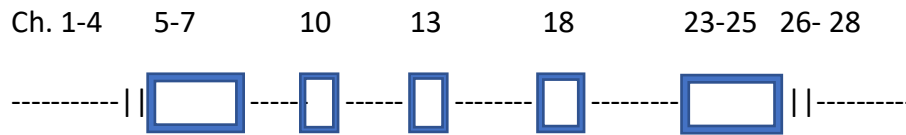


The Parable of Sheep and Goats in Matthew's Gospel

Rev. John Yieh, PhD
Molly Laird Downs Professor of New Testament
Virginia Theological Seminary

Jesus' Parables in Matthew's Gospel



- Sermon on the Mount (Ch. 5-7): 5:14-16; 7:24-27
- Debate with Pharisees on fasting: 9:16-17
- Mystery of the KH (Ch.13, 7x): 13:3-23, 24-30 (36-43), 31-32, 33, 44-46, 47-50, 52
- Community life (Ch.18): 18:12-14, 23-31
- Debate with leaders on authority: Mt 21:28-32, 33-44; 22:2-14 (wedding banquet)
- Endtimes warning (Ch. 23-25): Mt 24:32-35; 25:1-13, 14-30, 31-46 (sheep & goats)

Jesus' Parables in Matthew's Gospel

Jesus' parables in Matthew's narrative



| <u>SM</u> | <u>KG</u> | <u>Community</u> | <u>Endtime</u> |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 5:14-16 | 13:3-23 | 18:12-14 | 24:32-35 |
| 7:24-27 | 13:24-30 (36-43) | 18:23-31 | 25:1-13 |
| <u>Debate</u> | 13:31-32 | <u>Debate</u> | 25:14-30 |
| 9:16-17 | 13:33 | 21:28-32 | 25:31-46 |
| | 13:44-46 | 21:33-34 | |
| | 13:47-50 | 22:2-14 | |
| | 13:52 | | |

The Parable of Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31-46)

(1) The Son of Man comes to judge the nations

25³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels³² with him, then he

will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Daniel 7¹³ As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [a son of man] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

(2) The king says to those at the right side

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;³⁵ for I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick, and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family [my brothers], you did it to me.'

(3) The king says to those at the left side

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink,⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

1. Meaning in Jesus' Ministry: Day of the Lord

- 1) Coming of the Son of Man is the Day of the Lord: Jesus used this parable to remind his Jewish audience of the apocalyptic vision of Dan 7 about the day of the Lord when "The Ancient of Days" (in Aramaic) will sit on the throne (7:9-10) and send one with authority "like the Son of Man" (LXX *ὡς υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου*) to come on the clouds to judge all nations (7:13-14).
- 2) The throne indicates that (1) there will be a day of final reckoning when the almighty God will separate the righteous from the evil, (2) all nations shall be judged by their acts of kindness, or lack of them, to those who suffer physically, economically, socially, and politically, and (3) God has a preferential love for the underprivileged and disempowered.
- 3) The surprise of both groups indicates that God knows what people have done, even when they themselves do not. "From you, O God, no secret is hidden."
- For Jesus, God is both merciful and just. His disciples should act in kindness to others so that they may be perfect as their heavenly Father is and be ready for the final reckoning on the Day of the Lord.

2. Meaning in Matthew's Gospel: Jesus is the Judge

- Narrative context: Disciples asked about signs of the end times (24:3). In response, Jesus urged them to be "ready" for the final judgment (24:44) – though it seems delayed (24:48; 25:15, 19) – with four parables (Faithful servant 24:45-51; Ten Virgins 25:1-13; Talents 25:14-30; Sheep and Goats 25:31-46).
- Christology: The Son of Man who will sit on the throne to judge all nations is none other than Jesus Christ who has suffered, died, resurrected and exalted for them.
- Discipleship: All people including believers will be judged by their acts of kindness to the suffering. Faith alone is not sufficient. Practicing kindness could also help Matthew's church silence rabbis who do not practice what they teach (23:3).
- Why should people do kindness to the suffering people, esp. followers of Jesus in Antioch who are being harassed? Because they are considered one of the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters.
- For Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples to do kindness to others, and reassures those who are suffering that God cares for them because they are God's children.

3. Meaning in Early Church: Sheep and Goats

- Incomplete Work on Matthew [unknown author of early 5th C. favored by Aquinas], "The earthly shepherd separates animals by their type of body, where as Christ separates people by their type of soul. The sheep signify righteous people by reason of their gentleness, because they harm no one, and by reason of their patience, because when they are harmed by others, they bear it without resistance. He refers to sinners as goats, however, because these vices characterize goats: capriciousness toward other animals, pride and belligerence." (Homily 54).
- Incomplete Work on Matthew, "[feed the hungry and clothe the naked] This can also be said of teachers who gave the food of learning to those hungry for righteousness, so they might be fed and grow healthy in good actions; who administered the drink of truth to those thirsty for the knowledge of God. (Homily 54)
- Origen: "In the same way, we have woven a garment for the cold and shivering Christ. We have received the fabric of wisdom from God that we may impart knowledge to some and

clothe them with 'compassion, chastity, kindness, lowliness' and the other virtues. ... Therefore, when we have clothed with garment of this type 'one of the least' who believe in Christ, we have apparently clothed the Lord himself, so that the word of God in the world will not go naked." (*Commentary on Matthew 72*).

• **Main question:** Who is "one of the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters? Jesus' disciples? The saints? Teachers of the church? Missionaries? All the poor and the suffering?"

4. Meaning for Today

4.1 German historical approach: divine reality

- Focus on the King sitting on the throne to gather and judge all nations.
- This King is the Son of Man pointing to the returning Christ, who has authority to judge all nations.
- Christ' judgment surprises all. It is based on how people treat those who are less fortunate.
- Christ identifies himself with the suffering people in the world.

4.2 American literary approach: human existence

- Focus on the sheep and goats, which represent two groups of people, the righteous and the indifferent.
- All nations will be separated because of their actions or inaction to the suffering people around them and there are consequences, eternal blessing and eternal fire.
- These two groups represent two types of life: altruistic and selfish. • Doing kindness to others is the way of life blessed by God.

4.3 Gospel narrative approach

• **Narrative Context:** Presenting it as the last of four parables (24:45-25:46) in response to the disciples' question about the sign of the end times, Matthew's main point is to teach his church on how to be ready for the final judgment.

- The judgment begins with leaders of the church.
- Doing kindness to those in need, treating them as a brother or sister of Jesus, is the way to eternal blessing.

This teaching is consistent with what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

- "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfill it" (5:17)
- "Your righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees and the scribes in order to enter the kingdom of God." (5:20)

• Recent scholars are debating on who is "one of the least" of Jesus' brothers and sisters. His disciples? Every one who is suffering?

4.4 History of Effects contextual approach

• **Chrysostom,** "But to the others he says, 'Depart from me, you cursed.' He does not say they are cursed by the Father, for the Father had not laid a curse upon them, but only their own works. ... I prepared the kingdom for you, he says, but the fire I did not prepare for you but 'for the devil and his angels.' But you have cast yourselves in it. You have imputed it to yourselves." (*Homily on GMatt 79.2*).

•“Even when you see a dog hungry you feels sympathy. But when you see the Lord hungry, you ignore it. You are left without excuse.”

Augustine. Letter 208 [Donatists being schismatics were self-righteous and were worse than Bishop Caecilian who was consecrated by a traitor Bishop during the persecution of Diocletian.]

•*To the Lady Felicia, His Daughter in the Faith, and Worthy of Honour Among the Members of Christ Augustine Sends Greeting in the Lord.*

•I do not doubt, when I consider both your faith and the weakness or wickedness of others, that your mind has been disturbed, for even a holy apostle, full of compassionate love, confesses a similar experience, saying, “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?” (2 Cor 11:29) Wherefore, as I myself share your pain, and am solicitous for your welfare in Christ, I have thought it my duty to address this letter, partly consolatory, partly hortatory, to your Holiness, because in the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which all His members are one, you are very closely related to us, being loved as an honorable member in that body, and partaking with us of life in His Holy Spirit.

•Moreover, as there are good shepherds and bad shepherds, so also in flocks there are good and bad. The good are represented by the name of sheep, but the bad are called goats: they feed, nevertheless, side by side in the same pastures, until the Chief Shepherd, who is called the One Shepherd, shall come and separate them one from another according to His promise, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. On us He has laid the duty of gathering the flock; to Himself He has reserved the work of final separation, because it pertains properly to Him who cannot err. For those presumptuous servants, who have lightly ventured to separate before the time which the Lord has reserved in His own hand, have, instead of separating others, only been separated themselves from Catholic unity; for how could those have a clean flock who have by schism become unclean?

•For there are both good and bad in the Catholic Church, which, unlike the Donatist sect, is extended and spread abroad, not in Africa only, but through all nations; as the apostle expresses it, bringing forth fruit, and increasing in the whole world.

•But those who are separated from the Church, as long as they are opposed to it cannot be good; although an apparently praiseworthy conversation seems to prove some of them to be good, their separation from the Church itself renders them bad, according to the saying of the Lord: He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathers not with me scatters. (Matthew 12:30)

Calvin, Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke Vol. 3

•Matt 25:32 “As a shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats.” When our Lord says that the separation of the sheep from the goats is delayed till that day, he means that the wicked are now mixed with the good and holy, so that they live together in the same flock of God. The comparison appears to be borrowed from Ezekiel 34:18 where the Lord complains of the fierceness of *the goats*, which attack with their horns the poor *sheep*, and destroy the pastures, and pollute the water; and where the Lord expressly declares that he will take vengeance. And therefore, Christ’s discourse amounts to this, that believers ought not to think their condition too hard, if they are now compelled to live with *the goats*, and even to sustain many serious attacks and annoyances from them; secondly, that they ought to beware of being

themselves infected by the contagion of their vices; and, thirdly, to inform them that in a holy and innocent life their labor is not thrown away, for the difference will one day appear.

- Matt 25:35. "*For I was hungry.*" If Christ were now speaking of the cause of our salvation, the Papists could not be blamed for inferring that we merit eternal life by good works; but as Christ had no other design than to exhort his people to holy and upright conduct, it is improper to conclude from his words what is the value of the merits of works. With regard to the stress which they lay on the word *for*, as if it pointed out the *cause*, it is a weak argument; for we know that, when eternal life is promised to the righteous, the word *for* does not always denote a cause, but rather the order of procedure. But we have another reply to offer, which is still more clear; for we do not deny that a reward is promised to good works, but maintain that it is a reward of grace, because it depends on adoption.

- Paul boasts (2 Timothy 4:8) that a crown of righteousness is laid up for him; but whence did he derive that confidence but because he was a member of Christ, who alone is *heir* of the heavenly kingdom? He openly avows that *the righteous Judge will give to him that crown*; but whence did he obtain that prize but because by grace he was adopted, and received that justification of which we are all destitute?

- We must therefore hold these two principles, first, that believers are called to the possession of the kingdom of heaven, so far as relates to good works, not because they deserved them through the righteousness of works, or because their own minds prompted them to obtain that righteousness, but because God justifies those whom he previously elected, (Romans 8:30). Secondly, although by the guidance of the Spirit they aim at the practice of righteousness, yet as they never fulfill the law of God, no reward is due to them, but the term *reward* is applied to that which is bestowed by grace.

Summary of Messages for Today

- 1) Jesus will return as the Son of Man to judge all nations. His judgment will be a surprise to all, but it will be fair and final.

- 2) Jesus urges his disciples to do kindness to those in need and in suffering. Faithfulness is embodied by acts of charity by which one will be judged.

- 3) We live in a mixed community of good and bad, we need to discern our own way of life and leave final judgment to God.