

Modeling God's Love

Lesson 5: December 30, 2018

Bible Background • MATTHEW 25:31–46

Printed Text • MATTHEW 25:31–46 | Devotional Reading • JAMES 2:14–26

Responsible people are pulled in a multitude of directions in trying to take care of themselves and their families. Why then would one extend effort beyond self and family? Jesus teaches His disciples that loving acts to the forsaken and needy are really demonstrations of love to Him.

Words You Should Know

- A. Brethren adelphoi (Gk.)—Brothers and sisters, family members.
- B. Possess kleronomeo (Gk.)—To inherit or take authority over.

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: ANALYZE the parable of the sheep and the goats; AFFIRM the call to treat those in need as we would treat Christ; and ASSESS how to care for the poor and outcast in our own lives.

In Focus

Mr. Whitelow and his son were doing their routine shopping. At checkout, they noticed an older gentleman and his son putting some items back because they didn't seem to have enough money to pay for them. Mr. Whitelow went over and discreetly told the cashier he would pay for their groceries. The cashier informed the gentleman that his groceries had been paid for and he didn't have to put anything back.

As Mr. Whitelow and his son were packing their groceries in the car, the older gentleman and his son came over and expressed their extreme appreciation for what they had done. The Whitelow's reply was simply, "Praise God! Praise God!" Unbeknownst to the Whitelows, their neighbor Greg had been watching. Greg came over after work the next day and asked Mr. Whitelow about what he had seen. He wanted to know if he knew the older gentleman and his son.

Mr. Whitelow told Greg that he didn't know them but that it was his responsibility, but, as a Christian, to help those in need.

Greg confessed that he had never helped a stranger, especially not one who had not asked for help. He said he felt guilty because he had never even considered helping someone in that way. Mr. Whitelow shared that helping others was an opportunity to serve Jesus.

In today's lesson, believers see positive consequences of merciful behavior and negative consequences of failing to live a righteous life. When have you helped the poor?

Keep in Mind

"And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV

Matthew 25:31 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

33 And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

42 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

46 And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

NLT

Matthew 25:31 "But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne.

32 All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

33 He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

34 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 creation of the world.

35 For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.

36 I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

37 Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink?

38 Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing?

39 When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

40 And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

41 Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.

42 For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink.

43 I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

44 Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’

45 And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’

46 And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”

People, Places, and Times

Sheep and Goats. God’s judgment on the nations (Matthew 25:32) was a standard part of Jewish expectations for the future. God would ultimately separate the “sheep” and the “goats.” Several distinctions are made between the two. For instance, while sheep and goats grazed together, they were separated at night by shepherds in Palestine. Goats needed to be kept in a warm place; sheep preferred the outdoors. Goats were considered less valuable than sheep. Finally, in some instances sheep represented good and goats represented trouble. Thus, the comparison in Matthew 25:33. With these examples in mind, we can understand why Jesus used sheep and goats in His parable about separation and judgment.

Helping the Poor. In the Bible, God judged people on how they treated the poor (vv. 34–45). Specifically, Jesus says that if a person treats the poor unfavorably, then that person can expect no different treatment for himself. Jesus lists righteous deeds found in Jewish ethics and includes visiting the incarcerated (vv. 35–36). Devotion to Jewish religion included visiting the sick, helping the poor, and welcoming strangers in one’s home. Doing such deeds was like treating Christ in the same manner.

Background

There are four key participants in this parable, all of whom play a role in the Last Judgment: the Son of Man who appears with all His angels (v. 31); the nations, or Gentiles, who are divided into those who have and those who have not joined with God (v. 32); the King (Jesus) (v. 34); and brethren, or those who were once judged by man and now judge those who judged them (v. 40). The King is sitting on the throne, and the Gentiles (nations) are standing before the Judge.

The judgment of the sheep and goats occurs at the conclusion of the Great Tribulation to determine who may enter the kingdom of God. The basis of the judgment is the relationship of men to Christ as demonstrated by their treatment of those in need (Matthew 25:34–36). Those who are saved (sheep) enter the kingdom prepared for them (v. 34), while the lost (goats) go away into eternal punishment (v. 46). In the end, the kingdom consists only of the saved.

At a Glance and In Depth

At-A-Glance

1. The Great Appearing (Matthew 25:31)
2. The Great Division (vv. 32–40)
3. The Great Condemnation (vv. 41–46)

In Depth

1. The Great Appearing (Matthew 25:31)

Jesus is coming back. Jesus uses His Second Coming as the basis for teaching His disciples how to act.

Several things come to the forefront in this passage. First, the Son of Man will return. Although we do not know when, the time has been set. Next, the Second Coming will be “in his glory.” Jesus came the first time clothing His glory in a body of flesh. Instead of being wrapped in light riding upon the chariots of the sun (2 Samuel 23:3–5), He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and sleeping in a manger. But this time His glory will be splendidly displayed to the furthest parts of the universe.

Finally, all the holy angels, tens of thousands of them, are with Him and at His command. What a glorious sight! This time—unlike His first coming, when He chose not to call the angels to help Him—He will not hesitate to use the power at His disposal. This time He is not coming to serve but to receive the service due to Him. The text tells us that “then shall he sit upon the throne of glory,” reminding us of His royalty. The throne clearly indicates His Lordship. Though He is coming in glory, He is not agitated. He is at rest in His display of power. He sits upon the throne. Only Christ can come with such power yet remain seated. At Jesus’ first coming, very few came to worship Him (only shepherds and wise men). In this appearing, all the nations shall be gathered before Him. We are not told who gathers them, but nonetheless we are gathered in the presence of the One who sits on the throne.

2. The Great Division (vv. 32–40)

When Jesus appears, there will be a great division. Jesus enters the parable, dividing sheep and goats. Rather than address them as He is separating evil men from good men, or people of faith from unbelievers, he addresses them as He is separating His sheep from the goats. An indication of possession already sets us up to know that though all are His, only the sheep enter into His rest. The people of all nations, whether powerful or powerless, will stand before His throne to be judged.

This judgment will not be based on earthly possessions or racial superiority but rather on whether they belong to Him. The “goats,” as the Son of Man says in the text, are not His. By their very nature, they remain outside of His nature. They are also separated by their manifest character, that is, what they did or did not do. Many people claim to be born of God but do not act accordingly. When people who do not know God do evil, it is expected. But when those who profess to know God do evil, it raises questions about their relationship with Christ.

Jesus does not ask the sheep what they did because He already knows. Instead, He states exactly what separates them from the goats. First, He invites them with the words, “Come, you blessed of my father.” The invitation affirms them as His kin and blood relation. They are not strangers. Then He tells them to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” This inheritance reminds us of why God created humanity and of His generous offer to Adam as the ruler of all that God made. The group which He metaphorically calls sheep is now to inherit what God prepared from the beginning.

3. The Great Condemnation (vv. 41–46)

Compare verse 34 with verse 41. He will say to those on the left, which are referred to as goats, “depart from me.” This command to the group that first rejected Him has a ring of finality to it. When he came near to them, they chased Him away. Now He will chase them away. Those who refuse to participate in His nature, who will not become related to Him, will hear “depart from me.”

Those who the King pronounces as blessed are defined by their actions of outreach. Some were so caught up with their own survival that they did not give to others. But we place ourselves under divine judgment when we excuse ourselves from feeding the hungry because we claim not to have enough for ourselves. When we hoard resources and call it being thrifty while others suffer, we are not showing the character of Jesus.

What distinguishes people who have the nature of Jesus from the world is their propensity to care for others. The “sheep” and the “goats” are separated by their attitude of caring. No doubt the goats would have cared for those around them if it was clear that those in need were indeed Christ clothed as the beggar. But the basic difference is this: Those who had Jesus’ nature were naturally drawn to caring for others, even without knowing it was Jesus whom they were serving. The key here is that we must treat everyone in need as we would treat the Lord. What will separate us from those who are perishing is not how much we love the lovely, but how we treat the undesirable.

This is a warning to us as we walk in the Lord. Jesus comes to us in ways that we do not readily recognize Him. We are called to care for the least of these. Jesus is very clear that He represents them and that our treatment of them reflects our treatment of Him. Our giving and our caring must grow out of the fact that we are His sheep. His sheep will reflect the nature of the caring Jesus. He shows in this parable that service to the poor is service to Him. To reach out is to be blessed and have the honor of entering Christ’s rest; but to be selfish and create discord is to be put on His left and to go away into eternal punishment (vv. 45–46).

Search the Scriptures

1. What is the distinction between the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:40, 45)?
2. What is the significance of this judgment happening when King Jesus appears in glory with His angels (v. 31)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Have you ever been approached by someone in the street asking for food and ignored the request? Why did you decide to give or not give them food or money?
2. For Thanksgiving or Christmas, have you ever volunteered to serve food or spend time with people who do not have a home or family? Have you ever volunteered any time when there was no holiday?
3. Have you ever visited anyone you knew was in prison or in the hospital? Did you go to see them because you felt obligated or because you really cared about them?

Lesson in Our Society and Make it Happen

Liberating Lesson

There are people in our communities who need our help, but we don’t see them because we view them as part of the landscape. We wish they would go away, but Jesus taught us that “Inasmuch as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (from Matthew 25:45). The way we treat those in need is how we treat our Father in heaven. If we have no regard for others, we have no regard for our Father in heaven.

Christ did not say, “Let me check your references, your resume, and your ability to pay me back.” He said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Jesus opens His heart for us to pour in all our pain and despair; and He promises us joy, peace, and relief. We make and set conditions, but God pardons us when we fail to glorify Him. If we really trusted in God, we would not set conditions before we care for others. God loves and takes care of us unconditionally and blesses us

continually. God expects us to show His love and care to the poor, outcasts, widows, orphans, the incarcerated, the sick, and the least of these in our midst.

Application for Activation

All of us have the opportunity to donate clothes, feed the hungry, assist at a shelter, get involved in a prison ministry, or visit the hospitalized. We often leave these duties to the deacons and missionaries of the church; however, we are all disciples of Christ and share in the same responsibility. If you are not already part of a ministry that helps meet these needs, join one. If your church does not have this type of outreach, start one. It's up to you. Are you a sheep or a goat?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light On The Text

Mathew 25:31–46

31 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

This passage of Scripture is not so much a parable as it is prophecy. It does, however, have some parabolic traits in that it details the shepherd, sheep, and goats. The point here is to describe the events of Jesus' Second Coming. When Christ returns, He will come in His full glory, the same glory that clothed Him before He descended from heaven. His angels will accompany Him and will help gather all the people together at the same time.

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: 33 and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

Jews and Gentiles will not assemble in two different groups but stand together before the judgment of the King. Once more, Jesus teaches in a context with which the Jews are familiar. Sheep and goats typically graze together in the daytime but are separated at night. In this passage, the sheep go one way and the goats go another. The right side symbolizes blessing, honor, and favor; the left side symbolizes worthlessness and condemnation.

Jesus refers to Himself as “King” (Gk. *basileus*, bah-see-LEWS). In this case the King is not just King of the Jews, but King of kings who has all power and holds eternal judgment. Elsewhere, He calls Himself by other titles, and in so doing uses the first person, e.g., “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). In this verse, He uses the third person to maintain the narrative of a parable, although he clearly identifies Himself as the subject in following verses. Once the sheep and goats are separated, Jesus will address the sheep, inviting them into God’s kingdom. The word translated here as “come” is the Greek *deute* (DEW-tay), which Matthew significantly used when Jesus called His disciples to follow Him (4:19), and in another illustration of welcoming His followers (22:4).

Matthew uses the Greek word *kleronomeo* (klay-ro-no-MEH-oh), meaning “to possess,” and signals the sheep to inherit or take possession of the kingdom. This speaks of the kingdom of God, the place where God is acknowledged as sovereign and His presence brings wholeness and holiness. This idea extends from the Promised Land of Genesis and Exodus, where there is peace, prosperity, and fruitfulness in God’s presence, to ultimately of possessing the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus calls the sheep blessed, not because of the grace they received but how they used it. He adds that this place has been prepared specifically for them from the beginning of the world. Here in this prophetic parable Jesus marries two important themes of the Gospel of Matthew: stewardship and judgment. Judgment is eternal and based on how the sheep and goats steward the grace of God that they are given and use it to care for others.

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: 36 naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Jesus lists some acts of compassion that the sheep performed. The Bible is replete with such acts that His audience might recall. Rebekah giving water to the servant of Jacob. Ruth and Naomi receiving provision in Boaz’s field. Abraham and Sarai providing shelter for the three angelic beings in the wilderness. The prophet Elisha visiting the widow woman and her son. These stories all serve as narrative testimonies of righteous people performing the law of God in the Torah to care for the needy of society (Deuteronomy 10:18–19, 24:19–22).

Jesus here reminds people of something they already knew: the command to keep the law of God. But He adds the weight that to keep the law and care for God’s people is to care for the Son of God Himself. The need for compassion still exists today, and many people feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, house the homeless, clothe the destitute, and visit the sick and imprisoned. But the service is just as crucial as the motivation behind it. Some people get involved because of tax benefits, a guilty conscience, or obligations within a group or organization.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? 38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? 39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

Few people have seen Jesus with unmistakable certainty. But the righteous unknowingly served Him by ministering to others. Christ was never hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or imprisoned. Thus, confusion filled their minds. Yet the implication is clear: Jesus is found with people at society’s margins. When we care for those who are in need, we are pleasing God. Evidently, the righteous sacrificed themselves to attend to someone else, and their unselfishness pleased God. It is remarkable that they show authenticity in intention

and action; they did not do what they did because they knew they were serving Jesus directly, they did it because they had compassion. The honesty of their confusion in response to the King's words reveals their pure hearts.

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Jesus calms the sheep by reminding them to their merciful deeds born of God's love for them. The brethren of Christ are all who share a bond with Him through His sufferings and afflictions. He identifies with them, making their pain, sorrow, and tribulation His own. Jesus points to the least of His brethren, highlighting the humility exercised by the righteous in serving those thought unworthy of service. The Greek word used for brethren is adelphos (ah-del-FOCE), meaning brothers or sisters and signifying the kinship of immediate family. This use is in contrast to using brethren as in fellow countrymen or simply a fellow Jew. Jesus was saying that those who serve the least of these are His family.

41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: 43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

The Lord uses the same standards for both groups and parallels them to each other. Whereas Jesus invites those on the right to come, He commands those on the left to depart (Gk. poreuo, po-REW-oh). The Greek here connotes "going one's way." Christ recognizes that the goats have not been following Him, and invites them to continue along the path that they have chosen. Because the goats have chosen not to serve those in need, they are condemned to death.

Just as God made the kingdom of heaven ready for the righteous, He made the everlasting fire ready for the unrighteous (Revelation 20:11–15). Originally, the fire was designated for Satan and his followers (Revelation 12:9). But since sin and death entered the world, humanity was destined to join Satan in this judgment. God did not prepare this place for us because He is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9). But since God is just, our disobedience demanded that we be punished unless proper atonement was made. Christ made that atonement, so humanity must live through the One who paid our debt. Otherwise, we must suffer God's judgment.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? 45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. 46 And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Neither the sheep nor the goats appear puzzled by their destination but seem bewildered by the reason for going there. None of them expected to live or die based on how they treated Jesus because they did not think they ever had the opportunity. But because the goats chose not to serve those in need, they were condemned to death.

A similar circumstance exists today. Many people are not aware of the good they do through the Holy Spirit, and many don't recognize the chance to love as Christ loved and to serve Him by serving others. Furthermore, some people believe they are sheep, when God sees them as goats. Jesus reiterates that the service done unto others is also done unto Him. If anyone masks a deed of goodwill behind an expectation of selfish gain, it carries no spiritual value. If we do "spiritual" works and perform "religious" rituals but neglect the needs of

people in our communities, we have missed the mark of our call in Christ. Our service to our fellow man is not just leftover charity for those who are destitute but an act of service to Christ Himself.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Live by Faith

(Habakkuk 1:2–4; 2:1–4)

TUESDAY

Rewards for Hospitality

(Matthew 10:40–42)

WEDNESDAY

Welcoming Children

(Mark 9:33–37)

THURSDAY

Wait, The Lord Will Come

(1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)

FRIDAY

Keep Awake and Ready

(Matthew 25:1–13)

SATURDAY

Multiply God's Gifts

(Matthew 25:14–30)

SUNDAY

Inherit the Kingdom

(Matthew 25:31–46)