

Some Parables of Jesus Found in the Gospel of Matthew
A Study in Eight Lessons
Wednesday Evening Studies
Lesson Eight

Parable of the Sheep and the Goats
Matthew 25:31-46

Read the Parable

Introducing the Parable

Which side do you choose? Do you want to be on the goat side or the sheep side? That's not a trick question. It's an easy question. We hope that our Lord will see us as sheep! The problem comes when we decide that we will try out best to be sheep. It is then that we become goats. "That very exercise of 'whom do I serve' puts us into the goat category," says Stanley Saunders. "What would Jesus be saying to his disciples in this parable? This is his last bit of his last sermon before the Passion starts. It is not directed to the crowds but to the disciples. He's preparing them for what is coming."¹

The Teaching We Hear

Traditionally, we have read this parable and interpreted it as a call to true discipleship: to be the hands and feet, voice and kind deeds of Christ, working in the world in places and among people most likely to need our help. Who are these "least" to whom Jesus refers? Many scholars have tried to say, and their opinions vary widely. The quest to determine the answer to that question "turns out to be rather goat like," Saunders says. "Contrary to first impressions, Matthew does not intend by means of this story to provide the righteous with the means to distinguish themselves from the unrighteous, but affirms those who serve the least ones without any distinction or expectation of reward."² The two "surprises" in the parable are: 1) that Jesus tells the sheep that they have served Jesus himself when they served the "least"; and 2) that Jesus even knew and cared that they have provided such service. The ones on the sheep side serve out of gratitude for the blessings of their own lives.

1. What is your favorite thing about this parable? Why?
2. What is the answer to the quest to be a sheep rather than a goat?
3. What do you think is the purpose of the story?

What It Might and Might Not Mean

One of the risks of this parable is that we believe we can interpret it with certainty; that we can know where we are on the scale of sheep-ness and goat-ness. The parable *is* about

¹ Saunders, B862 Gospel Parables class notes, July 2017.

² Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*, 258.

judgment. And that gives the parable a somber tone. But no list appears requiring a certain number of check marks for a person to be counted on the sheep side. Barbara Reid says that the parable is encouraging for those who are spending or have spent time looking for ways and carrying out programs to help the less fortunate people in their communities. "For those who have been faithfully engaged in the deeds listed, it is not a time to be feared, but a welcome relief as they are embraced into eternal life in God's realm with the righteous."³ And the truth is, and God knows and Jesus knows -- every human being has both sheep and goat within. The parable is not a formula for figuring out where we stand. But it does call us, Saunders says, to be "watchful, attending carefully, faithfully, and creatively to Christ's presence among the least of our brothers and sisters."⁴

³ Reid, 228.

⁴ Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*, 261.

Congregational Study of the Parables in the Gospel of Matthew
First Presbyterian Church of Natchez, Mississippi
Eight Parable Lessons for Adult and Teen Sunday Study
Lesson Eight

Matthew 25:31-46

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

Read the Parable

Teachers: Ask for any preliminary questions or comments.

Christ the Judge

This is not a surprise to most Christians! It is Christ who will be the judge, sitting "on the throne of his glory" (25:31). Christ is the judge who has first-hand knowledge of the poor. He worked among them, ministered among them, and preached among them. He knows the poor and disabled and unwanted ones of the world. And he loves them. He calls his disciples then and now to minister to them in his name.

1. What feelings do you get when you imagine Christ as judge?
2. How do we read this parable without interpreting it as a call to "works-righteousness"?

What God Requires Restated by Jesus:

Read Micah 6:6-8. In these familiar words from the prophet Micah, we recall God's disappointment with his people. He calls them back to him. And he states simply what he expects them to do and what he cares nothing about. "Justice," "kindness," and walking "humbly with God" are those things to which he calls Israel. How do these relate to the message of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats?

Read the Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12

1. Assign a portion of the Beatitudes to each person.
2. Ask each person to interpret the blessings assigned to them.
3. Ask each to relate those blessings to the parable

Here are a couple of examples from one master teacher (Stanley Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence*) that may help to get the class started:

1) "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (5:7).* The merciful forgive, love enemies and strangers, and care for the 'least ones.' ...Mercy consists of acts that create space for those who have none, space to turn around, to be forgiven, reconciled, and restored to full humanity." (Saunders, 33)

2) "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (5:8).* ..."The sheep embody what it means to be 'pure in heart,' and they will see God, perhaps even among the least ones." (Saunders, 33)

Lessons of Love and Hospitality in the Gospel Parables: How Jesus Leads the Church to Love, Welcome, and Serve Our Neighbors

Devotionals by Rev. Joan Gandy
Based on Parables of Jesus Found in the Gospel of Matthew

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am excited to offer devotional guides for your use during the eight weeks we will be studying Parables of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. These devotionals may be used by one person, two, a family of five or a room full of relatives and friends! The important thing is to use them faithfully, each week. Of course, have a Bible nearby, also!

The devotionals, it is hoped, may deepen your spiritual experience of reading and studying the beautiful parables of Jesus. If you are able, it is helpful to have a particular time of day when you devote yourself to reading and reflecting. Try to create a space where there are few distractions. Seek God's presence by devoting mind, body, and strength to listening for that divine voice to speak to you through Scripture and prayer. And be with one another, taking time to talk about what you are reading and feeling as you devote yourself to this informal worship time.

There are three devotional readings for each of the eight weeks we will study selected parables in Matthew. Choose the same three days each week to share these little devotionals in your family circle -- maybe Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Here is how the devotionals are arranged: In addition to a verse or two from the Gospel to guide your spiritual experience, there also is a verse from Psalms that helps perhaps to expand the meaning of the Gospel reading. The devotional concludes with a short prayer that you may read together. Then it is hoped that you will have your own family prayers together. If family prayers are not a habit you have cultivated, this is a great time to try that helpful practice. So: three times a week, devotionals are provided. Use them on whatever days you wish, but do try to enjoy the devotionals during the week designated if possible.

I leave you with these readings with a prayer that God will be with each one of us as we make this journey through parables together in the weeks ahead.

In Christ's love,

Joan

Week Eight: June 17-23, Matthew 25:31-46
First Devotional

Gospel verse for the day:

"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" (Matthew 25:31).

Psalm verse for the day:

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

Do not miss the little phrase "and all the angels with him" in the opening line of the parable we're studying this week. Imagine the glory of such a scene. It's overwhelming, really. Ponder that image and talk about it with one another. What might you feel upon such an occasion? Many people read this parable and see and hear only the harsh judgment, the division between the ones who did it right and the ones who did it wrong. Do you think that's what Jesus means for us to hear in this parable? There is a word for us here about judgment. There will be judgment. That is a promise. But God in Jesus Christ is calling us to righteousness. If we have become lax in our relationship with God, if our loving deeds toward the needy have become thin and watery, we are called back by Jesus to the righteousness that is ours through him! Think this week about the ways that you can strengthen your relationship with God by serving the people who need the most. God will bless you.

Pray this prayer; then continue with your family's prayers.

Loving God, lead us into the world where there are things you want us to accomplish for you. Take us to places we have not remembered in a long time and remind us of the needs that are there. Give us hearts to serve as Christ has taught us to serve. In his name we pray. Amen.

Notes and Questions

Week Eight, Matthew 25:31-46
Second Devotional

Gospel verse for the day:

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35c).

Psalm verse for the day:

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 118:26a).

Throughout the Bible, we hear God's voice directing us to love the stranger; to welcome those we don't know; to show kindness to one who shows up on our doorstep. Hospitality was a way of life in the Old Testament times. And in the days of Jesus' ministry and the early church, the trend toward hospitality continued -- providing a safe place for a sojourner to sleep, offering food and drink to those who were just passing through. God calls us to the same kind of hospitality, especially in the life of the church. And if we find that strangers don't often show up on our doorstep, we have other ways of welcoming the stranger. We can support missions that give assistance to immigrants nearby or in another country. We can help agencies that provide food and other comforts for families passing through our community. And we can pray for those we may never know but who might be in need of prayers on this very day. Talk among yourselves today about ways you would like to answer God's call to welcome a stranger. Be strong in the Lord. He blesses you every day!

Pray this prayer; then continue with your family's prayers.

Dear God, thank you for all the blessings of this day and every day. We want to be a family who will welcome strangers and care for the people who are unfamiliar with the ways of our community. Help us to find our way to those people who need us. We love you, Lord. We make our prayer in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Notes and Questions

Week Eight, Matthew 25:31-46
Third Devotional

Gospel verse for the day:

"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" (Matthew 25:40).

Psalm verse for the day:

"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2).

We often talk about seeing Christ in the face of someone to whom we are ministering. Maybe you have seen Christ in the face of a sick relative when you have helped to nurse that loved one. Maybe you have seen the light of Christ shining in the eyes of a child to whom you gave a small gift of food or clothing. It is true that we can see the very Lord of Life, our own Savior Christ when we look into the faces of those who are receiving blessings. Perhaps as we go out hoping to bless in Christ's name, we, too, bear the image of Christ within ourselves. Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing -- that is, if we were to take a gift of food to a family and know that they might recognize that it is a gift from Jesus Christ. Talk together as a family about some things you would like to do in the weeks and months ahead to help neighbors you know to be in need. Who are they? What can you do to show loving kindness toward them? Keep the love of Christ shining in your heart so that you might reflect the light of Christ on others as you go out to serve him.

Pray this prayer; then continue with your family's prayers.

Heavenly Father, Lord of All, Mighty Redeemer, Rock and Resting Place: Help us as a family to know you more clearly and love you more dearly. Give us vision to know what we can do to help those in our community who are suffering, whether in mind, body, or spirit. Send us, dear Lord, and use us as instruments of your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Notes and Questions
