

Matthew 25:31-46 - New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

The Judgment of the Nations

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his **glory** and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the **throne** of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will **separate** people one from another as a **shepherd** separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ³⁵for I was **hungry** and you gave me food, I was **thirsty** and you gave me something to drink, I was a **stranger** and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was **naked** and you gave me clothing, I was **sick** and you took care of me, I was in **prison** and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, **just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.**’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of **the least of these**, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

The Sheep and the Goats

The Context

This week’s Gospel reading is about end times and judgment. I don’t know about you, but end times and judgment are just the sort of subjects I’d rather avoid. We are told not to judge, lest we be judged, and here is a vision of Jesus judging all people at his return. I don’t find it to be a comfortable or necessarily comforting subject, but it’s worth grappling with it, and I found that, perhaps, on the other side of some soul-searching, even if it is still uncomfortable, there is comfort in the message.

This teaching comes at the end of Jesus’ final discourse in the book of Matthew. In the next chapter Jesus will begin his final journey to the cross. In chapters 24 and 25, Jesus has been talking about end times and signs of his return. He has also given instructions on how to be prepared

for his return. He has told a story about young women with their lamps, urging us to live wisely and be ready for his arrival. He also warned us not to bury our talents in the ground, to live boldly, investing what we have been given because he will recognize and appreciate our courageous lives when he returns. So the previous two stories are about how to live, up until the end of life. This story is no different. Rather than instructions about the end of life, (upon Jesus' return) they are instructions about life — about how to live a life that is faithfully following Christ's message and his example — which are really one and the same. Jesus' words tell of his life and his life demonstrates his words.

Four views of Jesus

That said, we have four images of Jesus in this story. First we have Jesus as a king, enthroned in glory on his return. (³¹**“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.”**) This is where we see Jesus in his heavenly attire, with the veil pulled back. Next, we have an image of Jesus as a shepherd and then as a judge of the people of all nations. (³²**All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,** ³³**and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.**) We are familiar with Jesus as the good shepherd, who will leave the flock to rescue even one lost sheep, who, like King David, is obedient as a lamb to God, and also cares for his followers as if he were a shepherd. This image, which is inherently loving and caring in all other contexts, now has an added element of separation as Jesus divides the people into two groups, those who are his and those who are not. (It would have been a well known fact in those day, that different flocks would intermingle at a watering hole or in a pen for the night and then have to be separated out.) Jesus as king, Jesus as shepherd and Jesus as judge. These are the first three images we have of Jesus in this story. They are all very powerful images. But the fourth image of Jesus is not expected at all. It upends the old view of the Messiah as a violent military ruler.

The fourth of image of Jesus in this story is Jesus as one of the “least of these,” as he calls them — the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. He identifies himself with each of these

qualities and says that when we serve one of these, we do it to him. When we look at the hungry, sick or imprisoned, do we see the face of Christ? Well, neither did the people Jesus calls “sheep” in the parable. Christ’s sheep are to serve those who are in need. And we are to do it without the sense of accounting that marks so much of the world’s calculations. We are to do it in a way that we would even be surprised to find out we had done something that ultimately benefited ourselves.

This parable tells us who Jesus is and how we are to act to serve him and know him.

Sheep and Goats

Why does Jesus use sheep and goats in this story? Sheep and goats would commonly graze together. Flocks belonging to different owners would commonly share the same well or walled enclosure for the night. Thus different flocks would intermingle and need to be separated. In the Gospel of John it is written, “**⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.**” (John 10:4-5) Sheep would recognize and respond to the voice of their own shepherd, not to strangers. The people listening to Jesus were pastoral people and they understood Jesus’ metaphor from lived experience in a way that is most modern people cannot.

Does anyone here have experience raising sheep or goats? I have had only minimal experience around the two animals. A common consensus seems to be that goats are more clever and have more of what we’d call “personality.” Jesus uses the two animals to illustrate that he will differentiate between two groups of people.

We use the word “goat” in another way these days. G.O.A.T. stands for the “Greatest Of All Time” and is used to refer to sports figures whose performances were so dominant that they are crowned with the moniker. Muhammad Ali was the GOAT in boxing. Serena Williams in tennis. Tom Brady or Joe Montana is often given the title in football. LeBron James or Michael Jordan in basketball. You get the picture. This is a very illustrious

title, based on merit. It is a very worldly title. And, not to take away from the achievements of these athletes, it is somehow an apt title in a world where greatness is associated with glory, fame, money, notoriety, and the like. We have our financial GOATs too: the Bezos, Musk and Gates types. We have our scientific GOATs in Alfred Nobel and Louis Pasteur. We have our political and cultural and celebrity GOATs as well. This is the way of the world. It is helpful to have role models if you want to learn an art or be an athlete or scientist or artists, but remember, Christ said, “**Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant;**” (Matthew 23:10-11) The ways of the world are not the ways of our Father in heaven. We are called to obedience, to humble service to God. That is the way of the sheep, faithful to their shepherd who guides and protects them.

God and Reality

Enough about goats for now, but it is worth asking yourself, do you want to be counted among the great figures of this world, or among the servants of Jesus? This question points to our understanding of God’s judgement, and by extension, our understanding of the nature of reality, for they are truly one and the same. Is God indifferent to us? Is God’s judgement indiscriminate? We know from scripture that God is very concerned about his people. The new covenant in Jesus reveals to us that God sees each of us as precious and the rescue of just one of us who are lost is a cause for rejoicing in heaven. So God is not indifferent. But is God a stern and punitive judge if we miss the mark?

It is easy to see God’s judgement in a retributive sense. Scripture tells us time and again that God is jealous and wants our love and devotion. The people of Israel, amazingly don’t interpret their exiles and tribulations as punishments, but as consequences of their failure to uphold their end of the covenant with God. That is an amazing thing, especially when we consider that the human tendency is to blame others or blame God if things aren’t going the way we want them to. Our tendency is to be like Cain, resentful towards God and our brothers and sisters rather than looking at our own faults. Even in light of this, God repeatedly forgives his people and brings them back from exile and restores them. We are told to forgive others above and beyond counting, and God will forgive us as well.

A third way of seeing God's judgement is to see it as compassionate. God wants to be in relationship with us. God sent Jesus for this purpose. Jesus' instructions let us know how to behave so that we can be closer to God, in this life and the one to come. There is no ambiguity here. Christ ministered to the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and the stranger. We are to follow Christ by doing no less. And whether the end times come in at the end of the age or the end of our individual lives makes little difference in respect to how we have lived. When our days are concluded, then there is no time left to consider how we've lived and make corrections. We have been blessed with clear directions. The sense of there being a final judgement is compassionate in the sense that we have reassurance that we can rely on God's judgment and the scales are not weighted in human terms. No amount of fame, money, acclaim or worldly fortune matters in the end. All that matters is how we, as followers of Jesus, truly followed his example.

Ways of Being

We need assurance of proper judgement because this world is full of injustice. And we don't need reassurance based on our own conceptions of God's grace, or our own varied ideas on the end times. Has everyone here heard of "the rapture?" Did you know that this version of the end times was first proclaimed in the mid 1800s by a British evangelist? (John Nelson Darby, 1800-82) It is based on an interpretation of 1 Thessalonians and it is a modern invention. We don't know the day or the hour or the manner of the end times.

Nor should it concern us overmuch. Jesus preached to the living. He died so that we may have life in abundance. The point is not about the end, it is not about judgment even. Why be concerned about those things? Is it not enough to be concerned with following Christ each day and trusting that His way of love is also the way to life?

The parable of the sheep and the goats warns us about overlooking the here and now. The failure to help those in need is a sin of omission, of people who overlook the opportunities to minister to those who are around them, here and now. We can all do this. We can all miss opportunities to help those in need. That is why we pray for forgiveness for things we have done and things we have left undone. Have you been aware of those in

need and done your best to minister to them? That is the question. That is our responsibility.

So take comfort that God is just and Christ the king and Christ the shepherd and Christ the judge, is also the one who dwells with us and is who we will meet when we minister to those in need.