Chapter 7

Serving

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats
{Matthew 25:31-46}
Justin Guin

One Main Thing

God has given each of us opportunities to serve Him. We must use these opportunities to minister to others, especially to fellow believers, as if we are serving Jesus Himself, for people in need represent Jesus.

Introduction

In Matthew's gospel, the evangelist records five discourses of Jesus (Matt 5–7; 10–11; 13; 18; 24–25). One theme woven through each discourse is the importance of genuine faith. In order to follow Christ, His disciples must demonstrate their faith with action. The religious leaders during Jesus' life were described by Him as "blind guides" (Matt 23:24) who cared more about their traditions than the principles on which their law was founded (22:38–39; 23:23). Such an attitude had serious

eternal consequences because faithfulness demands serving God and our fellow man. How one responds to people in need has eternal consequences (25:46). Christ's disciples stand in contrast with the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders in Jesus' time. Christians are people of service and compassion, not neglect and indifference.

In the twenty-first century, our world must see a compassionate, serving church. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the church is Christ's "ambassadors." As such, He makes His appeal through us (2 Cor 5:20). When we serve our fellow man, the church is a sounding board for the gospel to a world in need of salvation (1 Thess 1:8). Neglecting such opportunities signifies spurning the opportunity to participate in the mission of God. Such is the situation described in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46.

Setting

The image of the sheep and goats is derived from common pastoral practice in Palestine. Sheep and goats grazed together during the day but at night the shepherd separated them. Sheep prefer the open air and goats need the warmth of a stable.

Also, sheep were worth more than goats and this may have influenced the portrayal of sheep as being righteous and goats as unrighteous. His audience would have been familiar with this pastoral process and its theological application (cf. Ezek 34:17).[1] Regarding the placement of right and left, it has been suggested this refers to the practice by the courts of placing the acquitted on the right and the convicted on the left.[2] The privilege of those on the "right hand" is attested in the Old Testament (Gen 48:13–18). In the Psalms, the "right hand" of God represents shelter from evil and a source of blessings for the faithful (Ps 16:11; 17:7; 18:35). In Matthew 25, those on the "right hand" of the Son of Man are given an inheritance of eternal life.

Interpretation

In Matthew, we are introduced to three parables which teach two principles: how to live wisely

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[1] Craig Keener, *IVP Background Commentary: New Testament*, Olive Tree Bible Software n.p.; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 636.

[2] James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (New Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 470.

and the consequences of doing and not doing.[3] Each stresses the responsibility of disciples and the need to make preparation for the coming judgment of the Son of Man. The final parable brings this message to a climactic end with a judgment scene. The Son of Man judges the nations from His glorious throne. According to Daniel 7:13–14, the Son of Man would reign over the nations in an everlasting kingdom. In the Old Testament, judgment of the nations was reserved for the Lord (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3).[4] In Ezekiel 34:17, the Lord would be the one who separates the sheep and the goats. Both the title "Son of Man" and the task of judging the nations is assigned to Jesus in this parable (cf. Matt 16:27; 19:28; 24:30). While incarnated Jesus lived a lowly life but in this passage Jesus is portrayed in His eternal glory as He judges the nations. He comes in power to inaugurate the final state of affairs.[5]

In this parable, the metaphor of the sheep and goats is dropped in 25:34. The Son of Man directly addresses the righteous, and notes their acts of

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[3] Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 458.

[4] Keener, *Background Commentary*, n.p.

[5] Morris, *Matthew*, 635.

service to fellow believers. Note the phrase "the least of these who are members of my family" (v. 40, NRSV). The list of deeds in the text follows standard deeds in Jewish ethics meeting the three basic human needs: food, shelter, and companionship. The righteous responded to those in need and did whatever the situation demanded.[6] Consequently, they inherited the "kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (v. 34, ESV). Inheriting something is a gift and not earned. Jesus is not advocating righteousness earned by works of merit.[7] Rather, righteousness is demonstrated by a lifestyle of ministering to others. This life is rewarded with an eternal relationship with the Son of Man.

In contrast with the righteous ones, those on the left neglected to meet the needs of others. They were guilty of sins of both omission and commission. Neglecting opportunities to serve others and respond to the Christian witness leads to damnation. Their inheritance was eternal punishment. God originally made no provision for eternal punishment. Once humans and fallen

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[6] Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 378.

[7] Morris, *Matthew*, 637.

angels chose to rebel then a place of punishment was prepared.[8] Contrast their eternal fate with that of the righteous ones. Those who are consigned to punishment have no one to blame but themselves.

Application

The church must be watchful for opportunities to serve, especially those who belong to the "household of faith" (cf. Gal 6:10). Souls in need represent Jesus. Thus, we must minister to those in need as if they are Jesus Himself. A genuine faith is a serving faith. This parable teaches several theological points that are repeated throughout the New Testament.

First, future judgment demands a life of service in the present. The judgment scene demonstrates that righteous deeds reap eternal rewards while neglect leads to damnation. While addressing the issues relating to the final resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul concludes with an exhortation to abound in the work of the Lord (15:58). Such a lifestyle is not lived in "vain" but will be fully rewarded.

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[8] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 379.

Second, the church's righteousness is demonstrated through acts of service. When we neglect those in need or offer words instead of action, James asks, "What good is that?" (Jas 2:16). Such a choice is not the marker of a saving, genuine faith. In fact, James states such faith is "dead" (v. 17). In Matthew 25:31–46, this same form of neglect reaps eternal damnation. Only God can declare a person righteous through His grace. God's grace prepares us for service so that we can demonstrate this declaration of righteousness (Eph 2:10; 2 Tim 2:1).

Third, serving others is serving Jesus. Note how personal the church's ministry is to Christ. He uses the personal pronoun "I" or "me" twenty-three times in 25:35–43. Souls in need represent Jesus Himself. Therefore, we must take advantage of every opportunity to serve others. Such is following in the "footprints of Jesus" (Matt 9:36). The church is the hands and feet of Christ to serve a world in need.

Conclusion

The church must be servant-minded. God has given His people opportunities to do good for others. We must minister to people in need as if they are Jesus Himself. When each part of the body

of Christ is doing their part it leads to the growth of the church (Eph 4:16). Such service pleases the Lord, and this is the aim of Christianity (2 Cor 5:9). The heart of Christianity is a relationship with the Lord, and this relationship is manifested in loving, sacrificial care for others.[9]

Discussion

1. How does the Parable of the Sheep and Goats relate to the overall context of Matthew 25? What is the emphasis of this parable?

2. What is the difference between those on the right hand and those on the left? How does serving our fellow man enable us to participate in God's mission?

3. In Matthew 25:40, Jesus refers to those who received aid as "brothers of Mine" (NASB). What responsibility does the church have toward fellow Christians? Do fellow believers have a greater priority than non-Christians? How does Galatians 6:10 help us understand this?

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[9] Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 263.

4. What does Jesus teach us about the eternal consequences of neglect? What are some ways we can take our Christian responsibility seriously?

5. How does God's grace prepare us for service? (cf. Eph 2:10)