

The Sheep and the Goats

May 7, 2017

Matthew 25:31-46

This morning we come to the third parable in Matthew 25, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Once more, you are probably well aware of this parable, but perhaps never associated it with the other two parables which precede it.

Even though, technically, this is not a parable, it fits well into our series. What makes it striking (and problematic) is the extreme nature of the result over the issue involved. Eternal judgment is assigned based on one's treatment of "the least of these brothers of Mine." On a superficial reading, you could conclude that entrance into heaven versus hell would be on the basis of good works toward a particular group of people. Indeed, the parable naturally leads us in that direction. But it need not trouble us that this is so. The parable is clear enough and in context this ought not be seen as the definitive word on the topic. Instead, I see here a connection between what we say and what we do. What we do will reflect who we really are. Our actions reveal our heart, indeed, even when we do it without thinking about it. What we do when we do not think it matters really shows the condition of our heart. And that is the point here. The test is not the issue. The test simply reveals what is inside of us.

Okay, enough set up. Let's just read the text and begin to wrestle with it. READ Matthew 25:31-46.

Main point: Sharing the Father's heart for His own will be noticed and rewarded.

The opposite is also true: failure to share the Father's heart for His own will be noticed and cursed, punished. And the punishment is extreme to the max. There is nothing further apart than the fate of the two groups of people here: eternal blessing or eternal cursing, or as we have learned from other parables: where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, hell, torment, agony, fire, etc. And here, determination is made by looking at how people used their resources to advance the Kingdom. To put the three parables of Matthew 25 together, how they kept their lamps burning is seen by how they utilized their resources for the advancement of the Kingdom. In other words, God wants us to take this usage of resources seriously. He expects us to pause and take stock of ourselves. He expects us to join the cause.

Same three step process.

I. Setting: The Second coming will feature judgment, with the whole being divided into two groups.

As we have been noticing all along, we must not miss the fact that just a few short days before Jesus is to be arrested and put on trial, His attention is not on His death, but on His return. And in this setting, the focus of His return is the judgment which accompanies it. And the issue surrounding judgment is that there will be two groups: in/out. There are only two destinations for mankind: heaven or hell. There is no third option, there is no "ceasing to exist." It will be either eternal life, or eternal death. It will be either joy beyond measure or pain and torment beyond measure.

Now, for me, that alone would make me sit up and take notice. Just hearing that would mean you wouldn't have to convince me that Jesus was serious about this stuff. Judgment is real. The alternatives are stark. And the standards are set. Indeed, it is presented as a black and white issue, an in or out issue, a joy or sorrow situation. This is the judgment.

And then we build upon the lessons of the previous two parables. This judgment will come without warning, without time for correction of any neglect in being prepared. If you are not ready when Jesus comes back, too bad. You have been warned. Then we notice that being prepared will be seen by how we utilize our resources. While we wait for His return, He has entrusted to each one of us a measure of His assets for us to multiply. Again, this is not about making money for the Kingdom, but about using the assets to grow the Kingdom. When He returns, He expects a return on what He has entrusted to us. Right?

And that brings us to this last parable, this last word picture. It seeks to answer the question, "What will He consider a suitable way to invest His resources?" We know that we must put the assets to work, but how? How do we know if we are investing it, or simply burying it for safekeeping?

II. Parable: a shepherd can tell his animals apart. vv. 31-45

Or, if we use the imagery present here of a king, a king can tell those who are his. It is a bit difficult to come up with a point of the parable since it is not really a parable. The imagery of the sheep and the goats actually ends with v.33, right at the beginning of the passage. He then switches to a king settling accounts with his people. So, which one is the parable? What part of the king and his settling of accounts is a word picture versus a reality? This is a bit difficult to solve. Thankfully, the point is quite clear: there will be a separation come judgment.

v.31- When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

Clearly, we start here with the reality. This age will end with the glorious return of Jesus, expressed by Jesus Himself here utilizing the powerfully descriptive, self identifying term from Daniel 7, "Son of Man." He is this Son of Man. He will return, show up unexpectedly with His angels. He will sit on His throne with all the power of God at His disposal. A more magnificent scene cannot be imagined. This most exalted One has come and is ready to act.

32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Everyone will be brought before Him, all those living, dead, Jew, Gentile, male, female. From everywhere on earth, He will gather the people...and He will separate them into groups. It will be as clear and distinct as a shepherd separates two different species of animals, sheep and goats. A goat is not a sheep and a sheep is not a goat. They are different beings. For his own purposes, a shepherd separates them. Notice here that the people are gathered and separated. This is key.

This theme of gathering and separating is found in Scripture from the first scene to the last. We often think of God as gathering, but the truth is that He divides. He distinguishes between people, distinguishes among people, puts walls between people, barriers to coming together as we see in the tower of Babel. But it is also true that the Spirit unites, bringing together people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. So, this gathering and dividing will culminate at the Second coming. It will be like a shepherd separating his sheep from his goats.

33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

One group will take the place of honor, power, and authority, the right hand. The other will take the place of shame, uncleanness, cursing, the left hand. (Think hand you use to shake versus wipe.)

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

So far, so good. He divides and blesses. This first group is blessed with an inheritance (more talents perhaps??), certainly that which has been reserved for them since the beginning, a place, a kingdom under His authority. Notice the Son announces the blessing of the Father. They have already been blessed by the Father. Then we get to the startling part.

35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

He offers as evidence of their identity a list of 6 things they have done for him: gave food, drink, shelter, clothes, health care, and visitation while he was imprisoned. These are the things they did that were noticed by the Father. Notice that the Son speaks here in first person. "You gave me food, you visited me..." They had done them and the King had noticed. But this creates a problem.

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

They don't remember doing it. And they would remember doing such a thing. You would remember visiting Jesus in jail, wouldn't you? Of course you would. But they don't remember anything on the list. Notice how many times this list is repeated in this passage. This tells me not that these are the only qualifying actions, but how important it is to do such things. The repetition provides emphasis of the point.

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

And then we see the part that surprises us. It counted as ministering to the King when they provided such services to "the least of these brothers of mine." Who are the "least of these brothers of mine?" It is possible to go too far in two different directions. Some have said that this refers to missionaries. When you helped missionaries, you helped me. While this is certainly true, it confines the picture too much.

At the other end are those who think of them simply as the poor. While this is better, it is not quite on point. The term here is modified with "brothers of mine." They are the Son's brothers. We know from elsewhere that not everyone is a brother. So, it is not just that they served food at the homeless shelter, but that they advanced the kingdom by helping those brothers who needed it. You have to keep the message of the parable of the talents before you. It is all about advancing, expanding the kingdom. It is not just doing good deeds, but doing them for the sake of the cause.

But what really strikes me about their question and his response is that they did it without even knowing it. They had never made the connection between Him and the least of these. In other words, they were not doing these things and expecting to get credit for it. They did them because it was who they were. It almost seems like it came naturally to them. They just did it. We all know people who do things to get something in return. That is not the case here. They did it but never made the connection that their

actions were expanding the Kingdom. They were the opposite from keeping score, “Lord, when did we do that???” That tells me that this is not a works based salvation. This is heart condition based salvation that shows itself by what you did with what He gave you. And He will notice things you do not notice. Nothing escapes His notice. He knows you didn’t do it to impress the boss. You just did it. Now we flip sides.

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

This is the disturbing part. Just allow these words to fall heavy on you, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Those are heavy words! Depart from God, cursed, eternal fire, devil and his angels. So, it is not just that he will make a distinction, but the distinction could not be further apart. This is the absolute worst thing you could possibly hear. Right? And then we hear the basis on which the designation was made.

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

The same list of six, the opposite observations. I was all of these things, but you did nothing about it.

44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

Again, they will plead ignorance. They do not remember the time when the Son was in prison, or thirsty, or hungry. In other words, they are being accused of neglect, but they don’t remember ever being faced with the scenario. Surely, if their king was any of these things, they would have done something about it.

45 “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Again, he equates their treatment of “the least of these” with their treatment of him. I take the term in the same way here. It is not that there were starving children somewhere in the world and you did nothing about it. That is bad and deserving of our efforts, but beyond the point here. The case here is

that God had entrusted them with talents of resources and they did not use them to help those who God sent across their path. There were brothers in need and they did not help.

Again we are struck by the fact that ignorance was not an excuse. "We didn't know it was you!" "We thought it was just some random person who was broken down by the side of the road." "If we had known it was you, we would have helped."

And again, such excuse making falls on deaf ears. They were guilty, even if they didn't know it at the time. God notices. Judgment has been made. The parable falls heavy, doesn't it?

III. Application: The King's resources were entrusted to you to advance His Kingdom. Use them!

Remember, the King is watching, and He will credit you as if you did it for Him when you do it for the least of His brothers. I think this is extremely good news. This puts all of us on equal footing. All of us have equal opportunity to minister to the Son. He counts it as if we washed His feet when we wash the feet of one of His servants.

But the opposite is true as well. He notices when we do not do anything to assist the least in His kingdom. When we don't help the least, He treats it as if we didn't help Him. And our action or lack of action will show our hearts and provide proof of why we will go where we do come judgment. All of these actions or lack of actions will show themselves on judgment day.

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

There it is, the ultimate distinction. Some will go to eternal punishment, others to eternal life. It is an either/or situation. There is no grey, no halfway, no temporary nature to this. It is one or the other forever. Notice the blessed group is called "the righteous." This does not mean that they are righteous because they did such things, but their doing such things showed them to be blessed of God, made new, given the righteousness they did not have. Because they are His, they are righteous, and you can see it by the way they make good use of their resources for the Kingdom.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will change our perspective on "the least of these".

2) We will take seriously our charge to help them.

3) We will renew our thinking to remember that Jesus equates helping them with helping Him.

4) We will get serious about using our resources to advance the Kingdom. It is an issue of just saying, versus doing. You always live out what you believe.

5) We will remember that Judgment is real and coming (soon).