

Matt 25:31-46 (1984 NIV)
When Sheep Serve the Shepherd

Introduction

An atheist farmer often ridiculed people who believed in God. He wrote the following letter to the editor of a local newspaper:

I plowed on Sunday, planted on Sunday, cultivated on Sunday, and hauled my crops on Sunday. But I never went to church on Sunday. Yet, I harvested more bushels per acre than anyone else, even those who are God-fearing and never miss a church service.

The editor printed the man's letter and then added this remark: "God doesn't always settle His accounts on Sunday."

The editor was right. We cannot be sure which day God will settle His accounts with us, but we can be sure there is a day when He will definitely settle His accounts with us; a day when He will definitely judge all humanity.

(<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-joel-preston-stories-secondcoming-godsjudgment-10734.asp>)

Our text today tells us that a time will come when it will be the Great Judgment Day. The candidates to be judged as either accepted or rejected will be all the people of this world, including you and me. And the one who is going to judge for or against the candidates is no ordinary person. He is Jesus Christ Himself who will on that Great Judgment Day be hailed as the King of kings and Lord of lords. No one, including you and me, can run away from this awesome day.

But instead of speculating when and how this day will come, I believe the wiser thing to do is to live our lives here in such a way that we will be accepted and not rejected when we eventually face it. So it is important for us to note some things in this text and understand how it can help us guard and guide our lives as we anticipate this Great Judgment Day.

The first thing we want to note in this text about this day is ...

I. It is a day of separation and not a day of deliberation (vv. 31-33, 41-46).

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

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.

When the Lord Jesus Christ comes again, He will not come in a way He did on that first Christmas Day.

- When He came first to save, He came in the form of a helpless baby. But when He comes again to judge, He will come in all His majestic glory as befitting of the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- When He first came to save, only His earthly parents were with Him. But when He comes again to judge, all the heavenly angels will be with Him; flanking, surrounding and escorting Him as one worthy of all the highest honours.
- When He first came to save, He was made to sleep in a dirty and dark stable that was meant for animals rather than human beings. But when He comes again to judge, He will sit on His throne of heavenly glory which not even the most powerful and richest of all men can lay claim on.

So, here is a picture of Jesus Christ coming in all His majesty, power and glory as the righteous Judge. All humanity will stand before Him on this day.

When Jesus Christ was doing His earthly ministry, He had to endure long deliberations with His enemies (even with His own disciples) concerning where they were wrong and what they had to do to get it right. He had to suffer the unjust and cruel words and works of men towards Him. But when He comes again as the righteous Judge, it will be a day of separation, not a day of deliberation.

The implication here is that it will be a day when He comes to act and not to talk. It will be a day when He comes to pronounce His decision on each person—either “Accepted” or “Rejected”. It is not a day when He comes to deliberate with each person whether he or she should be accepted or rejected by Him.

Our text tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ will act like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats when He comes again. Now, sheep and goats often look alike, at least from a distance. But sheep are docile and gentle. Goats are unruly and can easily upset the sheep. Therefore, the shepherd often separates the sheep from the goats for grazing in the day and for sleeping at night. This act of separation is based on the fact that the shepherd knows best the nature of the sheep and that of the goats. As a result of this knowledge, the separation of the sheep from the goats becomes a decisive action on the part of the shepherd. He knows what he is doing and knows it for sure.

Similarly, the Lord Jesus Christ will separate believers from unbelievers when He returns. Believers are likened to sheep and unbelievers are likened to goats. Our text tells us that Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd, will put the believing “sheep” on His right and the unbelieving “goats” on His left.

To be on Jesus’ right is to be in a place of ...

- Honour
- Favour
- Acceptance
- Blessing

To be on Jesus’ left is to be in a place of ...

- Disapproval
- Disfavour
- Rejection

In other words, those who have believed in Jesus Christ will be honoured, accepted and blessed when He comes again to judge. But those who have not believed in Him will be disapproved and rejected.

Human judges can make mistakes because of their imperfect knowledge of people. But Jesus Christ will have infallible knowledge of who are the believers (sheep) and who are the unbelievers (goats) when He comes again to judge. His day of judgment will be a day of certain separation, not tentative deliberation. He comes again not to deliberate, but to separate—with grace and mercy towards the sheep; with righteousness and justice towards the goats.

What then does this mean for people today? Well, it simply means that there must be a time when people (both sheep and goats) have to stop all deliberation, and take a decisive action. Human nature is such that we can hide behind all our talking, reasoning and discussing because we do not want to make a decision to act. But Scripture cautions us today that when Jesus Christ returns, it will be redundant to say anything more and too late to do anything new.

So, time will not always be with us. We do not know for sure when the Lord Jesus Christ will return. But we do know for sure that He will return. And we also know for sure that when He returns, He will pronounce separation rather than propose deliberation.

When Jesus Christ comes again, it will be redundant to say anything more and too late to do anything new, even if we are still alive. It will be Judgment Day; it will be Separation Day; it will time for the Lord to settle all accounts with people of this world. May we not be found unprepared because we have failed to take decisive action to be on the Lord’s side while time is still with us.

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Let me encourage to consider taking some decisive actions that will count for eternity as we prepare for the Lord's coming again.

In what way(s) can you act so that you will not merely be talking, discussing and reasoning the Lord's will for you, but really be obeying His will by taking some concrete, decisive actions?

God often does not show us everything before He calls us to act. But He does show us enough so that we can know enough to act in faith. He does show us enough so that we will not deliberate in doubt, but will decide in faith. And God does honour such faith—for those who so act in faith, they will be blessed with greater clarity. As they act in faith, they realize that it is not a blind leap into the dark, but a bold step into greater light in the Lord.

It might surprise some people to realize that the Great Judgment Day carries ONE judgment call for the goat, but TWO for the sheep.

- To the goat, the Lord Jesus Christ says in vv. 41-46:

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, "I tell you the truth, 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.

- To the sheep, the Lord Jesus Christ will say in essence as implied in vv. 34-40, "You belong to me. You are accepted." That's the first judgment call for the sheep.

Now, there's a second judgment call because the Lord Jesus Christ will add, "Since you belong to me, what have you done in my name to show your love and service for me?"

And that brings us to the next thing to note in our text today—i.e. the Great Judgment Day is not only a day of separation and not deliberation, but also ...

II. It is a day to testify how we have served the Lord by serving others (vv. 34-40).

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, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Some have interpreted vv. 34-40 as teaching salvation by good works. The sheep called to be on Jesus' right are said to be blessed by God the Father; to have an inheritance; to receive a kingdom prepared for them. Why? It is because they have done certain good works.

But the idea of getting saved by doing good works is of course contradictory to the biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. What the text actually teaches here is that those who enter the kingdom of God can only do so because of them being blessed by the Father in view of their faith in His Son (i.e. Jesus Christ). They will in no way earn their way into the kingdom on their own merits. A child does not earn an inheritance, but he simply receives it on the basis of his being in the family. In the same way, a believer does not earn his way into the kingdom of God, but he simply receives it as his rightful inheritance as a child of God and fellow heir with Jesus Christ.

The good works commended by the Lord in the text here are not the basis of salvation, but the fruit of salvation. These good works are commended by the Lord only (and only) because they are the visible fruit of salvation; because they show the love and service of the Lord's people for Him. The Lord's sheep serve/do good works to others as an outflow of their inner faith and love for their Heavenly Shepherd.

In other words, the Lord will judge according to works only in so far as these works are or are not the fruit of one's salvation. It has been aptly said: "Salvation is by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone." Faith that saves will display itself through works that reflect the fruit of the God's Spirit in and through the believer's life.

So what Jesus is trying to teach here in our text today is in effect this: “Come into my kingdom because you are children of God the Father, and your relationship with Him is made evident by the service of love given to me as you serve and care for others, especially those in the family of God.”

We see here an important feature concerning how the Lord will judge all humanity. He will separate those who are believers and those who are not. The important thing to note here is that those who are judged as “goats” are not merely those who declare “we do not believe in Jesus”. Those who are judged as “goats” include those who may declare that they believe in Jesus, but by their lack of compassion and concern towards human needs, the Lord Himself knows (we may not know) that they have not truly believed. They show no fruit of salvation whatsoever.

So we see here a special emphasis regarding the believer’s life.

- It is not just going round telling people the testimony of your salvation in Jesus Christ (though this is important).
- It is not just studying the Bible, praying to God, and worshipping Him (though all these are definitely important).

The special emphasis here regarding the believer’s life has to do with the call to meet the needs of others, especially that of fellow believers. It has to do with loving and serving Christ by loving and serving others because we do not have Christ here in person to love and serve. It has to do with the call to demonstrate our love and service for Jesus Christ by loving and serving others in His name.

That’s why it is so important for Christians to be a vital part of the local church. In a congregation of say 100 people, it means that at any one time, the Lord is presenting to each of us 99 opportunities to love and serve Him as we love and serve one another.

The Lord said in the voice of the King in v. 40: “I tell you the truth (I am not lying), whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

What are the things that the sheep do to others that have earned the commendation of the Lord?

- They feed the hungry.
- They quench the thirsty.
- They clothe the naked.
- They welcome the stranger to their home.
- They nurse the sick.
- They visit the imprisoned.

All these represent three basic human needs—food, shelter, and companionship. And all these deeds really deal with the common, everyday needs. They are not about spectacular achievements or monumental undertakings like preaching to thousands, or being martyred for your faith, or going into the deep jungles of Africa to win the cannibals for Christ. But all these deeds commended by the Lord here have to do with day-to-day kindness that helps to meet the needs of others.

We can learn two things regarding this kind of service to others:

- One, it is community service in simple things—feeding the hungry; quenching the thirsty; welcoming the stranger; cheering the sick; visiting the imprisoned; comforting the victimized. You don't need to be a Christian for 20 years before you can do all these. You don't need to be trained for many years before you can do these.

One time, I tried to volunteer myself in a day-care centre for the elderly. I met the supervisor and when he knew that I was a former pastor, he said with much reservation, “We receive funding from the government. And one of the rules we need to comply with is that we must not offend the religious sensitivities of our elderly.”

I reassured him that I was only keen to be a friend and encourager to the elderly folks. Then hearing that I would go overseas for Christian ministry from time to time, he said, “It would be very difficult for us to fit you into our weekly programme since you travel quite a bit. But we will keep you in mind whenever we need some extra help in special events, like an outing to somewhere.”

As you have guessed, I have not heard from him since that meeting.

Another time, someone who's running some programme for at-risk kids in schools asked me to assist him in some of the activities. He also asked me to send him my CV as the Ministry of Education (MOE) would want to look at it in order to “screen” me. The next time I heard from him, he asked if I would instead consider helping him in his intended ministry among university students in Hong Kong.

I guessed I knew what the response from MOE was.

What I am trying to say is that you don't need to have the same background and training like me before you can serve God and people. In fact, doors may be closed just like what I have experienced.

The simple deeds commended in our text today are things that anyone here can do everyday. We are not even talking about things that you can do for others only when you in church on Sunday. We are talking of what you can do for others on the other days of the week outside the four walls of the church.

So we are talking about serving in simple things, yet significant things in the Lord's sight. But we often look down on simple things.

- You may say: "I can't preach at all. But I always try to encourage the preacher by telling him how his message has helped me. It is only a very simple thing."
- You may say: "I don't know how to help so-and-so solve his problem. I can only write him a note to say that I am praying with him. It is only a very simple thing."

Isn't it true that we often think that simple things are not significant and spiritual things? We think that for things to be significant and spiritual, they must be spectacular and eye-catching, not simple and hardly noticeable.

But our text today reminds us that seemingly simple and inconspicuous acts are worthy of the Lord's commendation. Scripture tells us today that we can all serve the Lord and others when we consciously look out for opportunities to do the little things for people, and to keep doing them.

- Two, this kind of service we give to others is not only in simple things, but it is also service that is not calculative. It is service that is given not with ulterior motive to take advantage of others, or to pile up merits before God in order to gain His favour. But it is service that you can't stop doing because it springs forth from a loving heart towards others. Indeed, service that wins the Lord's approval is of this kind—given for nothing except for the sake of loving and helping.

One time a patient was admitted to Johns Hopkins Hospital. She was a middle-aged lady from a rural area and very ill. Dr. Howard Kelly, chief surgeon, seeing her condition, spared no effort to help her. After surgery he outlined a programme for special care, including a private room and a private nurse.

Finally, the day came when the patient was well enough to go home. Though happy with her recovery, she dreaded getting the bill. It would be enormous! Determined, however, to face reality, she insisted that the nurse bring it immediately. When she received it she began to read the items one by one. Her heart became heavy and when she saw the total cost, she almost had a relapse. But

then her eyes caught a glimpse of a brief note at the bottom of the bill that overwhelmed her.

Her mind quickly went back many years to a summer day when a young medical student, who was selling books to help pay his way through medical school, stopped at her home and asked for a glass of water. A young girl then, she offered him a glass of fresh milk instead. The young man, of course, accepted and enjoyed the milk to the full.

Years had passed when this woman entered Johns Hopkins as a patient. The young man who had stopped at her door had become Dr. Howard Kelly, chief surgeon of the hospital.

And that day, the note at the bottom of her medical bill read: "Paid in full by a glass of fresh milk."

And it was signed: Dr. Howard Kelly, Chief Surgeon.

Similarly, the Lord will not forget every simple act done to advance His work on earth. In fact, He will even reward us for a cup of water given in His name (Matt. 10:42).

(<http://amazingreallifeinfo.blogspot.com/2014/03/paid-in-full-with-one-glass-of-milk-dr.html>)

We are not to be calculative in our service. We serve others not because the benefit we expect to gain from them far outweighs our service to them. Rather, we serve because of our love for the Lord before anything else. Nevertheless, in His abundant grace and goodness, the Lord does promise in Scripture that He will reward us in His own way for our faithful service done in His name.

Conclusion

The Lord Jesus Christ is coming again to judge all humanity. He will separate the sheep from the goats.

The goats are those who have not believed in Him by faith. But the important thing is that the Lord Jesus Christ loves all humanity and wants all to believe in Him by faith so that they can be judged "Accepted" when He comes again. It takes just a simple act of faith to believe in Him. If you have not yet done so, please feel free to talk with any of us after the service. We will be most happy to share more with you about believing in Jesus Christ by faith.

The sheep are those who have believed in Jesus Christ by faith. Not only that, they are those who have demonstrated their faith in Jesus Christ by serving others in His name with simple acts of love and kindness. They are not saved

by these acts. Rather, it is by these acts that they show that they are truly the Lord's sheep; that they serve their Great Shepherd by serving others in His love and in His name.

What are some simple acts you and I can do as we serve the Lord by serving one another in His love and in His name?

- If you are a young person, you can encourage your parents by heeding their words and considering their feelings.
- If you are a working person, you can share your successes and failures so as to encourage and build up someone. You can also use your experience and expertise to advise or help another.
- For all of us, we can write a note, or give a call, or lend a listening ear, or help run an errand, or be with a lonely person.

The usual human instruments whom the Lord would use to do His work are not the spiritual giants doing great and mighty things. They are just too few and far in between. The usual human instruments used by the Lord to do His work are people like you and me, doing simple things to one another in the Lord's name and in the Lord's love from day to day.

Let's decide today to serve the Lord by serving others in His love and in His name, even if it is with a cup of water.

Amen!