used to encourage us to help the "least of these" in all sorts of ways?

And this is not, in fact, a bad lesson to learn. After all, God encourages His people over and over again to help the needy in various ways throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. God told His people through Moses, "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him

sufficient for his need *in whatever he lacks*" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8). John the Baptist told his listeners, "Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise" (Luke 3:11). Paul told the Ephesians that each one of them should "labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have *something* to share with him who has need" (Ephesians 4:28).

And of course, Jesus goes even further, saying in the Sermon on the Mount, "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42). And who can forget Jesus' words to the rich young ruler? "If you wish to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21). Oh yes, helping the needy is a key part of the Christian life.

And can we be honest? In many ways, we're pretty good at this sort of discipleship. Year after year, Mississippi ranks at or near the top of American states where it comes to the percentage of our income that we donate to all kinds of charities. Year in and year out, this congregation consistently gives away about 20 percent of all the funds that we receive. And over the last few weeks, I can personally testify to the way so many of you have helped me during my struggle with COVID: from scraping and painting the back porch of the manse, to filling my fridge and freezer with all sorts of goodies, to calls, texts and emails, I have been a rich recipient of your kindness and care in so many ways.

But if we're really going to stick close to our shepherd, we need to be careful not to get too focused on solving people's worldly problems. For that really wasn't the main point of Jesus' ministry, was it? After all, He didn't wipe out all the hunger and sickness and oppression that He saw all around Him. In fact, that was precisely why His people ended up rejecting Him. Because He would not lead them in a revolution against the Romans, because He would not immediately put an end to all the suffering and injustice in this world, their cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" were transformed in less than a week into "Crucify Him!"

No, before His death and resurrection, His people never really trusted Him in the unquestioning way that sheep trust their shepherd. They never really understood that His ministry was more about making sure that they could live with Him forever than about the quality of their temporary earthly existence.

But that's why the King's words to both the sheep and the goats in this passage are so important. For He insists that as they blessed or chose not to bless those whom He calls in verse 40 "the least of these my brethren," they were in fact blessing or choosing not to bless Him. In other words, the King identifies in a radical way, not with both sheep and goats, and not with all those who are poor and needy, but with those whom He calls His brothers and sisters. For those who trust in Him will not only live together with Him – by faith we become part of Him, members of His very Body.

So, what does all this mean? Simply this: if our salvation by the grace of God will always result in our following Jesus and caring for others as He did, our relationship to Christ will always lead us to greater love for and kindness toward other believers, other members of His body, His brothers and sisters. In short, it is simply not possible to be a lone Christian, insisting that we have a personal relationship with God while at the same time remaining aloof or even estranged from other believers.

And on this point, all of us American Christians, however generous we might otherwise be, have a lot to learn. For how many of us have been slow to return to worship after COVID, contenting ourselves with online resources while refusing to be a source of encouragement for one another as we gather? How many of us have become content with writing a check to fund faraway missions or church

plants instead of personally reaching out to those all around us who need to know Christ or to know Him better? How many of us are willing to volunteer with organizations like Hands of Hope or Christian Volunteer Services to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger and to visit those who are sick or in prison? How many of us have allowed old grudges or misunderstandings to fester, instead of pursuing reconciliation with our Christian brothers and sisters?

For that's an essential by-product of a saving relationship with Christ: to love His brothers and sisters just as much and in the same way that we love Him. For the fact is that if we aren't willing to bless our fellow believers – those who are just as connected to Christ by faith as we are – then we really aren't interested in blessing Jesus. And on the day that the King of Kings, the Son of Man and the Son of God returns to judge the quick – the living – and the dead, He will make that point painfully plain.

So, while we await Christ's return, let's truly trust Him to be our Good Shepherd. Let's follow His example of unconditional, self-sacrificial love for everyone, but especially for other believers, His brothers and sisters. And in this way, may we have ever greater assurance that on Judgment Day, the King will welcome us into the Kingdom that He shed His blood to prepare for us.