

We finish up the hospitality series with a very challenging parable—The Sheep and the Goats. The first time I remember hearing about this parable was when I was a senior in high school. I wasn't a Christian yet, but I was starting to hear from various people in my life about the cross, grace, hell, and the importance of believing in Jesus.

I distinctly remember being at a party while in High School. I remember standing in the shallow end of the pool, leaning back with my arms on the pool deck, and there was another guy from my high school that I hadn't spoken with since we were freshmen, as our lives went in different directions. His name was Dickie. He was a short guy with red hair and freckles. He was the kind of guy that stopped growing and started shaving in about eighth grade. He was funny, a gregarious guy, and he would have been perfectly cast in the Little Rascals.

We started to talk about religion. He told me he was attending a Mormon church and how he couldn't understand why Christians believed that their works didn't earn their salvation. He believed that Christians used the term grace cheaply. If you claim you are saved by grace alone, it can be an excuse to act out in any way you want because your works don't really matter to God.

Then he said if I doubted him, I should read the parable of the sheep and the goats, and then we could talk. I probably knew enough about faith at that time to be dangerous with what I knew. I didn't have a sense of the Holy Spirit in me at that time.

I told Dickie that I really enjoyed our conversation and I would read the parable of the sheep and the goats, but there was something that bothered me because grace is so important, but I knew works matter. I didn't think they had anything to do with my salvation or saving me. I did read the parable when I got home, and it made me uncomfortable.

I don't know if it makes you feel uncomfortable. It does read as a very works type of teaching and in high school, it annoyed me like a pebble in my shoe. I couldn't get rid of the thoughts about it.

A year later, I accepted Jesus as my Savior, and I was baptized, and looking back, I think my friend Dickie was partially right. My works do matter to God. The poor matter to God. The sick matter to God. The marginalized matter to God. And I've been very grateful over a long time of being connected to a church with very good teaching.

I've learned that the arc of the story of God is a redemption story from the very beginning. It's a story of God's grace and of love and forgiveness. Those that are far from God are brought close to God. Those that are lost are saved. Those that are condemned become forgiven. Those that are in death become alive again. They move from law to grace.

I think back to Genesis 15, God came to Abraham, and Abraham believed God, and his belief was credited to him as righteousness. His faith was credited to him as righteousness. There were no good works that he did first that led God to come to Abraham.

As we've been in Exodus over the summer, we learned that it was the blood of the spotless lamb that mattered. That when the death angel saw the blood of the spotless lamb over the doorposts of the Hebrew houses, he passed over. Death passed over that house. This was a foreshadowing of what we know in the New Testament, which tells us that if we apply the blood of the spotless lamb, Jesus Christ, to the doorposts of our hearts, we will be saved.

*"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).* God looked at me. He didn't wait for me to clean myself up first, but he saw in me in the midst of my mess, my anger, my unforgiveness, my addictions, and my immorality. He saw me in that state, and he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for me.

Why did God do this? God sent Jesus, his Son, to die for me because God loves me unconditionally, and he wants to have a relationship. I never have, and I never will deserve his love. I never will earn his love. It's called grace.

**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works,**

**so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:8-10**

So we are saved by grace through faith, but the grace of God leads us to do good works. To put in the language of our series, to practice hospitality, the kind of works that God loves so much.

This parable starts out by describing this awesome scene set in a future event called The Second Coming of Christ. In Matthew 24 and 25, Matthew is recording Jesus's final series of sermons. It's known as Jesus' Olivet or Olivet Sermon. Scholars believe that Jesus likely delivered these teachings on the Tuesday of the week. That would mean Jesus was to be crucified three days after giving this message.

So these teachings are about the future and how we should live now in order to prepare ourselves for the future Second Coming of Christ. In the second coming, the parable says men and women will be judged. In fact, all nations will be judged. So it paints this picture of a judgment scene.

**"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Matthew 25:31-33**

In verse 31, Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man. That's interesting to me because the term, Son of Man, is used in the Old Testament in the book of Daniel to describe the coming of the Lord. That was one of Jesus' many titles describing Daniel's vision of the Messiah coming again. Jesus says that all nations will be gathered that day.

So, every person who has ever lived is mingling in front of Jesus's holy throne. And there'll be a process of separation. That judgment involves a gathering, and it involves separating believers from unbelievers from every part of the world. Standing before his judgment seat, he separates them into goats and sheep as he sees fit.

It was a common understanding in Jesus' day for sheep and goats to graze in the pastures together. They would do that during the day, and at night the shepherd would separate the sheep from the goats and put them in different pens. From a distance, goats and sheep can look very much alike, but a shepherd knows the difference. Sheep were considered to be

valuable because of their wool coats. And they are, by nature, docile creatures. They listen to their shepherd, and these sheep were given a place of honor on their right.

As we saw that Son of Man title, another title comes along—The King. Not a king, but the King. So Jesus was more than the Davidic king, the son of David, which he was, but he's also the divine King, the Son of God. Within this judgment scene, we see God's grace lead the sheep to do good works, whether they understand it or not.

**"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. 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, 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.' Matthew 25:34-36**

So, the scene here takes the shape of a celebration. Just imagine coming before Jesus one by one and then being told that you're blessed by his Father and that you will receive an inheritance from the Father. That inheritance, as Peter describes it, is imperishable. It's undefiled, it's unfading, it will never die, it will never rot, it will never break, it'll never lose its value, and it's kept safe for us in heaven.

Then the king gives the reasons for why believers can take their inheritance. He names six ways these believers served while they were on earth. These six are not an exhaustive list, but they describe a tone and give a theme for this kind of service.

**You fed me; You gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, I was an outsider, and you opened your home; you invited me in. You clothed me when I was poor. I didn't even have money to buy clothes; I was naked, and when I was sick, you checked in on me to make sure I was okay. When I was in prison, you came and visited me.**

I think what's indisputable about these verses is that the same grace God dispensed to save us also calls us and equips us for loving service. At a very basic level, he calls us to the important work, and I say acts of service. But I want to preface that with an adjective—simple service. We will be judged based on our simple service because followers of Jesus serve out of love. God will bless that loving, simple service.

So, Jesus' parable describes two kinds of people. The sheep on the right, who have served the least of them, and the goats on the left, who didn't. At the second coming of Christ, the sheep will be judged righteous by the king, receive the blessing, and receive the confirmation of eternal life, and the goats will be judged for their unrighteousness by the king and will receive curses and eternal punishment.

Isaiah 48:18 describes judgment as that day when God's righteousness will finally flow like a river. And Habakkuk 2:14 says the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. It takes me back to Paul. Every knee shall bow, and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. So, Jesus' parable is designed to create tension in us. A tension in us even this morning.

One of my favorite commentaries on Matthew is by Douglas Sean O'Connell. He wrote, "We like the comfortable couch of Christian commitment. And so he has placed these pointed rocks in the cushions to keep us up and keep us going." I love that.

So this parable tells me through these sharp pointed rocks that I am accountable, that judgment awaits everyone, and that the heart of the Christian faith is a close relationship with Jesus Christ. He is present in our simple acts. He is pleased with our simple acts. The parable reveals some things that may surprise us. We can safely say that grace will surprise us.

**"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'  
Matthew 25:37-39**

As I study this passage. There is something that is now obvious to me that I missed before. The sheep that were blessed were surprised. We know the goats were surprised because they asked the question, "How come we're goats?" Yet three times, the sheep ask, "When did we see you? We invited strangers into our home, but you weren't a stranger. We went into jails. We didn't see you behind the prison bars."

The sheep here are confused in a different way, but they're as confused as the goats were. They are unaware and taken by surprise. It seems to me that a point of this parable about judgment is going to depend on unknown, unremembered acts of kindness and love that these sheep never gave a second thought.

These blessed sheep didn't remember the little things that the king remembered and mattered so much to him. These blessed sheep are not keeping track. They're not keeping score about their works. In fact, they don't remember them. It's as if they're saying, "Forgive us, Lord. Could you remind us? We don't remember seeing you even when we did these little things."

I'm trying to picture this judgment scene, and trying to picture myself as I stand before the King.

**The King says to me, "Dan,"**

**I respond, "Yes, Lord."**

**"Dan, did you bring your calendar to the judgment seat?"**

**"Yes, Lord. I brought my calendar. I don't go anywhere without my calendar."**

**"Okay, pull it out, open your calendar." So I pull out my iPhone, open my calendar, and he says, "Look up April 2011."**

**So I turned to that month. "Oh, yeah, Lord, that was the month we opened up that brand new student and children ministry center building we had in that church in Wisconsin. We had a celebration with cake and punch and everything. It was great."**

**"Cake, punch, and a new building don't matter much to me. What mattered to me was that I knew what was going to happen to a family in the church, and I wanted you to show up for that family the day their baby died of SIDS. I know how you reached out to me as you walked up that driveway, scared to death, not knowing what you were going to say or how you were going to be of comfort. That's what mattered."**

**"Dan, look up Easter 2016. I now have you serving at Central Peninsula Church."**

**"That was the year that Mark Mitchell asked me to preach the Easter services at CPC. I never understood why he did that, but he did it. And I was honored, of course. I remember, Lord, I worked really hard on that message, and I thought I had a really good one. I think it was one of my better ones, Lord."**

**And I imagine the Lord saying to me, "I wasn't thinking about your message, and I wasn't thinking how clever and clear you were from the platform. I was thinking about the fact that later that week, it was your turn to speak at Street Life. You were going to be on that dirt vacant lot in**

**Redwood City to give a talk and interact with those who were waiting in line for their meal."**

**"I know you didn't feel like you connected at all, but you stepped up and asked me for help. I led you to a man, you talked to him, and you were able to pray with him in that line before he received his meal."**

I'm seeing it now. I'm seeing how it works. Our good works, no matter how simple, no matter how mundane, no matter how insignificant they may seem to us at the time, matter to Jesus. Jesus is there, and those works are all about what his heart is. Whether it's helping the veterans here on the peninsula, whether it's going to visit somebody lonely and playing a card game with them, whether it's providing a meal, whether it's giving someone a bag of groceries, whether it's picking somebody up and taking them to a doctor's appointment, these good works fill Jesus' heart, and we know that he's there when we do those things.

*"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'" (v. 40 ).* So the Lord's saying to me, "Do you understand, Dan, that when you were talking to that devastating family, you were talking to me. That when you were talking to that homeless man, you were talking to me?"

This parable specifically describes a term we should talk about. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine." So, the context of this is interesting because we're into the Second Coming of Christ, and the scriptures are pretty clear that believers will be suffering persecution, they will be imprisoned, they will be poor, and they will go hungry. God cares about those believers who are out there in dangerous places, and we in the church are to minister to them. God honors them.

Not that we just go to those Christians, but that's our first priority. Then also to all people, it says, all nations will stand. So Jews, Gentiles, Christians, non-Christians, everyone gathered before Christ's throne that day. We serve because that may be the only way our neighbor sees Jesus.

I think Paul summed it up well in Galatians. He cast a vision for how were to help those who suffer hardship. He said, *"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers"* (Galatians 6:10). So, this parable

about judgment teaches followers of Christ about the heart of Christ.

There are other places in scripture that offer more precise and detailed teachings on judgment. In Romans 14, for example, Paul says that every believer will one day stand before Christ and give an account for himself or herself. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says that every believer, as they give an account, will receive what is due to them (this is a bit ominous here), whether good or bad. Which means to me, whether it be a reward or a rebuke.

I just know that God wants us to do good for the least of these, especially those in the family of God, one person at a time. To some, that challenge brings comfort. "I'm doing this. I get it. This is so much a part of who I am and my ministry." To others of us, it may feel like we're sitting on a couch made of pointed rocks.

There's another judgment in scripture that's called the Great White Throne of Judgment, and it's found in Revelation 20. The Great White Throne of Judgment is not for believers in Christ. The church will not be there for that judgment. This final judgment is for those who have rejected the invitation of Christ, who chose not to receive the grace of Christ, the good news, and believe it and accept it on faith. The good news is that through Jesus' death, we receive forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life.

So, that final judgment is for those who choose not to believe, and it happens in Revelation 20 just before Jesus establishes the new heaven and earth for eternity in Revelation 21. That's a sermon for another Sunday.

So, this morning's parable tells us that there are goats who are going to be absolutely certain that they're sheep. They will confidently walk over to the King's right side, and the King will stop them. The goats will say,

We're sheep. We did all this stuff. It felt good. We got a lot of praise. We got a lot of attention for doing it. We've prophesied in your name. We've done miracles in your name. We're very respected amongst church circles, and we have earned this.

But tragically, the King of kings will say, "No, you're the goats in sheep's clothing. You didn't help those who are the least among you. Jesus paints this vivid but tragic picture of those who don't take Jesus seriously. Who are indifferent to the sufferings of God's people and all people. It's clear that God will judge in accordance with our reaction to human needs.



So, some observations. The care that Jesus is talking about is simple, unassuming, things that just come up in daily life. Simple acts of hospitality. Simple acts of kindness. Simple acts of generosity. These blessed sheep were surprised. They were not about calculating the rewards they were going to get for what they did. They just did good. And they didn't even connect that they were ministering directly to Jesus. That he was present with them in this.

I like how the writer of Hebrews brings some additional clarity to this. What a beautiful picture this is for us who receive this challenge of this parable. *"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it"* (Hebrews 13:2). We now know from this parable that when we help the least of them, it brings joy to Jesus.

I had some questions as I was preparing this week. What was happening inside those blessed sheep for them to serve in such humble acts? Why were they surprised that those acts of service mattered to Jesus? I tried to answer this by flipping the parable around and, for a moment, put myself, and I want you to put yourself in the position of being the least among these.

Consider your own story of God's grace in your life. God met you someplace. Quite likely, he met you in some dark place, and he invited you to himself. Could the answer as to why these blessed sheep were motivated to help be because they saw themselves as the least among these? They saw themselves as in desperate need.

Isn't it in our lives that Jesus came to us when we were hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. The Bible is clear that we have no hope unless Jesus comes to us. When we were hungry, Jesus gave us the Bread of Life. When we were thirsty, Jesus gave us the wine of his blood. When he found us naked, he clothed us with the robes of righteousness and took off our tattered robes of sin. When he found us sick and diseased, he came and laid down his life on the cross to bring spiritual, emotional, and physical life and healing. When he found us imprisoned by guilt, shame, and addictions, he opened the prison doors. He cut free our chains. He broke us out of bondage, and he offered us a path of freedom.

The King did all of this for us, not because we had something to offer him or that we could pay him back in some way, but because he's full of grace. What the King is showing us in this parable is that when we

receive the King's grace, it changes us. Grace rewires and transforms our motivational structure, what motivates us in our hearts.

That's what we're talking about with these blessed sheep. That was what was inside them. They were filled and overflowing with gratitude because of God's grace in their lives, and as they were overflowing with this gratitude, they began in that overflow to engage in ordinary, simple, everyday acts of love. They were doing good, without even thinking about it. It's just who they are now. That's what makes them do what they did. That's what makes us do what we did, the grace and mercy of the King shown to us.

My prayer is that you and I will continue, in this time between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ, to make a difference because of God's grace and mercy, filling our hearts and overflowing to others in need. I pray we will practice kindness and hospitality, starting with those nearest to us. When this happens, we're demonstrating that we are changed. That we are taking on the character of the King.

As I look back and think about standing in that swimming pool with Dickie, I compare where my life was then and where my life is now. I know that grace has changed me, not that I have arrived. I think it is fair to say that I'm not where I want to be, but because of God's grace, I'm not where I was. I love this quote from Kenneth Ulmer. He gifted a pastor down in Los Angeles, who recently retired, and said, "When I first became a Christian, I used to cuss at the drop of a hat. But now, since following Jesus, I don't cuss that fast anymore."

God cares about the unremembered little acts of kindness and hospitality that you've shown others. There are many of us here right now, and I know their stories. They are exhibiting hearts of compassion. I think if others understood and followed them around, they would be stunned at what they are doing in these little acts that nobody knows about. They are pouring out their life's blood to care for the needs of others. I hope you're encouraged today. You're on the right track. Keep it up!

I want to end by challenging the rest of us. If we see room for growth in this area, in view of all that God has done for us and all that God has said to us, we should dare to care more for someone. Dare to get off that comfortable sofa and open our hearts further to the needs of the least among us, as Jesus put it. Know,

that when you do, you're tapping into the heart of God.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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