



The Sheep & Goats

Matt. 25:31-46

(Expanded Sermon Notes)

This passage is often described as a parable, but Jesus does not use this term for it. This, of course, is not decisive (he does not describe the story of the talents as a parable either, but most of us are happy to refer to it in this way). But this concluding part of the discourse reads like a description of what will happen on Judgment Day rather than like another parable. It puts strong emphasis on the truth that, ultimately, every person on earth will be called upon to account for his or her use of the opportunities of service experienced through life.⁵⁰ Uniquely, this teaching comes at the end of Jesus' life and ministry and during the events of the passion week. Jesus is giving his disciples final preparation for post-resurrection life. Of course, we know that they don't know that yet, and won't fully understand until Pentecost (Acts 2). Like many of the parables we've studied, it can be easy to get lost in the details of this parable... sheep, goats, Jesus' return, etc. As before, we want to resist the temptation to get distracted by those details and miss the critical point Jesus is trying to make. This parable is all about the importance of obedience and what it reflects about our relationship with God. When we **know** him and are **known** by him, we will be about his business. When we only have an intellectual relationship with God, we don't truly know him, aren't known by him, and thus our lives show that because we aren't about his business. Jesus is giving a stark warning to a highly religious society that you can find religion and miss God altogether. Yes, Jesus sounds firm, but reality is firm. And he loves us so much that he doesn't want us to miss out on the with-God life. We can have confidence that we know God and are known by God when we are about his business. Simply, **changed people live changed lives.**

1. Sheep and Goats... What's the difference?

- a. Role of shepherds? → Explanations of the sheep and goats imagery.
 - i. Jesus is using a very common first-century image here.
 - 1. **These were the most common of the smaller domestic animals, and of the two *the sheep* were prized the more highly. The two groups of animals would graze together, but in due course *the shepherd* would separate them out.**¹
 - 2. It is possible that they would be separated for climate reasons. - Some suggest that sheep and goats were separated each night because goats were more vulnerable to the cold and would need more protection.
 - a. Not a ton of real evidence for this theory.
 - 3. Dalman suggests that the division took place to separate young males for slaughter.
 - 4. Others suggest that it is the separation of the ewes for milking.
 - ii. In the end, no reason is given for the separation, and the text does not say that such a separation takes place each night. The reason for the separation does not impact interpretation.²
 - 1. What is most clear is that this was an image and a process that Jesus' audience would have innately understood.
 - a. **Caution** – We do not want to get distracted by the details of the sheep and goats and either read too much into the image or miss the real point of the parable altogether.
- b. **The power of the image.**
 - i. The power of the image is not even in the type of animals used. (Sheep & Goats)
 - 1. Sheep likely would have been more valuable, but they were both valuable.
 - 2. **Goats, do not carry a negative connotation in ancient Palestine;** both sheep and goats were valued and were pastured together. **The analogy is built on the separation of right and left, not on the character or valuation of goats,** even if sheep would have been valued more highly. Nothing cultural prepares the reader for the strong condemnation of the goats.
 - ii. **The power of the image is in the separation.**
 - 1. It accords with this that *the sheep* are on *his right* and *the goats* on *his left*, for the right-hand side was generally seen as the favored side; **for example, to be at the ruler's right hand was to be in the place of highest honor the ruler could give.**³
 - 2. Right and left are traditionally, but not necessarily (cf. 20:21, 23), associated with positive and negative respectively.⁴
- c. This passage in the larger passage.
 - i. **Up to this point in the discourse Jesus has been teaching about the responsibility of disciples and, with the emphasis on being ready for the coming of the Lord, implying the thought of judgment.** But now there is explicit treatment of the judgment of the

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 635–636.

² Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 550–551.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 635–636.

⁴ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 550–551.

nations. Not only is the concept of judgment made explicit but the horizon is extended worldwide.

1. **Jesus makes it clear that on Judgment Day there are going to be some surprises.**⁵
- ii. **Wise and foolish maidens** – The value of expectancy.
 1. 5 maidens were prepared and waited expectantly for the groom's arrival. 5 were not prepared and missed out on the celebration.
 - a. ¹² **But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.'** (cf. 25:12)
 2. We are to live lives of active expectancy both for Jesus' return and for God to work in our midst.
- iii. **Talents and Pounds** – Complacency is a thief.
 1. Complacency robs us of the joy of being about our Father's business.
 - a. The servants the knew their master's heart were brought into the joy of relationship.
 - b. **His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'** (cf. 25:23)
- d. This is less of a parable and more of an application.
 - i. **This passage is often described as a parable, but Jesus does not use this term for it.**
This, of course, is not decisive (he does not describe the story of the talents as a parable either, but most of us are happy to refer to it in this way). But this concluding part of the discourse reads like a description of what will happen on Judgment Day rather than like another parable. It puts strong emphasis on the truth that ultimately every person on earth will be called upon to account for his or her use of the opportunities of service experienced through life.⁵⁰
 - ii. It is worth reflecting that this is Jesus' last teaching to his disciples in this Gospel; Matthew proceeds from this to the story of the passion. He leaves with his followers the teaching that in daily life the way they treat the lowly, the needy, and the unimportant is of the greatest significance. Not for them is it to flatter the great and to seek to ingratiate themselves with the wealthy and the powerful in this world. They will serve their Master when they serve "the least of these."⁶
- iii. **Jesus wants to make it clear changed people live changed lives.**
 1. It is highly possible to find religion and completely miss out on a relationship with God.

2. Jesus, why are you so uptight?

- a. **Jesus does not mince words here, and that is a hard pill to swallow in our modern sensibilities.**
 - i. We like the cultural picture of Jesus as tender, meek, mild, and compassionate.
 1. **Yes, he is those things, but what makes those things powerfully striking is because he is also a sovereign judge.**
 - ii. Jesus is not just the loving savior, but he is also the righteous judge.
 1. Again, he must be both, or he cannot be either.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 633–634.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 641.

2. If he doesn't have the power and authority to judge, he doesn't not have the ability to save.
 - a. **Imagine if you stood before a judge who had all the trappings of the court, you plead your case, the judge is engaged with you and reads their judgement... you are innocent. → You'd be relived, exuberant, and delighted.**
 - b. **Then, the judge states they don't actually have the authority to uphold that verdict, and all of this was for nothing. → You would feel angry, betrayed, and despondent.**
 3. Jesus has the authority to judge and, with that, the ability to save.
 - a. **V. 46 - The net result of the elimination of the teaching of eternal punishment from the Bible would be the loss of the Gospel.⁷**
- iii. **And, Jesus has the authority to judge all people, in all places, and from all time.**
1. That *all the nations* will come before him makes it clear that Jesus is speaking of the final judgment of the whole race. In the end each of us must stand before Jesus to give account of what we have done. He does not go into detail, but says that he will "separate them from one another."⁸
- b. **Caution:** We need to avoid making this about legalism by forgetting the rest of the Scriptures teaching on grace.
- i. This parable is not about the process of salvation. → Salvation is a gift of grace by faith.
 1. **V. 34 - Something that is inherited comes to one as a gift, not as the result of one's own earnings, and that may be why the word is used of the life of the world to come.**
 2. What they are to inherit is *the kingdom*, which signifies a sure and accepted place in the kingdom of God rather than that they are to be kings themselves (they are "made" a kingdom, Rev. 1:6, where we find that they are also "priests"). **And the kingdom they will inherit is no afterthought, but one "prepared for you from the foundation⁶⁵ of the world." This strong expression brings out the truth that this has always been in the plan of God.⁹**
 3. This statement is an in-text refutation of works-based salvation. I.e., Our inclusion and receiving of eternal life is a gift from the Father.
 - ii. **It is about the about the impact of salvation on your life.**
 1. If you have been changed by God's grace, are now a child of the Kingdom, you will have a changed and an increasingly changed Kingdom perspective.

3. Changed lives begin with a changed perspective.

- a. **Yes, the separation is and should be striking for us. → We need to engage that feeling.**
 - i. **Wrong** – because we live in a production / performance-oriented culture, we tend to go to the actions of the two groups.
 1. One did the right action and was accepted.
 2. One did the wrong action and was denied.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 641.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 635–636.

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 636–637.

- a. This is not Jesus' point and not how we should view the two groups.
- ii. **Right** – Those who were accepted had the right perspective on Jesus.
 - 1. And, consequently, because they had the right perspective, they acted accordingly to the heart of Jesus.
 - a. **Obedience always follows relationship in the gospel.**
 - b. 1 Jn. 2:6 - **whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.**
 - c. **Key** - Abide is a word of remaining relationship.
- iii. So, what perspective did each group have?
- b. **Those who served others...** we serve because we have been served by **you**.
 - i. They were about Jesus' business because they had Jesus' perspective.
 - ii. They had Jesus' perspective, because they knew Jesus and are known by Jesus.
 - i. **The blessing of obedience is the assurance or confidence that it gives us in our relationship with God.**
 - 1. It reminds us that we are unified with him.
 - 2. That we are safe and secure in him now and in the future.
 - 3. That we are cared for by him. → Again, if he cares for us now, how much better with his care be in the age to come?
 - ii. The real beauty of obedience is the intimacy it fosters in our relationship with our Father in Heaven. Skye Jethani notes this reality in his summarizing of the Prodigal Son; he says,
 - 1. **Like the younger son, we often build our identities around what we receive from God. Or like the older son, we find our value in how we serve God. A great deal of effort is expended in faith communities trying to transform people from younger sons into older sons. But this is a fool's errand, because what mattered most to the father was neither the younger son's disobedience nor the older son's obedience, but having his sons with him. And so it is with our Heavenly Father. Reversing the rebellion of Eden and restoring what was lost can only be accomplished when we learn that at the center of God's heart is having his children with him.¹⁰**
 - iii. Their identity had been changed, and so it was common or second-nature to act out of that new identity.
- c. **Those who were looking specifically for the savior...** we want to serve **you**.
 - i. This sounds righteous, pious, and preferred.
 - 1. **It is actually selfish and self-centered.** → Why?
 - a. Because it places them at the center of defining what is most valuable or purposeful in their identity.
 - b. I.e., They are the authors of their identity. → This is an act of rebellion that says, "I know best."
 - 2. And, ultimately they are asking the wrong question, "What more do I need to do for you?"
 - a. I.e., If I do the right things you will accept me.
 - i. **The gospel says, once you are accepted, you will want to do the right things because you have been abundantly loved.**
- d. **We can see Jesus clearly. (Jn. 1:14-18)**
 - i. The Father wants us to see Jesus clearly.

¹⁰ Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the way you relate to God* (2011), p. 95.

1. This is an important reminder.
 2. ¹⁴ **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.** ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.
- ii. My sheep know my voice...
1. ²⁷ **My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.** ²⁸ **I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.** ²⁹ **My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.** ³⁰ **I and the Father are one.”** (Jn. 10:27-30)
 2. They know the shepherd’s voice and they follow him.
 - a. When we know Jesus, it gives us a changed perspective, and with a changed perspective comes changed behavior.

4. Changed perspectives lead to changed behavior.

- a. When we live with a changed perspective it comes out through our behavior.
 - i. I.e., Behavior corresponds to belief.
 - ii. Consider this... I told you I was...
 1. A cheeseburger, an astronaut, a published author, or a fry-cook
 2. No matter what I claimed, you would demand the evidence.
 - iii. I can’t just say I am a Christian, and then not live as one.
 1. My actions will always reveal my foundations convictions and perspectives.
- b. **Do you know me? → The question of relational intimacy.**
 - i. Intellectual vs. Heart
 1. Intellectual knowledge – I can pass a test through regurgitation of facts.
 - a. I’ve heard it said that we (western Christians) are educated beyond our obedience.
 2. Heart knowledge – I intimately know you, your heart, and motives, and I am reciprocally known by you.
 - ii. We have confidence that we know Jesus through our obedience to his mission.
 1. Again, this is an overflow or an outpouring of our identity.
 - a. Obedience always follows relationship in the gospel.
- c. **So what am I to think about the list of actions Jesus references? →** He goes on to speak of some of the things they have done in their lives on this earth. Four times this list is repeated in this and the following verses (it “is clearly meant to be remembered as a guide to practical discipleship,” France). We should not understand this in the sense that these good works have earned them their salvation; grace is as important throughout this Gospel as anywhere in the New Testament. Jesus is not saying that these are people whose good lives have earned them salvation as their right. He is saying that God has blessed them and brought them into his

kingdom, and he proceeds to cite evidence that shows that they do in fact belong in that kingdom.¹¹

- i. These actions literally? → Yes and no.
 1. This is another interpretive mistake. To work for the gospel, means to do these things literally. I.e., Jesus is being prescriptive.
- ii. Jesus is actually being descriptive. → He is giving shape to the virtue of hospitality.
 1. The Old Testament knows of a man who prepared to spend the night in the town square (Judg. 19:15; cf. Job 31:32); thus a *stranger* could not rely on facilities for temporary lodgings. **If he was not to spend the night in the open air, someone would have to take him into a private home.**
 2. **This was done among the Christians (Acts 10:23; Heb. 13:2, etc.), who seem to have taken the duty of hospitality very seriously.** Bonnard takes the word to mean exiles from their own country and thus people without rights and without protection. These, too, would be people who were very needy and obvious candidates for the kind of help that the King now praises. So now Jesus commends those who *welcomed* him when he was in need of a place. **They offered him hospitality when he needed it.**¹²
- iii. **Hospitality requires an others-centered love.**
 1. I.e., You cannot truly be hospitable and be selfish at the same time.
 2. Application – How is hospitality expanded? What does hospitality look like today?
 - a. Patience
 - b. Grace
 - c. Dignity
 - d. Acts of compassion
 3. **Caution** – In an age of social media and 24-hr news coverage, we can feel as if we need to or are required to respond physically and emotionally to every tragedy. This is a unique feature of the last 30 years and would have been a foreign concept to Jesus' audience. We do not have the physical, financial, or emotional capacity to respond to every need or tragedy.
- d. **Questions for reflection:**
 - i. Do I know Jesus, or know about Jesus? → Am I abiding with him?
 - ii. How am I growing in my obedience, and what is my motivation?
 - iii. Am I more inclined towards action or intellect?
 1. I.e., Do I believe it is more important to do the right things or believe the right things?
 - iv. Do I look for ways to serve others out of a sense of abundant love or religious performance?

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 637.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 638.