

Loving Jesus through our neighbours

Loving our Neighbours

Matthew 25:31-46

Dan Hoffman

~On Judgment Day King Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats based on how they loved their neighbours~

If you've ever seen a show on TV called "Under Cover Boss" you know how this works. Some high level CEO leaves his desk job and regular tasks behind to work alongside some of his low level employees. This enables him to figure out what is really going on in his company.

Sometimes the boss finds out things aren't as easy as he expected as he has to grunt his way through menial labour, and sometimes he finds out that his employees aren't doing what they should be. At the end of the show when the disguise comes off the faces of the employees say it all. Everyone is shocked.

Those who have been model workers feel appreciated, knowing that their boss knows how hard they work, while those who have been lazy are undoubtedly thinking "if only I had known this was my boss I would have worked a little harder!"

Today we come to our last text in our series and another familiar but surprising teaching by Jesus. Please open your Bibles to Matthew 25 and follow along. Matthew 25:31-46

[Read Matthew 25:31-46]

[Pray]

The big idea of this text is as follows: **On Judgment Day King Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats based on how they loved their neighbours.**

I'd like to start off today by saying that I hope you have enjoyed and been challenged as we looked at the words of Christ throughout this series. I know for myself I certainly have. Just to let you in on a little of what I go through when I prepare a sermon when I pick a text I have a general sense of how it will fit in with the series that I am preaching through, but only in a very general sense. And I choose my texts and outline my series between half a year and a year in advance.

But then when Tuesday morning comes around and I look at my wall chart and the text I will be preaching out of this week my goal is not to bring my preconceived ideas to the text, but rather to let the text speak fresh to me.

The result is I never know how the sermon is going to turn out until it is done. And that allows me to be challenged and surprised by the text as much as anyone else. It also means the title on the sign outside might not watch what you get on the screen behind me.

And that certainly has been my experience throughout this series. Here is why:

If you divide Protestantism into two categories, Conservative Protestantism and Liberal Protestantism there are usually a few stereotypes that go along with both. And stereotypes are just generalizations so they aren't always true, but many times they are.

Conservative Protestants like ourselves generally take a very high view of scripture – which we do. We believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God.

On the other side Liberal Protestants have generally held a much lower view of Scripture. Some even saying that we can't be sure Jesus actually said any of the words that are in red in our Bibles.

But regardless of their different views of scripture both Liberals and Conservatives have favorite scriptures that they use a lot, and others that they tend to shy away from. Conservatives tend to like those that speak about faith. And Liberals tend to like those that talk about good works.

Here's the problem. Conservative Christians know, at least intellectually, that we don't get to choose which scriptures we like and which ones we don't. Instead we have to read the whole Bible and hold together both what we like and what we don't.

And today's text is one of those that generally Liberal Christians like and Conservatives shy away from. The evidence for this was that as I was studying this week one of the stages in my writing process includes looking at what some of my favorite preachers have said on the topic. And so I go to excellent conservative preachers like John Piper who have thousands of sermons on their websites, and I'm shocked that in 32 years of preaching my hero hasn't hardly touched this passage. That bothers me.

And what this shows me is that truth, capital T truth is not found in human traditions like conservative or liberal. Capital T truth is only found in Jesus Christ who said things that make both liberals and conservatives uncomfortable. But Jesus said He was "the way the truth and the life" and so that's where I want to

go. I want to find and understand Jesus, I want the truth and I hope you do as well.

And so today we are looking at a text that makes me uncomfortable. It has stuff in it that honestly I don't fully understand. But it is an incredibly important text especially because it is the last teaching that Jesus gave.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew starts in chapter 5 with the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, and it ends here in chapter 25 with this text. This is Jesus' final sermon as it were. And it's a sermon about Judgment day, and where we all end up.

So with that extended introduction come with me to the first part of our big idea:
On Judgment Day King Jesus...

Look at verse 31

[Read Matthew 25:31-32a]

This is an absolutely jaw dropping scene. The second coming of Jesus is not something anyone is going to miss. The Son of Man, which is Jesus' favorite way of referring to Himself, will come on that day in all His glory.

I've been in a couple of millionaire's houses who have some pretty nice toys, but I've never been within a hundred kilometers of a Billionaire – at least not that I know of. But I have seen a couple of Billionaire parties on TV. They are amazing! The poorest people there are 1000 times richer than the richest people I've ever met. Hundreds of servants, everything is gold and diamonds and hand-made exotic cars. It's as glorious as humanly possible.

But this is no little billionaire we are talking about, this is the Creator of the Universe sitting on His glorious throne that Revelations 4 tells us is made of rainbows of precious stones and flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. And here He comes accompanied by all the angels in Heaven – how many is that? I don't know – and surrounded by all the nations in the world – billions and billions of people of every different color and race and political preference and economic position. All focused on Jesus.

One thing is for sure, it will be impossible to miss that day. In the previous chapter Jesus tells us

“If anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24:26-27)

In this moment there will be no denying that Jesus is King; that there is no other God but Him and that He deserves all the worship and praise in the universe. There will be no debate.

Can you see the glory? The millions of powerful angels surrounding Him. All the color and light, not shining on but shining from the One throne, and the One being who holds the very universe in His hands.

There is no space big enough or glorious enough on earth for King Jesus' Judgment Day. And its out of that context that we get the second part of our text:

And On Judgment Day King Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats...

Look at verse 32

[Read Matthew 25:32-33]

Jesus says all the nations will be here, every different group of people will be here, the rich and the poor will be here, every adherent of every religion or non-religion in the world will be here. There is no group that is standing off to the side, who is excused from being part of this Judgment day – everyone will be here.

And while there are almost limitless different ways to categorize people on earth, on that day everything will boil down to one position or the other and the greatest sorting event that has ever occurred will take place.

Glorious King Jesus will separate people into two groups. And here is where we get the only parabolic language in this text. Jesus will separate people like a shepherd separates His sheep from His goats in the evening.

In the first century shepherds would have flocks of sheep and goats and they would graze together in the fields. But at night when they would return home to their pens they would be housed separately. And the shepherd with his staff would stand at the divide between the two pens and herd the sheep into one pen and the goats into the other.

And notice verse 32 says “Jesus will separate ***the people*** – the nations that have gathered before Him – as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” The point here is that this separation is both easy and conclusive.

First it is and an easy separation. Now for us city slickers the thought of how to get 50 sheep into one pen and 50 goats into another could be a little challenging, but for a shepherd this poses no difficulty. The shepherd had no problem identifying who was who. And it's the same thing for Jesus. At this point in history everything is clear. There is no difficulty for Him to determine who is who

– it's as easy as separating sheep from goats. Fords from Chevys, John Deers from everything else. It's easy!

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And second it is conclusive because there is no way anyone is in the wrong. One goat in a pen full of sheep sticks out like a soar thumb.

And there is no appeal process or petition that the animals can sign to get them into the other pen. When the gates are shut for the night that is the way they stay.

And that's what Jesus says will happen on Judgment Day. All humanity will be divided in two. All previous divisions and subdivisions among people will be abolished in this moment and a great distinction will be drawn (Jesus says in verse 46) that will remain forever.

And this thought is grave enough on it's own, but it leads us to ask "on what criteria will people be divided into these two groups? Why are some sheep and others goats?" And most importantly "how do I make sure I'm a sheep?"

And here we get to the last section in our thesis and the part that makes conservative Christians uncomfortable:

On Judgment Day King Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats based on how they loved their neighbours.

Look again with me at verses 34 and following

[Read Matthew 25:34-40]

First to those on His right Jesus tells them in verse 34 that they are blessed of His Father, they have an inheritance they are entitled to and this has all been in the works from the very beginning.

And that seems all very acceptable, until we begin to look at why they made the cut. And the following verses are certainly difficult and raise questions for us. I would like to deal with two questions that they raised for me.

First, what kinds of actions are people commended and chastised for here? They are different then I thought.

And second what do we do with Jesus' works theology in these verses? Everything people in this text are commended or chastised for has to do with what they did rather than what they believed!

So first let's look at what kinds of actions Jesus commends in this section. Starting in verse 35 Jesus gives six examples of what those on His right who are blessed by God did. He says when they encountered Him hungry or thirsty or as a stranger or naked or sick or in prison they ministered to Him – they helped Him.

But the ministry they provided, Jesus says, was nothing remarkable. This is particularly evident in verse 36 where Jesus says “I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Jesus could have said “I was sick and you cured me, I was in prison and you liberated me”, but He doesn't. The ministry that these people offered Jesus was ministry that anyone could do.

And here is the point. There are very few people on earth who are unable to minister to those around them as Jesus calls for here. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, or intelligent or stupid or old or young, all people are able to do the things Jesus calls for here.

Jesus says the sheep saw the people around them who were in need and simply were with them! Commentator Dale Brunner notes “Whatever we call them, these ministries are within the reach of every one of us; every person has access to Christ through a needy person.”¹

And it is those kinds of simple services to the needy that allow the sheep to help Jesus.

But, second, what do we do about the absence of faith talk in this passage? Salvation and damnation here are dependant entirely upon the deeds of these people rather than their faith.

You can see why conservatives have been wary to deal with this while liberals have concluded “yes, here it is in black and white, salvation has everything to do with good works and very little to do with right doctrine and faith – after all Jesus doesn't even mention faith in His final teaching.

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A few weeks ago you may remember we settled the debate between predestination and free will once for all, which caused some choking from a certain young theologian sitting in the front row.

But after the sermon as far as I know that theologian hasn't petitioned the deacons to have me thrown out on charges of heresy so today I want to speak to a more important issues and answer the debate between salvation by works and salvation by faith once for all.

¹ Brunner, Dale “The Church Book: Matthew 13-28” (W.B. Eerdman's Pub Co: Grand Rapids), 2004. pg 570

In my experience this has been something we talk about without acknowledging that there are two very strong sides to the issue. And when we come to texts like this one us conservatives usually read it quickly and put it aside and instead focus on other texts that seem to agree with our position like where Paul says:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Or even where Jesus makes it clear that salvation is by faith in Him when He says:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies (John 11:25)

But by reading only these verses and excluding others that don't seem to agree we actually cut ourselves off from the truth... So how do we hold those texts in tension with texts like today's?

Well, I think the best answer comes down to the fact that there are actually two theologies of works as they relate to salvation in the Bible. And it is the confusion of these two that has caused the whole hang up over salvation by faith alone.

So first, when Paul writes about "works" he is arguing against a notion that Christians follow Jesus but still must keep all the Old Testament Laws in order to gain the favor and ultimately the salvation of God. And he calls these kind of works "Works of the Law".

We can see this in texts like Galatians 3 where Paul says:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith." (Galatians 3:10-11)

Or in Ephesians where he says:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Salvation is something that is given undeservedly to us by God and is received through faith. There is nothing in this formula that we bring of our own effort. Salvation is not by works of the Law but by faith alone.

But works for Jesus is something different altogether. Jesus agrees with Paul that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, but for Him when He talks

about works – which He does a lot – they are the works of response that prove God is at work within us.

Paul’s “works” talk about earning salvation – which he denies; while Jesus’ “works” talk about what we do because we are saved – which He affirms.

Like we saw last week in Luke’s Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said:

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:36)

We are commanded to be people of mercy, but we are enabled to obey the command because we are already children of God.

So, while works for Jesus don’t earn us our salvation, they are a clear sign of whether or not God has indeed saved us and that is why Jesus can also say:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

Those who are saved will do works of response. And of course Paul agrees with this as well. He says:

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. (Titus 2:11-12)

The self-controlled, upright and godly works that people do are not things that earn salvation here, but come about because God’s grace works within us.

So like it was with the debate between Predestination and free will, the answer to the debate between faith and works is “yes”. Yes salvation is by faith alone and yes everyone who is saved proves this with good works. Or as James says:

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:17)

But this also means that in our passage today all the works that Jesus commends can only be done if His saving grace is already at work within us.

It is impossible for non-Christians to love like Jesus loved because, as we saw last week, Jesus’ call to love means so much more than being nice, it means “doing to our enemies what we wish they would do to us even though we know they won’t.” Nobody can do this without Christ at work within them!

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In the latter half of the text Jesus deals with the goats but the only thing I want to say here is to point out how both the sheep and the goats were surprised by Jesus' decision about them.

The sheep are surprised that their good deeds were that big a deal – and they were surprised because Jesus' heart had so filled them that they thought nothing of what they were doing their actions of love seemed small to them. While the goats on the other hand were surprised that their lack of good deeds were a big deal.

The sense when it comes to the goats is that many had lived good lives, perhaps some were even outstanding church members or even pastors who had grown successful thriving churches, but yet had failed to have Christ's heart for the people around them and had therefore proved that they were never saved in the first place.

As Jesus says again at the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7:22-23)

In the end we can see that it is the simple love of neighbour that is so basic that anyone is capable of doing it, and yet is impossible such that we can only do it when Jesus lives within us and it is this love within us that will separate us from the goats.

Friends, brothers and sisters of Fort George. It is here that we will close this series with the realization that we have indeed been hired into the company of Christ. And here Jesus lets us in on a little secret: that our boss and King is working and living right along side us such that the actions we do or don't do to the nobodies living beside us, even to those we can't stand or look down on, are actions we do or don't do to Christ Himself. Friends we have an undercover boss, and He lives out there!

And so we can conclude **On Judgment Day**, we will all stand among the multitudes and **King Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats based on how we loved our neighbours.**