

## **Series Kingdom Parables**

### **This Message Sheep and Goats**

#### **Scripture Matthew 25:31-46**

Today is the final message in this series on the Kingdom Parables from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus began to teach by means of parables sometime toward the end of His second year of public ministry. By means of the parables, Jesus taught His disciples an incredible number of important spiritual truths. He wanted them to understand that His purpose in coming to earth was to defeat the spiritual powers which were at work in the world, not the political powers. He taught that the physical manifestation of His power and authority would not be revealed until the end of the age. The disciples were taught the value of following the ways of the kingdom of heaven, about the conflict between good and evil which would be the characteristic of this age, and the judgment which would occur at the end of the age. The disciples were taught that they would need perseverance and determination if they were to live as kingdom people in this present age.

Jesus presented the final parables to His disciples just three days before the crucifixion. As they were sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples had asked Jesus for clarification about when the events of the end of the age would happen and what the signs of Jesus' return to earth and the end of the age would be (*Matthew 24:3*). In the beginning of His response, Jesus gave direct answers to the questions, but then He presented a series of parables which emphasized the responsibilities of His disciples during this present age. The parables instructed the disciples to be "watchful" and "expectant," "faithful" in their service, "prepared" for Jesus' return, and "diligent" and "productive" in their use of the resources made available to them.

In the final verses of the Olivet Discourse, the verses we are going to think about today, Jesus described a judgment scene, an event which would occur immediately following His return to earth.

#### **Read Matthew 25:31-46**

Verses 31 and 32 are, for the most part, a straight-forward description of what will happen at the end of this age. But notice in the middle of verse 32: Jesus said that “the nations will be gathered before Him and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.” That little word “as” indicates that the straight-forward statements change into a parable. He will separate people “in the same way” that a shepherd separates one kind of animal from another. The remainder of the passage, verses 33 through 46, which explains the “why” and “how” of the judgment and separation, is in the form of a parable.

In our study of this passage, we need to keep in mind that Jesus was continuing to respond to the specific questions asked by the disciples at the beginning of chapter 24. They wanted to know about the return of Jesus and about the end of the age. This parable, like all the others, provides both general information about His return and more explicit instruction about how the servant followers of Jesus are expected to live in order to please their Master and Lord. How to live in this age is the main lesson for us today.

In the category of general information, Jesus described what would happen when He appears. Verse 31 states that He “will sit on His throne in heavenly glory.” In the context of this passage, the throne will be the place of judgment.

Jesus had previously explained the responsibilities that angels would have at the end of the age. In the parable of the wheat and weeds, Jesus had said, “harvesters will first collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then the wheat will be brought into the barn” (*Matthew 13:30*). In explaining that parable to His disciples, Jesus stated, “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.” He said that the angels would throw all who were evil into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, after which the righteous, the good grain, “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (*Matthew 13:40-43*).

In explaining the parable of the fishing net, Jesus had said, “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (*Matthew 13:49-50*).

The statement in verses 31-32 is another description of what will happen at that time of judgment. The angels will gather all people before the throne of Jesus. The righteous will hear Jesus say, "Come, take your inheritance." The wicked will hear, "Depart from me, you who are cursed." After He renders judgment, that is, after He divides the wicked from the righteous, the angels will cast the wicked into the furnace of eternal fires, and the righteous will enter into their kingdom inheritance.

The text states that "All the nations," will be gathered before the throne of Jesus. The literal translation is "all people groups." However, as we look deeper into the text, we discover that the parable is focused on individual persons, not on groups. The sheep and goats represent individuals, not socio and ethno-linguistic groups. Every individual still alive when Jesus returns will be subject to judgment.

In the parable, both the sheep and the goat groups were surprised by the outcome of their judgment. The sheep were surprised that they were invited into the kingdom on the basis of the work they had done; the goats were shocked that they were not.

The questions asked by the members of the two groups are very revealing of their attitudes. During their ministry efforts, the sheep people never physically saw the Lord, yet they ministered to the needs of people and thereby served Jesus. The goat people saw lots of needy people around them but they provided no help to them, although, they insisted, if they had seen Jesus, they would have provided help.

The attitudes of both the sheep and the goat people were revealed by their behaviors, but they were ultimately judged on the basis of their inner attitudes and motives. Let me try to explain the connection between attitudes and behavior, and why attitude is the ultimate factor considered by Jesus in His judgment of people.

Our attitudes and behaviors are constantly evaluated by God. He knows what we do and how we think. The sheep people and the goat people were not aware of that fact, but during their lifetimes, their attitudes and behaviors had been tested and evaluated by Jesus. If the goat people had known that their lives were being tested, and if they had known that a good grade on the test required them to visit needy people in the hospitals or prisons, and to give food to hungry people, then, as they said, they would have been glad to do these activities. They would have been glad because it would be the means to receiving a good grade.

However, there would still be the problem of attitude and motive. If the conditions for getting a good grade had been known ahead of time, then these goat people would have worked just to pass the examination, not because they were concerned about needy, lonely, and hungry people. The goat people were rejected in the judgment because they were not genuinely concerned about others, and therefore did not please the King.

Now let's think about the sheep people. They, like the other group, were not aware that their behavior was being examined and would be the basis of judgment. Yet they visited in the hospitals and prisons, and gave away food. Why? Because they loved other people. They did not do their good deeds to get good marks. Grades were not their primary motive. That is why they were surprised at the affirming response of the King. The point is that the sheep had not shown love in order to gain an eschatological reward but because of their loving, compassionate attitudes towards others.

If the goat people had thought that their treatment of others would gain them eschatological acceptance, they would undoubtedly have been more loving and compassionate, at least outwardly. However, Jesus was looking into their lives more deeply than just their physical actions. He was looking for righteousness in the whole person, a righteousness that comes from the heart. Jesus was looking to see if they had the character of a kingdom person.

Kingdom people are those whose lives are aligned with the standards of the kingdom. They are the people who are moved by the distresses and afflictions of others. They are concerned about both physical and spiritual needs. People who are aligned with the standards of the kingdom will be aligned with the Messiah, who identified Himself with down-and-out people when He was in the world. He was Himself poor and an outcast. He consorted with lepers, mourners, tax-collectors, prostitutes, those who were lonely. He continues to identify Himself with the humble, deprived, exploited, and neglected people of this age.

True disciples will be filled with the love of God, and hence, they will love one another and serve the needs of others with compassion, and in so doing they serve as the hands and feet of Jesus. Patterns of behavior are not developed through occasional, sporadic actions or choices. A pattern of faithful God-pleasing service is determined by a person's habitual "lifestyle." By "lifestyle" I mean what the person does naturally and consistently without having to stop and think about rightness and wrongness in some analytical way. "Lifestyle" is "second-nature" behavior. The person whose natural inclinations have been changed from within by the Holy Spirit will think in ways and act in ways which are pleasing to God. Holy Spirit controlled actions are reflexive, automatic, and instinctive, without any self-serving motive.

The good works of the sheep people were the evidence of who they really were inside. Their works were evidence of their inner attitudes and motivations. They had lived as authentic kingdom people. They fulfilled the purposes God had for their lives.

What Jesus said to the sheep people was, in essence, "In your daily life and conduct, you have proved that you are my true disciples." Jesus did not compliment the sheep people because they had prophesied in His name, or cast out demons, or had performed mighty works. The sheep people were simply unpretentious but sincere followers who honored Jesus in the ordinary activities of their lives.

The evidence of membership in the kingdom of heaven is not loud profession, nor spectacular spiritual accomplishments, nor proclamations of great spiritual experience. Many professing Christians have a very impressive spiritual vocabulary. They recite the creeds and sing hymns of faith. Many professing Christians are busily involved in good deeds and beneficial activities in church fellowships and in their communities. For many of these professing Christians, good deeds have become a substitute for doing the will of the Father. Sadly, these professing Christians assume that their good deeds will guarantee their favorable standing on the day of judgment, but such activities, in and of themselves, are not evidence that a person has a relationship with Jesus. As a result, Jesus will tell many people, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers."

Jesus is not necessarily impressed by our pious behavior and orthodox words. The evidence that He wants to see is our yieldedness and obedience to His instructions. The fruit that God looks for in our lives is a growing conformity to the standards of the kingdom: standards of righteousness, holiness, humility, trust, prayerfulness, honesty, love, generosity. These are the qualities which give evidence of obedience.

Jesus proclaimed 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.” The inheritance mentioned here is, for believers, the final step on the pathway into eternity. The full experience of heaven is available to kingdom people who are faithful on earth. They will be welcomed into the place which had been prepared and reserved for them by the Father.

Let me summarize the lessons of kingdom parables. The parables in the Olivet Discourse have revealed to us, as modern day disciples, what Jesus expects of us in this age. Through the parables Jesus has instructed us to be “watchful” and “expectant,” so that His return does not catch us by surprise. He expects us to be “faithful” in our service for Him no matter how long it will be before He returns. He expects us to be “prepared” for His return, and to be “diligent” and productive in our use of the spiritual resources made available to us. And from the parable we have thought about today, we have learned that Jesus expects us to live with self-sacrificing love.

Jesus taught that love for God is evidenced by love for neighbors. Our experience of God’s forgiveness should lead us to show mercy to others. Our experience of God’s love should lead to the extending of God’s love to others.

**Some things that the passage tells us:**

- \*All people are accountable for how they live.
- \*All people will be brought face to face with the Judge, Jesus.
- \*There will be great surprises on the day of accountability.
- \*All people will not go to the same eternal destination.
- \*The proof of true discipleship is love for others.