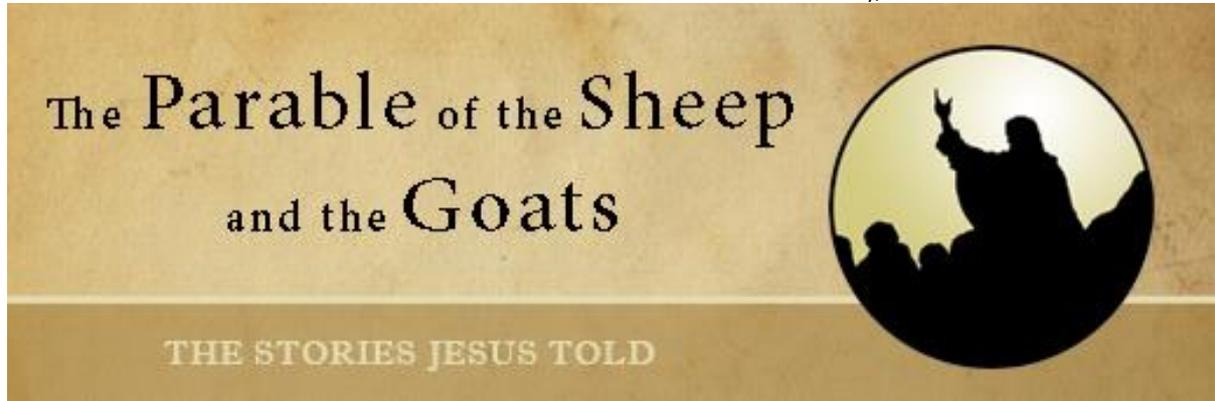


21. Encouragement for the Journey



Sermon

Sunday, 22nd November 2020 – Glenda Bolitho



Bible Reading:



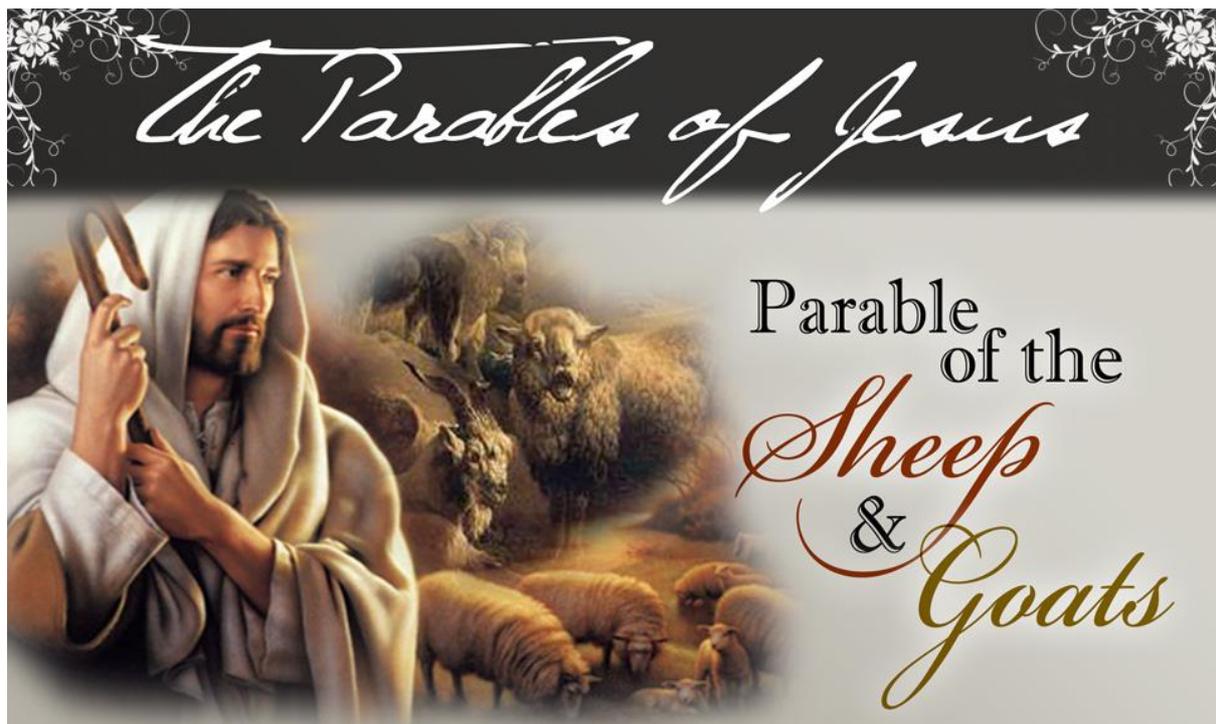
Greeting

Greetings and a very warm welcome to our service here at St. Luke's Anglican Church Concord and to those who may be following us on line. I'm Glenda Bolitho a member of the ministry team here at St. Luke's and we gather together today to hear God's word, to pray with one another, to share the Lord's Supper, and to share time together.

Before I commence, let me pray,

*"May the words of my mouth and the
Meditation of my heart,
Be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."*

Amen



Introduction

This morning, we celebrate the last Sunday of the church's year, a Sunday in which we honour Jesus the Christ, as King. It is a day to remember that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God calls us to acknowledge that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is worthy to be our Lord, who will judge the world in righteousness.

Today's Gospel reading, often known as "The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats" is one of the most vivid of Jesus' stories. The intent of the passage is to provide a description of the Last Judgement. Strictly speaking, this passage on the Last Judgment is more prophecy than parable. Only the part about the sheep and the goats is parabolic; and yet this rather brief comparison eminently served Jesus' purpose in teaching His followers the doctrine of the Last Judgment where Jesus will separate His obedient followers from pretenders and unbelievers.

Demonstrating What We Believe

We demonstrate what we believe by the way we act. To treat each person we meet as if he or she were Jesus is no easy task. What we do for others demonstrates what we really think about Jesus' words to us; Feeding those who are hungry, giving homeless people a place to stay, taking care of widows, ministering to refugees, looking after those who are poor or sick, visiting those in prison. This parable describes acts of mercy we can all do every day. These acts do not depend on wealth, ability, or intelligence; they are simple acts freely given and freely received. We have no excuse to neglect those who have deep needs, and we should not think that these responsibilities belong only to churches or the government. Jesus demands our personal involvement in caring for others' needs (Isaiah 58:7). The focus of this parable is that we should love every person and serve anyone we can. Such love for others glorifies God by reflecting our love for Him.

Jesus used sheep and goats to picture the division between believers and unbelievers. Sheep and goats often grazed together but would be separated when the time came to shear the sheep. Ezekiel 34:17-24 also refers to the separation of sheep and goats.

How Do We Get to Heaven? Is Anyone Righteous?

We can't earn our way to heaven for none of us meets God's standards, because He is a pure and Holy God and His requirement is holiness. As Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome, "*There is no one righteous, not even one*" (Rom 3:10); and a few verses later "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Rom 3:23). As the psalmist wrote, considering his own spiritual condition, "*If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?*" (Ps 103:3).

What then is the answer to that question “who could stand”? No one. No one, in light of our universal sinfulness can stand before a Holy God. And therefore, unless some other provision is made, no one can enter into the place where God dwells, which is heaven. *“There is no one righteous, not even one”* – we all fall short.

But there is good news. And that good news is that, although we cannot merit heaven, we don’t have to. Jesus Christ has done it on our behalf. Through faith, His merit and holiness are imputed to us, that is, credited to our account. His perfect obedience to God is viewed as if it were ours; and our sin likewise is transferred to Him. That’s why Christ had to die for our sin. To pay the penalty, not for His own sin, but for ours. That is what Martin Luther called *“a wonderful exchange: Christ’s righteousness for our sin.”* Luther wrote: *“That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s and the righteousness of Christ’s not Christ’s but ours.”*

The Apostle Paul writes of it this way: *“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor 5:21).

And the means by which we appropriate, by which we claim this righteousness of Christ, this holiness, this merit, is not our works, not anything which we have done, but only our faith; for as Paul says, *“We... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So, we too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified”* (Gal 2:15-16).

And again, Paul writes, in his letter to the Romans, *“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference*

between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood – to be received by faith” (Rom 3:21-25). That’s a wonderful promise. That’s the essence of the Gospel.

From our Gospel reading this morning (Matt 25:31-46) we know that Jesus had even more to say on the topic of what we must do to enter heaven.

What does Jesus say in this passage?

Why does he say to the one group of people, **the sheep**, “*take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world,*” while to **the goats** he utters these words, “*Depart from me, you who are cursed...*”?

What distinguishes the members of the two groups?

What determines if they will be among the sheep on his right hand or among the goats on his left?

And the answer, from this passage of scripture, is that what clearly distinguishes them, is what they have done or not done.

To those on his right, Jesus will say,

*“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.**” (vv 35-36)*

While to those on his left, he will say this,

*“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 in prison and **you did not look after me.**” (vv 42-43)*

Now I'm wondering in His teaching here, does Jesus say anything about faith in this passage? In His teaching here, on heaven and hell, does Jesus have anything to say about faith? Yes, He does. It's a little bit of a trick question and the answer will help us to untangle this theological conundrum. It will help us to reconcile these two seemingly opposed sets of scriptures. Yes, Jesus is speaking about faith in this passage. No, He doesn't use the word, "faith". He doesn't have to; because the actions He **does refer to**; are all the evidence of faith, or lack of it, needed.

Let me explain. The "sheep" don't get into heaven because of what they did. They don't earn their place in heaven. They get into heaven because of who they are. They are sheep. They are people who have trusted in Christ, who have been forgiven, who have experienced the new birth. And the way they live their lives, the things they characteristically do – that is feeding the hungry, refreshing the thirsty, clothing the needy, caring for the stranger, remembering those who are ill or are in prison – those are the outward expression of that inner reality, their inner "sheepness".

Conversely, to ignore the needs of those who are hungry, or thirsty or in need; to close one's eyes to the needs of those who are far from home or ill, or in prison – ignoring those needs is evidence of another kind of spiritual reality, and that is one's identity as a "goat"; as someone who has never experienced the spiritual transformation that comes through faith in Christ.

Let us put it another way. You don't get into heaven because of what you do. Salvation is by grace through faith. You get into heaven because of what the things that you do reveal about who you are. It's a subtle distinction, but a critical one. Here's how James expresses it:

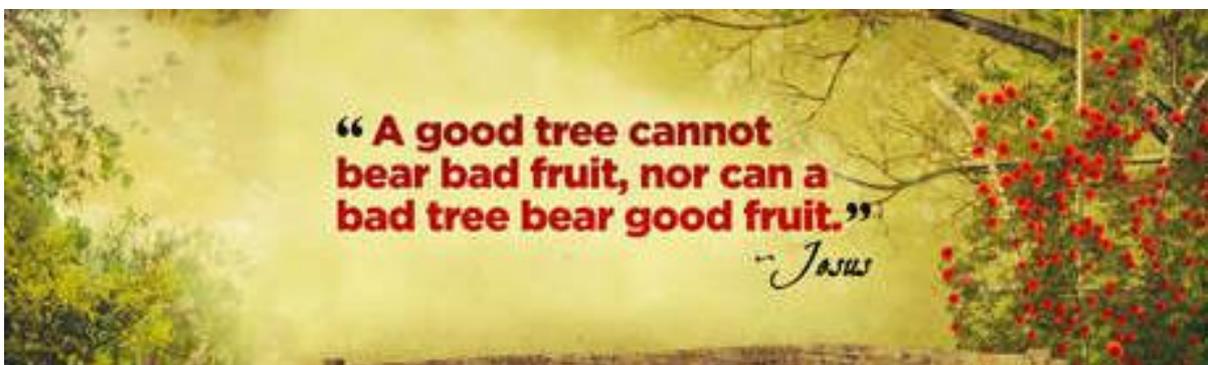
*"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is **not accompanied by action**, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me*

your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by my deeds,”
(James 2:17-18).

In other words, a genuine faith, a living faith, produces deeds. Such as caring for those who are ill, or hungry, or thirsty, or alone. That’s how our faith is demonstrated; that’s how it reveals itself. Sheep will do ‘sheepy’ things and goats will do ‘goaty’ things. The critical point, the same point being made by Jesus and James, is that faith produces deeds. If there are no deeds, it doesn’t mean that you have a lazy faith, or an underachieving faith, or an intellectual, rather than an active faith. It means that you have a ‘dead’ faith, which is to say no saving faith at all.

And that’s how we reconcile Jesus’ teaching concerning the sheep and the goats with the glorious truth that salvation is by faith alone. It isn’t the deeds that save us; we don’t earn our salvation. We aren’t saved by feeding the hungry, or befriending the lonely, or caring for the sick. Those things are the evidence of what does save us, which is our faith in Christ. And so, when Jesus refers to these people’s deeds or the lack of them, He’s referring to those things as the evidence of who they are; that is, sheep or goats. If you are a sheep, you do these things; if you are a goat, you don’t.

By Their Fruit You Will Recognize Them



What we do, reveals what we are. As Jesus teaches in another place, the type of fruit we produce reveals the kind of tree we are.

“By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles. Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt 7:16-20).

The “fruit” Jesus is talking about here, the fruit which is the evidence of what kind of tree we are, includes both what is observable to us, and also what is hidden from other people, but seen by God. As the author of Hebrew’s tells us: *“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13).*

So now let’s reflect again on our gospel reading from Matthew chapter 25. I’m emphasising this because ignoring the needs of those around us isn’t what sheep do. That’s what goats do.

Now, you might ask, why are these things so important anyway? Its because they represent a transformation that takes place within us when we trust in Christ, when we experience the new birth. We are changed from people who are fundamentally self-centred, focused on what we want and how we feel, people who habitually put our needs and our desires front and centre. And we are changed into people who are like Christ; Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who out of love gave up everything, even His own life, in order that he might give us eternal life. We become like the one who said, and did, this:

“Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:26-28).

The Apostle Paul describes Jesus in this way:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

And Paul writes elsewhere (Phil. 2:3-8)

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In the mindset of Christ Jesus:

Who, being very nature God,

Did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

Rather, he made himself nothing

*By taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself*

*by becoming obedient to death-
even death on a cross!”*

When Jesus talks about the “sheep” and the “goats”, and the things sheep do which the goats don’t do, he’s talking about the changes which take place within those who know Him, so that over time they become more and more like Him. And this is what Jesus is like. He doesn’t ignore our loneliness, our sorrow, our hunger, or our thirst. He doesn’t pass by when He sees we lack food or clothing. He doesn’t try to find excuses why He can’t help those who are ill, or separated from friends and family. He cares for us. **And if we belong to Him, we will do what He does.** We won’t turn a blind eye to another’s needs. We will care for one another.

Let me give you another reason why these things matter by reflecting back on our Gospel reading this morning (Matthew 25:35-40).

What does Jesus actually say? Not, *“those people were hungry”* but *“I was hungry”*.

- I, **Jesus**, was hungry.
- I, **Jesus** was thirsty.
- I, **Jesus** was a stranger.
- I, **Jesus** needed clothes.
- I, **Jesus** was sick.
- I, **Jesus** was in prison

“And you cared for me.”

What does He mean by that?

Here’s what He means. When someone trusts Christ, not only are they spiritually transformed, but another change takes place as well. They are united with Christ; They are brought into a spiritual union with Christ. As Paul writes,

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? ...But whoever is united with the Lord is one with Him in spirit”. (1 Cor. 6:15, 17).

And also,

“Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” (Phil.2:1-2).

Those who have trusted in Christ are a part of Him, and He is a part of them. And so, when we reach out to serve others in the body, we are actually serving Christ. Not metaphorically, but actually. When we feed a hungry brother or sister, we are feeding Christ. When we comfort a brother or sister who is ill, or lonely, or in need of a friend, we are serving Christ. What a fantastic opportunity! Have you ever wished you could somehow repay Christ for all He has done for you? Somehow give back to Him in some way? The opportunities to do

that are all around us. As we serve these people, we are serving Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to share with you this beautiful story of a sculpture which theologian Myron Augsburger and his wife saw whilst on sabbatical in Switzerland. This is what he wrote: -
*“Spending a sabbatical in Basal, Switzerland, my wife and I visited St Martin’s Church and were impressed by the sculpture on the front wall depicting Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier with Christian faith. One cold winter day, entering a city, Martin, the soldier, was stopped by a beggar asking for alms. Having no money, Martin took off his cloak, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night Martin had a dream of heaven, and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak. An angel asked Jesus, **“Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak?”** And Jesus answered, **“My servant Martin gave it to me.”**”*

Amen

Reference Material

The Preacher’s Commentary on Matthew – Myron S Ausburger
The Parables Understanding the Stories Jesus Told – Simon J Kistemaker
The Parables of Jesus - James Montgomery Boice
Life Application Study Bible (NIV)
Sermon Central: Sheep Do Sheepy Things, Goats Do Goaty Things – Alan Perkins
We Are Saved By The Grace of God – Ronald Harbaugh

Further Food for Thought

Matthew 25:31-46

(1.) Matthew 25:31-33

On the final day of judgment, God's going to separate people (the sheep from the goats).

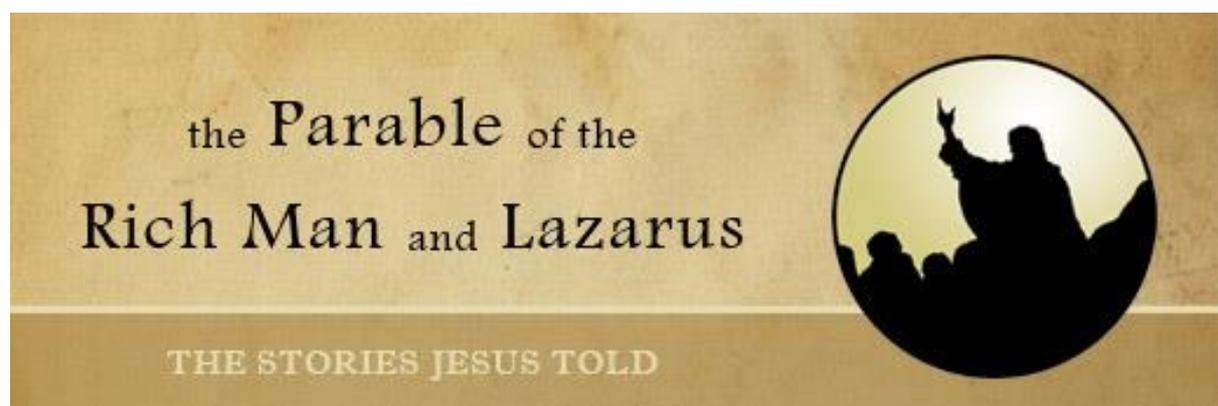
-sheep: true believers of Jesus Christ

-goats: pretenders and unbelievers

As a Christian, it is always tempting to try and separate and distinguish true followers of Christ from unbelievers in the church.

-We must leave God's job to him and allow him to do the separating because he knows the heart of man.

Other Parables of Judgement



James Montgomery Boice in his book *The Parables of Jesus* deals with four Parable of Judgement. Three from Matthew and one from Luke; "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16:19-31).

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