

Ministering Mightily

Devotional Reading: Matthew 25:14-15, 19-30

Background Scripture: Matthew 25

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

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. 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.’

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?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

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. 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.’

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?’

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

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

Key Text

“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. 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,” —Matthew 25:34-35

Introduction

A. Not for the World

A businessman traveled to India to represent his company at an important meeting. After the day's sessions ended, the man walked through a part of the city where lepers were being cared for. He watched as a woman tenderly washed the feet of an older man suffering from leprosy. The businessman watched for a moment, shook his head, and then said, with disdain, "Miss, I wouldn't do that for the world." Without looking up, the woman replied, "Mister, for the world, I wouldn't do it either."

To minister to others in Jesus' name often means going where most others would not. Those who do so may wonder at times whether their efforts are significant. Today's lesson reveals the answer.

B. Lesson Context

The setting of our lesson is during a busy day of teaching during the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry. As part of his "Olivet Discourse" of Matthew 24:3–25:46, Jesus taught the truth of today's lesson, probably on Wednesday of what is often called Passion Week.

The Olivet Discourse was set in motion when the disciples asked Jesus about the sign of his coming and of the end of the world (Matthew 24:3). Jesus began his reply by warning against deceptive signs and predictions of persecution (24:4–26). Then he shifted to specifying genuine signs (24:27–35). This was followed immediately by a lengthy challenge to be ready to expect the unexpected (24:36–51).

Jesus went on to illustrate with two parables all that he had been saying: the parable of the 10 virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) and the parable of the bags of gold (25:14–30; in Luke 19:12–27 this is the parable of minas).

The chapter closes with a dramatic picture of the final judgment—today's lesson of Matthew 25:31–46. Some students think this is a parable, while others do not. Parables usually compare something earthly to "the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:24, 31–34; 25:1, 14; etc.), but Matthew 25:31–46 does not have this feature. The only comparison that could result in this being consid-

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 3: Life in God's Kingdom

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Jesus' description of what will happen at the final judgment.
2. Contrast the behavior of the "sheep" with that of the "goats."
3. Write a plan to serve Jesus in the week ahead as the "sheep" do.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Not for the World
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Judge (Matthew 25:31–33)

- A. Glorious Moment (v. 31)
- B. Great Gathering (vv. 32–33)
"Not Our Thing"

II. The Sheep (Matthew 25:34–40)

- A. Invitation (v. 34)
Our Planning and His
- B. Explanation (vv. 35–36)
- C. Consternation (vv. 37–39)
- D. Commendation (v. 40)

III. The Goats (Matthew 25:41–46)

- A. Rejection (v. 41)
- B. Explanation (vv. 42–43)
- C. Consternation (v. 44)
- D. Condemnation (vv. 45–46)

Conclusion

- A. Three Functions
- B. Where's Jesus?
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

ered a parable is Matthew 25:32, where the final judgment is compared with a shepherd's separation of "sheep" from "goats." However, this fits better the idea of metaphor (figurative or symbolic language) rather than a parable.

I. The Judge

(Matthew 25:31-33)

A. Glorious Moment (v. 31)

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

With this declaration, Jesus was still answering the disciples' question in Matthew 24:3: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" The word *when* reinforces the certainty of Jesus' return (compare Matthew 16:27). That word also anticipates a time factor as part of the declaration. But during Jesus' earthly ministry, no one except God the Father knew the specific day of Jesus' return (24:36). The phrase *Son of Man*, for its part, confirms Jesus will be the one returning since that phrase is his frequent self-designation (examples: 9:6; 16:13; 20:18; compare Daniel 7:13).

It is instructive to contrast the circumstances of Jesus' first coming (advent) with those of his second coming. The first time, in Bethlehem, he came as a baby born under very modest conditions (see lesson 4). His return will be anything but ordinary; he will come *in his glory*, and he will be seated upon *his glorious throne*. A "great company of the heavenly host" was present to herald Jesus' first coming, announcing his birth to shepherds near Bethlehem with the words "Glory to God in the highest heaven" (Luke 2:13-14; see lesson 4). When Jesus returns, he will be accompanied by not only *all the angels*, but also by "his holy ones"—godly people who have died (1 Thessalonians 3:13; Jude 14).

What Do You Think?

What do you have to do in order to be ready for the return of Christ the King?

Digging Deeper

If the King were to return today, how would he evaluate your faith?

B. Great Gathering (vv. 32-33)

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."

At Jesus' first coming, the angels spoke of good news to "all the people" (Luke 2:10); at his return, it will be good news to some but bad news to others as everyone is *gathered before him*. While other passages in the Bible emphasize that every person must give a personal, individual account before Jesus (examples: Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10), the focus in the verse before us is on *all the nations* appearing before him.

In the first century, many Jewish people believed that when the Messiah arrived, he would take control over powerful nations like the Roman Empire, as this verse describes. The purpose of Jesus' first coming, however, was "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus' intent was and is for all nations to receive the message of this good news (Matthew 28:19-20). His second coming will bring all nations (both ancient and modern) under the power of his mighty hand and the authority of his flawless judgment.

Judgment will result in separation, as one group is distinguished from another. Separation language is very important in the New Testament, and it always signals an evaluation of some kind for categorizing things, behavior, or people themselves. These distinctions are intended to be helpful (example: 2 Corinthians 6:17), but some are counterproductive (example: Galatians 2:12). Other key verses in Matthew regarding eternal separation are 13:40-43, 49-50.

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

To be at a ruler's *right* was to be in the place of approval and acceptance (compare Psalm 110:1 [quoted in Hebrews 1:13]; Acts 7:55-56). It is in this prominent position that *the sheep* are placed. Note that Jesus describes only two groups. When he carries out his judgment at this gathering, there will be no middle ground, no "provisional sheep." Although we tend to view others in shades of gray, Jesus will be able to pronounce judgment clearly and decisively.

“Not Our Thing”

We spent the entire day sorting out bent nails from straight ones. My grandfather, who grew up during the Great Depression, believed in not wasting anything that could have a later use. That’s why he gave me and my cousins large buckets filled with nails to sort. Some were bent and could not be reused; others were straight and still usable. We viewed the task as “not our thing,” and it showed in our efforts. After sorting for a while, the nails all seemed to look alike.

We are called to use specific evaluations in the church (example: 1 Corinthians 5). As we do, we are careful to recognize a boundary: those processes do not put us in the place of Jesus as the ultimate judge. We cannot infallibly see the motives in a person’s heart, but he can (Luke 5:22; 6:8; John 2:25). Today’s lesson reminds us that the Son of Man is the one who will gather all the nations and distinguish between the righteous (sheep) and the unrighteous (goats). This is a responsibility that Jesus does not delegate; it is “not our thing.”

What *is* our thing, however, is to be aware of the state of our own heart. How can we ensure that proper, godly motives stand behind our works of service to Jesus? —J. M.

II. The Sheep

(Matthew 25:34-40)

A. Invitation (v. 34)

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.’

Speaking as *the King*, Jesus’ first pronouncement is *to those on his right*, the sheep of the analogy. Their invitation to *take* their *inheritance* is an invitation to enter Heaven. The fact that this kingdom has been ready for them *since the creation of the world* alludes to the truth of Genesis 1:1.

Even now, Christians belong to the kingdom of Jesus, having been delivered from the realm of spiritual darkness (Colossians 1:13). We wait for the ultimate consummation of that kingdom, even as Paul did (2 Timothy 4:18).

What Do You Think?

What significance do you see in the statement that the kingdom was “prepared for you since the creation of the world”?

Digging Deeper

How would you describe the joys of this kingdom to someone who had never before heard this good news?

Our Planning and His

When our kids were younger, we enjoyed traveling but could not afford fancy accommodations. So, instead, we would search for campgrounds to stay overnight. One day, we traveled to Chicago to see the city and enjoy authentic Chicago-style pizza. When the night came, we drove around looking for a campground to no avail. When I asked convenience store employees for directions to the nearest place to camp, I was met with confused looks. Therefore, we spent the night sleeping in the car.

That experience became a pivotal moment in our marriage. My wife, a meticulous planner, took charge of all travel arrangements from that point forward!

Whether or not we were born with “the planning gene,” we can rest in the assurance of God being the master planner. God had planned for the inbreaking of his kingdom, salvation, and the final judgment, all in advance. One key difference between God’s planning and ours is that God is omniscient (all-knowing). He can see both the beginning and the end. There are no unforeseen circumstances to him. He is never caught off guard like we might be in our planning. How should that fact influence your planning? Before answering too quickly, read James 4:13-17. —J. M.

B. Explanation (vv. 35-36)

35-36. “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, 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.”

The favorable verdict resulted from six ways the favored helped the king and met his needs. Their conduct is reminiscent of that in the parable about the Samaritan who met the needs of someone after others had merely passed by (Luke 10:30-34).

Such a heavy emphasis on doing good to others may indicate that Judgment Day will be a time for counting up such deeds and calculating our “final score.” So how does Jesus’ commendation of good works here square with the biblical teaching on salvation by grace? In truth, salvation encompasses both divine initiative and human response. Salvation by God’s grace results in appropriate good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). We are not saved *by* works, but we are saved *for* works—a point James makes especially clear (James 2:14-26).



Visual for Lesson 13. *Have this visual on display as you review the discussion questions associated with Matthew 25:35-36.*

What Do You Think?

What are specific ways our congregation can address the six needs of people given in this story?

Digging Deeper

What education or training might your congregation need to address these needs effectively?

C. Consternation (vv. 37-39)

37-38. “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?’

Those designated as “sheep” are also *the righteous*. They will express their confusion at being told they were serving Jesus the King during their acts of mercy. They had seen themselves as meeting the needs of ordinary people, not Jesus. When had they ever encountered Jesus during such times?

39. “When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

The last act of mercy mentioned is the most fascinating of all. Prisons in the ancient world were not places of long-term incarceration as they are today. Prisons back then were places of short-term custody where perpetrators awaited either (1) corporal punishment such as flogging and then

release or (2) execution. At what point would the righteous sheep ever have encountered King Jesus in such a place, especially after his ascension (Acts 1:9)? The answer comes next.

D. Commendation (v. 40)

40. “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Here is the answer to the sheep’s bewilderment. Whatever the sheep have done to help even *the least of these brothers and sisters*, they have done it to the greatest of all, King Jesus. The phrase *brothers and sisters of mine* indicates Christians—those who have accepted the kingship of Jesus (compare John 1:12-13; Hebrews 2:11). This does not mean, however, that we have the freedom to ignore the needs of those who are not followers of Jesus (compare Proverbs 3:27; 25:21-22; Matthew 5:45; Galatians 6:10). Throughout Jesus’ life, the least and lowliest of the people in his surroundings received special attention.

At this point in our reading of the text, some may ask, “If Jesus is providing these details about the final judgment, will we even raise such questions as the sheep are pictured as asking since we already know what the answer is?” Perhaps the element of surprise will occur as each of us individually comes before Jesus to be judged (2 Corinthians 5:10). There, we will see the true impact of our service to others. We likely will be astonished

to discover the occasions when we were serving Jesus and did not realize it.

What Do You Think?

How might our faith be strengthened if we think of our ministry to others as being directed to Jesus himself?

Digging Deeper

What are some “roadblocks” that prevent you from ministering to others, and how will you address these things?

III. The Goats

(Matthew 25:41-46)

A. Rejection (v. 41)

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.’

Next, Jesus will address the goats, those *on his left*. Note how the command to this group is exactly the opposite of that given to the group on Jesus’ right. The sheep will be invited to “come”; the goats will be ordered to *depart*. The sheep will be called “blessed”; the goats will be called *cursed*. One group will inherit a kingdom; the other will be sent *into eternal fire*.

Unlike the sheep, the goats won’t be sent to a place that has been prepared just for them. Instead, the goats are to be sent to the place *prepared for the devil and his angels* (compare Revelation 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

B. Explanation (vv. 42-43)

42-43. “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me

How to Say It

Corinthians	Ko- <i>rin</i> -thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
omniscient	ahm- <i>nish</i> -unt.
Pontius Pilate	Pon-shus or Pon-ti-us <i>Pie</i> -lut.
propitiation	pro- <i>pih</i> -she-ay-shun.
Samaritan	Suh- <i>mare</i> -uh-tun.

nothing to drink, 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.’

King Jesus will confront the goats with the fact of having faced the same groups in need that the sheep faced. But whereas the sheep are pictured as having helped people in need, the goats chose to ignore those people. It is rather sobering to consider that the goats are not accused of doing anything evil—like murder, adultery, or theft. Rather, they are condemned for doing nothing. They had opportunities to meet needs, just as the sheep had. But the goats chose to look the other way. Sins of commission and sins of omission can both be sins (James 4:17)!

C. Consternation (v. 44)

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?’

The goats will react with the same surprise that the sheep exhibited. The sheep will be astonished to be considered as having helped Jesus when they helped those in need; the goats no doubt will reason that had they realized the danger of their lack of action, they would have been more than eager to help. However, such logic is flawed, as it is circular. The goats will have no excuse (compare 1 John 3:17).

D. Condemnation (vv. 45-46)

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

The failure of the goats to address the needs of others is a failure to serve Jesus (compare James 4:17). This is an image reversed from that of the sheep.

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

It is virtually impossible to imagine a greater contrast between the *eternal punishment* that awaits the goats and the *eternal life* that awaits the sheep (compare Galatians 6:8-10). The goats’ endless punishment will be where “the fire is not

quenched” (Mark 9:48, quoting Isaiah 66:24). Hell is a place of unspeakable torment.

In contrast, eternal life awaits those numbered among the sheep (compare and contrast Daniel 12:2; John 5:29). Nothing is said in today’s passage about this life other than it is eternal. But other portions of Scripture provide insights concerning it. The book of Revelation describes a heavenly city, eternally bright, inhabited by only the redeemed. It is a place where “the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4)—everything associated with a sin-cursed, broken world. God will be with his people, and they will be with him—forever.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to the claim that a loving God would not allow a person to experience everlasting punishment?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures come to mind to support your answer?

Conclusion

A. Three Functions

In today’s passage, Jesus holds three positions: the *king* on his glorious throne (Matthew 25:31, 34), a *shepherd* dividing sheep from goats, and the *judge* determining the eternal destinies of those gathered before him. We must keep in mind the unique manner in which Jesus exercised each of these roles. He is no ordinary king, shepherd, or judge.

King. Pontius Pilate brought Jesus before the crowd and proclaimed sarcastically, “Here is your king” (John 19:14). Pilate spoke better than he knew: Jesus was indeed a king, but not one of this world (6:15; 18:36; Revelation 17:14; 19:16). We want to stand confidently before King Jesus on Judgment Day in anticipation of inheriting the kingdom. Therefore, we must realize that meeting the needs of others means serving our king.

Shepherd. When Jesus declared, “I am the good shepherd” in John 10:11, he said, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Jesus’ death provided an atonement (propitiation) for the sins of the entire world (1 John 2:2). But what has been

provided must be accepted in order to be counted among the sheep under his care.

Judge. The one who said “I pass judgment on no one” during his earthly ministry (John 8:15) becomes the ultimate judge at his return—one before whom all must appear (Matthew 16:27; John 5:22-23; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

B. Where’s Jesus?

We live in a time and culture when the world seems to treat the Christian faith with contempt. Such an abrasive atmosphere is predicted in 2 Peter 3:3-4: “In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this ‘coming’ he promised?’” Even Christians might wonder *Where’s Jesus?* in times of despair.

Answering that question may be compared somewhat to the *Where’s Waldo?* books that have fascinated children. The books contain illustrations depicting crowds engaged in various activities at specific locations. The reader is challenged to find “Waldo” somewhere in the crowd. The key to doing so lies in Waldo’s outward appearance: he can be found if one first knows how he can be recognized. Jesus makes it clear in today’s passage that whenever we serve anyone in need, we are serving him. Christians often see themselves as being the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus to other people, and rightly so. But Jesus is also seen in the needs of others around us. Do you have eyes to “see him” in such situations?

C. Prayer

Father, there is so much brokenness and need in our world. Refresh and revive us when we feel overwhelmed. Help us not to become callous or indifferent to the hurting people around us. Clear up our spiritual vision so that we see not only others through the eyes of Jesus but also ourselves serving Jesus as we respond to needs. May we never forget that faith without works is still dead. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Jesus is closer than we realize.