

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The best response we can give to this profoundly important text is to stay as close to our Lord as possible! He is our route through the traumas of the End Times and the Last Judgement. The only way we can do this is to keep close to what our Lord would have us do now; and this is what Jesus taught all the way through the 'parables' at the end of Matthew. It is also right for us to look at this passage and note that Jesus regards provision for the poor, welcoming of strangers, and visiting the sick and imprisoned, as a right thing for anyone to do, and for a Christian, it should arise from their commitment to their Lord, and not because the lack of doing it provides a threat to their livelihood and eternal life!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *This passage of scripture is very challenging, and despite the study, you may feel that it challenges you to do some of the socially 'right' things mentioned. Ask the lord to show you how to react to the story.*
- *Pray for those who you know who do not accept that you are a Christian and you are one of God's people who seeks to do His will in the world.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have given me so much. You have often challenged me, You have filled me with love, You have pointed out my errors, You have guided me through pain; You have led me to do Your will. Keep going, Almighty Father, and when I grow old, may I still feel the power of Your Spirit driving me on, into Your Kingdom! AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You bear the marks of humanity, and the mystery of divinity. Help me, therefore, as Your disciple and follower, to be faithful in all I do for You, and may I always keep in mind the eternal destiny You have won for me. I long to reflect Your love, compassion and justice, my Lord, in everything I do; so by the power of Your Holy Spirit, may I never fail You, Lord Jesus. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray for those who in the course of their work, have had to deal death and loss of life due to fire, whether people they know or people they do not know. Pray for their blessing.

On-going prayers

- *Thank God for the joys of preparing for Christmas*
- *Pray for the safety of young children in schools and institutions*
- *Pray for small businesses struggling to keep going*

Meditation

Protect us, Lord God, in the paths we take;
May we be wise in all our decisions.

Protect us, Lord God, from the company we keep;
May we be careful to keep close to You.

Protect us, Lord God, during all our conversations;
May we be wise in the things we say.

Protect us, Lord God, while we do our work;
May we build Your glorious Kingdom.

Protect us, Lord God, when our passions overflow;
May we be committed, sincere and faithful.

Protect us, Lord God, guard our hopes and dreams;
May we accept Your plans for our future.

Bible Study - Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ *'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be assembled before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on His right hand and the goats on the left.*

³⁴ *'Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ever since the beginning of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I had no clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you a drink? ³⁸ And*

when did we see you as a stranger and welcomed you, or in need of clothes and clothed you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visited you?"

⁴⁰ And then the king will answer them, "Amen, I say to you, just as you did this for one of the least of my family (brothers), you did it to me."

⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, "You who are accursed, get away from me! Go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, without clothes and you gave me no clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴ Then they will answer in turn, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, "Amen, I say to you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

⁴⁶ And these will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Review

In this passage we reach the climax of Jesus' teaching, and it is a controversial text, to say the least! This passage is often called 'the parable of the sheep and the goats'; but it is not really a parable, because it does not have the classic features of a parable, such as a the beginning; 'the kingdom of heaven is like ...' (13:1, 25:1 etc.). It is a story about what will happen when the 'Son of Man comes in His glory' (25:31), which uses the illustration of a shepherd dividing sheep and goats.

At the heart of this passage is the 'Final Judgement'; God's assessment of right and wrong done by the people of 'the nations' (25:32) which determines who will enter His Kingdom, and who will be condemned to eternal punishment. The big question is who is being judged; is it everyone? The answer to this question determines what you believe this passage says about how people are 'saved' and enter the Kingdom. If the term 'the nations' (25:32) refers to all people, then the judgement of God is all based upon what people have done in this life (whether they fed the hungry etc.); and this is 'salvation by works'. However, this can hardly be what Jesus means, as the rest of Matthew tells us that people enter the Kingdom by following Jesus and trusting in Him. We will have to find out how these two different approaches to entry into the Kingdom may be resolved.

The Last Judgement of what and of whom? The scene is set using words from Deuteronomy 33:2, Daniel 7:13,14, and Zechariah 14:5 (25:31,32). The coming of the 'Son of Man' has also been a theme within Matthew's Gospel (e.g. see 16:27, 24:7,30,37,39). At the Last Judgement, therefore, Jesus is with the Father bringing Creation to a close (25:31). Now we might expect the Lord to be concerned about the 'big' issues of right and wrong in the affairs of nations and the judgement of Satan and all evil, for example. However, the whole story is about Jesus' judgement of personal and moral issues. It is very important that we recognise this because we should realise straight away that what is described here is only a part of what God intention do 'at the Last Judgement'. The Book of Revelation (chs.18-22), tells us a great deal more, but does not say much about personal moral issues.

The story gets under way with the assembly and immediate judgement by Jesus of the gathered 'nations' (25:32). The Greek word here means 'Gentiles' (ethne), but does this mean a general gathering of all people? Matthew would also use this word in the famous commission of Jesus; 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (ethne)' (28:19), so the call is clearly universal. However, just as Jesus' disciples were with Him when the

Great Commission was given, and 'ethne' meant everyone else in the world, this is the case here.

The separation of the sheep The story of the Last Judgement tells us that Jesus will act as a Shepherd who knows the difference between sheep and goats in a flock. In the mixed flocks of the day, it was not easy to spot the difference, but Jesus will make the separation immediately upon His coming. After the separation, He explains Himself to those whose fate has already been decided, and a line is drawn in history when what is done is done, and what has been left is left undone. There is no going back.

The six simple things Jesus described as tests of 'righteousness' in the story are arranged in pairs; feeding the hungry and giving a drink to the thirsty, hospitality to a stranger and the offering of clothes, and visiting of the sick and visiting those in prison. They are important issues, but a comprehensive revelation of social justice! Yet each has a history within scripture; for example, acting with 'mercy' or 'justice' and in a manner worthy of God (e.g. Isaiah 58:7, Ezekiel 18:7, Proverbs 25:21 etc.). The list is representative rather than definitive and scripture mentions many others, such as 'tending to widows' (Deut. 24:19,20,21 e.g.). Nevertheless, the object of this mercy and justice is Jesus Himself; 'I was hungry ... I was a stranger ...' and those who responded to His need are astonished and unaware that they have done what is right (25:38,39). Astonishingly, Jesus said to the sheep 'Amen I say to you, just as you did this for one of the least of my family (brothers), you did it to me', a phrase which helps us unlock the door to understanding this passage. Here, Jesus indicated that His 'family' (His disciples) were already with Him, and they were neither sheep nor goats!

At the Last Judgement therefore, Jesus' story applies to all people ('ethne') who are not with Jesus, and God's Judgements are based upon how 'the nations' treat Jesus and His disciples!

And now, the goats Next, when the goats are faced with their neglect, it transpires that whatever good deeds of justice and mercy they did for the poor of the world, they had not recognised Jesus or His disciples as being in need (25:44). Because they did not recognise this, they did not provide for Him or them. Their punishment of separation from Almighty God (25:46) is the final consequence of their blindness to Christ and His disciples, whatever good deeds they may have done.

It is possible that this is not what you thought this scripture said when you started the study! It is, however, where we have ended up. It is undoubtedly true that there are many different interpretations of this passage within the Church, and this has been the case for centuries. However, this makes sense of the whole of Matthew's Gospel and the ministry of Jesus, and interpretations which suggest a 'salvation at the Last Judgement by works' are out of character with the rest of Matthew, let alone the rest of the New Testament. All of us who decide for Christ in this life already know we are not worthy of passing the test of the 'Last Judgement', and place ourselves in the hands of Christ.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this scripture say about Christians who do not recognise the needs of the poor, if anything?
2. Is it possible, given the interpretation above, to say who the 'sheep' might be, or who the 'goats' might be?
3. Should Christians escape the consequences of the 'Last Judgement' because of 'salvation by faith'? How are Christians judged?