

Matthew 25:31-46 The separating shepherd

It's not just **technology** that has totally changed in our society in the last couple of generations. If you go back much more than, I guess, 20 years or so, it was just generally accepted by the majority of people that marriage *just was* something for one man and one woman - even if the permanence of that arrangement was slowly eroding. I don't really need to tell you that has almost totally been changed in the thinking of a typical teenager nowadays.

But if you start looking back a few centuries instead of a few decades, you get some even more profound changes. Not that I know for sure the precise numbers, but if it's much more than 300 or so years, most people in this country probably believed in God in some form. Mostly in some vague approximation to the God of the Bible. And - whether they lived entirely consistently with this notion or not - they would generally have accepted that every human being was individually responsible to him.

The so-called "Apostles' Creed" speaks of Jesus being ...

*Seated at the right hand of the Father
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead*

("quick" there meaning "alive"). But over the latest few centuries, the notion of there *actually* being a God, who is *actually* well described in the Bible, and who is *actually* going to intervene at some point in human history in that decisive kind of way, has just slowly fuzzied away.

And the idea of a judgement, of the kind that Jesus describes in the words we've just read ... that's something that even many Christians nowadays feel more than a little uncomfortable about. Possibly we're even a bit ashamed about feeling we have to believe it. Maybe we would just prefer to skip to the next chapter.

Or maybe, as some people do when they come to this passage, we might make the mistake of thinking that this is just Jesus telling his disciples to be good neighbours - and if someone does that, they'll be fine, irrespective of what they do or don't actually believe.

Folks, no doubt about it, this is an uncomfortable passage we've got in front of us today. But we need to look at it as rigorously as any other passage. And if we find ourselves chafing at what Jesus plainly does say here, we probably need to challenge ourselves about whether we are just being, as you've probably seen it paraphrased ...

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, ...

(Romans 12:2, J B Phillips translation)

Folks, let's just pause and make that our prayer before we start here today.

...

The judge and the judged
The sheep and the goats

- **The judge and the judged**

Just before we dive straight in, note where we are in Matthew's Gospel. Turn over into the next chapter, and you find this:

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."

(Matthew 26:1-2)

So at the end of Matthew 25, we've got the last bit of teaching that Matthew has included in his account of Jesus' life. That seems to fit, really. To me, those last words of the chapter are immensely solemn, even if it finishes with the words "eternal life". This is like that rare musical performance that is so moving that not even the most rabid fan will dare to start clapping and break the silence as the echoes of those last notes fade.

"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

(Matthew 25:46)

And here we are, also, approaching that most solemn moment in Jesus' life. So it will be tomorrow night, or maybe the night after, Gethsemane, the betrayal, and the kangaroo court, all of that. That whole process would start its awful, unavoidable course. We are approaching that moment when the history of the whole world hangs in the balance, and the sun will refuse to shine as the one who ...

... upholds the universe by the word of his power.

(Hebrews 1:3)

bows his head ...

... to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:8)

But look, this isn't the end. And Jesus knows it isn't. See what he says here.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, ...”

(Matthew 25:31)

That’s what Jesus has been teaching about, over the last couple of chapters, in response to his disciples’ question. And although the “when” there could actually be translated as “whenever”, the *event* is sure, even if Jesus does not appear to have a specific time in mind. So he is seeing beyond the cross. Just, also, as he had been teaching his disciples for some time now:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

But *when* he is raised, and when he returns, it will be different for that “Son of Man”. It used to be a term of deliberate ambiguity. It *could* mean that strange potent being spoken of in the book of Daniel, or it *could* just mean “human being”. That title is like a disguise scattered with question marks. But the disguise will be discarded. Did you notice a change as we went through the passage? Jesus starts out talking about “the Son of Man” ... but later, it’s ...

“Then the King will say ...”

(Matthew 25:34)

And that disguise starts to peel away as Jesus introduces this whole section. He has been announcing the Kingdom of Heaven, throughout his ministry. Now he clearly stakes his claim as the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. Who must have, therefore, a throne, and attendants:

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

(Matthew 25:31)

And twice in that verse, not the coming humiliation of the cross, but *glory*. Now glory, that’s OK. That’s what you expect from a king. The world could maybe be happy with that. But there is an even more intrusive claim that Jesus makes now. He is not just coming as King. He is coming as *judge*.

“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

(Matthew 25:32)

It’s lovely to think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. That’s normally a wonderful and comforting picture:

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

(John 10:10-11)

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,”

(John 10:14)

Even if this was too much for the Jews, we love this inclusiveness:

“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

(John 10:16)

But a shepherd who also separates, who distinguishes between sheep and goats ... now that is not so welcome.

“Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

(Matthew 25:32)

No, we can't hide from this. He will not just separate *nations* from one another, but every human being from every nation will pass before him, and be recognised as either one thing or the other, sheep or goat.

It's strange, though. We have an inbuilt sense - even if it's imperfectly tuned - for justice. We look at what's happening around the globe and - unless you're convinced by the Russian propaganda - we conclude that Russia's incursion into **Ukraine** is *wrong*.

We hear not uncommonly of people who have committed dire crimes, but seem to be given a ridiculously short prison sentence - or even let off with a metaphorical “slap on the wrists”. We try to make, as Gilbert and Sullivan wrote in one of their operettas from some time back, **the punishment fit the crime**. Even though we know it's probably impossible to work out what amount of white-collar crime is on a par with old-fashioned brutal thuggery. But we hear it is a cry of joy and relief to know that this is a rhetorical question which demands the answer Yes:

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

(Genesis 18:25)

We *want* justice ... and yet we are somehow a bit less happy about a shepherd - even the Good Shepherd - being also the judge. Because, the way Jesus relates this, he is not “the judge” in an abstract and theoretical sense. It is not just that he is the judge. It is that he judges. There are, as we said a moment ago, **the judge and the judged**.

And that judgement reveals the distinction between ...

- **The sheep and the goats**

It's odd, but I haven't seen this in any of the books I've been reading this week, but I had always thought that there was something here that slips underneath our British radar. Here in this country, **sheep and goats** look very different. But I had heard that the animals as they were back in Judea and Galilee in Jesus' day didn't just look rather different from our modern animals, but looked far more like each other. So separating them really was a very skilled task. Your average 21st-century Brit would probably be totally at a loss.

And maybe we need to remember that the task is not necessarily even going to be easy for *us*. The theme of eventual judgement has already been heard more than once in Matthew's Gospel. Remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds?

“Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

(Matthew 13:30)

And part of the imagery of that parable is that the weeds - specifically “tares”, you might have heard that word, too - looked very similar to wheat in the early stages, and grew very closely around its roots, too.

But eventual separation of wheat and tares, and, here, of sheep and goats, that's what Jesus does. Remember his claim about his own sheep?

“I know my own ...,”

(John 10:14)

And that is comfort. But when we have reference in Jesus' own words to a shepherd who separates, that becomes less comfortable to think about. Right at the start we have the distinction made, and even how the sheep and goats are segregated looks significant.

“And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.”

(Matthew 25:33)

The right hand is the position of honour. The left side was regarded far less positively. Anyone know the Latin word for “left”? *Sinister*. The nuance has carried down into English. So right away here, it looks as if nobody should opt to be a goat. And here now is the honour bestowed on those at the right hand:

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

(Matthew 25:34)

Just notice a few things in this verse, so that we can see the contrast in what follows. It starts with the beckoning, encouraging, **come**. Approach me. Be with me. Stay at my side. As the sheep would do with their own shepherd. Safe. *Saved*.

Why can they come? Or why can *we* come, if we are Jesus Christ's sheep. It is not just any old blessing, but the specific **good-word-spoken**, putting it literally, of Almighty God. Just like back in Genesis, where *God* decided to speak, and then did speak, and creation sprang into existence. In a similar way, the word that Matthew uses might hint, God has spoken blessing over us. "And it was so". And it *will* be so.

And amazingly, although this is called "the Kingdom of Heaven" - or "the Kingdom of God", same thing, but Matthew is usually considerate of Jewish sensitivities in the use of the divine name - but it is constructed with people like you and me in mind. Isn't that rather startling? It is **prepared for you** - and that has been part of the plan ever since **the foundation of the world**.

Look at the contrast with the other word spoken, to those at the left hand of the King. The sheep were called to come, but ...

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

(Matthew 25:41)

It's opposite, but not *entirely* opposite. This isn't quite a **mirror image**. There are deliberate *non*-correspondences that I'm sure are significant. How it starts, with **depart from me**, is an obvious enough complete opposite. And that will tie up with one of those pictures from Revelation:

Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

(Revelation 22:15)

But back to Matthew. And the opposite of "blessed by my Father"? *No*, not what you would expect, perhaps. Simply **cursed**. Of course that is bad enough, but can you see how important this lack of symmetry is? *Not* "cursed *by my Father*". God, I think we see here, does not relate equally and oppositely towards the saved and the lost. He delights to save those whom he saves. But he does not delight to lose the lost. Twice in Ezekiel, speaking to his people who had turned to idolatry ...

"Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?"

(Ezekiel 33:11)

What about those two destinations? A *kingdom* can sound rather majestic and exciting, something purposeful and constructed, perhaps. Something that you

are privileged to be a part of, with such a King, for sure. Whereas the alternative in Jesus' word picture here is something that sounds far less specific, more *destructive*, more randomising. If the imagery allowed it, I'd say it was a chilling idea. Instead, I'd opt for *scary* or *awful*.

But look, the *kingdom* is prepared for its inhabitants ... but the *fire* is not. That fire was originally set in place for another purpose, for other beings: ***prepared for the devil and his angels***. Folks, throw away that pagan notion of hell with the devil and his cronies delighting in tormenting lost souls. Instead, that place was specifically put in place with *those beings* in mind. It is only being repurposed for these "goats" here - and I wonder if that means that the torments of that place, although still terrible beyond really considering, as less than they would be, had it been prepared *for the goats*. Even in hell, it appears there is that level of mercy.

But those two verses are not all the differences between the left and the right, the sheep and the goats. There's a difference in regard to their destinations, but also in regard to their deeds.

Before we launch into this, I want to flag up a couple of misunderstandings that could drag us off course in the rest of the chapter.

We've got, four times over, although increasingly summarised as we go through it, good or charitable works done or not done. And you will get some people who just latch onto this, forget the rest of the NT, and just zoom in on doing good. That's what will get you into heaven, they say. Though I suspect people who make this mistake would typically prefer to avoid the detail about what heaven is about, and probably totally ignore anything at all to do with there being an alternative destination.

But it is a fair question, that needs a decent answer. How can you and I be saved? Is it the kind of stuff you see people doing here, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick? Actually, if you think the Bible as a whole holds together, you can't say that. You've got this absolutely clear statement in Ephesians, for example:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

(Ephesians 2:8-9)

I could have chosen other verses to make that point, but I picked this one because of what comes next. The question of where our behaviour as believers fits in follows on directly from Ephesians 2:9. So here it is:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

(Ephesians 2:10)

These “good works” are *evidence* that we have received God’s grace, not the *cause* of God showing his grace to us. When we go back to Matthew 25, we need to have that point stuck like a **post-it on our screens**, to make sure we see things with Biblical perspective. It’s not that deeds like this *make* us sheep or goats, but they reveal the nature of the beast underneath. Changing our imagery a bit ... a true sheep wouldn’t lick its lips at the idea of mutton stew ... but maybe **a wolf in sheep’s clothing** would. The actions betray the inner being.

The other mistake that is commonly made here is by overlooking a few important words that Jesus included. Who are the recipients of these “good works”. Jesus does specify:

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

(Matthew 25:40)

Now if you follow a particular line on the End Times, you might interpret that as caring for literal Jews during the Great Tribulation, but I personally don’t go in for those theological schemes much. I think this is just what we see in standard NT life.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

(Galatians 6:10)

Not that we’re meant to push this too far - *anyone* is a suitable recipient of good - but *other disciples* should be given priority. If it’s a question of

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

(Hebrews 13:2-3)

... that is in the context of ...

Let brotherly love continue.

(Hebrews 13:1)

Those strangers in need of a bed might be fleeing persecution for the sake of the Name. They’re in prison, maybe, because they would not deny the Name.

So back to those sheep and goats, and first, the commendation of the sheep.

“... ‘inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’”

(Matthew 25:34-36)

There's a wonderful unselfconsciousness here, wouldn't you say. The response brings it out. Did they do these things out of self-interest? Was it consciously trying to notch up favours with Jesus?

“Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ...’”

(Matthew 25:37)

Do you notice something that *is* there, but is unseen, and something that is unseen because it *isn't* there? First, there is the unseen presence of Jesus Christ among his people.

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

(Matthew 25:40)

The same thing comes through when Saul, then a prosecutor of the church, is blinded and brought to his knees on the road to Damascus:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ... “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

(Acts 9:4-5)

Folks, remember that when we come to break bread in a few minutes time. That is one thing that needs to be clear in our mind when we seek to “discern the body”: if you do good to someone here, you do it to Christ. If you withhold good from them - like, most likely, the slaves who came to the Corinthian church's so-called “love feast” to find the food already eaten, and far too much wine already guzzled - then you do that *dishonour* to Jesus Christ.

I'm not saying that we're excused from ever putting ourselves out for people who are not believers, but *here* is where it must be most particularly evident.

“... just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

(John 13:34-35)

Something - some*One* - present, but invisible. But have you noticed what *isn't* mentioned there, too? When the King calls the sheep into the kingdom, and questions are asked, notice that there is no mention of their sins. Their love shown to Christ is recalled, but their sins are not dredged up. God is not some embarrassing old relative who, when he introduces you to someone new, makes reference to something silly you did when you were little.

So your sins do not appear there, in this interchange. Because they are *covered*, gone, buried, passed over, forgiven, dealt with, cleansed.

But if the sheep do not boast their good deeds, the goats do not seem to acknowledge their fallings short.

“Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’”

(Matthew 25:44)

But this is the point: there is no *evidence* to back up their claim.

“Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

(Matthew 25:45)

“Of these”, once again, in shortened form, as the illustration moves to its conclusion, has got to be once again a failure of love *to fellow believers*.

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

(1 John 4:20)

So these deeds are evidence supporting the judgement and the separation decreed by the King. It’s really just what you’ve heard here before, numerous times. Will you take Jesus as your Saviour, and bow before him as Lord - and be cleansed and changed - or will you instead meet him only later as your Judge? For every one of us, there is no more important question. See these final words from Jesus:

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

(Matthew 25:46)

There are just two ways to live. You are already walking upon either one path or the only other. Jesus has said it before:

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

(Matthew 7:13-14)

And, awful though it is to have to insist on this, these are Jesus’ words, not mine. If you want to insist that Jesus doesn’t really mean eternal when he says eternal, because you do not wish to accept the concept of eternal punishment ... then must accept that eternal life is not *eternal* life, either.

Folks, these are the most solemn words, the last ones which Matthew records before he starts to relate his account of the Passion. It is a start statement of spiritual reality, from the one we see described in awed terms in Revelation:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, ...

(Revelation 19:11-12)

These are *his* faithful and true words:

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

(Matthew 25:46)

So, just how are we going to respond to those faithful and true words?