

INTRODUCTION

For the past two years as we've been walking through the Gospel According to Matthew, we've paused to admire every parable and miracle of Jesus. This is message number seventy-eight, and I have six more messages planned in this series. The final messages are all about miracles, so we come today to the last parable Jesus told before the cross, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. It's a parable about judgment.

Unless you've been living in a cave and don't watch TV or read the papers, you are aware of the Casey Anthony trial. Was she guilty or not guilty? A Florida jury deliberated for 11 hours and decided the state had not proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Casey was guilty of murdering her daughter, so they pronounced her not guilty.

That "not guilty" verdict has created a scandal. This trial was surrounded by a media storm and most people think Casey Anthony is guilty. She is scheduled for release today and precautions are being made for her safety. People are angry. KOTV in Tulsa, Oklahoma reported this past week that a woman named Sammy Blackwell was driving her car when she was intentionally rear-ended by a woman who thought she looked like Casey Anthony. Police arrested the driver of the van who rammed Ms. Blackwell and charged her with assault and battery with a deadly weapon. She told police she was "trying to save the children." There is a "Hate Casey Anthony" Facebook page that has 400,000 friends—but I don't know if "friends" is the right word!

Our justice system isn't perfect. Sometimes guilty people go free, and sometimes innocent people go to jail. But I still think it's the best justice system in the world. We live in a land that cherishes the right to a trial by jury and when someone is arrested they are innocent until proven guilty. Can you imagine living in a nation where someone arrested is considered guilty until proven innocent?

But one day, we're all going to stand before Judge Jesus, and the verdict that will be rendered will be perfect. That's because Judge Jesus has perfect knowledge. But as we shall see in this parable, those being judged tried to disagree and argue with the verdict.

Matthew 25:31-46. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 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.

"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.'

"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?"

"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.'

"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. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and 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.' 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?'

"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.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Some commentators want to split hairs about when this judgment takes place in the sequence of the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the return of Christ. I certainly believe those events will happen in a certain sequence and I clarify this in the book I wrote on Revelation. However, I don't think this is primarily a passage about prophecy; it's mainly a parable. In Israel, shepherds often had sheep and goats in the same flock during the day, but at night, the shepherd separated the sheep and the goats. The sheep, which are more defenseless, were herded into a stonewalled sheepfold. The goats, which are more aggressive by nature, were left outside the sheepfold. It was a common sight in Israel to see a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats; and this is the powerful picture Jesus uses to describe how He will judge all people at the end of the world.

Let's learn four important lessons from this final parable of Jesus.

I. There will be a time when Jesus will separate the real believers from the imposters

Jesus' favorite term to identify Himself was the Son of Man. He says the Son of Man will be the One who sits on the throne and makes this judgment. You cannot find a clearer testimony where Jesus claims to be God.

The text says Jesus will be judging "the nations" but you shouldn't think in terms of nations with boundaries like the United States, Canada, or Brazil. The Greek word is *ethne*, which means ethnic groups. We still use the word nation in that way when we talk about the Choctaw nation or the Cherokee nation. Everyone will be a part of this judgment, every ethnic group.

The key to understanding this parable is to realize this is not a judgment between bad people and good people. It's a judgment between two *groups*, both of which profess to belong to the Good Shepherd, Jesus.

Ray Stedman is correct when he wrote: "It is important to note that it is a judgment of sheep and goats, not one of sheep and wolves! Jesus is not choosing between the obviously bad and the obviously good. In the judgment of the sheep and the goats Jesus is distinguishing sharply among persons all of whom profess to be Christians and claim to belong to him as members of the family of God. It is the separation of the hypocrites from the real; of the false from the true."

Sheep and goats sometimes look similar, especially after sheep have been shorn. They even make similar bleating sounds. Even so, the two groups of people in this judgment tend to look the same—they both claim to be followers of Jesus. They both say the same thing: Both groups called the Judge, "Lord." Let me describe the difference between "sheep people" and "goat people."

A. "Sheep" have a servant's heart and naturally help those in need

In the final judgment, the "sheep people" were revealed because they showed love and mercy to those who needed help. Sheep tend to be gentle, docile creatures that follow a shepherd. We speak of being "as gentle as a lamb."

Sheep have a flock mentality. If a lamb in the flock is being threatened, the sheep will provide a protecting circle around that lamb. Sheep seldom attack their own kind. Goats are different by nature.

B. "Goats" have a selfish heart and naturally ignore those in need

In this parable the "goat people" were revealed by their unconcern for those who were in need.

I don't have much experience around either goats or sheep, but I found a website where a woman named Marnie Pehrson raises both goats and sheep and she compared the two. She wrote: "Sheep are generally docile creatures who follow their shepherd in all things. Goats, with their individualistic me-first mentalities, mark a stark contrast to the easy-going, follow-the-leader temperament of sheep." Here's how she describes three of her goats: "These three goats have three distinct personalities, but one thing they have in common is their complete inability to share. They'll knock each other out of the way, fight, and quite literally horn in to get what they want. Wilma is one of the most selfish beasts I've ever seen. Not only does she want all the feed for herself, but she can't stand for Hannah to have a speck of it. Not only does she not share a trough with Hannah, but also she doesn't want Hannah to have a trough of her own. She'll leave her own feed to ram her horns into Hannah's side and drive her away from her food. Wilma makes me think of people who aren't satisfied to have their own success, but can't even tolerate anyone else having some too. This competitive, jealous, scarcity mentality is what gives goats a bad name, and I'm certain it's why Jesus used goats to illustrate the nature of the selfish individuals who do not give their hearts to Him." (Marnie Pehrson)

II. This judgment will determine where you will spend eternity

Surveys have shown about 80% Americans believe in the existence of heaven, and most people think they are going there. Only about 40% of Americans claim to believe in hell. People have

proposed all kinds of theories about the afterlife all the way from Universalism, which says everyone will be saved to reincarnation. But Jesus says there are only two eternal destinies.

Jesus said to the sheep-people: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." (Matthew 25:34). He said to the self-centered goat-people: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41)

Unbelievers love to ask the question, "How could a loving God send people to hell?" But that's a faulty question, because Jesus said hell was never created for human habitation—it was created for the devil and his angel-demons. Second Peter 3:9 tells us "God is not willing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance." People choose hell themselves when they refuse God's free offer of grace and forgiveness.

Notice that these goat-people are not judged because they did something terrible. They didn't commit murder; they weren't child-abusers or drug-pushers. They were judged because of what they FAILED to do: When they encountered needy people, they did nothing.

Notice there is no middle ground here. There is only right or left, and that's it. There are sheep and there are goats. There are no "shoats" or "geep." Sorry, I know that was baaaaaad. At this judgment, sheep are revealed as sheep and goats are revealed as goats. It's not always apparent in this life who is really a Jesus-follower and who isn't, but it will be revealed that day. Remember, sheep and goats may look similar, but they have different natures. Some people may claim to be a follower of Jesus, but they have a self-centered nature that has never been changed by Jesus.

A drama group at a Christian college was performing a biblical play and there was one scene when a character would stand on a trapdoor on the stage and say, "Behold, I descend into hell." A stagehand beneath the stage would open the trapdoor and the character would plunge through and land on a mattress under the stage. The play was well received. One evening the actor playing that part was ill. So another actor, who was quite overweight, took his place. When the stand-in actor said, "Behold, I descend into hell," the stagehand opened the trapdoor, and the actor started his fall; but either he was too large, or the opening was too small because he became hopelessly stuck half way into the trapdoor. There was silence for a while until finally one student in the balcony stood up and said, "Hallelujah, hell is full!" Wouldn't it be great if hell was full? But sadly, it still has a vacancy sign on its gates.

III. Helping those in need doesn't earn your salvation; it is evidence of your salvation

What's the point of this parable? Is Jesus telling you to go out and start feeding the hungry and clothing the naked so you can get into heaven? Absolutely not! That would be earning your salvation. This parable has been misunderstood by some who believe good deeds will get them into heaven. The Bible says in Isaiah 64:6 that even our good deeds are like filthy rags compared to the purity of God's holiness. If you could do anything to earn your salvation, then you could boast about it.

The Bible says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) Suppose a wealthy rancher decided to give me a check for \$1,000,000, just because he liked me. The money is mine if I want it, but I must endorse the check to receive the funds. In no way is signing my name to be considered earning the million dollars; it's just an act of receiving the gift. If someone asked me where I got so much money, I could never say I worked for it. God's grace offers me forgiveness, and it is by faith I endorse the check of grace. But if the rancher later came to me and asked me to feed his cattle one weekend when he was gone, what would be my response? Go hire someone? Nope. Out of gratitude and appreciation for his great gift to me, I would gladly help him. That's a picture of salvation that begins with God's grace, is accepted by my faith and is followed by good works.

Dr. Richard Hoefler has written a book entitled *The Divine Trap* where he makes this observation about our parable: "Sheep and goats are not made sheep and goats by the judgment; they are only identified for what they are. The deeds of mercy which the sheep performed were not works of merit, but evidences of the fact they were sheep and not goats. Therefore, judgment is not a threat of something to be feared in the future, but a warning that one day all people will be revealed for what they are now." (*The Divine Trap*)

Remember, sheep and goats look alike. Both groups claim to belong to the shepherd. But they have different natures. A goat person still retains the self-centered nature we're all born with. A sheep person is someone who has had his or her heart changed by Jesus. They now have the DNA of Jesus, the Lamb of God. They have the compassion-gene implanted in their personality. When Jesus looked on the crowds of suffering people He was moved with compassion. When Jesus has changed us, we demonstrate that change by showing the same compassion He showed to hurting people.

IV. When you show kindness to others it's like showing kindness to Jesus

Jesus mentioned six categories of people who need mercy: the hungry need food; the thirsty need a drink; the naked need clothes; strangers need hospitality; the sick and imprisoned need visits.

To the goats, Jesus said He was in all six of those conditions and they ignored Him. The goats are surprised. They asked, "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, a stranger, sick and in prison?" Jesus said, "When you *didn't* do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me."

Notice also the sheep are surprised too. They asked the same question: "When did we see you in those sad states?" Jesus said, "When you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me." The sheep hadn't shown mercy because they saw Jesus in those hurting people; they showed mercy because they had the merciful nature of their Lord—and they were surprised to discover they had helped Jesus when they helped hurting people.

When Jesus said, "When you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me," exactly WHO are the "brothers?" We don't have to wonder. In Matthew 12 some people came to Jesus and said, "Your brothers are outside looking for you." They were referring to his biological brothers. And Jesus said, "Who are my brothers?" He pointed to His disciples and said, "These

are my brothers...For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:49-50)

But that doesn't mean we restrict our acts of kindness to Christians only, because we can't be sure who really is a sheep and who is a goat! The Bible teaches in many places that we should show kindness to ANYONE in need. "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)

Jesus identifies with His people. When you help them, you help Him. When you hurt them, you hurt Him. When you ignore them, you ignore Him. In Acts 9 when Jesus stopped Saul on the road to Damascus. He didn't ask, "Why are you persecuting Christians?" Instead Jesus said to Saul, "Why are you persecuting ME?"

Edwin Markham wrote a poem entitled "How the Great Guest Came." It's really a Christmas poem about a poor cobbler named Conrad who is told in a dream that Jesus is going to visit his house on Christmas Day. Conrad is so excited that he gets up early and cleans up his house and fixes some food and drink to give to the great guest, Jesus. He calls in his friends and tells them that Jesus is coming that day. I won't read the entire poem, which is rather lengthy, instead I'll pick up toward the end. "His friends went home; and His face grew still/ As he watched for the Shadow across the sill./ He lived the moments o'er and o'er,/ When the Lord should enter his lowly door/ The knock, the call, the latch pulled up,/ The lighted face, the offered cup./ He would wash the feet where the spikes had been,/ He would kiss the hands where the nails went in,/ And then at last, would sit with Him/ And break the bread as the day grew dim./ While the cobbler mused there passed his pane/ A beggar drenched by the driving rain./ He called him in from the stony street/ And gave him shoes for his bruised feet. / The beggar left and there came a crone,/ Her face with wrinkles of sorrow sown./ A bundle of firewood bowed her back,/ And she was spent with the wrench and rack./ He gave her his loaf and steadied her load/ As she took her way on the weary road./ Then to his door came a little child,/ Lost and afraid in the world so wild,/ In the big, dark world. Catching him up,/ He gave him the milk in the waiting cup,/ And led him home to his mother's arms, / Out of the reach of the world's alarms./ The sun went down in the crimson west/ And with it the hope of the blessed Guest./ And Conrad sighed as the world turned gray:/ "Why is it, Lord, that your feet delay? Did you forget that this was the day?"/ Then soft in the silence a Voice he heard: "Lift up your heart, for I have kept my word./ Three times I came to your friendly door;/ Three times my shadow was on your floor./ I was the beggar with the bruised feet; / I was the woman you gave to eat; / I was the child on the homeless street." And Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

CONCLUSION

So are you a sheep or a goat? Check your heart: Do you have a servant's heart always ready to help hurting people or do you have a selfish heart always looking for "What's in it for me?" Remember, both the sheep and goats were professing Christians.

One of the greatest temptations facing a 21st century Christian is have a "consumer mindset" when it comes to church. When someone is looking for a church they often use the phrase "church-shopping." That means they are looking for a church the same way they look for a new

car. They want the most features at the best price. They bring their checklist and want to kick the tires. They say, "I want preaching that makes me feel good. I want quality music that makes me feel happy. I want a children's ministry that is fun for my kids. And I want all of this with as little as I can spend." That's a goat attitude.

Just as there are two kinds of people in this parable, there are usually two attitudes people have when they come to church. It's either "Serve us" or "Service." Church isn't a place you go to say, "Serve us." Instead, it's where we find opportunities and encouragement for "service." So check your heart, are you here to ask, "What can you do for ME?" or "How can I serve the Lord?"

So let's go back to Casey Anthony. What do you really think about the "not guilty" scandal? Oh, I'm not still talking about Casey Anthony, I'm talking about us. If you could pull back the curtain on my life and yours, how many times have we sinned against God, and nobody knew about it? Sins of commission: lust, pride, or lying? Sins of omission: ignoring the needs of others. I don't know about you, but I stand guilty before a Holy God. I'm a sinner to the bone. But on the cross, Jesus took my guilt and accepted my sentence of hell. And because of His grace and mercy, God said, "Not guilty." And although I deserve the punishment of hell, I'm walking free today. That's the "not guilty" scandal of grace. And because He has changed my heart, I want to show His love to everyone who needs it!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*