

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.”

But, I Like Goats!

My first response to this lesson is, “But, I like goats! Can’t we put the sheep on the left?” The goats I’ve encountered have been friendly, loving, playful, and blessed with an iron stomach to eat anything, not limited to poison oak, sumac, hemlock or bermuda grass. I hope to pick a couple of these happy little lawn mowers in the future. Sheep on the other hand are known for being rather helpless creatures who rely on their shepherd. Before we get sidetracked and obsess over the pastoral lifestyle, about which animals are better, realize that this lesson isn’t about sheep or goats but Jesus and his judgement.

That's my second response to this lesson, "Am I a sheep or a goat?" That might be a scary thought for some of us especially when we consider the eternal consequences. We may be terrified at the thought of judgment, worried that we haven't done enough good to counteract the bad. Worried that we might be classified as an old goat.

But that's not the reason Jesus taught the disciples this lesson. You don't need to be worried about Judgement day because the one who will come to judge the living and the dead - is the same one who came to be judged for us and in our place. The King who sits on his throne is the one who came down to serve as our shepherd. Jesus separates and vindicates his people.

Our lesson comes from the final discourse in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus spoke these as the sun set on Mount Olivet just east of Jerusalem as the religious leaders made plans for his arrest and execution. Jesus spoke these words to comfort his disciples when they would need it the most because in just a few short moments Jesus wouldn't look like a king coming in glory. Rather it will appear as if the wicked have won, his own have betrayed him, evil has triumphed. Just then Jesus says, "*When the Son of man comes in his glory he will sit on his throne and the nations will be gathered together.*"

No one is going to escape this. When Jesus comes, he will put the pieces back together. The dust and ashes of all who ever lived will stand before his throne 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.* Sheep and goats are still often pastured together but at the end of the day the sheep were brought into the fold separated from the goats. The Shepherd was easily able to identify sheep or goat. They are separated not based on their works but based on who they are: sheep or goat. The sheep might not be able to tell who is who but their shepherd can and does separate them.

Jesus then justifies his judgment, *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.* (Matthew 25:34-36)

To our surprise the sheep protest. They argue with God as if they don't know he's working for their good. It's like they think they should be condemned. You've got this all wrong, "*When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?*" Meanwhile the goats wonder why their works aren't ever mentioned. They question, "*When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?*" We've done all these things. In other words we've always

been doing these things, when haven't we done them? What's surprising is that both groups express the same surprise as Jesus separates and vindicates his judgment.

When we look at the world, we might be concerned at the lack of justice. We might be even more concerned when it comes to thinking about our own judgment. For some reason we don't see the end of the world as the happy day that we should. It's a joyous moment when we finally get to inherit all that God has done for us. This is the way the world was supposed to be from the beginning of time. And maybe you're not so excited you hope God will hold off until I get to see my children grow, maybe have grandchildren, and enjoy the life we have here and now.

But why worry about the judgment day? Why hold on the trappings of this world when the kingdom is yours? "He will come again to judge the living and the dead." If you're like me, you're probably worried, "I'm a goat." So often we act like goats thinking of these words when we do "good" for the least of these. We may even proudly go about serving the poor and lowly thinking of how we are serving Jesus all the while worrying we haven't done enough. The problem is that **we often look to the Law trying to determine how we are doing with God, rather than look to the cross and the forgiveness of sins freely given to us.** Rather than find comfort in these words that Jesus our loving shepherd separates and vindicates us we act like goats.

Worse yet is when we come across this lesson wondering how to be counted among the sheep (what can we do?) only to discover that our attempt places us among the goats.

The sheep protest when Jesus brings up good works. They don't want to be judged on the basis of their works. They're worried when they're mentioned. The goats on the other hand want to be judged on the basis of their work. Neither of them realized they were serving Jesus when they served "*one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine.*" While so many take these words to refer to the poor, the marginalized, the foreigner - Jesus is speaking specifically to his brothers and sisters. This is his church, his people, "*whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*" (Matthew 12:46-50). "*Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me... And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.*" - Matthew 10:40-42 While it is good for us to care for others outside of the church we should especially have compassion for those inside of the church. God wants us to show our love for our brother. The way we treat others demonstrates our faith in God.

To the surprise of the sheep and the goats, these are the people our God identifies with. He doesn't look like a judge or a king sitting on his throne. Even his kingdom, his church, struggles holding onto the hope that he will come again restore justice and vindicate his people. All the while, worried that we will end up on his left exactly where we deserve to be.

But you did notice that the Shepherd separated the sheep and goats before any mention of good works. The separation occurs back in v. 32 before works are brought up. The works are brought up as evidence of identity, that "for" is evidential not causal. The good works of the blessed are evidence of what they are. Sheep act like sheep. Likewise, the lack of "good works" of the cursed are evidence of what they are. Goats act like goats. This is the sole basis by which Jesus judges is sheep or goat - not on the basis of their work.

The funny thing is that the sheep didn't even know they were doing good works. They were just being sheep of their shepherd. They did not count on their good works to place them in a good standing with God. The sheep did not think they were serving him. Neither the sheep nor the goats, the righteous or the cursed were aware that their king was present among them and living as one of them. Jesus does not act like your typical ruler or judge. He places himself among the least, the lowest. He humbled himself being born to a poor family, fleeing from Herod as a child in the slaughter of the innocents, feeling pain and hunger, taking on sickness, disease, and the sin, guilt, and shame of the world as he suffered and died. **He was judged in our place. He was the goat, the scapegoat who was condemned in our place.**

He is also the lamb, the only one who lived and acted as we all should have. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. These words were spoken to reassure and comfort his troubled disciples that all is not as it seems. All will be set right. Justice will prevail. God's kingdom will come. Until then be sheep. Do sleepy things.

Jesus expects his people to act like his people. There *is* an expectation, even an obligation, for Christians to serve those in need , The elect act like the elect. Sheep are sheep. They act out of compassion, without any awareness that the king might be present among them and without any thought of reward. "Good works" do not justify us but flow freely without force or coercion of the law by from the love of God that has been freely poured into our hearts.

Just think about that. God justifies us. Motivates us to do good works. And then keeps track of them so he can call out, "*Well done good and faithful servant.*" If you are worried you haven't done anything good that's probably a good thing. That means you are blissfully unaware of all the good that you have done. Just like the sheep in this short parable. You do good works. Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word and sacrament do good and when Jesus credits his perfect life to our account our judge sees only good. We are not judged on our works. We are judged on the basis of God's work for us, on the fact that he has been judged in our place.

In baptism God claims you has his own. *He is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.*" Psalm 95:7 Don't look to the law to determine how you are doing - look to Jesus. Look to the cross knowing it's all been taken care of. Live as sheep and do sheepy things even if you like goats.

I like goats but God calls us his sheep. He also tells us we do good works and then he points to them as evidence of his just judgment. Don't argue with God. Realize, you have nothing to be afraid of. It's finished. Rejoice, be glad, yours is the kingdom of God. You've been spoken well of by the father. While you may have no idea what you are doing, neither do the sheep or the goats. That's why they are entrusted into the care of our shepherd who **came** suffered and died, **comes** to us in his Word and Sacrament, and **will come again** to judge the living and the dead. Then all will be separated and his people vindicated. Amen.