

The sheep and the goats

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 26th November 2017 at St George's Church, Owlsmoor

Reading: **Matthew 25:31-46**

Introduction: Christmas socks

There are now less than 29 shopping days to Christmas, and perhaps you've been looking for that imaginative gift for the person who has everything. A couple of years ago one of my sisters-in-law gave me a pair of socks – not just any socks, but *biblical socks*. There are sheep on one sock, goats on the other.

A bit of frivolous fun, you might say. But the content of today's gospel reading is deadly serious. In the first part of Matthew 25 Jesus has told two stories, one about the foolish and wise bridesmaids and one about the 3 servants who were given money to invest. In today's parable Jesus uses the image of a shepherd separating his sheep from his goats – the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. It's a lesson about judgement: when we come to meet our maker there will be some reckoning up to do, and we had better be ready for it. So which category do you think *you* are in – sheep or goats?

The Coming of the Son of Man

In this parable, Jesus uses two concepts which would have been familiar to his hearers from the Old Testament. One is the final judgement. Let me read some extracts from Daniel chapter 7 (NIV):

⁹“As I looked, thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat...

¹⁰...The court was seated, and the books were opened...

¹³... I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Jesus has already used the title “Son of Man” to refer to himself. Here he uses the imagery of Daniel to present himself as the Son of Man who will come as King to judge the living and the dead.

The Righteous and the Wicked

The other Old Testament concept is the Righteous and the Wicked, a theme that appears frequently in the Wisdom literature in the Bible, including many of the Psalms, e.g.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. (Ps 1:6)

The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously. (Ps 37:21)

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;

but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth. (Ps 34:15-16)

A few months ago I visited a couple who were asking for baptism for their new baby, and their older son was there. Somehow in the conversation we got onto heaven, and the boy told me that good people go to heaven and bad people go to “the other place”. (Perhaps that’s what you were taught as a child.) “That’s very interesting”, I replied. “So how do you think God decides who is good and who is bad?” It didn’t take very long for the boy and his parents to understand that it wasn’t quite as simple as he had thought, since all of us do good things and we all also do bad things. In fact, I explained, since all of us do bad things none of us deserve to go to heaven, but God made it possible by sending Jesus to die on the Cross so that all the bad things we have done could be forgiven and we could all go to heaven. It’s what you might call the “old time gospel message”, or in other words the message of God’s grace.

Today we come to this altar to remember the sacrifice that Jesus made for each of us. As the old Good Friday hymn puts it,
“There was none other good enough to pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.”

As Paul puts it in Ephesians,

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Eph 2:8 NIV)

So how are we to understand today’s gospel reading in the light of the gospel of grace? The message in the parable seems to be that those who have cared for the poor, the sick, the prisoners, those whom Jesus describes as “the righteous”, will be rewarded with eternal life, whereas those who have not done these things will go to eternal punishment. It looks as if Jesus is saying it’s quite simple to divide people into “good guys” and “bad guys”. How do we square this with the gospel of grace?

Sheep or goat?

I’ll admit this is one of the more tricky questions I have had to deal with in studying the Bible. But I also don’t believe that God contradicts himself. The principle I follow when faced with what looks like a contradiction is to ask myself whether I’m missing something. Perhaps I’m looking at the question too superficially. Perhaps there’s a bigger dimension to all of this. So here’s a possible way in to holding these different perspectives together.

If you know much about Matthew’s gospel, you’ll be aware that it seems to have been written for a Jewish audience. The big issue that faced the early church, who at the beginning were all Jews, was whether people who were not Jews could have an equal place in the Kingdom of God. They’d been brought up to believe that they were the Chosen People. But Matthew’s Gospel challenges the assumption that God didn’t care about the rest of the world. When Jesus is born, it is foreign astrologers who are led by the star to worship him. In chapter 8, almost at the beginning of Matthew’s narrative about Jesus’ ministry, we see Jesus commending the Gentile Centurion who trusted his word that his servant would be healed, and this is what he says:

“Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 8:10-12 NIV)

And at the end of the Gospel, Jesus sends out his apostles to make disciples of *all nations* (Matt 28:19).

That is the context for the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus says that when the Son of Man comes, all the nations will be gathered before him to be judged (25:32). Jesus' contemporaries would have expected the nations of the world to be judged and God's Chosen People to be vindicated. But that's not how Jesus tells it. There will be no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Everyone will be judged on the same basis.

And what is that basis? How they have responded to Jesus.

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.' (25:35-36, NIV).

And he goes on to explain that

"whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (25:40)

I think what Jesus is saying is pretty closely related to what James argues in his letter: faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Faith isn't about saying the right words in the synagogue - or in church. It's not about belonging to this special group or that one. I'm reminded of Paul's words in Romans, where he is talking about God treating everyone equally:

¹⁴When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. ¹⁵They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Romans 2:14-16 NRSV)

Judgement and grace

Taking all of this together, I think the key is to understand what God means by "righteous". Righteous means "right with God", being in a right relationship with God – and with others. It means being reconciled to God, being on God's side, putting God first, trying to please him. It's not a question of ticking boxes or passing a religious knowledge examination. God knows all our secrets thoughts, he sees everything we think, say and do, and he knows our motives. Being right with God shows itself in the way we live, the way we treat others. It involves being humble about our shortcomings, recognising our need for forgiveness, but sincerely wanting to live God's way. As St John writes, if you can't show love in practical ways to the brother you have seen, how can you say you love God whom you have not seen? (1 John 4:20; 3:17).

"Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:18)

Or, as Jesus put it,

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven.' (Matt 7:21 NRSV)

Putting it into practice

So the parable of the sheep and the goats is not telling us that we've got to clothe and feed "x" number of homeless people in order to earn our place in heaven. What Jesus *is* saying is that being righteous is not about reciting prayers or being born into a religious home, or being a member of a church or any other group. It's about responding to Jesus with our heart, soul, body

and strength, putting our time, energy and money into doing the work of his Kingdom, living our whole lives as if Jesus is not only our King, but the one who receives our love every time we express it to one of the least of his brothers and sisters.

So when you and another person arrive at the supermarket checkout queue at the same time, think what you'd do if the other person was Jesus – would you let him go first? When the letter from Tearfund or whichever charity you support drops onto your door mat, asking you to donate to help the people whose homes have been swept away in terrible flooding, think what you'd do if the child in the photograph was Jesus.

And perhaps we can practice the habit of treating people as if they were Jesus right now. When we come to the peace, imagine that it is Jesus saying "Peace be with you". And then wish the peace to your brothers and sisters as if they were Jesus himself.

Prayer

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (Matt 7:7)

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you gave up the glory and security of heaven to become one of us, so live as we live and to die on the Cross to save us.

As you became like us, help us to treat every person as we would treat you. As we have received mercy, help us to be merciful. As we have experienced your grace in our lives, help us to be channels of your grace to others, that the world may reflect the light of heaven, and all people may know that they are loved by you.

In your name we pray. Amen.