

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 32: The Sheep and the Goats -- Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus has been teaching about His coming through pictures: a bridegroom at midnight, a master settling accounts. Now He pulls back the curtain and shows us the thing itself. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne" (v. 31). The carpenter from Nazareth, the one being plotted against in the very next chapter, describes Himself seated on a throne of glory with the nations gathered before Him. This is where all of history is heading.

And then He does something tender and terrifying at once. He separates the people "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats," the sheep on His right, the goats on His left. To the sheep He says, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." To the goats He says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire." One gathering. Two destinies. No third option, and no appeal.

What is most striking is the basis He gives. The King points to the hungry who were fed, the thirsty given drink, the stranger welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick and imprisoned visited. And both groups are surprised. "Lord, when did we see you?" The King answers with words that should change how we look at every overlooked person we will meet this week: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Real faith, it turns out, has hands and feet. It shows up with a meal and a visit.

This is the last great scene before the cross, and Jesus means for it to lodge in us. He is the coming King and the final Judge. The day is real, the stakes are eternal, and the evidence of a living faith is a life poured out in love for the people He loves. So we come to this passage not to be scared, but to be searched, and to let the King who will one day judge us teach us now how to live.

Group Discussion: Jesus says that whatever we do, or fail to do, for the least of these we do to Him (vv. 40, 45). How does it change the way you see the overlooked people around you to realize that Christ identifies Himself with them?

Personal Reflection: Both the sheep and the goats were surprised; neither realized they had been serving or ignoring the King (vv. 37-39, 44). What does that surprise reveal about how genuine love actually operates, and where might you be missing Christ in the people right in front of you?

Read Matthew 25:31-46

Study Questions

1. Jesus describes Himself coming “in his glory, and all the angels with him,” seated on His glorious throne to judge the nations (vv. 31–32). What does this scene reveal about who Jesus truly is, and how does it compare with the way the world saw the carpenter from Nazareth?
2. The King says, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (v. 40). Who are the overlooked people in your life that Jesus may be asking you to treat as though you were serving Him?
3. The King separates all people into only two groups, sheep and goats, with two destinies (vv. 32–33, 46). What does this teach about the reality and finality of the judgment, and why is there comfort as well as sobriety in the truth that Christ Himself is the Judge?
4. The righteous are genuinely surprised, asking, “Lord, when did we see you hungry?” (vv. 37–39). What does their surprise reveal about how true, humble love operates, and how is that different from doing good deeds to be noticed?
5. Jesus presents acts of mercy, feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting, as the evidence that distinguishes the sheep (vv. 35–36). What is the relationship between genuine saving faith and a life of practical love, and how do we hold this together with salvation by grace?
6. The goats are condemned not for doing evil things but for failing to act, the meal not given, the stranger not welcomed (vv. 42–45). Where are you most prone to the sins of omission, the good you could do but leave undone?

7. The King tells the sheep to “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). What does it mean that this inheritance was prepared before creation, and how should the certainty of that prepared kingdom shape the way you live now?
8. Both groups address Jesus as “Lord” (vv. 37, 44), yet only one group is welcomed. How does this challenge you to examine whether your own faith is showing up in action, not just in words and worship?
9. Jesus speaks plainly of “eternal punishment” and “eternal life” as the two final outcomes (v. 46). How does the Bible’s teaching on one final judgment and two eternal destinies confront both the idea that everyone will be saved in the end and the idea of a future earthly kingdom that bypasses this judgment?
10. Looking back over this final scene before the cross, name one specific person or need where you will let your love for Christ take concrete shape this week, so that your faith is shown to be alive.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 7:21–23, the difference between calling Jesus Lord and doing the Father’s will; James 2:14–17, faith without works being dead; 1 John 3:16–18, loving not in word only but in deed and truth; Galatians 5:6, faith working through love; 2 Corinthians 5:10, all appearing before the judgment seat of Christ.