

December 30, 2018  
Lesson 5: Modeling God's Love  
Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

**Context:**

Our lesson in loving God jumps from the infancy narrative of Jesus to the end of his ministry when he speaks in parables to those who have gathered to hear him preach. The scripture given for this morning is known as The Last Judgment. Are you a goat or a sheep is the question that Jesus asks as he sits on the throne.

The background of the passage comes from Jesus's teachings and some of the early concerns of the early church. In the text there is the specific mention that this day will be when "all the nations" have gathered in front of him. The translation of the word "nations" in Jewish Greek was a technical term designating non-Jewish individuals; similar to the word for Gentile.<sup>1</sup> Thus, "all the Gentiles" refer to pagans who are neither Jewish proselytes nor converts to Christianity.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus speaks to the crowds, he is answering a specific question about a specific group of people.

Given the state of early Christians trying to figure out how to think about their pagan neighbor, this teaching would have helped the crowds understand what truly mattered in following Jesus. Jesus uses the parable to make a point about his identity and how people are to respond to him. While some want to pinpoint that Jesus is talking about a specific time or place, he is actually making a bigger statement about how we are to view our neighbor in the here and now.

For Jesus, there are two groups of people: the sheep and the goats. The sheep are commended for acting on the tenets of the faith. They have fed the hungry, quenched the thirst of the parched, welcome the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. When they did such a thing, they were not just taking care of their neighbor, they were taking care of a child of God.

Those on the left, the goats, were those who were did the opposite of the sheep. They walked past the hungry, hoarded their water, dismissed the stranger, looked the other way at the naked, neglected the sick, and ignored the prisoner. When they neglected to do those things, they did not think that their behavior would have any repercussions. Yet in dismissing the plights of those around them, they dismissed and ignored a child of God. These goats are to be punished, to be tormented for their inability to love their neighbor.

Yet the righteous ones are redeemed. Note that Jesus does not give clarifying points to who composes the righteous. They are no titles such as disciples or followers of Jesus. They are simply "the righteous," those who have loved their neighbor.

Jesus is telling those listening to him and to the early church that their job is not to focus on the eternal destination of those who are the pagans. While they may invite them and evangelize, they are to do what God has called them to do. In the same way, those who do the wrong things as pagans will be punished; but it will be God who deals with

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY1993), 288.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

them. To a degree these righteous pagans are “anonymous Christians,” something that should give hope to the diverse Christian community.

### **Application**

Growing up, the imagery in this passage terrified me. The idea of being held accountable for my time here on earth seemed to be daunting, even terrifying. Yet now the passage gives me a strange peace. It is not because I am given a checklist of things to do as instead I am given assurance that in the midst of all, Jesus is the one on the throne. He is king and I am called to do the best that I can and leave the rest to him.

Today this passage especially speaks to the pluralistic culture we find ourselves in. As the world changes at a more rapid pace than it ever has before, I have heard many people lament where the church find itself. Regular church attendance is now twice a month instead of three to four times a month. More and more people are absent on Sundays playing with travel leagues and quick vacations. There is more religious diversity, particularly within our country. We have become a melting pot of so many different flavors.

I have often heard people bewail these statistics as the gloom and doom of the church. And I have heard other people struggle with the eternal fate of all those who find themselves outside of the church. Yet this passage still speaks to us today. Once again we are reminded that Jesus has given us certain tasks to do. They are not always easy, but they are to challenge us in a deeper walk with Jesus. Most of us in the church do these things because we want to be more like our Lord and lean on the example that he lived in his own life.

Yet there are others around us who are doing the same thing and they may not be able to tie it to Jesus. And I think that is okay. In fact, I have often found that when you work beside those people, you can begin to have those conversations about faith and life. There are so many who have questions about God and faith and unfortunately the church does not always feel like the safest place to ask those questions. But if you are working together at homeless shelter and there’s a time and space for questions, people will ask them and perhaps you can learn more about how people view the church and God. I often discovered that the God they talk about is not the God that I know and serve.

Even if the conversation is with someone of a different religion, you can actually learn more about your own and what you believe and why you believe it. I have found that I have become a better follower of Jesus by meeting people of different faiths and seeing both the similarities and distinct differences. I truly do believe Jesus is the one to follow yet I respect those who are just as faithful to their religion. When we both have that respect for each other, the world becomes a better place.

The best part of it all is that it does not get left in my hands to judge their souls. That is above my pay grade and whenever I slip into that habit of figuring out their eternal destination, I lose a second or minute of time to dive deep into the work my Lord has called me to do. I become a goat, someone who is so focused on my own self-importance and standing in the world that I miss the calling and the opportunities to which Jesus has given me to do. I bypass the King on the throne and want to call attention to my life, my beliefs, and the narrow world I’ve created without paying homage to the one who is “the way, the truth, and the light.” I try to steal his job, sit in his seat, and play a role that is not mine to play.

So as you read this passage, it might be good to reflect on several things. Are you a sheep or are you a goat? Can you tie your faith to your daily life practices? How do you

interact with people of different religions? Do you judge those who are not Christian and put them in boxes? How would you feel if someone condemned you to eternal damnation because you followed Jesus? How can you live respectfully with those who believe differently than you? Who sits on the throne of your life? As we begin a new year hopefully these questions and this passage can give you direction for your life and the places that God may be calling you.

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