

Matthew 25:32-33

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The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: “The First Judgment: Sorting the Sheep from the Goats”

Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats to describe what will happen during the first of three judgments to occur. This image establishes the tone for the entire teaching that follows.

This parable has no apparent parallel in the other gospel accounts.

TheBibleSays commentary has subdivided the parable of *the Sheep and the Goats* and its subsequent elaboration (Matthew 25:31-46) according to the outline below. To better facilitate continuity and cohesion, the entire passage of this teaching is included in the Biblical text at the bottom and its words are italicized throughout these portions of commentary even if they do not appear in this specific portion of scripture.

This portion of the commentary focuses on Matthew 25:32-33—“The First Judgment: The Sorting *the Sheep from the Goats*”.

Matthew 25:31-46 **The Context of the Parable**

Matthew 25:31 **The Opening Remark**

Matthew 25:32-33 **The First Judgment: Sorting the Sheep from the Goats**

Matthew 25:34 **The Second Judgment: The Reward of the Righteous**

Matthew 25:35-40 **The Life Choices of the Righteous**

Matthew 25:41 **The Third Judgment: The Banishment of the Accursed**

Matthew 25:42-45 **The Life Choices of the Accursed**

Matthew 25:46 **The Closing Remark**

THE FIRST JUDGMENT: SORTING THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS

After Jesus announced that He would return to earth in glory, He then described the first judgment. This judgment appears to be a basic sorting of two groups from one another, a separating between believers (*sheep*) and unbelievers (*goats*):

All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

Every *sheep* is a believer in Jesus and a member of God's *eternal* household.

Every goat is an unbeliever and has never been a member of God's *eternal* household.

All the slaves (faithful and unfaithful) in Jesus's first and third parable, and all the bridesmaids (wise and foolish) in His second parable are *sheep*.

The name of this parable—*the Sheep and the Goats*—is taken from this opening simile; Jesus compares the judgment to come *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*. Jesus said *the Son of Man will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left*.

This judgment between *the sheep and the goats* will begin *when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne*.

As the Messiah, *the Son of Man is the King*. When *the King sits on His throne He* is in charge. Throughout the ancient world, kings were monarchs. They were the head of state, a one-man president, Supreme Court, and legislature combined. (History has shown that this form of government leads to tyranny because people abuse their power to exploit others when they have no accountability. But Jesus is the perfect *King*.)

A *king's* decisions were absolute and beyond review. Jesus is *the King*. *He* is not a figurehead. *He* is not a representative leader of a republic or a democratically-elected official who is beholden to the whims of his constituency. *He* is not a member of a parliament or congress who must build a consensus to accomplish *His* will. There is no separation of powers or division of government in *Him*. The government rests upon *His* shoulders (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus is the omniscient and omnipotent and absolute *King*. The image Jesus described to *His* disciples here is one of absolute authority and ultimate judgment.

The scale of this judgment will be massive. It will involve *all the nations* of the earth. Given the cosmic context of this judgment it is reasonable to assume that the expression *all the nations* includes *all the nations* of the past, present, and future. *All the nations* who have ever existed or will exist will be called to account and judged by *the Son of Man* at this judgment. Every person who has ever lived *will be gathered before Him*.

The judgment Jesus described sounds a lot like the judgment that the prophet Joel and the apostle John saw in their visions of the apocalypse:

“Let the nations be aroused
And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,
For there I will sit to judge
All the surrounding nations.”
(Joel 3:2)

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne.”

(Revelation 20:11—12)

Once *all the nations* have been gathered before Him, Jesus will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Earlier in *His* ministry, Jesus also taught that *the Son of Man* would ultimately judge the world,

“For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son...and [the Father] gave [the Son] authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man.”

(John 6:22, 27)

It is fascinating to consider that it will be Jesus—*the Son of God* and *the Son of Man*—who will be the final judge of everyone (believers and unbelievers) in the history of the world. Jesus is a perfect judge because *He* is God. But it is also fitting that Jesus will be our judge, because *He* lived and endured trials as a human being. *He* identifies with us. *He* knows what it is like to suffer the so-called ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.’ The author of Hebrews likewise pointed out that *the Son of God*’s human experience also made *Him* fit to be our redeemer (Hebrews 2:9-11) and high priest (Hebrews 2:17-18)

The Separation of the Sheep and Goats as it relates to Jesus’s Conversation with Nicodemus

But even as we see how Jesus will be our Judge, we must also remember that *He* was not originally sent to earth to condemn the world—but to save it.

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.”

(John 3:17)

Jesus said this in *His* conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, just after *He* explained to him how “God so loved the world, that He gave *His* only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus went onto explain how:

“The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

(John 3:18)

This passage indicates that this judgment between *the sheep and the goats* appears to be a separation of the ones who believed in *Him* and the ones who did not believe in *Him*. *When the Son of Man comes* the second time *He* will determine if people were believing *sheep* or unbelieving *goats*.

Jesus explained to the Jewish leader Nicodemus that the amount of belief required was quite slight, only enough belief to look on Jesus lifted up on a cross, hoping to be delivered from the venom of sin, just as Israel looked upon a bronze snake lifted upon a pole hoping to be delivered from the venom of vipers. Those who look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the deadly venom of sin will be saved from being *goats*, and become part of Jesus's flock of *sheep* ([see commentary on John 3:14—16](#)).

The Son of Man has the authority and wisdom to see these distinctions, but every person chooses for themselves to either become a *sheep* or remain a *goat*.

In *His* conversation with Nicodemus, *Jesus* also revealed the motives behind people's choices to remain *goats*,

“And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, so that his deeds will not be exposed.”
(John 3:19-20)

Jesus also revealed what happens when people become and live as *sheep*,

“But the one who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds will be revealed as having been performed in God.”
(John 3:19-21)

As will be seen later in this commentary, this also aligns with what Jesus said of *the sheep and the goats'* actions in life. Christ was not sent to condemn the world, but *when He comes* again, Jesus will sort who believed in *Him* and who refused to believe in *Him*, *as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*.

The book of Romans tells us that all believers—all *sheep*—have a destiny to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). That means all believers will be blessed. The preceding trio of parables covered the extent or level of blessing they will receive. The faithful servants will be blessed immensely beyond what we can even conceive (1 Corinthians 2:9). But all sheep will be blessed, and all will be conformed to the image of Christ. It seems reasonable to think that the judgment of Christ will play an integral role in that refining process.

Jesus as the Shepherd

Shepherds are overseers and managers of *sheep*. They protect and take care of them. Jesus used a metaphor of *sheep and goats* having intermingled, and Jesus as a good shepherd will separate his *sheep from the goats*. Jesus is the good *shepherd* (John 10:11).

Jesus may also have been alluding to Ezekiel 34 with this metaphor of *sheep and goats*. In this beautiful passage the Lord likens Himself to Israel's true *shepherd* and promises to gather *His* lost *sheep* and to lead them to green pastures after they had been scattered and abused by false shepherds.

“As for you, My flock,’ thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats.’”
(Ezekiel 34:17)

At this judgment of *the sheep and goats* in Matthew 25, Jesus will judge every person among *all the nations* and determine if that person belongs with *the sheep* or *the goats*.

Sheep as Believers

In Jewish culture, *sheep* are symbols of purity and innocence.

Sheep were symbols of innocence in three ways. First, they were largely ignorant and helpless. They did not know how to protect themselves. This sense of haplessness is what Isaiah was getting at when he wrote, “All of us like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6). Another instance of this sense of innocence was when Jesus looked upon the multitudes and “felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

The second reason *sheep* were considered symbols of purity and innocence was because they were trusting and compliant—especially when compared to *goats*, which are more independent, self-sufficient, and stubborn. *Sheep* and children share this type of trust that displays itself in simple and humble faith: “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

The third reason *sheep* were considered symbols of purity and innocence was their inclusion in the Jewish sacrificial system. Sacrifices often called for these animals to be without spot or blemish (Exodus 12:5), “According to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).

Jesus is our spotless sacrifice, who died to save us from our sins. *He* is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29). *His* gift of righteousness and innocence are graciously and unconditionally bestowed upon everyone who believes in *His* name (John 3:16; Romans 3:22).

But *the sheep* in this parable do not gain or earn their righteousness from their own works. Their righteousness is gifted to them by God’s grace through faith. *The sheep* are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). And again, *the sheep* would include the unfaithful figures in all three of the *Lord’s* previous trio of parables.

Goats as Unbelievers

While *sheep* are seen as symbols of purity and innocence in Jewish culture, *goats* are portrayed as symbols of sin and guilt.

In Leviticus, Aaron the priest was commanded to take two *goats* and cast lots. One was to be offered as a sacrifice for the LORD. The other was to be the “scapegoat.” The scapegoat was not

killed but was to be presented alive before the LORD and released into the wilderness. This scapegoat was the personification of all the nation's sins, and its release into the wild depicted the banishment of sin from Israel's midst. It was a physical reminder that symbolized the removal of the nation's stain of guilt (Leviticus 16:7-10).

Some see Satan playing the role of the scapegoat released into the wilderness when he tempted Jesus there (Matthew 4:1-11). It is possibly for this reason that *the devil* is sometimes portrayed as goat.

But Jesus was our real "scapegoat." *He* was the One who assumed all of our sin and guilt and unrighteousness.

Isaiah identified the Messiah as the One who bore our sins and would become Israel's scapegoat (Isaiah 53:4). It was with Jesus's transfer of *His* innocence to us and our guilt to *Him* in mind, Paul wrote that, God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

"And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."
(1 John 2:2)

As sheep, we received the Messiah's perfect righteousness by faith, He willingly assumed all our guilt and received the penalty for our sins on the cross.

But *the goats* did not believe in Jesus as *the Son of God* and therefore they have not received His righteousness. The goats remain unrighteous. They were not made new creations (2 Corinthians 5:21). They were not made alive with Christ and remained dead in their sins (Ephesians 2:5). (The goats made no appearance in the previous trio of parables.)

In the metaphor of this parable, *the sheep* represented *the righteous* and are sorted to *the King's right*. And *the goats* represented the *accursed* scoffers who rejected *the King* and are sorted to *the King's left*. It is difficult to overstate the importance or the enormous difference of this distinction. One is extremely good (*the sheep*), because they have been granted the righteousness of Christ through faith. The other is extremely bad (*the goats*) because they have rejected this gift, which was freely offered.

The First Judgment and the Judgement in the Wheat and the Tares

This sorting between *the righteous sheep* and *the accursed goats* is similar in some respects to what Jesus said *the angels* will do upon *the Son of Man's* return when *His kingdom* comes, in His explanation of "the Wheat and the Tares" and His "Parable of the Dragnet." In those parables the *righteous* wheat is gathered into the barn after the tares have first been gathered and burned (Matthew 13:30; 13:40). And the good (*righteous*) fish are gathered into containers for safe keeping while the bad (wicked) fish are thrown away (Matthew 13:48—49).

In this parable of *the Sheep and Goats*, *the Shepherd* (who represents *the Son of Man*, i.e. Jesus) is the one doing the sorting. In the Matthew 13 parables, *the angels* were the ones sorting, but at least in the case of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares they did so under the direction of *the Son of Man*. Even though it was not stated, it is possible that *the Son of Man* oversaw *His angels* as they sorted between the good and bad fish. Ultimately Jesus is the final judge.

It could also be that the parables of the tares and dragnet relate specifically to a judgment for Israel. In the parable of the tares, it appears that the tares (sons of the evil one) are taken away to be judged, while the good seed, the wheat (sons of the kingdom) are left behind. So this could be speaking of a time when “all Israel is saved” (Romans 11:26).

These metaphorical “sortings” represent major judgments that will occur *when the Son of Man comes* and sits on *His glorious throne*.

His judgments will be perfect.

“The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.”
(Psalm 19:9)

His judgments will be just and equitable.

“And He will judge the world in righteousness;
He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity.”
(Psalm 9:8)

“For there is no partiality with God.”
(Romans 2:11)

His judgments will be absolute and final.

“The sum of Your word is truth,
And every one of Your righteous judgments is everlasting.”
(Psalm 119:160—NASB 20)

There are only two outcomes given at this first judgment in the parable of *the Sheep and Goats*: Each person is either a *sheep* and belongs with *the sheep on the King’s right* or he is a *goat* and grouped with *the goats on His left*.

There are no exceptions. There is no third option.

Biblical Text

³¹ “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. ³⁴ “Then the King will say to

those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation 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 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to 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 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' ⁴¹ "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been 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; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' ⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see 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 say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."