The Sheep and the Goats

The parable of the sheep and the goats, referencing the Son of Man's return, is one of three parables in Matthew 25. The other two are The Ten Virgins and The King and the Stewards (also known as The Talents and the Pounds). These three parables make comparisons between groups of people: the five wise and five foolish virgins; those who invest their talents and those who bury them; and in this parable, the "sheep" and the "goats."

The parable begins:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. (Matthew 25:31-33)



These opening words reflect Jesus' teaching throughout the Gospels regarding His role in the final judgment.

The Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. (Matthew 16:27)

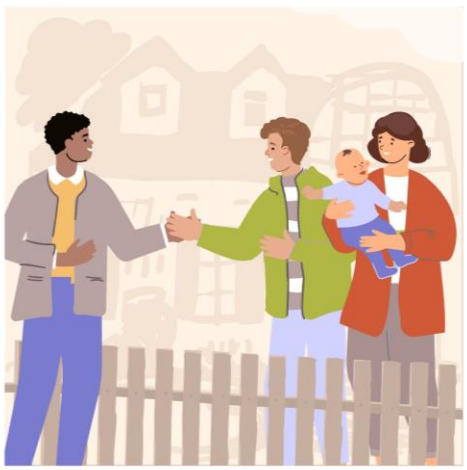
For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. (John 5:26-27)

Jesus likens humanity to a mixed flock of sheep and goats. Flocks of sheep and goats often grazed together, and some authors suggest that shepherds would separate the sheep from the goats each evening, as the goats required a covered shelter due to being more susceptible to the cold, whereas the sheep preferred the open air. In like manner, we're told that the Son of Man will separate people into two groups, placing some on His right side and others on the left.

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. 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)







Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" 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 25:37-40)

A question this gives rise to is who would qualify as one of the least of these my brothers? The interpretation that best fits the passage and other teachings of Jesus, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, appears to be that Jesus was speaking about any needy person, and that any acts of mercy to someone in need are offered to Him.

Helping those in need has its roots in the Old Testament, where generous people received the promise of God's blessing.



There will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land." (Deuteronomy 15:11)

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed. (Proverbs 19:17)

He who is generous will be blessed, For he gives some of his food to the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)



The New Testament writers reflected both the Old Testament concept of generosity as well as Jesus' teachings on the subject.



Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Hebrews 13:16)

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4)

If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? (1 John 3:17)





In the first part of this parable, Jesus refers to those who act mercifully as the sheep who are on His right side, who are *blessed by my Father, and who will inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.* He then changes the focus in the second part.

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. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

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?" 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."

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:41-46)

Jesus isn't referring to those who sinned by overt immoral actions such as killing or stealing; He's referring to those who sinned by not doing what they should have done, by sins of omission. They ignored those in need instead of helping them, and because of this they face a horrible punishment. They are separated from God's blessings and are instead in the presence of the devil and his angels, in a place Jesus refers to as hell.

Like the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke, this parable brings to mind that everyone is going to face judgment and our godly actions toward the needy—or the lack of them—will make a difference at that time.



Jesus pointed out that He is found in the faces of the poverty-stricken, the destitute, the sick, and imprisoned—who together symbolize everyone in need. Those who treat them with love and compassion and care for them do so to Jesus. Those who ignore them and refuse to give aid also do the same to Him. The former are blessed for the love and care they gave to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and foreign, and are welcomed into God's presence. Those who show no concern, who ignore or refuse to help those in need, meet a different fate.

Jesus stressed the importance of His followers being compassionate by highlighting the drastically different outcomes for those who show love and compassion to others, and those who are unwilling to share their bread, clothe the naked, and aid the needy. He used this word

picture as a teaching tool to focus on the point that everyone will be held accountable for their actions, or the lack of them. He also showed how we are responsible for both our sins of commission and our sins of omission. As believers, we are called to not only love God, but also our neighbors; to reflect Jesus' care and concern for those in need, and to take action to help meet those needs.



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