

Matthew 25:31-46 CEV The Final Judgment

³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all of his angels, he will sit on his royal throne. ³² The people of all nations will be brought before him, and he will separate them, as shepherds separate their sheep from their goats.

³³ He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those on his right, "My father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created. ³⁵ When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, ³⁶ and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me."

³⁷ Then the ones who pleased the Lord will ask, "When did we give you something to eat or drink? ³⁸ When did we welcome you as a stranger or give you clothes to wear ³⁹ or visit you while you were sick or in jail?"

⁴⁰ The king will answer, "Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me."

⁴¹ Then the king will say to those on his left, "Get away from me! You are under God's curse. Go into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! ⁴² I was hungry, but you did not give me anything to eat, and I was thirsty, but you did not give me anything to drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger, but you did not welcome me, and I was naked, but you did not give me any clothes to wear. I was sick and in jail, but you did not take care of me."

⁴⁴ Then the people will ask, "Lord, when did we fail to help you when you were hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in jail?"

⁴⁵ The king will say to them, "Whenever you failed to help any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you failed to do it for me."

⁴⁶ Then Jesus said, "Those people will be punished forever. But the ones who pleased God will have eternal life."

When?

I've said Jesus parables are often myth busters. Is this one of them? If it is, what's the myth? Could it be possible "salvation by grace through faith" is a myth? Is this story of dividing the sheep from the goats based on what they did for others, teaching we're actually saved by how we treat others, therefore we're saved by works?

It could be very tempting to understand that in the end, a bunch of good people who've done a lot of good in their lives will be suitably rewarded and a bunch characterised by their sins of omission, their failure to care, will be suitably dealt with by Jesus. Everyone gets what they deserve in a final 'karma style' settling of accounts.

Jesus has been consistently teaching that the key is faith or unfaith in God's gracious love revealed in the person of his Son. Has he done a gigantic backflip at the last minute of his ministry? In this story is the beautiful multi-coloured bubble of God's gracious love in Jesus burst?

No, definitely not! Capon says in his commentary, this parable, "should not be interpreted in a way that portrays Jesus as having taken off the velvet glove and put on brass knuckles."

In the very next verses Jesus talks about his coming crucifixion. There's no need for Jesus to die on the cross if we're saved by what we do for others. If we can save ourselves by just showing enough love and mercy to others, then we don't need Jesus to save us.

And, to be honest, this saving ourselves scenario makes me pretty nervous. How many times have I failed to help a person in need? How many times have I failed to show mercy? How sure is my salvation if it relies on me?

So, back to the story, how do we make sense of this parable in light of the rest of the New Testament teaching on salvation?

Jesus explains he's going to come in glory and sit on his royal throne and separate the people of all nations. He's the judge. Everyone will be there and as a shepherd separates sheep from goats he'll separate people into two groups. A group on his right and one on his left.

The story makes it clear the sheep acted differently to the goats. But, here's a big question, do they both belong to the shepherd? Are they his sheep and his goats? Also, is it what they do that makes them sheep and goats, or do they do what they do because they are sheep and goats?

Don't get too bogged down with those thoughts because it's also clear neither group recognised Jesus. They didn't recognise him in those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison. I chose the theme "when?" because "When did we?" - is the question asked by both groups. "When did we see you, Jesus?"

It's also clear this separation results in an eternal difference. Blessed by the Father versus cursed by God.

Here's a few thoughts to ponder.

When we know we're loved and accepted by the King, by Jesus, despite ourselves. Although we can't find anything in ourselves to justify his gracious love for us. But when by the same divine grace we believe it's true - it changes the way we see Jesus and also the way we see every other person in the world, or in the kingdom.

Could it be the sheep knew the shepherd loved them but the goats didn't?

If the goats didn't believe it when the King said they were loved and worthy, and if they didn't trust him, would that change everything? Maybe they would've taken matters into their own hands and to the best of their ability took care of number one. If our focus is firmly on self - it's hard to see others and recognise their needs. On the other hand, the sheep believed the King when he said they were loved and worthy. They knew him and trusted him and that changed everything. Because they knew they were accepted and loved they were able to love. They were free to see others and their needs. Their relationship with Jesus changed all their relationships.

If that's the case, when we love and show mercy to the needy, it's a response to being loved by God rather than a condition of God's love.

When we know Jesus and know his love and mercy, we know joy. The joy of his gracious presence. Also the joy of his needy presence in those to whom we can show mercy. When there is no Jesus, there's no mercy, and there's no joy.

These situations are both temporal and eternal.

This is a tricky passage and I pray God will bless your meditating on it. A final word from Capon: "Jesus is the Love that will not let us go. If anybody can sort it out, he can; if he can't nobody else ever will. Trust him, therefore. And trust him now. There is nothing more to do." Amen.