

*The Parables of Jesus: When Did We See You?*

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*Deuteronomy 24:17-22; Galatians 6:7-10; Matthew 25:31-46*

Our final Scripture reading for today is Matthew 25:31-46. May God add His richest blessing on His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “[Jesus taught,] “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 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. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 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. 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, 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.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ 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. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.’ 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?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.””

Invisibility is a dangerous superpower that fascinates us. As far back as Plato’s *Republic* in 375 BC, there was talk of the legendary “Ring of Gyges” that would grant someone invisibility, and what people would do if they could know that no one could track them down for their actions. H. G. Wells wrote the famous book *The Invisible Man* in 1897, where the lead character goes insane because of the experiments he underwent to become invisible. That story has been made into countless films. What would *we* get up to if we were invisible?

On the other side of this is not real invisibility, but another issue altogether – feeling invisible. It’s one thing to literally not be seen; it’s something else entirely to feel unseen – feeling like you aren’t heard, that your voice doesn’t matter, that no one takes you into account, that you are powerless over your situation. Sometimes, these are people on the margins of society, sometimes not. Sometimes groups demand their voices be heard, that they have wrongly been pushed to the side. But I think for most people, it takes a completely different form. And it’s one that most of us know personally.

How many people do we not “see” throughout our weeks? We have a great mailman by the name of Cleve. Just really friendly, always ready with a wave and a smile. He’s just a neat guy; we’ve even had the chance to pray for him when he had a member of his family who was sick. But it also made me realize that I have no idea in my 47 years who else has ever delivered my mail. How many restaurants do we eat at – or did we eat at before the pandemic – where we went in once a week and yet never knew the waitress’ names? How many workers at the local grocery do we know? The local fast food take out we frequent? The dental hygienist or the scheduler at the doctor’s office? How many people do we come into contact with everyday, or at least on a regular basis, who are a means to an end for us?

All of this matters when we look at today’s parable, the last of Jesus’ formal teachings to the crowds in Matthew’s gospel. This is also a curious passage because, while it’s told with language of a parable and is almost always counted as a parable, it’s actually not a parable at all. It’s not a fictional story Jesus told to make a point. It’s the story of a future yet to come, when Jesus returns to reign in glory, that uses a vivid illustration to help us understand it. Because of that, of all Jesus’ parables, this is the one we might need to take the most seriously, because one day, we each will either be considered a sheep or a goat.

Our passage today starts with the clear point that a day is coming when the Son of Man – which was Jesus’ most common name for Himself – would be glorified. He would come in glory and reign in glory. This world is not going to continue forever in the way it always has. *There is a point at which history as we know it will end with the coming of our Lord and King, and the world will be judged.* I know we studied Revelation together recently, this is not a new idea to us, but it is one that we need to keep in the back of our heads; we need to meditate on it; we need to live our lives in deep awareness of this truth.

Eternal consequences are what keep us from becoming invisible men. If this world is all there is, if there is no God, if there is no eternal judgment, then we really are free to do whatever we can get away with. All we would face would be immediate consequences, but not lasting ones. And most people live their lives with this mindset whether they realize it or not. How many devastating insults have been followed up with, “I was just playing around?” How many people have been hurt only to be told “it’s no big deal”? When we consider the enormous crimes that have happened throughout history, we realize that many of them occurred because those who committed them believed there would be no significant consequences. It is the reality of eternal judgment that makes our actions in this life have weight and meaning. We as Christians need to be heavenly minded enough that our actions reflect a mindset that there is more to life than this life here and now.

Let’s turn now to the parable idea of the passage – that people are separated into sheep and goats as a shepherd would do. I didn’t really know much about this, so I did a little research this week. Goats and sheep are often herded together even today. And at first glance, they have much in common, so much so that you might not immediately see the differences that are there. Sheep graze on pastureland; goats eat everything, but they roam around trying to find food. Goats are naturally more aggressive, but sheep usually win in a direct conflict. Goats are independent minded; sheep tend to flock together and get agitated when they can’t find the herd. While they are herded together, they are penned apart.

When an ancient shepherd separated out the flocks, they would have them go down a chute to their pens that was only enough space for one at a time. The shepherd would open up the gate to their pen, then close it and let the next animal into its pen. What we learn in relationship to the passage is this: *while all the nations will be in the judgment, the judgment will be at an individual level.*

We often think of ourselves as part of groups. My family comes from Italy, Spain, Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico. I am part of a sports team or am a part of this club or activity. Those of us here probably think, “I’m a part of a church.” We identify with all sorts of groups, usually because they represent us or they benefit us in some way.

In the ancient world, there was incredibly strong identification with your family, your tribe, and your people group. You lived and died as a nation. To lose your national identity was to lose who you were. If you committed a crime, it was shame on not only you but your kin and your tribe. In fact, when Deuteronomy 24:16 spelled out that parents weren’t to be put to death for the crimes of their children or children for their parents’ crimes, that was common in the ancient world. Personal accountability was unusual.

When Jesus tells us this parable, we learn that we will stand before the throne of God judged on our own, not by the merits or demerits of the groups and tribes we belonged to. We do not earn credit for what our father did or get counted down for our brother’s indiscretions. When we go before the judgment seat, we go alone. And Jesus will either be our advocate welcoming us into the Kingdom or our judge sentencing us to our rightful punishment. This is only scary if we do not know Jesus and Jesus does not know us.

So what happens now? We see Jesus welcome the sheep into the Kingdom of eternal life, yet the goats are sent to eternal punishment. Just as sheep and goats in real life seem very much the same until you take a closer look, there’s a lot repeated between the two sides. Both are judged on the same criteria. Both sides seem essentially oblivious to the core issue Jesus is getting at. The repetition is meant to get our attention. And the central idea is this: *our actions and attitudes towards the least among us are our actions and attitudes towards Jesus Himself.*

Jesus’ criteria are straightforward – did you feed me? Clothe me? Help me even though you didn’t know me when I had nowhere to go? Did you care for me when I was sick? When I was in prison? And both sides are like, “When did we see you?” “When were you among us?” Both the sheep and the goats really hadn’t given thought to the concept Jesus is teaching here. They had never thought about the aid they’d given or withheld being as to Jesus Himself. But that’s the precisely the point.

Before we started our quick pilgrimage through some of Jesus’ parables, we were looking through the start of Genesis, and we learned there that humanity was made in God’s image. So what does that mean? The man on the street corner you pass every day...made in the image of God. The lawyer, the defendant, the victim, the prosecutor, and the judge alike, all made in the image of God. The sick and strong, the guy with the mansion and the homeless guy, the Burger King employee and the computer programmer, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, all made in the image of God. How we treat them reflects on how we treat God.

I want to take a moment and reflect on this in light of our theology. We don't believe that people get into heaven by being nice or by doing good deeds. That is not what Jesus is teaching here. We are all imperfect. I have a friend with very different theology than mine who preached on this topic. She preached, "We're all sheep and we're all goats." The idea was that none of us does this perfectly, and of course, she was right. She took the passage to mean that we'd all be saved, which I think goes against the straightforward meaning of what Jesus said.

But there's still a grain of truth in there. Even the self-centered person occasionally throws a quarter into the Salvation Army kettle. Even the most noble-minded person who helps everybody sometimes says, "You know what? I've got more important things to do today." We need Jesus' sacrifice on the cross because we all fail. We are not perfect sheep. We get this wrong a lot. Without the mercy of God that comes from Jesus standing in our place, taking our punishment for us, we'd all be in the line of the goats. So let's be clear that this passage is not a reversal of the gospel message.

If we still must be saved by Jesus and Jesus erases all our sins, if our deeds don't get us into heaven, then what is this passage really about? By itself, alone, we might wonder. But here's what is the real takeaway is: *faithful followers are characterized by blessing and serving others in tangible ways*. It's not something natural from within us. It's the Holy Spirit at work, driving us towards greater love and charity, driving us to truly love our neighbor as ourselves and to recognize our neighbor as potentially anyone. It's not everyday, all the time, we make mistakes, we're human, but as the Holy Spirit works, it becomes our overall character – to see the people that are unseen in our culture and reach out to them.

Let's be clear too that these aren't nice thoughts, but tangible actions. As James taught us in James 2:15-17, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" The goats may have well-wishes, but they haven't spent their time or money on actually helping others out. Even your average unbeliever doesn't want people to go without. Nice thoughts don't make you a Christian; only your faith lived out in action does that.

Why is it, if living this way is definitional for the Christian, if the sheep and the goats can be told apart by their actions on behalf of others, why do we not see it? In some ways we have. The church has long supported missions of mercy. Churches have had a history of soup kitchens and food pantries and clothes closets and even hospitals. It's no wonder that the Salvation Army is internationally known for helping the poor with clothing and shelter and food.

The problem is, we got away from it being a personal responsibility, we made it into a church responsibility, and now even the church has drifted away from coordinating help for others. The modern church has emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus without realizing you can't have a relationship with Him without doing the things He commands His disciples to do. If we are in a real relationship with Jesus, we'll do these things because He loves us and we love Him and we see Him reflected in the people we see in need around us. We will start seeing the waitress who needs a better tip and the elderly woman who needs help with her groceries. We'll start paying attention to the people around us who need the love of Jesus – whether they need a helping hand or just a shoulder to lean on in this difficult world of ours.

Let's dismantle arguments that have been keeping us from helping others. Growing up, I was told, "Don't give that person begging money – they'll just spend it on booze or drugs." Well, this passage doesn't tell us to give money – it tells us to feed, clothe, shelter, visit, care for. If you're not sure where your money will go, don't give money – that's the easy route anyway.

Instead, do what Jesus says. It's worth more. It takes time and effort to get someone groceries or even a drive-through meal. It takes sacrifice to make a room up for someone who needs a place to stay for a few days. It takes planning to make time to see someone who's sick and in need. And it takes effort to stay in touch with someone in prison. (When I tried to visit a friend a while back, I found out that adding my name to the visitor's list would bump off someone else in his family. I wrote him a letter instead.)

If all someone on the side of the road will take is cash, that's one thing. There are scammers out there. But it's between them and God if they are just hustling us. A lot of folks simply need help. And here's where the beautiful part comes in – we get to be the hands and feet of Jesus to them, and they get to be a representation of Jesus to us. Sometimes we'll be acknowledged; sometimes not. That's not what we're doing it for. We're doing it for our Lord. And I think that we don't have to be Pharisaical with the list. You can be volunteering to help with someone's taxes or tutoring or mentoring a young mom at Compassion and those count too. The person doesn't have to be impoverished to need our help and to need us to notice them.

Not everyone has a ton of money to help the person in need. You might be the person in need! But most of us can help, even if we don't have a lot. If we can afford a Hot and Ready, we can afford one for someone in trouble. It costs time to visit someone – right now we can't do that like we once did, but with vaccines and treatments, I think we're closer to being able to visit others than not. And how many of us clean out our closets on a regular basis? Making sure those go to someone in need isn't too hard; it just takes time.

I'm going to put out there probably our biggest objection, the one that hurts but can be true for many of us, and that is that those in need are often people we find undesirable. They may smell. Their clothes and hair may be unattractive. Their attitudes might suggest mental illness. None of that matters. Because in the dingiest, dirtiest, hardest person to love is the face of Jesus staring back at us.

The reality is, even when we have a real relationship with Jesus, even when we want to serve others, the truth is that we may just not be able to relate to some people. We may not be able to see Jesus in someone else. How do I bring myself to help someone where in my sinful self I'm repulsed or taken aback? How can I help someone when all I've got is this passage in my head and a world of reasons to not do what I am called to do?

For me, and maybe this will work for you too, is I think of someone very close to me. What if that guy sitting on the corner in the filthy jacket and mangy beard was one of my sons in twenty years? My first thought is, "God forbid," but we don't know. If I wasn't able to help and something happened where one of my sons was living hand to mouth, I'd hope and pray that someone would step in and buy them that cheeseburger, give them that coat, help them get a roof over their heads. If that guy with the cardboard sign were my son, I'd do anything to help.

And as much as I love Jackson and Cameron, that guy sitting out there isn't just my son. He represents my Savior, the One who died to rescue me, the One who left His throne above to one day bring me safely into His Kingdom. When I help him, I'm helping give a drink to the One who was thirsty on the cross for me. When I help him, I'm making sure the Savior who had no place to lay His head has someplace to sleep. You get the picture.

Around Christmas time, we think of baby Jesus in a manger, in a stable with the animals. Maybe on the dirty floor of someone's home, maybe in the far side of a cave, we don't know exactly. All we do know is that the nicest place, the place of dignity, the inn, well, there was no room for them there. We think back and we imagine, "If I was there, surely I would have taken Mary and Joseph in! Surely I would have made sure the infant king had all the creature comforts! Surely I wouldn't have left them out in the cold." You have that chance today, with every person in need you see. Will you take that chance and reach out to those unseen people in your midst? Will you be among the sheep?