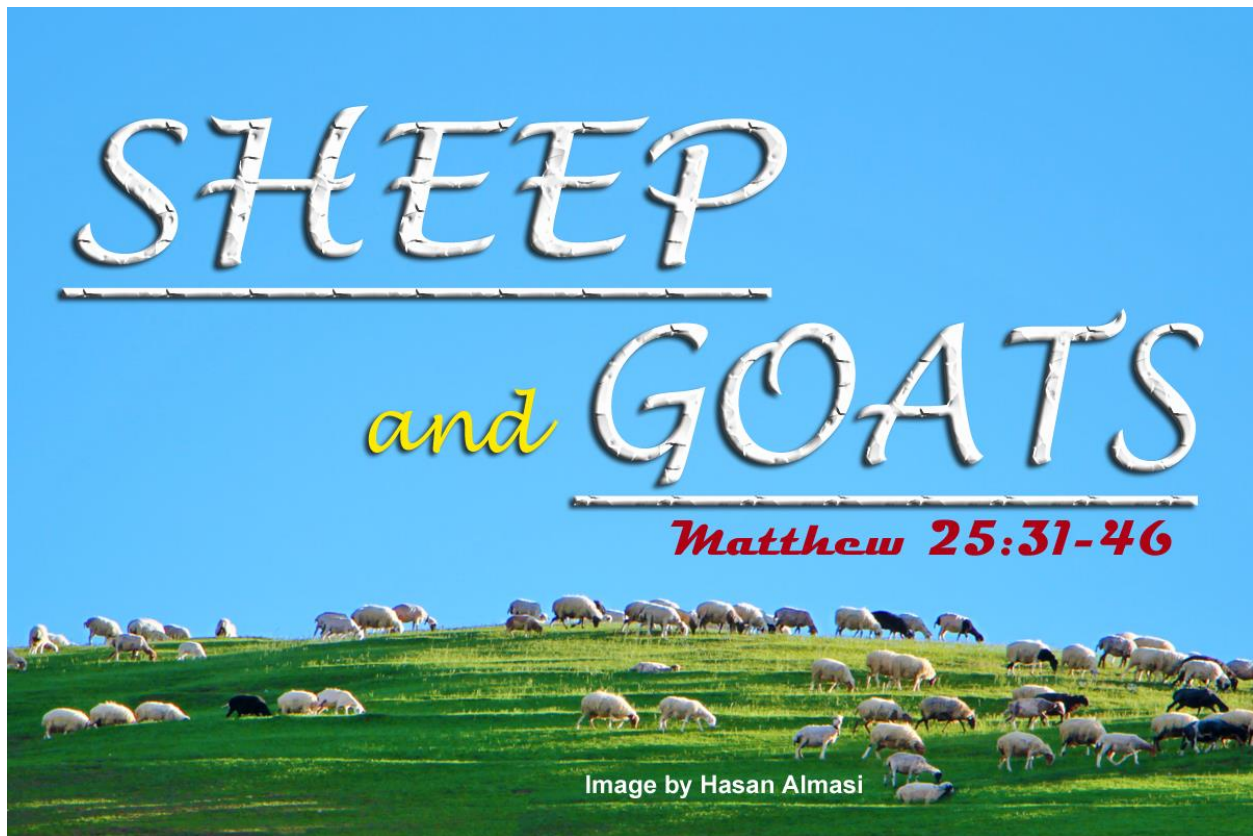


July 19, 2020

Sheep and the Goats



Matthew 25:31-46

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

32 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.

33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 “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.

35 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,

36 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.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

41 “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.

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

43 I was a stranger and you 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.’

44 “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?’

45 “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Special Music: Jamie Kimmett – Love your Neighbor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9N4o-hqV6A>

Raising sheep is the oldest organized industry on the planet. Sheep are, by nature, both extremely intelligent and extremely unwise. They know their own names, can sense emotions, and know the voice of their keeper. If you allow different herds to join together while feeding, they will find and follow their individual herders when called. Their wool is constantly growing and will continue to grow even if they are not sheared. They have best friends in the herd, are extremely independent when born and are community oriented in their lifestyle. But, they are also given to a lack of wisdom. Sheep are grazers. If a sheep sees a crop of green grass on a ledge below a cliff, it will often jump down to that ledge without pondering how they is going to get back up. When this happens, the shepherd will often let the sheep starve for several days. This is not cruelty on the part of the shepherd, but a common practice when shepherding. If the shepherd immediately tries to retrieve the sheep, the sheep will struggle with all its strength making the retrieval process extremely difficult. However, if the shepherd waits a few days before trying to retrieve the sheep, then the sheep will be weak from hunger and more prone to cooperate as the rope is fastened around it and it is lifted back up the cliff. Sheep are loyal to a fault and provide comfort both to their fellow sheep and human companions.

In many ways, goats are somewhat opposite from sheep when it comes to the social graces. While a sheep is geared towards empathizing with its fellow sheep and its human protectors, goats get depressed when they do not have other goats to associate with. They are more into receiving compassion than giving it.

They are herd animals in the respect that they need community for their own mental stability. They are foragers, not grazers. They are not fond of grass and the parasite found in grass will often make them ill. They are very good climbers and in their natural habitat they will go to extremes to munch on baby trees and small bushes that we would think would be out of reach. After being born, a kid will develop a unique call that its mother will recognize, allowing her to pick it out of a crowd. They can learn their own names and can also learn to come when called.

For the most part, sheep and goats will ignore each other if they share the same pasture. They truly are two different kinds of animals with different kinds of needs. While both are herd animals, Sheep are truly born empaths with a desire to comfort others, while goats are more needy and somewhat self-focused with a desire to be comforted.

Matthew 25 is all about parables, stories that exemplify how we should live our lives. The first parable is the story of the 10 virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom but five of them forget to fill their lamps with oil and had to return home to refill their lamps and by doing so, missed meeting the bridegroom

Another parable in Matthew 25, is the story of the master of the house who called three of his servants to him and entrusted them with bags of gold while he went

on a journey. The story tells of how two of the servants invested the gold and provided a greater sum for their master when he returned home, but the third, buried his bag and could only return what his master had given him, which was a great disappointment.

The third parable is the parable of the Sheep and the Goats which is the focus of our message today. This well-known parable creates a beautiful image of how Christ returns and sits upon His throne, surrounded by angels and all the nations are gathered before Him. In the parable, Jesus separates the people, represented by sheep and goats, into two groups. Basically, these groups are the givers and the takers, the sheep and the goats. We can see from our understanding of sheep and goats why Jesus would pick this analogy. As we talked about, while both sheep and goats are herd animals, their approach to the sense of community created by a herd is different. While the sheep are interested in nurturing one another, the goats have a desire to be nurtured.

Jesus had a way of simplifying the complex through the use of stories, to bring the important matters of living life on this planet into focus. I have to admit that sometimes we read a lot more into these parables than what the stories are telling us. In the parable of the Sheep and Goats, it specifically says that He, Jesus, will separate the people. That He will decide who has lived the life of a sheep, and who has lived the life of a goat. Who has been a giver, and who has been a taker.

But sometimes, we feel that there is a verse missing from the story that reads something like “And He will appoint certain shepherds to undertake the task of separating the sheep from the goats.” There is nothing in this story that tells us that Jesus will appoint any man to stand in judgement over his people and he isn’t looking for volunteers. Why do we assume that Jesus needs our help with this? Why do we feel the need to question the lives of others, when the Jesus specifically wants each of us to examine our own perceptions of community and how we participate within the greater herd?

Yes, the analogy does short when we understand that we are not goats and sheep. A goat cannot pick to be born a sheep and a sheep cannot pick to be born a goat. In our world of black and white, where Paul declares in **Romans 3:23** “**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” and David exclaims in **Psalm 51:5** “**Surely I was sinful at Birth and sinful from the time my mother conceived me,**” we have to admit that we are all given to being goats. We simply can’t, and shouldn’t, try to get around the fact that we are all born goats. And if we want to be sheep, we have to be born again with a new attitude. We have to choose to be reborn as sheep. It isn’t an automatic process. By the very essence of our nature, we are born as selfish goats, where our only desire is to be nurtured. We have to choose to reverse that inherent nature and allow God to transform us from creatures given to self-nurturing into creatures with an desire for nurturing others.

Christians choose to be Christians. We choose to follow Christ. We choose to live our lives as servants of our living God and also as servants of our fellow human beings. If we do not choose this path, we will remain goats. And while there are some nice goats in the world, they cannot know the same joy of fellowship with God that we come to know as sheep. They may serve people out of compassion or a sense of justice, but they do so without having the resources and guidance of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The lack of that presence often leads to depression and helplessness as the demands on their time, resources and empathy exceed their capacity to provide. As sheep, we have a limitless supply through our common relation with Jesus Christ and with our fellow sheep.

The story of Zacchaeus found in Luke 19, speaks to this process of realizing that we are goats and then choosing to become sheep.

- 1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.**
- 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.**
- 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.**
- 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.**
- 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”**
- 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.**

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

9 Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.

10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Zacchaeus knew he was a goat. He wasn't just a tax collector. He was a chief tax collector. And he was very good at his job. He was so good at his job, in fact, that the Romans had put him in charge of other tax collectors. He was a shining example of what a tax collector should be. Which also means that he was despised by his fellow Jews since he was a Jew enforcing an overwhelming tax burden on the Israelites in his area. He probably had few friends and when the Sadducees and Pharisees talked about Jesus' morals, they talked about how Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors in the same sentence. Two classes of people that no Jew wanted to be associated with. Zacchaeus was boxed in. He had been put in the pigeonhole of people that good Jews should avoid at all costs. Even if he stopped being a tax collector, everyone would still think of him in that particular light. I truly believe that he was looking for an out and believed that Jesus might be it.

Of course, he had no way of knowing what Jesus had planned but he went to extraordinary lengths to catch a glimpse of this man that might offer him at least a glimmer of hope in escaping his current situation. He climbed that sycamore tree with a hope of finding Jesus, never anticipating that Jesus wanted to find him.

But that is often the experience of looking for answers to life's most difficult problems. We are seeking answers. We are looking for people who can take away our pain or can speak into our pain. We are searching and see Jesus as an opportunity to change the nature of our existence, only to find out, Jesus was never hiding from us to begin with. Jesus is offering us a way out, a way to change, a way to leave our goathood behind and, for lack of a better term, embrace our inner sheep.

That transformation from goat to sheep can be instantaneous and dramatic. It can also take time to leave our past behind and allow Christ to manifest himself through us. And sometimes, it is totally dependent on how desperate we are to change. Zacchaeus was desperate, and the change was immediate. He didn't hesitate to accept Jesus' invitation. He didn't hesitate to do a complete 180 on his life. He saw the opportunity that Jesus laid out before him and jumped through the door, leaving his life of isolation and misery to enter a life of generosity and nurturing.

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Jesus invited himself to dinner. He didn't ask Zacchaeus to change. Zacchaeus made a split-second decision on the spot to be all in. If Jesus, this prophet who could heal the sick, raise the dead, feed the 5000, a man who obviously carried the spirit of God wherever he went, could stoop to entering his house and break bread with him, the chief among sinners, then he could undergo the transformation that he knew was necessary to reconstruct his lot in life. He could choose to become a giver rather than a taker.

Read that verse again:

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

That is a verse of joy. A verse of understanding. That verse is Zacchaeus Claiming Freedom. Claiming Freedom outside of the cage that he had shut the door on to keep others out. Claiming the Freedom that can only come to a person who realizes that the joy in life is through serving and giving to others.

And Jesus joins in his enthusiasm and joy by proclaiming:

9 Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.

10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

It is the embodiment of the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus had told his followers just a short while before and can be found in Luke 15.

“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. ”

The same is true of the Parable of the Lost Sheep or the Parable of the Lost Coin, both also found in Luke 15. The angels in heaven rejoice when we choose to become sheep and leave our life of goathood behind, when we choose to seek out the joy of allowing Christ to change us, to sit at our table, to use us to make a difference. When we have that moment of revelation where we understand that Christ was reaching out to us all along, and inviting Himself into our lives, and all we had to do was embrace that change, allow ourselves to be used by our loving and purposeful God. There is joy when we Claim Freedom over isolation, Freedom over confinement, Freedom over constraint. There is joy in realizing that the cage door was open all along, we just needed to climb the sycamore tree and allow Jesus to show us that it was open.

34 “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.

35 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,

36 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.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

My prayer for you is that you know the joy of being a sheep in a world dominated by goats. I pray that each of you finds your Zacchaeus moment and experiences the transformation that Zacchaeus discovered. There is no hope in remaining a goat. The joy that you find with a relationship with Christ far surpasses any gain you will ever know as a goat. All you need do is make the choice and Claim the

Freedom that Christ offers. He is inviting Himself to dinner. Are you willing to let Him join you at the table?

AMEN

Copyright © 2020 Rev. Walt Wellborn

Scripture references provided under copyright by:

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.