

## **The Stories That Jesus Loved to Tell: Sheep and Goats**

Matthew 25:31-46

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'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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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." Then 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?" Then 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." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

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At 8:00 in the evening on the day before Halloween in 1938, Orson Welles nearly scared the pants off of millions of American citizens when he read a version of H.G. Wells' novel, *The War of the Worlds*, on the radio.

With almost no introduction, Welles began to read the story as if it was news. People tuning in a little late heard men speaking in grave tones about aliens landing in Trenton, New Jersey. The Martians were waging war on the human race. A man who sounded a lot like President Roosevelt addressed the "citizens of the nation" to urge them to carry on their responsibilities amidst this grievous attack.

As the broadcast ended, many people in New England packed up their cars and fled the area. Thousands called the radio station and the authorities. Churches filled up with people who wanted to pray. The chaos lasted for days.

The moral is that it matters if you know the genre of the story.

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Take the Sheep and the Goats. Is what I just read from Matthew's gospel a prediction, or is it a parable? Is it intended to be descriptive about the end of the world? Or, is this another one of those kind of stories that Jesus uses to teach his disciples about the Kingdom of God?

Among Bible scholars, there is no shortage of debate about how to classify this piece of scripture.<sup>1</sup> As with all scripture, the issue is interpretation.

How we choose to read this passage has bearing on our faith, the way we view God, and the way we understand time.

If Jesus' words here are a prediction...if they are meant to describe some future event, then it appears that the main point of this life we've been given is to use our time in preparation for the final judgment.

On the other hand, if these words are spoken as a parable, then Jesus appears to be using judgment of the king in this parable to illustrate something about the nature of God's kingdom that is breaking into our world.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the work of Dr. Stan Saunders, professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, who wrote a commentary (*Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*) and taught a class that I took on the parables.

I throw my lot in with those scholars who read this Scripture as a parable – a parable that is grouped with three other parables that Jesus tells to his disciples just before he is led away to be crucified.

Parables are stories that disclose something that is true about the nature of God and the nature of God’s kingdom, or – as Bishop Desmond Tutu called it – God’s Dream<sup>2</sup> for the world.

Parables make us think – the genre is intended to mess with our minds – and in telling the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus succeeds at that goal.

Consider this: in the parable, what is the difference between a sheep and a goat? Confronted by the king whose role is to look back on their life and examine their choices before separating them, both the sheep and the goats ask the same question: “Lord, when was it that we saw you...hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, in prison...?”

And what we see is that the difference between the two is in the motivation.

As in, the sheep acted on behalf of those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison with no thought to what might be in it for them.

The goats’ question “Lord, when did we see you?” almost seems incredulous, suggesting that they *would have* taken compassion on the least of these *had they known* that the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and those in prison were actually the king who was to stand before them in final judgment.

Which, of course, is not the point.

The practice of compassion toward those who are vulnerable is not a means to an end. About this, the parable is clear. Sheep are not sheep simply because they are compassionate. They are sheep because they demonstrate compassion without regard to a reward.

Here’s what will really get you thinking about this parable. The fact is, for anyone who hears this parable about judgment – once we get the idea into our

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you, Bishop Desmond Tutu (*God’s Dream* is a wonderful children’s book, authored by Tutu, that is appropriate for Christ the King Sunday).

heads that there will be a great sorting out – it is now impossible for that not to inform our actions.

Once you hear this parable, the naiveté is gone.

When we hear this parable, we can't forget about the reward.

When we hear this parable, that knowledge that our compassion toward the least of these will impact our standing before the King means that we cannot ever recapture the pure motives of the sheep who act with compassion without wondering what is in it for them.

So – we might ask, where are we in the equation?

Throughout our lives and our lives of faith, I am sure – like me – you have served food to the homeless, or supported ministries that clothe people who are naked, you've visited the sick, and given money to help with prison ministry. But was there any part of you that did all of that with an eye to what might be gained?

Was there any part of you that did those things because you worry about what God might think about you if you didn't do them?

So what are we – sheep, or goats?

And what about those other people – those other kind of Christians, those people who stay at home on Sunday mornings, those people who believe in a different God – are they sheep, or are they goats?

I mean, c'mon, Jesus!

Let's just be clear about this!

Who is who?

Who will be on your right and who will be on your left?

And Jesus' answer is found in the muddy water of the parable – where it simply isn't clear where we, or they, or anyone is in the eyes of the king who sits as judge.

If that is frustrating to us, perhaps the question is why.

Why does not knowing who is in and who is out matter?

Why is it important that we have a clear sense of who is righteous and who is not?

Why must we comprehend the mind of the judge?

Perhaps one reason why Jesus tells this parable in such a way as to leave us unsettled about where we fit in is because we spend too much of our time and energy worrying about where we fit in.

As New Testament scholar Stan Saunders says, “the parable ultimately subverts all of our attempts to render the world into categories of good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, weak and powerful.”<sup>3</sup>

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I chose to preach on this Scripture months ago when we were putting together our summer sermon series on the parables. And then – last Sunday – Orlando happened. We were gathered here last week – and while we prayed for those who had been affected by the tragedy, at the time I don’t believe any of us understood how horrific the attack was.

First it was news of a shooting. There were injuries. Then we heard that 20 lost their lives. Then 50, including the perpetrator.

We’re still not clear on the reasons why Omar Mateen committed this atrocity. Perhaps it was because he was radicalized in his Muslim faith and viewed those who were outside his faith as infidels. Perhaps it was because he was homophobic and carried out a vendetta against the LGBT community. Perhaps it was because he was at war with himself over his own sexuality.

Whatever the case, the reason Omar Mateen resorted to irrevocable violence was because he viewed the people that God had created in different categories: holy or infidel, normal or perverse, worthy or deserving of punishment.

I’ll be honest – I’ve really not known what to do this week with the heartbreak over yet another national tragedy. But what breaks my heart almost as much as the news out of Orlando are the ways that I have watched our country respond – on Facebook, the news, talk-radio, you name it. You know what we’ve done? We’ve rendered the world into different categories. We’ve

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<sup>3</sup> Saunders, Stan, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God’s Presence*, p. 261.

gathered and responded in our little camps: Democrats, Republicans; gun-control advocates, gun-rights defenders; hawks and doves.

To be sure, the categories we divide the world are less severe than what led to the tragedy in Orlando, or Charleston, or San Bernandino, or...

But ask yourself: how much compassion do we have for the people who fall into the other side of the categories we have created? How much time do we spend caring for the vulnerable populations of the groups that we deem “the other” or “the enemy?” How quickly and easily do we dismiss the value and concern for lives that seem so removed from our own?

“Lord, when did we see you...”

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I’ll say it again – I don’t think this is a story that Jesus tells to warn us about a future judgment. I do not this morning’s Scripture is meant to be read as a prediction about the end of our days or the end of the world.

What I think Jesus does with this parable is reflect back to us the judgments that we have made and expose them as woefully inadequate to the kind of expectation that God has for the people whom God has created in his image.

The time we give and energy we waste and the damage we do to the world because we render what we see into categories – this is not a reflection of God’s dream.

So what Jesus does is unsettle us with a parable that turns the tables on our judgments about who is and who is out; who is right and who is wrong; who is worthy and who is unworthy. Because after hearing Jesus tell this parable, we all sit in that unsettled place before the king.

And if we don’t waste our days worrying about categories – then the best way to use our time and our energy would be to attend carefully, faithfully, and creatively to Christ’s presence among the least of our brothers and sisters.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

What a different world that would be.  
What a powerful witness to our faith.  
What a gratifying way to spend our lives.

The good news is – we can start...today.

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