

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31–46: ³¹ “When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, ³² and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. ³⁵ I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, ³⁶ naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ The righteous will then answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸ When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Away from me, you that are under God’s curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! ⁴² I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they will answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we would not help you?’ ⁴⁵ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.’ ⁴⁶ These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.”

2 Corinthians 5v16-21: ¹⁶ No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so. ¹⁷ **Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come.** ¹⁸ All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also. ¹⁹ Our message is that God was making all human beings his friends through Christ. ^[a] God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends. ²⁰ Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God himself were making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends! ²¹ Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God.

James 2v14-17: ¹⁴ My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? ¹⁵ Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don’t have enough to eat. ¹⁶ What good is there in your saying to them, “God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!”—if you don’t give them the necessities of life? ¹⁷ So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

Romans 2v6-7: ⁶ For God will reward each of us according to what we have done. ⁷ Some people keep on doing good, and seek glory, honor, and immortal life; to them God will give eternal life

Song of Solomon 2v4: He brought me to his banqueting hall and raised his banner of love over me.

Sermon over page:-

The Parable of the Goats and the Sheep

Joined to Christ

We take as our text for today 2 Corinthians 5v17. 'Anyone who is **joined** to Christ is a **new creation**; the old is gone, the new has come.' What does that look like in practice for you today as an individual and you today as a church. Hold that thought. We will come back to it. To unpack this verse today, I am going to use 2 calendars, one slightly scary parable, and a verse from an erotic poem!

Goats in Trees and Lambies in Jammies

My son Simeon has moved to be with you in Wales and works at Rheidol hydro power station alongside some farmers, and not too surprisingly had become a bit of an expert on sheep. So for Christmas he got these two calendars. One of my long-term favourites 'Goats in Trees' and a new one on me 'Lambies in Jammies, which is photographs of lambs in their pyjamas. Well actually they are in warm coats really, but that doesn't rhyme. So I am going to place the goats on my left, and the sheep on my right. The theologians amongst you have already guessed where I am going with this. And here it, the slightly scary parable.

The slightly scary parable

Jesus told a parable about sheep and goats. We think it is the last parable Jesus ever told. It is a picture of the end times, and Jesus is King on his throne surrounded by angels and all the nations of the world are gathered in front of him. He divides the people like a shepherd separating out sheep from goats. He puts the goats on the left, and the sheep on the right. He then says to the people on his right (the sheep), Go and enter the kingdom of God and enjoy all of its blessings for ever. Why? Because when I was hungry you fed me, when I was thirsty you gave me a drink. When I was a stranger you welcomed me into your home. I had no clothes and you gave me some. When I was sick you cared for me, and you even visited me in prison. The people replied – What, when, how? We did none of that for you Lord. The King replied, Yes, because when you did that for the least of my followers it was for me. I was the elderly neighbour you visited regularly, I was the bereaved mother you took flowers too, I was the motorist with the flat tyre in the pouring rain that you helped, I was the refugee that you were kind to, and I was the starving Ethiopian that you send aid too. It was me, All those acts of random kindness you performed were received by me.

Then he turned to those on his left, and said you lot get away from me to a place of eternal punishment that I prepared for Satan and his angels. Because you refused to feed me, welcome me, clothe me, care for me or visit me. They replied, we know you are the King, but we never had the chance to do any of those things for you. If the Queen broke down outside our house, of course we would make her a cup of tea, and provide some water for the corgis, and call the AA for her. The King shakes his head. No, when you refused to do any of those things for the least of my followers, you turned your back on me. You are selfish, your money and time is always your own. You have no compassion for the poor, you don't care for the needs of anyone else except yourself. You never responded to my voice and followed me, you just kicked back against my wishes for your life, and pulled in your own direction. No more excuses. Be gone!

Goats become Sheep

I am told that if you were to take a sheep and a goat up a mountain, you would soon see their differences. In a short time, the sheep would soon get the idea that it needs to follow you and would eventually trot happily beside you, without even needing a rope. The goat would definitely need a rope, and would pull against you all the way. It wants to be independent and does not want to go where you want to go.

Following this analogy, we start out life as goats, pulling against God, wanting to go our own way, and usually messing up. Then we come to the point where we realise we need God, and accept

Jesus into our life, let him be Lord of it, and follow him. This is us joining to Jesus and becoming a new creation. The goat that pulls away, becomes the sheep that follows.

No fence

Also, You can not sit on the fence, and just believe in Jesus, just believe he visits the poor, but not follow him and do likewise.

We can admire Jesus, without doing what he did.

We can applaud what he preached and stood for, without caring about the same things.

We can admire his cross and commitment, without taking up our own cross and being committed ourselves.

You may say the words to ask Jesus into your life, but if you don't turn from your old life, & **join** to Jesus then you are **not** a new creation. You are still being a goat, but now you are a goat up a tree. You are looking down observing what's going on in the Christian World but not being a part of it. We have to make a decision.

The prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel declared to the people: **“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal is God follow him”** (1 King 18v21).

We can't stay in the tree.

Being a new Creation

We are not saved by what we do, our salvation is a free gift when we make Jesus Lord of our lives. But our response to the love from Jesus is to please him and to serve him. We are called to a living faith. In the letter of James, he says **“if faith is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead”**. James 2v17. Paul says much the same in his letter to the Romans (2v6-7).

1. Being joined to Jesus as a new creation means that we put Jesus first in our life. We listen to his voice, and we follow his lead best we can. Just like sheep follow a Good Shepherd.

2. Being joined to Jesus as a new creation also means that we have compassion for the poor. Why? Because Jesus did, and our new creation bit by bit is becoming more like Jesus. The parable shows how much he cares for those in poverty, sickness, and loneliness.

3. Being joined to Jesus as a new creation also means that we have compassion for the poor in spirit, that is those who don't yet know him. The goats. He commissions us to take the gospel into all the world, otherwise they will end up on his left facing judgement. This parable gives us the sense of importance and urgency of this. Understanding their ultimate fate can help us to push through any awkwardness we feel about sharing the good news of Jesus in the most natural and loving way that we can.

4. Being joined to Jesus as a new creation also means that we are wrapped up in his love and his protection, just like the lambie in jammies are protected by the elements. The Psalmist David was so confident of God's consistent love and protection that he said 'Even though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death you are with me (Ps 23). Why because there is no shadow without a source of light. His light is always with us and will never leave us.

No competition. No guilt trip

This is not about whether we do a little or a lot. It's not a parable that should take us on a guilt trip because some-one else has done more good works than you have. It is not a competition in how many homeless people you have spoken to this week, but it is about whether or not you have this

Jesus centred faith rather than just a belief in God. You must not judge others, for the great or the little they do. We know from another parable some are given more 'talents' than others so more is expected of them. And they may be much good work that some people do in secret, that is rightly hidden from us, or good works and influence they achieve without ever knowing it.

I was baptised 40 years ago. If I had nothing to show for my faith in 40 years, if there was no good fruit from my actions, then I mustn't be surprised, if I died tomorrow, that Jesus tells me to line up on the left. My commitment to Jesus would not have been a real one. Kevin, join the goats !

We need to concentrate our own life and becoming more like Jesus, then we will see the opportunities he give us to serve him.

Boy in the Ghetto story

A little lad was being teased in the ghetto by an older lad. 'If your God loves you so much, then why doesn't he take care of you better? Why doesn't he tell some-one to bring you some shoes, and a warm coat, and some better food? The little boy starts to cry under the intimidation, and replies 'I guess he does tell somebody, but somebody forgets,'

A survey of committed Christians asked if Jesus spends time with the poor today, and 80% replied that he did. In the same survey, only 2%, said that they spend time with the poor.

Seeking Opportunities to serve the poor

In the parable the King declares - *'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!'* (Mt 25v40).

Each parable is a window into the Kingdom of the God. No one parable contains the whole gospel message, and can be taken in isolation. It has to be read alongside the rest of the Gospel. So when this parable declares that we should be helping the poor fellow Christians. This is true but not in isolation, because we are called to to be a light in the darkness to all people

You as individuals and as a church should be seeking Him, and listening to his voice to understand what that looks like for you. What is his heart for you. You do not set out to invent something for yourself to do and make your own plans. You try and find out what he is already doing and what he wants you to get involved with. Pray about it. Seek his face. And if you are unsure, then it doesn't matter, just show love to whoever he puts in front of you every day.

Macedonia

One of the opportunities for you today is to bless the believers in one of the poorest countries in Europe, which is Macedonia. This is not the only opportunity for you of course, as some of you will already be doing some great works and you have other mission partners that you support, but I believe today that the Lord is calling at least some of you into this work. When Brenda told me of how many from this church wanted to come to Macedonia on our mission work this year I had to stop in my tracks, and say what is God doing at St. Mikes. Our entire team last year was 5, this year it could be 6 from this church alone.

So what is this ministry in Macedonia. Well our main focus is in serving the poor, and supporting a network of fledgling free churches under the evangelist Brother Jimmy, with one or two new churches being planted every year. We give financial support, for example to provide fuel for the winter for a family in poverty. We take out a lot of reading glasses, because they can't afford them but we can buy them in Poundland. We support a single Mum who now encouraged in her faith, had recently started running a Sunday school. We encourage and pray for the leaders and their churches. We invest into the teenagers and young adults and teach them how to minister in the gifts of the Spirit. We want to help some of them get to Bible school to train to be Pastors. We are encouraging worship and want to see a new worship movement birthed in the country. We support

evangelism events and have seen many give their lives to Jesus. We pray for unity, and we have started up an annual Easter conference in an indoor football arena which we call 'New Hope' Here we bring together hundreds from all over the country, the only event of its type in Macedonia. We subsidise it heavily because we want even the poorest person to come and celebrate Jesus together. We offer prayers for healing at the conference and have seen many people miraculously healed.

This work is not straight-forward. The path is sometimes very difficult. As well as the poverty, there is corruption in the politics, there is high unemployment coupled with a huge migration issue. They lose many of their talented workers and their young people, typically leaving for Germany or the USA. In a growing church we can suddenly lose much of the congregation and even the pastor to migration. There is persecution of the 'free church' from the Muslims **and** the Macedonian Orthodox church. At one new church plant everyone left when the Orthodox priest visited them individually and told them if they continued going to the 'free church' they would not be allowed to bury any of the family in the cemeteries. A few days ago I was in the very poor village where the church is full of children, that was until recently when the local mosque has successfully bribed half the children not to go. So it is an ongoing challenge, but we know that our God is greater. He that is in us, is greater than he that is in the world. It is a challenge, but it is an exciting one.

The Banqueting table

'Anyone who is **joined** to Christ is a **new being**'. I said I would unpack the verse, with two calendars, a slightly scary parable, and a verse from an erotic poem. The leaders of this church will be pleased to know that I have not been surfing the internet for erotic literature, but it is in a verse from the Old Testaments love poem, the Song of Solomon !

Song of Solomon 2v4: He brought me to his banqueting hall and raised the banner of love of over me.

So this is the exciting part ! Whilst this is an Old Testament love song, it is also echoed by Jesus for you today. Jesus is taking you to the banqueting hall, or more literally to His house of wine. He also hangs over you a banner of love. He is not ashamed of you, and he wants everyone to know how much he loves you.

In the Bible when they talk of the final banquet, it is usually talking about the end times, such as in the parable of the great banquet. But here's the thing, I was praying for you when I was in Macedonia, and I felt that this verse was relevant to what Jesus wants to do now, **for** you, **in** you and **through** you. The banqueting table is where you feast on the opportunities that God is going to give you to serve the poor. He wants to take you into his spiritual Wine Store. This is New Wine which signifies New blessing. The old is gone, the new is come. This is less about the destination and more about the journey.

Imagine some-one bought you a ship, and it was anchored in the harbour alongside the dock. You looked at it thought its nice and safe in the harbour, I'll keep it here and start up a floating café restaurant. But that's not what the ship was built for, it was built for adventure in the open seas. You can't discover new lands without losing site of the shore. The banquet is not to be held in the harbour, but out in the open seas.

For those on the outside, Serving the poor, and blessing Christians in poorer Christians, can seem like a dull burden. Oh, that will cost me time, money and effort. It will take away from me and leave me depleted, and prevent me from doing things I really enjoy. No. When you listen to his voice, step out in faith and follow him into what he is calling you, it is quite the opposite. Rather than being a dull burden, it is an exciting feast. Your banqueting table is to serve the poor. In doing so, you will receive more than you give, you will grow closer to Jesus, and you may experience him in exciting ways that you never imagined. When Brenda, Emma and Freya from this church stepped out in faith to join our first mission trip, all thinking like I had done once, I don't suppose they thought they would be praying together for a lady and seeing the sight restored in her eye. I don't expect Emma thought that she would be sharing her testimony to hundreds of people who were

then deeply moved by what they heard, setting down a foundation for many to come to faith. I am sure that Carmen, Paula, Martin and Simeon will similarly be stretched and blessed as you send them out to Macedonia this Easter with your blessing and support, to join Brenda and Freya again.

There is an invite to all of you today to make a personal and corporate commitment to step into the Wine House and receive your blessing. Then as you step out for him, he will not leave you out in the cold, he will wrap you in his love, like a lambie in jammies. He is telling you 'My banner over you is love'.

Zacchaeus

When Jesus was walking out of Jericho towards Jerusalem he looked up and he saw a goat in a tree, a sycamore tree. The goat was the most despised person in town, the chief tax collector Zacchaeus. He was interested in seeing Jesus, but he was still a goat up a tree. Jesus called to him, and said come down immediately and be one of my sheep, and I'm taking you to the banqueting table, it's at your house. I love you, and I accept you if you will follow me. Zacchaeus followed him back to his own house and put on a banquet. And what did he say at the banquet. **"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."** (Luke 9v8).

The goat came down from the tree, joined to Jesus, and became a new creation. He accepted the love of Jesus and became a lambie in a jammie. Jesus led him to a banquet, and his first response was to serve the poor. What a great example for us.

Taking up the challenge

I think if you take up this challenge and go to the banqueting table, then there will be a focus in your calling as a church going forward, on serving the poor, particularly helping believers from poorer countries.

I just want to encourage each of you to pray, how can I come to the banqueting table, how can I serve the poor. Perhaps its Macedonia, perhaps he has laid other ministries on your heart, but don't miss out on the New Wine, on the new blessings that God has for you, as you step out in faith for him, as a lambie wrapped up and protected by the love of God.

Conclude

'Anyone who is **joined** to Christ is a **new creation**; the old is gone, and the new has come.' We are transformed from goats who pull away from Jesus, into sheep that follow him. We can't sit on the fence, or hide up a tree, and just believe the Gospel is true, believe that God is Good and believe Jesus visits the poor but do nothing about it. That is a dead faith. Being a new creation means that we have a living faith, led by Jesus. We are wrapped up in his love, like lambies in jammies.

Stepping out in faith and helping the poor is challenging, and is not without its frustration and difficulties along the way. However it is rewarding and can be great fun too. When I am doing ministry, and I feel the Spirit, and see Gods power at work, I like to think at that moment I am on Gods great dance floor, pulling some shapes and monies for Him. Ignoring others and just serving yourself is boring in comparison.

If you think that you are still a goat in a tree, and though you believe Jesus is real and visits the poor, you have never given control of your life to Jesus, then please please come down from that tree and do it today. Follow Jesus into whatever exciting things he has planned for you. At the end of your life, you don't want to be left on the left.

If you have at some point in your past and made that commitment to Jesus to follow him, then be assured that you are joined to Jesus, you are a new creation, and you are wrapped in his love, like a lambie in a jammie

But where Church are you going now? This church has a missionary tradition, has a missionary heart, and I believe you are being called back to the banqueting table to feast on new wine, with new opportunities that Jesus has for you to serve others. Ask him today to take you to that spiritual Wine house.

Don't keep your ship in the harbour, clinging onto the familiar. The old has gone, the new has come. You are a new creation, step out with your living faith, and serve the poor in Jesus name. Amen.