

The Least of These

Matthew 25:31-46 on March 29, 2020

Please read Matthew 25:31-46 before going any further in this transcript.

Before we jump into the sermon, let me update you on our church's Good Friday plans: We are planning to livestream our service. The details are in your bulletin. We are going to try something a little unconventional. We are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together via livestream. We just really feel that it's important to remember our Lord this way and to recognize our spiritual unity, even if we can't physically gather in the same room for a while. There are instructions in the bulletin regarding how to prepare the juice and the bread in your own home.

Today is our 4th and final sermon in our series on "The End of This World."¹ Please open your Bible to Matthew 25:31. Matthew 25:31-32 begins, "When the Son of Man (Jesus) comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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."² Even though these verses never actually mention the word judgment, it's clear that's what's going on here. When Jesus comes back, He will return as the King of kings. He will return with power and authority to judge the nations.³ Jesus will render judgment from His throne; rewarding some and punishing others.⁴ The key issue will be who the sheep are and who the goats are. Simply put,

The sheep = are the righteous, headed for their heavenly inheritance.

The goats = are the unrighteous, headed to hell with the devil.

I know there are a few families in our church who have sheep and goats. I'm not a farm boy and I've never owned either one. I've just seen them at petting zoos or when I've been over to some of your houses. For those of us, less familiar with sheep and goats, here are a few things we might like to know:⁵ Sheep are grazers, slowly munching on plants close to ground; goats are browsers, eating just about anything and everything. Sheep tend to stick with the flock; goats are more independent and tend to get into more trouble. Sheep are woolly; goats are hairy. Sheep don't usually have horns; goats usually do (including the females).



Jesus will put the sheep on His right, the goats on his left. In Jewish culture, the right side was considered more honorable than the left side.⁶ By the way, sheep and goats can be lots of different colors. The real question here is why would this distinction, between sheep/goats, have mattered to Jesus' original listeners? This is where a good Study Bible really comes in handy. According to the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, "Palestinian sheep and goats often looked similar from a distance and often grazed together. But they needed to be separated at nighttime because the goats required a warmer place to rest."⁷ (In other words, if you're not wearing a wool coat, the cooler weather is more of a problem!) 😊 Just about all of the people sitting there listening to Jesus talk about this, would have understood these 3 things about Palestinian sheep/goats:

1 They LOOKED similar, from a distance. 2 They often grazed TOGETHER. 3 They needed to be SEPARATED at the end of the day. So, here's the point: 1 The righteous and the unrighteous LOOK similar, from a distance. 2 The righteous and the unrighteous often eat TOGETHER. They often spend time together in close quarters. 3 And, the righteous and the unrighteous will need to be separated at the END OF THE LAST DAYS, when Jesus returns.

This is what Jesus is getting at: He will be able to clearly discern who is righteous and who is unrighteous. Just like any good shepherd/goatherder, He knows how to separate the sheep/goats at

¹ As we approach Easter, it's interesting to note that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25 happened during His passion week. Matthew 26:1-2 tells us that Jesus is wrapping up His sermon just 2 days before the Last Supper, 3 days before His crucifixion.

² See Matthew 16:27.

³ See Matthew 24:30.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "For **we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

⁵ I got some of my information from <https://www.treehugger.com/natural-sciences/difference-between-sheep-and-goats.html>

⁶ See Isaiah 41:10.

⁷ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1986 footnote on Matthew 25:32.

the end of the day. Jesus' judgment will be perfect, flawless. He will not mistakenly convict the innocent, nor will He wrongly pardon the guilty. The way that He's able to distinguish between them, is by their behavior: By how they treat those who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, and in prison. He lumps these people together in a group called, "the least of these." (These 6 things are a representative list, not necessarily a comprehensive list.) Jesus now wraps up His Olivet Discourse, in Matthew 24-25, with a sobering call to reflect on our behavior: Does our behavior clearly reveal our IDENTITY as one of His sheep, or as a goat?

From the outset of this 4-week series, we have been considering how these "Signs of the End of This World" are meant to motivate us toward godly living. **When He returns, Jesus will judge each one of us according to how we have treated "the least of these."** This is the main point that we're going to consider today, and it begs 2 questions. First of all,

1) Who exactly are "the least of these"? Matthew 25:40 says, "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.'" If Jesus is going to assess our behavior according to these criteria, then we'd better make sure that we know "Who exactly are 'the least of these'?" Now, you may already be thinking, "well that's a stupid question! Why should it matter exactly WHO these people are? Shouldn't we be willing to help ANYONE who is hungry or thirsty or homeless or in need of clothing?"⁸ Well, it may surprise some of us to learn that there is actually a very good reason to ask this question: Who exactly are the least of these? The reason for this question, is the immediate context. Look at Jesus' exact words in Matthew 25:40, "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.'" You see, Jesus seems to use a qualifier in verse 40. He doesn't simply say "do this for everyone," but He says "do this for these brothers and sisters of mine."

There's actually quite a wide range of opinions, for how we should understand this phrase, "these brothers and sisters of mine": Some would say that Jesus isn't qualifying anything; He is referring broadly to EVERYONE who is hungry, thirsty, homeless, sick, or in prison. Others would say that Jesus is strictly qualifying his statement; He is referring narrowly to ONLY the Apostles and Christian missionaries. Still others would say that Jesus is only somewhat qualifying his statement; they think Jesus may be referring to some middle ground between these other extremes.⁹

Having no qualifications or limits to who we help, would be in line with multiple other passages in the New Testament. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of this. It teaches us, that it is our clear Christian responsibility, to help ANYONE in need, regardless of their ethnic or religious background.¹⁰ And yet... we do see qualifications in other parts of the New Testament. Specifically, qualifications for putting the needs of God's people 1st. For example, Galatians 6:10 specifies, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."¹¹ Therefore, although the Bible does give us a clear message about doing good to ALL PEOPLE, it also gives us a clear message that there are occasions when we should focus our help on God's people first. As it turns out, that is likely what Jesus is saying in Matthew 25 when He refers to, "these brothers and sisters of mine." In other words, Matthew 25:40, "does NOT refer to the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity" but only to our brothers and sisters in Christ.¹²

This is when it's important for us to keep in mind that Matthew 24-25 is all part of one and the same sermon. As it turns out, at the end of Matthew 25, Jesus is actually circling back around to

⁸ In fact, some of us may already be thinking about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells this story in Luke's Gospel, when an expert in the law asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus basically says, "love God with all you've got and love your neighbor as yourself." But then, the expert in the law tries to narrow down the field a bit, "who is my neighbor?" In other words, Jesus, you can't expect us to love everybody, so who exactly should I consider to be my actual neighbor? Jesus then goes on to tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which illustrates that we should BE a neighbor to ANYONE in need. So, this sounds like a stupid question: "Who exactly are the least of these?" Sounds like Pharisee talk to me! Why would anyone try to limit who we help and who we don't help?

⁹ See the *NIV Study Bible* footnote on pp. 1639-1640, for Matthew 25:40. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011)

¹⁰ Another example would be James 1:27, "look after orphans and widows in their distress." This is stated without qualification.

¹¹ See also Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-35.

¹² Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 207.

where His message began in Matthew 24. Jesus began this sermon by talking about signs of the end of this age. And those signs were warnings to His followers. Look at how Jesus began in Matthew 24:9-13, "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." In other words, the endurance of our own personal faith will prove our faith genuine. But, so also will our support for our fellow believers in need, as times of persecution and wickedness increase. The evidence of our genuine faith, our genuine identity as sheep and not goats, will be found in how we treat the least of our bros/sis in Christ.¹³

It may seem easy right now, in America at least, to publicly support and care for our fellow believers. But when the persecution ratchets up, there may be a very strong temptation to look the other way. To ignore their needs for food/drink/shelter. To abandon them when they are sick or in prison.¹⁴ To not put ourselves at risk by our association with them. To deny our shared identity as Christ-followers. And, in the process, to deny Christ Himself. To reveal our true identity, as a goat, who does not serve the needs of the "least of these," and therefore, does not serve Christ Himself.¹⁵

When He returns, Jesus will judge each one of us according to how we have treated "the least of these," those who are our Brothers and Sisters in Christ. Jesus' coming judgment, begs one other question:

2) Why are the righteous and the unrighteous surprised? The righteous ask a very curious question in Matthew 25:37-39, "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'" This isn't just false modesty; this is genuine surprise.

Probably in part, because Jesus says they did these things directly to him. But also in part, because they didn't think they were doing anything special. They were merely doing what righteous people do: they were living godly lives.¹⁶ In other words, they were just doing what came naturally to them. They weren't trying to earn spiritual merit or to get on God's good side. Their behavior was simply the overflow that happens when sheep follow their Shepherd. It was the most natural thing in the world for them to help their fellow believers who were in need. But Jesus highlights the immense significance of these behaviors: They reveal who the sheep are. "Good deeds done to Jesus' followers," ...reflect where people are at, in relation to the kingdom and in relation to Jesus himself.¹⁷ Put another way, when we align ourselves with the needs of God's people, we align ourselves with Jesus himself.¹⁸

It's VERY interesting to note that the unrighteous also respond with surprise. Matthew 25:44 says, "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?'" It's a little eerie, they ask the same question that the righteous asked: "when?" But they are asking from an entirely different point of view: What do you mean Jesus? When did we not help you? If we had seen YOU, needing help of any kind, of course we would have helped YOU! Lord, there must be some mistake!¹⁹ But when Jesus returns to render His final judgment, there will be no mistakes. Only perfect justice. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows

¹³ Consider Matthew 10:40-42.

¹⁴ Consider Paul's abandonment in 2 Timothy 1:15; 4:9-18. Consider also the faith Rahab displayed in sheltering the spies in Joshua 2, Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; and James 2:25.

¹⁵ New Testament Professor, Craig Blomberg, summarizes it well: "The parable of the sheep and the goats, then, makes very good sense as referring to final judgment based on how people have responded to the needy, itinerant Christians, because in accepting these needy and ministering to them, they show that they have accepted the Christian message as well." Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 208.

¹⁶ See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, pp. 1986-1987 footnote on Matthew 25:37-40.

¹⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Rev. Ed. #9, *Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 583.

¹⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Rev. Ed. #9, *Matthew & Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2010, p. 586.

¹⁹ If you've never listened to Keith Green's song "The Sheep and the Goats" before, it's totally worth 8 minutes of your time to give it a listen. Check out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBkNzb283-U>

how to correctly separate the sheep from the goats. In other words, the spiritual hypocrisy of the goats will be revealed.²⁰

Let's be very clear here, Jesus' message isn't that goats need to start acting more like sheep. This is NOT about working harder to behave the way that God wants us to behave. This is an issue of IDENTITY. It's about asking ourselves, what does my behavior reveal about my IDENTITY? If I am acting more like a goat than a sheep, then I need to become a sheep. I need transformation. Not just changed BEHAVIOR, but changed IDENTITY. 2 Corinthians 5:17 talks about this, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" So, if you're a goat, don't spend your energy trying to act like a sheep. Don't try cutting off your horns and trying to somehow grow a woolly coat. Spend your energy repenting of your sin and asking God to make you into a brand-new creation. Let the Good Shepherd transform you into one of His sheep. This happens by grace through faith in Jesus, not by anything that you can do. **When He returns, Jesus will judge each one of us according to how we have treated "the least of these," which will reveal our true IDENTITY as either a sheep or a goat.**

Our identity is revealed by whether or not we are helping our fellow believers. Whether we are feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink,²¹ and providing shelter and clothing. Jesus gives quite a challenging list of examples, including those last two: looking after the sick and ministering to those in prison. With the time we have left, let's look at those last TWO more closely:

1. We should be ministering to those in prison. Jesus' words in Matthew 25 echo in the words of Hebrews 13:3, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." For various reasons, some Christ-followers are in jail today. Some because of persecution, some because they got off track. We are called to remember them, to visit them, and to care for them. Let's also remember to pray for them. Some people from our church work at the jail, or the Juvenile Detention Center, or in some other law enforcement agency. These are important jobs, but they are also important ministries. Jim Frick is the Beltrami County Jail Chaplain. He is also one of the Global Partners that we support. You can find his photo with his wife, Karen, in our Prayer Flipbook. When we give to our General Ministry Fund here at the church, part of that money goes to support ministries like Jim's chaplaincy. There is a ton of Christian Ministry that happens in correctional facilities all around the world. God doesn't give up on people, just because they are convicted of a crime. Neither should we. Let's remember to pray for those in prison ministry.



The final application that we're going to consider today is that...

2. We should be looking after the sick. In Matthew 25:36 Jesus says, "...I was sick and you looked after me..." In Jesus' day, they didn't have modern hospitals like we do today. In fact, throughout much of human history, a majority of the care for the sick was done by family and friends. Let's take time to praise God for the health care systems that we have today! Let's also express our sincere thanks to all of our health care workers. We need you and we appreciate you. Many people in our own church are working in the medical field. Let's remember them in our prayers.

One of the best pieces of advice that I've received recently, regarding this COVID-19 Pandemic, is to learn from our history. COVID-19 is not the first time that Christians have been confronted by a global health crisis. There is a lot that we can learn from how people responded to previous pandemics. We can glean not only medical wisdom but also spiritual wisdom. One article that I read

²⁰ It's worth pondering that when the unrighteous assessed their own standing before God, they were not only surprised at Jesus' response, they were still addressing Him as Lord!

²¹ Consider Matthew 10:42 and its preceding context.

this week, went all the way back to the year 1527.²² Martin Luther wrote an article almost 500 years ago titled, “***Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague***.” Luther was writing in response to a request that he got from another pastor serving in Germany.²³ The question of the day was this: Is it proper “for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague?”²⁴ Luther’s response is fascinating.²⁵ He gives a lot of challenging and encouraging spiritual advice. His blunt way of writing, had me laughing out loud at times. Luther gives a very sobering challenge to Christ-followers. He calls us to trust God fully, and to avoid having a fearful response to deadly plagues. As I was reading this letter, I was struck by his firm rebuke that was tempered by wise discernment. It caused me to stop and pray multiple times regarding my response to COVID-19.

Before I share this first quote, keep in mind that this was written 500 years ago. It was written before modern medicines and N95 masks. And yet, it almost reads as if it was written today! Luther writes: “[Some are] ...much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are... This is not trusting God but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.”²⁶ Doesn’t this sound like something that could have been written for us in March of 2020?

At a different point in his letter, Luther writes the following: “if it were Christ... who were laid low by illness, everybody would... gladly become a servant... Everyone would want to be bold and fearless; nobody would flee but everyone would come running. And yet they don’t hear what Christ himself says, ‘[whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me]’. ...If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbor close at hand.”²⁷

What a response during the time of a deadly plague! “You have your sick neighbor close at hand.” You see, back then Luther believed, what Jesus is teaching us today in Matthew 25: That looking after the sick is a part of our Christian duty. And frankly, if our hospitals do indeed run out of space in the coming weeks, some of us may need to be ready to care for people in our own homes, if necessary. Brother or Sister in Christ, whether it’s looking after the sick, visiting those in prison, or whatever else it might be... when Jesus comes in His glory, may He find us living godly lives. May there be plenty of evidence that demonstrates our identity as His sheep.

This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on March 29, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

²² Thanks to Pastor Dwight Warden at the Blackduck Evangelical Free Church in MN for passing this recommendation along to me.
https://www.academia.edu/42236069/Whether_One_May_Flee_From_A_Deathly_Plague

²³ His name was Johann Hess.

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut □. Lehmann, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 119–38.

²⁵ By the way, I don’t agree with everything in Luther’s response. For example, his explanation for the origin of plagues in general, and of the devil’s part in them, go too far for me to buy in fully.

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43 (p. 131): Devotional Writings II, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut □. Lehmann, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 119–38.

²⁷ Martin Luther, *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague*, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 43 (p.130): Devotional Writings II, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut □. Lehmann, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 119–38.