

The Sheep and the Goats

July 30, 2017

Matthew 25:31-46

We are going through the parables of Jesus this summer. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It's an extended metaphor. It's symbolic so it's not to be taken literally. And it illustrates a single idea. While you will find a few in the Old Testament and in the Book of Hebrews, 48 of them are in the three gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus was a master of them.

Today's parable is found in Matthew's gospel. The theme is judgment. In fact it follows an extended teaching segment on this topic. It begins with Jesus predicting the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, followed by a description of the Last Days, followed by four parables on the judgment: the faithful and

unfaithful servants, the Ten Virgins, the Talents, and then this one about the sheep and the goats. It's a long passage.

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and

feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

That’s hard stuff. You might be tempted upon hearing those words of Jesus to think getting to heaven is hard work. So let’s if we can figure out what Jesus is trying to teach us today.

The shepherd/king is God. Interestingly, King David was considered a shepherd/king. The sheep and the goats are the nations. They are separated by the shepherd. Jesus’ audience would have been familiar with sheep and goats, we not so much. They would know that at the end of the day they were separated. Goats prefer to sleep in shelter together for warmth; sheep prefer to sleep out in the open air. Our daughters both had sheep projects for 4-H. They are in my

opinion, some of the dumbest animals God ever put on earth. I never owned goats but my grandfather did. I remember them being strong willed and stubborn, like my grandfather. I remember once when my parents took us out for a visit, usually Sunday afternoon after church, Grandpa brought one of his goats in to the kitchen. I have no idea why he did that but Grandma had a fit. It was the only time I remember her being angry and she threw them both out of the house.

The king does the same thing to the goats in our parable. *“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”*

The goats are confused. Why? What did we do? *“I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was*

sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“You’ve got to be kidding. We never saw you.”

“No, but you saw people who belonged to me and you didn’t do anything to help them.”

Sheep and goats are confused

But it’s not just the goats who are confused. So are the sheep. “When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you. When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?”

They don’t remember. It just wasn’t that big of a deal. It’s part of who they are as Christ followers. Does this happen to you?

Some years ago a man who had grown up in this church and went on to become a

pastor, shared with me how he came to answer the call. He was just a teenager when his mother sent him to see me. He had told a lie and she was hoping I could straighten him out. He told me the whole story of how he came to my office and shared what he had done and something I said spoke deeply to him and God used my words not only to break him of the habit of lying but also it was the beginning of his call into the ministry.

He asked me if I remembered that important day in my office. I really, really wanted to say yes. But I don't remember. But he does. And God does.

When Melinda and I were newly married and I was in school and pastoring a church part time in the tiny village of Vinton, Ohio, we lived in a parsonage. It was heated with propane gas and in the fall they would come and fill up the tank. We knew nothing about this until we got the bill for \$500. That doesn't seem like a

lot today but my monthly salary was \$700 and most of that went for school tuition and books. It might as well have been \$50,000, we had no hope of paying that bill. So we didn't. We were getting overdue notices but we had no options. Then one day we received a notice the bill had been paid. We didn't pay it and no one ever said. We always thought it was an older couple in our church, Dan and Ruth, but we don't know.

God does. God will say on that Day to Dan and Ruth, "I remember it."

I think there will be all kinds of surprises when we come to the Last Judgement. There are going to be people who are absolutely certain they are sheep. They will head over to the right side and say, "Of course we qualify. We have prophesied in your name. We have done miracles in your name. We put a dollar in the Salvation Army bucket every Christmas. And the king will say, "You

are goats in sheep's clothing. I never knew you."

And then there will be other people who have been broken by their sinfulness, ashamed of things in their lives, who wonder if there is even a ghost of a chance that they'll get in to the kingdom. They will conclude that the only possible way for them to get in is the grace of God. And they will hear, "Come you who are blessed by my father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

Everyone is judged

Who will be judged? Jesus makes it clear that all of us will stand before his throne. All of us—church goers, non-church goers, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindu's, agnostics, and atheists. No exceptions.

Who will judge us? The Son of Man—Jesus. That all of us will appear before

Jesus Christ is a huge comfort and encouragement to those who have turned to Jesus and asked him to save them and to forgive their sins. Any who have turned to Jesus as Savior, as friend, as shepherd and high priest, are going to meet that Savior and friend Jesus on Judgment Day.

Those who have rejected Christ, who have no time for him, who push Christ away, who only know him as a curse word, will also meet him on that day.

We are told that the reason people get to inherit the kingdom is because they did six things.

Notice Jesus doesn't offer eternal relationship with him based on the things we think he would like church membership. He doesn't say, "You joined Anderson Hills United Methodist Church! Well done. Welcome into my eternal kingdom." So many folks think that everything is good between them and God

because they have their name on the membership rolls of a church, or because they are involved in church activity.

Don't get me wrong. Those are good things. Joining a church, joining a small groups, engaging in worship, tithing, all help you to grow. But none of those things are mentioned in our scripture. None of these seem to be the basis on which Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. It is because you fed the hungry and gave water to the thirsty and welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked and cared for the sick and the imprisoned.

No one earns salvation

Some of you may be thinking, "Wait a minute pastor. How does this square up with the biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith alone? This sounds contradictory. Jesus seems to be teaching that we get to heaven through good works—what we do.

No one earns God's love or forgiveness. No one earns their salvation or eternal life. It's a gift. Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant reformation put it this way, "Sola fide...faith alone. Salvation is by faith alone, but true faith never remains alone."

The main passage of scripture we often use to talk about this is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians 2:8, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

But in the very next verse, Paul writes,

¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So which is it? Grace or good works? It's both. This has been so hard for the church through the ages to get right. We tend to go from one extreme to the other.

Our care for people does not earn our salvation. Our care for others is the evidence of our salvation.

You can't get good fruit from a bad tree. What we see on the outside of a person; feeding the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and imprisoned—is the evidence that that person has been given a new heart on the inside through the gospel. Your compassion demonstrates that your heart has changed because you received God's grace. You are moving from a life centered on yourself to a life centered on others. You are showing that you belong to Jesus, that you have a different world view. And they are really not hard things. He doesn't ask us to climb mountains or go to a faraway country. It doesn't take special training to feed someone who is hungry. You just give your lunch away. You don't need to be a doctor to visit the

sick or a lawyer to visit jail. Anyone can visit.

Our brothers and sisters

Notice what Jesus calls these hungry people, these thirsty people, these strangers. *"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"*

Jesus calls people in this world who are most vulnerable—the sick, the dying, the imprisoned—Jesus calls these people his brothers and sisters. The Greek word is *Adelphia*. It's the word that denotes someone is not just a family member but a spiritual brother or sister; a member of God's family.

The language we use when we speak about people who live on the margins of society is not only an indication of what is in our hearts, but it actually changes our hearts. Your words are not just the

fruit of what is in your heart. Jesus says, “*out of the abundance of your heart, your mouth speaks.*” But the words you choose actually change and steer your heart.

The letter of James reminds us in chapter 3 verse 4 that the tongue is like the rudder of a ship. Just as a rudder steers a ship, so what comes out of your mouth steers you and shapes your heart.

Think about what comes out of your mouth. Think about the language we use for the different groups Jesus is referring to in this text. What do we call the poor and homeless? Trailer trash, lazy bums, or bag ladies. We make our own judgments about them, don't we?

I was tempted to be judgmental about some people just the other day. I was thinking that I was better than they and it was all based on exterior things, not the inner stuff that really matters. And the Holy Spirit had a little conversation with me and I had to repent.

We ought to be extremely sensitive about how we label people. Again James writes, “*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who have been made in God's likeness.*” Language communicates if we truly see another person as made in the image of God.

Jesus calls us to be with these vulnerable people. This church has committed itself to be with at-risk children through Whiz kids. It is committed to children with special needs through Open Arms. It is committed to the homeless through our hosting of Interfaith Hospitality Network. It is committed to the thirsty through our WASH program in Zambia. If you haven't seen the pictures of the wells that were just dug, go to our Facebook page to see them.

We are committed to the hungry through Project 5000 and Inter Parish Ministry.

But it has to go beyond just giving money. We are committed not just to give something but to give ourselves. There is something that happens to us when we spend time loving people. First John 4:20 says, *“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”*

I cannot love God and hate people. Notice it says, “Must love.” You are thinking, “Pastor, how can I make myself love someone” First of all, I didn’t say it, The Apostle John said it. We think love is some of feeling. It’s not. What characterizes this kind of love is that it’s not primarily a love of the emotions or feelings. It’s a love that is committed to the well-being of others. It’s a love that seeks the highest good for other people.

That’s why Jesus can say in the Sermon on the Mount love your enemies or pray for those who persecute you or do good to those who spitefully use you. Don’t ask me to have warm feelings towards those who have hurt me. I can’t command myself to have affection towards them or like them. But I can decide to do good to those who have hurt me, to seek the highest good of other people.

Love is something you do. It’s not just talk. It’s not just marching in streets. Love does. Love seeks to restore broken relationships. It seeks the welfare of the helpless, the homeless, and the immigrant. It invests time, energy, and money, not just to put on a resume, but because God’s love has changed their life and they want to share that with others. Love is authentic, transparent, courageous, humble, extravagant, and generous.

Conclusion

I have a lot of Indian immigrants in my neighborhood. Sad to say, not everyone is crazy about that. When I'm out running I see them taking a walk or playing cricket at the park. We smile as we pass but I want to know them so I have learned to say hello in Hindi. Several weeks ago I was out running, hoping I would get a chance to run into one of my Indian neighbors. I was almost at the end of my run when I saw an older couple on the other side of the street. I looked their way, folded my hands together in the Indian fashion and yelled, "Namaste" to them. The wife looked at me, gave me a big wave in the American fashion and yelled back, "hello".

Does God care that I did that? I don't know. But I do know that God loves that couple and therefore so must I and the first step is to get to know them. Mother Teresa said, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

How about you? What small thing can you do this week that might make someone's life a little better?

It might be so small that a year later you won't even remember what it was.

But God will remember. On that day when you stand before him and hear him say, "*Come, you who are blessed by my father' take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*"

Prayer

(Invite to come forward for prayer as last song is sung)