

Parable of the Sheep & Goats
Matthew 25:31-46
ABC 9/6

This morning we reach the conclusion of the section of Scripture referred to as the Olivet Discourse in Mt 24-25. As Jesus left the Temple & was ascending the Mt of Olives with His disciples, they asked Him what the signs of the end of the age would be. Jesus gave them some of the events that would precede His return to earth to set up His millennial kingdom as well as several parables stressing the need for everyone to be ready, watching, & waiting for His return, & while doing so, working for Him, His glory, & His kingdom. We all need to be prepared & remain faithful to the end, whether that happens with the rapture of the church or our own death. Jesus wraps up by telling the disciples, & us, what He'll do upon His return. As we know, all sin must be punished, even the sins of Christians. But the marvelous & gracious privilege we have as Christians is the judgment & punishment for our sins has been placed upon Jesus, who died as the substitute for us. By God's grace, we have the guilt & penalty for our sins nailed to the cross with Christ. But those who don't receive Jesus as Lord & Savior must bear the penalty for their own sins, which is spiritual death & eternal hell. The fact that Jesus will return in wrath to render judgment isn't what's amazing but rather His 1st coming in grace to offer salvation. The wonder isn't that Jesus will someday come in glory to judge the world but that He 1st came in humility to save sinners. The marvel isn't that God promises to condemn sinners for their sin but that He offers them deliverance from it. What's remarkable is that He came to redeem sinners who are worthy only of His judgment. No one in Scripture spoke more of judgment than Jesus. Yet nothing Jesus said or did was inconsistent with His gracious love. His warnings of judgment were acts of love, appeals for us to turn from our sin & experience life now & forevermore. His closing words in this sermon are one of the most severe & sobering warnings of judgment in all Scripture. I believe this judgment will occur just before Christ establishes His millennial kingdom on earth. Not only will it determine the ultimate & eternal destinies of everyone living at the end of the Tribulation but will also determine who will & who won't enter His kingdom. Only those who belong to the King, believers who've been born into God's spiritual family & been made citizens of His spiritual kingdom will enter His kingdom. While this

isn't a parable it's often called one. Jesus uses a simile to liken the **Son of Man's** separation of the people of the nations to a shepherd separating sheep from goats.

1. The Coming Judgment 31-33

The Judge over this separation of the sheep & goats will be Christ Himself, **the Son of Man**, a messianic title (Dan 7:13). This is the most common title Jesus used of Himself. It declared His incarnation, His identity with mankind, & His time of humiliation & sacrifice. It reflected His condescension, submissiveness, humility, meekness, & His gracious love for fallen man. Jesus had earlier declared that **not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father** (Jn 5:22-23). God the Father has delegated all judgment authority to His Son. What's the setting here? At the end of the tribulation, armies of men will gather to battle stubbornly with God. They're utterly defeated; their rebellion is crushed. The event that follows is the judgment of those who are left. The armies have been destroyed & Jesus now deals with those who weren't part of those armies. This is the point at which our text picks up the story. Man's rebellion against God is crushed & all people are brought before Him to be judged at the beginning of Messiah's 1,000-year reign. His 1st act as sovereign King will be to decide who enters His millennial, earthly kingdom & who does not. He who is called **faithful & true** in Rev 19, comes in glory with His angels. At that time, Paul says, **the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God & to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus** (2 Thes 1:7-8). When He appears,

immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, & the moon will not give its light, & the stars will fall from the sky, & the powers of the heavens will be shaken, & then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, & then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, & they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power & great glory. & He will send forth His angels (Mt 24:29-31).

The Lord will come not only with His angels but with His saints. Paul told the Colossian Christians, **when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory** (Col 3:4).

The OT saints, the saints of the church who've died, the saints who've been raptured, & the saints who'll have been killed during the tribulation will all come with Jesus & join the saints still living on

earth when He descends to establish His kingdom. He returns as the conquering King & takes His position on the royal throne of David (2 Sam 7:16; Lk 1:32). The nations are then brought before Him & He starts the judgment proceedings. The time for deciding to receive Christ will be past & the decisions people have already made regarding Him will determine His decision regarding them. Those for whom He is Lord & Savior will enter the kingdom & those who've rejected Him will be forever excluded. **Nations** has the basic meaning of *peoples* & here refers to every person alive on earth when the Lord returns. Although He'll have taken all believers into heaven at the rapture, during the 7 years of tribulation many others will come to faith in Him. As Jesus makes clear, those who're alive on earth when He returns will include both saved & unsaved, represented by the sheep & the goats. Those 2 separate peoples will have 2 separate destinies. The believers will be ushered into the millennial kingdom & the unbelievers into eternal punishment (46). Why use the analogy of sheep & goats? Because they were a familiar sight in Israel & everyone knew their characteristics. Sheep are docile & gentle while goats are more rambunctious. Jewish lore often depicted goats as *black, smelly, lecherous, & omnivorous*. The Hebrew words for *goat, devil, & abode of idols* were all very similar. Demons were also believed to be able to possess goats.¹ If you'd to been animal during Bible times, it would be preferable not to be a goat. For one reason, there's that whole scapegoat thing. The scapegoat was the goat over whose head the high priest Aaron confessed the sins of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement. Then the goat, symbolically bearing their sins, was driven out into the wilderness where it probably became dinner for a hungry lion. Of course, one might argue, being a sheep could be equally as dangerous. A sheep, after giving up its wool, often appeared on the dinner table or on the altar as a sacrifice. That said, goats in the Bible clearly aren't viewed as sympathetically as sheep. In this passage, Jesus speaks of separating sheep from goats & it's clear that the goats are the losers in the sorting. The 2 herds would often intermingle during the day, but at night the shepherd would separate them so the goats wouldn't upset the sheep while they rested. As Jesus said, **My sheep hear my voice, & I know them, & they follow Me** (Jn 10:27). When Jesus sits on His glorious throne &

¹ J Duncan M Derrett, *Unfair to Goats*, pp 177-178

separates the righteous from the wicked, His sheep hear His voice & will be put on His right hand. The goats, the unrighteous, are placed on His left. Now each group will be judged.

2. The Judgment of the Righteous (34-40) 34

Jesus 1st came as the humble **Son of Man** who'd die as the substitute for our sin but He returns as **King**. Until this point, Jesus had never directly referred to Himself as a King. But now, days before His death, He does. & as **King**, He judges. He who was despised & rejected will one day reign supreme. This passage has troubled people because, as we'll see, it seems to indicate the sheep go into eternal life based on their righteous works while the wicked are condemned because of their failure to do these righteous works. Can a person be saved by works? If any text of Scripture seems to imply it, this would be it. But when other Scriptures are considered it becomes clear that salvation by works is an impossibility under any & every circumstance. Notice what the **King** says to those on the right. These are those that are **blessed of My Father** & they're called to inherit the kingdom that's been **prepared for** them since **the foundation of the world**. There's nothing random going on here. Those who are on the right hand aren't there by chance, luck, or fate. They're there because God had already planned for them from eternity past. Paul describes this in Eph 1:4-5 saying, **just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy & blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.** In Rom 8:29-30, Paul describes the various actions God has taken in bringing an individual to salvation, & it begins in eternity past.

For those whom God foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; & these whom He predestined, He also called; & these whom He called, He also justified; & these whom He justified, He also glorified.

This passage is sometimes called the golden chain of salvation as it describes God's actions, link-by-link which brings a sinner to salvation & ends in their glorification. God foreknew. God predestined, God called, God justified, & God glorified. The certainty of the promise is emphasized by using the past tense of **glorified** to describe the future event when God will glorify His children by completing His work of conforming them into **the image of** Christ. Jesus makes clear that believers won't **inherit the kingdom** based on good deeds they'll have done while on earth. Their

inheritance was determined countless ages ago, even **from the foundation of the world**. Those who enter the kingdom won't do so on the basis of the works they've performed for Christ but on the basis of their being **blessed** by the **Father** because of their trust in His Son. They'll in no way earn a place in the kingdom. A child doesn't earn an inheritance but receives it because he's family. In exactly the same way, a believer doesn't earn his way into the kingdom of God but receives it as his inheritance as a child of God & a fellow heir with Jesus (Rom 8:16–17). These who are on the King's right hand are those who are blessed of God because they've been made righteous through the Lord Jesus Christ. But now notice in vs 35-36 what King Jesus points out to them as the evidence of their righteousness. **35-36**

The righteous deeds Jesus mentions here are evidence of salvation & He commends those who've performed them. He's saying, *Welcome to My kingdom, because you're the chosen children of My Father & your relationship to Him is made evident by the service you've rendered to Me by ministering to your fellow believers, who, like you, are My brothers* (40). These good deeds are the fruit, not the root, of salvation. It can't be emphasized enough that they aren't the basis of entrance into His kingdom. If a person hasn't trusted in Jesus as Lord & Savior, no amount of so-called good works will bring any spiritual benefit. The deeds of these people is evidence of their righteousness as is their surprise & humility they express at receiving such approval. **37-39**

The response of those whom the King commends is remarkable & is another proof of their salvation. Because they've ministered in humility & selflessness, not to be seen & honored by men (Mt 6:2, 5, 16), they've seemingly forgotten about the many things they've done & are surprised they're worthy of mention by the Lord. Jesus addresses them as **the righteous**, not simply because they've been declared righteous in Christ but because they've been made righteous by Christ. Their works of service to fellow believers gives evidence they're the product of divine **workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them** (Eph 2:10). They couldn't recall doing anything like that to the Lord, so Jesus explains further in vs **40**.

All 6 acts that Jesus mentions are situations in life that would demonstrate a person's heart. Jesus doesn't use miracles or mighty works as the evidence of faith, but instead, He points to simple acts of responding with godly compassion to those around us. What are they? Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, housing the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, & the prisoner. No great intellect required, no theology degree demanded, no great act of piety, just a simple response demonstrating God's love to others. The fact these acts are done even to **the least of these** stresses they're acts of godly love & not something done out of selfish motives. Why? Because the **least of these** have nothing to offer in return for the kindness shown to them except gratitude. Jesus addressing these people as **brothers of Mine** gives evidence that they're already children of God & don't become so because of their good works. The writer of Hebrews declared, **For both He who sanctifies & those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren** (Heb 2:11). Paul says, **The one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him** (1 Cor 6:17), & because of that union a believer can say, **it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; & the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, & delivered Himself up for me** (Gal 2:20). So why the emphasis on what they'd done? Simply because the good works are evidence of a righteous heart. James makes that clear when he says, **If a brother or sister is without clothing & in need of daily food, & one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed & be filled," & yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself** (2:15-17). John makes the same point in 1 Jn, **But whoever has the world's goods, & sees his brother in need & closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed & truth** (3:17-18). Whatever believers do for each other they also do for their Lord & King, Jesus. The person who genuinely receives & serves other Christians in Christ's name proves he himself is a Christian. Jesus said, **By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another** (Jn 13:35). It's the practical acts of such love that Jesus will call attention to as he ushers the tribulation saints into His millennial kingdom. This *parable* is best understood as distinguishing Jesus' true followers from everyone else as those who've embraced

the gospel & demonstrated their trust in Christ by helping the physically neediest of His people.² Those Christians during the tribulation who respond to other needy Christians show they've accepted the gospel of Jesus as well.³ Believers during those 7 years will have great need for the basics Jesus mentioned. Because of their identity with Him, they'll be persecuted & will often be hungry, thirsty, without decent shelter or clothing, sick, & imprisoned. Those who meet the needs of fellow believers will themselves have suffered great need. Few, if any, believers during the days of the tribulation will be able to give out of abundance. Most will have resources hardly sufficient to meet their own needs. Their generosity to each other sets them apart as God's people even before, as returning King, He publicly declares them to be His own. The righteous are judged & receive their commendation & their entrance into His millennial kingdom.

3. The Judgment of the Wicked Jesus then continues on to describe the judgment & condemnation of the wicked. **41-43**

Jesus doesn't condemn these people because they failed to serve Him (42-43) just as He doesn't save the others because they did serve Him (34-35). These are **accursed** because they rejected Him, just as those who enter the kingdom are **righteous** (37) because they accepted Him. His description of them is the exact opposite of the sheep, the righteous. These too are astonished & immediately seek to justify themselves claiming the King's judgment about them must be wrong.

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I'm sure you can picture them bringing their argument: *How can You condemn us for this since we never saw You in any of these conditions. We would've helped if we'd seen You like that.* I'm confident that describes their attitude because that's the heart of the wicked. Even the most wicked man will extend help to someone he thinks will help him later on. Even the most selfish will help if they think there's a reward to be received later. & so the wicked claim they hadn't seen Jesus in need, implying they'd have helped if they had. Jesus clarifies the reason for their condemnation in vs **45**.

² Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp 400-401

³ Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, p 208

The evidence that these people never belonged to Christ will be that they didn't love & serve His people. Their response to believers' needs will have been just the opposite of those who enter the kingdom. Their failure to do works of compassion is just as much an evidence of their unrighteousness & lack of love for God as doing such actions was evidence for the righteous of their love for God. Sins of omission, failure to do what is right, are just as serious as sins of commission, actively doing wrong. That's a lesson & warning all of us need to hear. While mankind tends to make a distinction between the 2, God does not. Stealing is stealing whether it's robbing a bank or slacking on the job. Lying is lying whether it's a fabricated story or purposely withholding information for your own gain. Cheating on your taxes is the same whether you exaggerate your deductions or fail to report money earned under the table. Both sins of commission & sins of omission bring you under God's just & righteous condemnation, & that's the point here. God knows the heart & the failure to do right reveals the true nature of a person. Their excuse that they didn't see Jesus in any of those conditions reveals they knew it was right to be compassionate to someone in need, but they failed to show such compassion to those they saw in it. They saw the need & had the means to meet the need, but they closed their hearts against those in need. King Jesus judges them because they knew what was right & didn't do it. Look again at vs 41 & the sentence pronounced on them by Jesus. He calls them **accursed ones** & commands them to depart from Him & **into the eternal fire**. We don't like that. The concept of hell is disturbing. There are many reactions to the doctrine of hell. Some believe it & listen to the Lord's warnings because they want to avoid it. Others try to find a way to ignore or reinterpret the passages about it to change it into something not as terrifying as how Scripture describes it. Others react by challenging the character of God with questions such as, *How could a good God send people to hell?* Depending on how they answer that question, some will reject the doctrine of hell while others reject the Bible's description of God & remake Him in their own image. Then there are those that reject God altogether claiming they won't believe in a God that elects some to heaven & not others. But that's like rejecting the laws of physics because you don't like them. Entropy & gravity are true whether you believe them or not. Your body is declining from a state of energy & order to one of less energy & disorder. We

all experience that as we age. Gravity will pull you toward the earth if you fall no matter if it's from a stool, roof, or cliff. God is real & His character is what it is whether you like it or not or believe it or not. What Jesus says here about this judgment is strong but it's also perfectly just. Jesus is neither arbitrary nor cruel. What stands out to many when they read this are the words **eternal fire**. What should stand out is the description of whom it was prepared for. Who was hell prepared for? **The devil & his angels**, not for men. It's wrong to think that God elects or predestines people to hell. If that were true, Jesus could have easily made it clear here, but instead He adds in this phrase that it was prepared **for the devil & his angels**. People don't go hell because God predestined them for it. People go to hell because they've failed to accept God's gift of salvation through Jesus alone. We're all born dead in our sins. We all stand condemned because **the wages of sin is death** (Rom 6:23) & **the soul who sins will die** (Ezek 18:4). God would be just to send every human to hell because that's what we all deserve. However, God's own character of mercy, grace, & love resulted in His plan from eternity past to provide salvation for us. God demonstrated His love for us when Jesus died for our sins as the sacrificial substitute to redeem us & offer forgiveness of sins to all who repent & believe in Him (Rom 5:8; Eph 1:7; 2:8). Those who place their faith in the Person & work of Jesus are adopted into God's family with heaven promised as their eternal home. If you haven't done that yet, 2 Pt 3:9 makes it clear God's desire for you is for you to repent instead of perish. He is patient & longsuffering while He waits for you to turn to Him in faith. In other words, God's response to unrepentant sinners is righteous & just. In a very real sense, eventually He grants them what they've demonstrated throughout their lives that they foolishly desire. He'll judge them & set the appropriate punishment & then He'll send them away from His presence because of their rejection of Him & His provision of salvation. It's significant the marks of lostness Jesus mentions here aren't gross sins but simple acts of kindness *not* committed. The 5 foolish virgins who had no oil for their lamps weren't shut out of the wedding feast because they were morally wicked but because they were unprepared (Mt 25:1–13). In the same way, the slave with 1 talent wasn't cast into outer darkness because he embezzled the master's money but because he failed to invest it (14–30). In the same way, a person who's shut out of the kingdom of God isn't

condemned only because of the greatness of his sin but also because of the absence of his faith. It isn't that those who are damned to hell are equally wretched & vile. No, their common reason for condemnation is a lack of faith in Jesus Christ. Hell is a place reserved for Satan & his demons & now for people who've fallen to the devil's lies instead of believing God. & so **the Son of Man** commands the goats, the wicked on His left, to depart to a place of torment that had been prepared for the devil & his demons. People will go to hell because that's the just place of punishment for all who've proven their wicked character by their sins of both commission & omission. &, as stated in 2 Thes 1:8, it is **retribution to those who do not know God & who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus**. They've failed to heed the warning & take advantage of the gift of redemption & forgiveness offered by Jesus. Instead, they face God in their own righteousness, which is as **filthy rags** (Is 64:6). Those who follow the lies of the devil in life shouldn't be surprised to find they'll spend eternity with him in eternal punishment. God's love doesn't hinder His righteousness or justice. In fact, His righteousness & justice magnify His love because Jesus paid the penalty of sin for us so we might receive His grace & mercy. Remember, we don't want God to be fair with us, we want Him to be merciful & gracious to us by justifying us through Jesus Christ.

4. The Final Destiny Vs 46 brings the matter to a conclusion. **46**

Those who argue there will be no eternal punishment show themselves to be ignorant of what the Bible clearly teaches. They've chosen to believe what they want to believe as if reality must conform to their own wishes. Those who argue there is no hell don't pay attention to what Jesus taught on this subject. In vs 46 the realities of both heaven & hell are presented side-by-side & the same adjective is used of both. The goats are sentenced to go away into **eternal** punishment while the sheep are welcomed to **eternal** life. What's true of **eternal** for one is true for the other. This vs also destroys the arguments of those who acknowledge hell but claim it will only be temporary with either the souls there eventually being annihilated or that they can eventually be transferred to heaven after they've suffered for their sins long enough. Neither purgatory nor the concept of it appear anywhere in the Bible because man cannot in any way or manner, no matter how hard or long they try, make themselves righteous & acceptable to God. You either come through the

imputed righteousness of Jesus or you don't come at all. You're either a sheep or a goat. The concept of eternal punishment shouldn't be a shock to us. God is perfectly holy & so punishment for those who reject Him is to be expected. We shouldn't be surprised that Jesus returning as the conquering King will pour out His wrath in judgment against those who've rejected Him. We should be amazed at His great love demonstrated in His 1st coming in which He purchased our salvation through His own death & in His many warnings to those who still reject Him. It isn't astonishing there's a place of eternal punishment, but it's astounding there's a place of eternal reward offered to repentant sinners. That God would hate sin is perfectly understandable. That God would love the sinner so much that He'd redeem them by becoming a man & die in our place is astonishing. Yet He did! We'll celebrate & remember that fact in just a moment with the communion table.

Jesus doesn't end this discourse on a negative note but a positive one. Yes, eternal punishment awaits those who continue to reject God but eternal life awaits those who ask God to forgive their sins & place their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Heaven is the passion & prize for the Christian. The warnings to be prepared for eternity are a fitting conclusion because the time to be ready for Jesus' return or to enter eternity through death is now. Tomorrow may be too late. If you aren't ready, talk with someone here today so that you may find peace with God. Those who are followers of Jesus look forward to His return & pray it will be soon even while being grateful that each day of delay is a display of His patience that allows more people to be saved. We face the future as did Paul, without fear, because for us **to live is Christ & to die is gain** (Phil 1:21). So Jesus brings His sermon to an end with a warning. Yes, He's coming. When's He coming? We don't know. Therefore, we should be ready at all times because irreversible judgment will occur when He comes. On one hand will be the sheep who've embraced the Savior & been made righteous & have received the love of God which they show to others. On the other hand, are the goats, not made righteous, not possessors of the love of God, & unable to show it. The sheep come into the kingdom. The goats are sent to eternal punishment. This is the choice we all have. That's how eternity will be, just 2 places. & every person who has lived on earth will be in one or the other. Do you believe? If not, why don't you believe today? PRAY

COMMUNION

Jesus is coming again. 1st, in the clouds to rapture His church. Then in judgment to rule & reign upon the earth for 1,000 years. The illustration of the communion table is to remind us that the 1st time He came, He came to die. To die for you & for me. On the night before His death He ate the Passover supper with His disciples. During this dinner, He did something different, something He tells us to do on an ongoing basis until He returns again.

Mt 26:26-30

We take the bread, remembering His death, in our place, for our sins, so that we might have life with Him eternally. BREAD

We take the cup, remembering His death, in our place, for our sins, so that we might become children of God, sheep of the good & great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. CUP