

Don't Be A Goat

Scripture Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction

Are you acting like a sheep or a goat? That may be a strange question to ask. Who wants to act like either one of them? Not that I want to act like them, but I think goats are interesting. I love seeing the videos of goats screaming at people. They seem to have such a personality. They also seem to be good to have around as they eat just about anything, thus cutting down on the amount of grass to cut. But what does being like a sheep or a goat have to do with us? Maybe not much, but Jesus did refer to people as either sheep or goats, and it was an important distinction. Towards the end of the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus spent much of His time teaching His disciples about the end times, when the great tribulation will come, and when He would return, which no one knows the day or hour. Jesus taught about the faithful servant who would be working for the Master, faithfully using the resources of the Master, and who would be ready when the Bridegroom returned. Then, Jesus taught this passage to His disciples about the final judgement when He will separate the sheep from the goats.

There Will Be A Final Separation for All People

We are all born separated from God because we are all born into sin. Sin separates us all from God, who is holy. The question is this: will you remain separated from God or will you be reconciled to Him? Jesus said in this passage that He will gather all people at the end time in order to separate them as a shepherd would separate sheep from goats. Look at the following verses.

Matthew 25:31–34 ³¹ *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*

Shepherds who lived in Jesus' time frequently had to separate their flocks this way. Sheep and goats would freely intermingle at times and often looked quite similar in appearance, at least from a distance. We, too, could probably not guess from just external appearances who are truly God's people, but the Good Shepherd knows. He will separate them. "His right" refers to a place of honor, and His "left", a place of disgrace. In this passage, however, the King's right side represents eternal life, and his left side represents eternal punishment. The sheep are destined for eternal life, but the goats (cursed) are destined for eternal punishment (fire). Look at the following verse.

Matthew 25:41 ⁴¹ *Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”*

Everyone is separated from God by sin. However, the righteous will be reconciled to God and enter eternal life that has been prepared for them. The unrighteous, the goats, will *continue* in their separation to God, and will be further separated from God and the righteous by going into eternal punishment. Both fates are eternal, and both fates are prepared. There are two interesting differences, though. The fire was not prepared for the goats, but rather for the rebellious angels. Neither is the fire prepared “from the creation of the world” (v. 34). One could read this to mean that no one needs to join with the demons in their punishment. No one needs to be a goat and be cast into hell; unfortunately, some will choose hell by rejecting Christ. Which have you chosen - to go with the sheep into eternal life, or to go with the goats into eternal punishment?

Our Earthly Behavior *Demonstrates* Our Eternal Fate

Why did Jesus tell us about the future judgement of the world? Was it just to satisfy our desire for end time prophecies? Was it just so we would know what is coming? Jesus revealed future events to warn us about what is going to happen, but also to describe the characteristics He demands for all of His disciples. For instance, in this section of Matthew, Jesus told His disciples to be alert and ready (24:32–25:13), to be faithful servants with what He entrusts to them (25:14–30), and in this passage, to be compassionate to others (25:31–46). Jesus spoke about the final judgement, so that we would obey God’s will for us by being kind to one another and displaying acts of kindness. Does this mean that our behavior determines our fate? Look at the following.

Matthew 25:35-36 ³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*

This passage reveals to us what sheep look like. The sheep had good behavior. The sheep were blessed by the Father. They cared for Jesus, feeding Him when He was hungry, giving Him drink when He was thirsty, providing clothing when He needed clothes, showing Him hospitality when He was a foreigner (stranger), and visiting Him when He was sick or imprisoned. Essentially, the sheep were kind and did acts of kindness to Jesus. Kindness is an attribute of God. Kindness is a characteristic of true love (1 Corinthians 13:4, *love is kind*). Kindness means showing care and sympathy toward others. It is the quality of being helpful or providing something beneficial to others. The sheep did this for Jesus. There are three basic human needs, apart from salvation—food, shelter, and companionship. We can show kindness to others by meeting those needs. What about the goats, though? What do they look like? Why did they not enter into everlasting life? Basically, it was because they did *not* do acts of kindness to Jesus. Look at the following verses.

Matthew 25:41-43 ⁴¹ *Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal 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 welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”*

Thus, at the final judgment, Jesus will reward those who have shown kindness to Him. The righteous (sheep) will go into eternal life because they did acts of kindness, and the unrighteous (goats) will go into eternal punishment because they did not do acts of kindness. That sounds pretty simple, right? Maybe not! What does that interpretation say about *how* we become saved? Is our salvation based on works or is it by grace? If we read this passage literally and in a vacuum with no other supporting scripture, we may very well believe that just doing kind things on this earth earns us eternal life in heaven. Our salvation is certainly not based on works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Keep in mind that the sheep in this passage are “blessed” by the Father with an “inheritance” that they did not earn, but was given. *The good deeds of kindness mentioned in this passage are not the root of our salvation, but rather the fruit of it.* For those who profess to belong to Christ, their words *and* their works will demonstrate the faith they have. Thus, this is a call for us to demonstrate “fruit in keeping with repentance”. See the following.

Matthew 3:8 *Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*

This supports our understanding of the fruit of the Spirit, which is a natural result of the Spirit’s work in our lives. True faith and repentance will produce a lifestyle and behavior that demonstrates a transformed heart. There is no more urgent priority in this life than for us to respond to Jesus by becoming His disciples through faith in Him. It does not stop there, though. It is not that it takes something in addition to the blood of Christ to save us, but it is that the blood of Christ and genuine faith in Him will produce fruit. As the Bible repeatedly affirms, genuine faith *results* in genuine works of faith. If we are truly disciples of Christ, we will demonstrate our faith in Jesus through acts of kindness. A healthy tree produces good fruit (Matthew 7:17).

Kindness Begins With The Church

One issue with this passage is that neither the sheep nor the goats understood how they had ministered so directly to Jesus. With this being a picture of the final judgement where all nations will be present, the vast majority of believers will not have been able to minister to Jesus in the way He described. So, what did Jesus mean?

Matthew 25:37–40 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 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”*

The goats asked a similar question, and Jesus answered it like He did the sheep.

Matthew 25:44–46 ⁴⁴ *Then they also will answer, 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, “Truly, I say to you, 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 eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*

The righteous people are rewarded for ministering to Jesus and the unrighteous people are condemned for not ministering to Jesus. Both the righteous and the unrighteous at the final judgement are perplexed about how they could have ministered or failed to have ministered directly to Jesus. Perhaps the answer to how we can show acts of kindness to Jesus is in His statement about the “least of these my brothers” in verse forty. Who are His little brothers? We see a similar statement in chapter ten of Matthew. Look at the following passage.

Matthew 10:40, 42 ⁴⁰ *Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me...* ⁴² *And whoever gives one of **these little ones** even a cup of cold water because **he is a disciple**, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.*

In Matthew the “little ones” are the true family of Jesus. They are His disciples. But it was not just Jesus referring to those who receive acts of kindness as the “least of these”. Jesus also referred to those who received acts of kindness as His brothers. Being in Christ means we are part of a spiritual family. Thus, Jesus’ “brothers” are related to Him spiritually, meaning those who believe in Him. Look at the following.

Matthew 12:50 *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*

When one shows mercy to a follower of Jesus, one is essentially showing mercy to Jesus Himself. No doubt, we should do acts of kindness to everyone in need, but it is doubtful that Jesus’ little brothers (and sisters) are all the needy people in the world. They are the family of God, the church. We certainly need to help all people of the world, whether they are believers or not; however, that does not seem to be the point here. The sheep at the final judgement are the people whose earthly works demonstrate that they have responded properly to the Gospel. The sheep are those who have demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit and have acted kindly towards others, primarily to their brothers and sisters in Christ, the church. Doing acts of kindness to each member in the church is doing acts of kindness to Jesus Himself. Jesus identifies with His people. Their suffering is His suffering, and compassion shown to them is compassion shown to Jesus. While we should perform acts of mercy and kindness to all people, we must *especially* do it to those of the household of faith. Look at the following.

Galatians 6:10 *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

So, how can we demonstrate kindness to one another and show that we are the sheep of Jesus’ pasture? Jesus mentioned those who are hungry, foreigners, unclothed, or sick. Are there people who belong to the church who are in need of food? Could you provide meals for someone in need? Oftentimes, there are missionaries who are traveling and need a place to stay temporarily. Could you provide a place to stay for a while? Maybe you could provide clothes to someone or to some family in need. We have many people in our congregation who are sick or homebound. You could simple

call them or visit them. Demonstrate kindness by showing others you care. If you are a brother or sister in Christ, are you helping your other brothers and sisters in Christ? That is how to not be a goat...by being Christ to those in your church family.

Conclusion

In closing, we need to do a better job of being the church to the church. Jesus indicated in this passage that acts of kindness were important to Him, which revealed the ones who were truly faithful to Him. We need to demonstrate the kindness that Jesus mentioned in this passage, the kindness that is indicative of those who profess Him as Lord and Savior. No one in the church needs to feel left out or forgotten. If you have been saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, then you are a part of God's family. Families take care of themselves, so let us take care of God's household here. Let us serve one another through acts of kindness. And let us not stop there. Let us extend our kindness to those outside the body of Christ, so that we can show the world who we really are - *the true sheep of the Good Shepherd*. Thanks be to God. Amen!