

The Biased Kingdom

Ezekiel 34:11 – 24, Matthew 25:31 – 43

Quiz – different pics of sheep and goats

It's not easy to tell who is a sheep and who is a goat. Who remembers another of Jesus' parables where 2 things exist side by side until the end of the age? The wheat and the tares focuses on the side by side nature of the kingdom. Both parables have something in common – it's not up to us to do the separating.

I have a question. It's not scientifically proven, but it seems that sometimes anyway, poor people are more generous than the rich ones. There has been a bit of a push back about the rich singers giving their time to put together the Christmas song – Do they know it's Christmas time at all? - while the rest of us are asked to give our money to support the cause. It's not that straightforward. Never the less:

Why are poor people sometimes more generous than the rich?

Daniel Lillford, Nova Scotia thinks it has much to do with the circles people travel in. If you are wealthy, you might live a "hedonistic life, hopping from country estate to Paris to yacht to roller to casino and back again." He suggests your chances of rubbing shoulders with homeless people or slum dwellers are fairly remote. But if you live in a poorer area where everyone struggles, then you know that a little can make a big difference. He goes on to say that for many "their life is blinkered by their upbringing, class, snobbery and ideology" and that those things are not confined to the rich. He admits to knowing mean poor people and wealthy generous people.¹

More than two thousand years ago, a single girl discovered with fear and trembling, that she would bear God's Son. In song, she praises the Lord for choosing her for this privilege, coming as she does from a humble background.

She goes on to sing that the Lord:

... has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Lk 1:46 - 55

Mary's song cries In Luke, out for justice for the poor. Later in Luke's gospel, we read that Jesus came to preach good news to the poor. And in this same gospel Jesus blesses the poor and curses the wealthy.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,,50484,00.html>

These passages echo many similar thoughts expressed in the First Testament.² If the Bible expresses the heart of God, then clearly God does have a bias towards the weak, the humble, those in need.

Anne Roberts has spoken of a rose bush she saw. The edges were blowing in the wind and moving about. The middle was much more calm. Certainly the wind blew there too but it was more stable. Anne believed, and I agree with her, that the Spirit is moving much more strongly on the fringes of our church than in the core. He is present in the core. Yet he is much more active on the messy edges.

The 'messy edges' is where the poor are mostly found. Yes some in need come to church, but many don't. Our challenge is to work with the Lord where he is – his Kingdom leans towards the hungry, the naked, the sick, those in prison.

Our challenge is to be a sheep, working in the Shepherd's realm and to do it from the secure base of being loved. So often we work because we experience guilt when we don't, or we need recognition, or we need company or for a variety of other self-centred reasons. The Lord wants our work simply to overflow from our relationship with him.

Actually, He wants us to know we are deeply loved first and foremost. Whether we work or not we are children of God, esteemed highly in his eyes, adored with a passion we don't yet comprehend. If we are to work with the Lord to extend his biased Kingdom, we must only do it, if we are secure in his love for us.

So let's look at the story in Matthew's Gospel. We need to notice that it occurs in context of Jesus' teaching about his return. Matthew recounts several parables Jesus uses to prepare his disciples for his return:

Thief in the night	Ch 24	They must be expectant
Good and wicked servants	Ch 24	They must be responsible in their duties
Ten virgins	Ch 25	They are to be watchful & prepared
Talents	Ch 25	They are to intentionally use their gifts

The parable of the sheep and goats describes what will happen when Jesus has returned. All nations will be gathered before the Lord. Occasionally the world 'Ethne' is translated as 'Gentiles' but often it is translated as 'the nations' and that is the most appropriate translation here. So everyone will be judged according to what they have done to help others.

Now there is a problem here isn't there? What is it?

We argue about grace vs works don't we? We quote Eph 2:8 & 9
For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

² The principle of leaving gleanings after harvest Lev 23:22, returning a poor person's cloak if they have used it as a loan surety Deut 24:12, and the generosity to the poor exhibited in Job 20:10 are some examples.

However, Matthew knows nothing of the grace versus works thing. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus insists upon righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:17-20). He says calling him "Lord" is a waste of time if we fail to do what he says (7:21-29).

Jesus tells the parable of the two sons; one promises to do as he's told but doesn't while the other one says "Nah" but does go to work. (21:28-32).

The risen Jesus charged his disciples to "obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:20).

Matthew gets that we need to do what Jesus says. So does the writer to the Ephesians. Chapter 2:10 says For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Now this doesn't exclude grace. Jesus reminds those who are thinking about following him that "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (11:30). Judgment is part of the picture for sure, but that judgment involves a large measure of surprise. Jesus tells some who prophesied, cast out demons, and performed miracles in his name that they are stiff out of luck. "I never knew you," he told them (7:21-22).

In the story we heard today, there is an element of surprise. The goats are surprised. Lord, when did we see you and fail to care for you? The sheep are just as surprised! Lord, when did we see you and do this stuff for you?

Interesting isn't it? Goats do not know they are goats -- but neither do sheep recognize themselves as sheep.

This is what I mean when I say that what we do must come from our relationship with Jesus and from who the Lord has made us to be. Good behaviour doesn't come from trying harder, working our butts off, striving, striving, striving. Good fruit comes from good trees. Jesus explains, good trees can't bring forth bad fruit, nor can bad trees bear good fruit (7:17-18). Trees are known by their fruit (12:33).

Jesus doesn't tell disciples that they should become the salt of the earth or the light of the world; he tells them they already are salt and light. Jesus doesn't command them to hunger and thirst for justice, be peacemakers etc. He blesses those who do that (5:1-16). Judgment isn't an add on. It's a bit like exams at the end of a school term. Exam questions ask what we have been learning throughout the term. Judgment exposes a reality that has been present all along.

Of course the judge is Jesus. He does the separating not us. His criteria is not necessarily the same as ours.

What criteria would you use?

"Saved" - belief, sinner's prayer

The story says nothing about accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour or believing in God the Father. There are no essential creeds listed. It appears as if the only criteria is serving others.

That is actually pretty fair it seems to me. I'm not saying belief in Christ is not important, of course it is. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

It is also clear in Scripture that relationship with Jesus works itself out in what we do, in how we live. James – what good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ... if someone is naked and you don't help their physical needs, what good does that do? Faith by itself, if it has no works is dead.

The sheep helped because they could not help themselves – their actions were unconscious. They were not motivated by any thought of reward or otherwise. It was in their very nature to love in practical ways. Because Jesus' love had transformed them from the inside-out, they loved others the way that he loved them.

Acts of mercy are the evidence that the sheep belong to the king. They have received salvation and are being transformed. That transformation reveals itself in acts of love.

A pastor described a conversation with a member of his church. The guy said "You preachers talk a lot about 'do unto others,' but when you get down to it, it comes down to basin theology."

The pastor asked what basin theology was about.

The church guy responded "Remember what Pilate did when he had the chance to acquit Jesus? He called for a basin and washed his hands of the whole thing. But Jesus, the night before his death, called for a basin and washed the disciple's feet." He went on to challenge the pastor "It all comes down to basin theology: Which one will you use?"³

Often we don't know who are the sheep and the goats. Sometimes we see those who use the basin of servant-hood but sometimes their actions are hidden. Sometimes we are not sure whether we ourselves are a sheep or a goat. It's perfectly normal to wonder at times. If the poor are more generous than the rich, perhaps it is because they know what it is to be poor. It seems to me that is not a bad thing.

Lord, remind us that we ourselves are nothing without you. Show us how much you love us, that we can go out as poor sheep to share what we have with others, regardless of whether they are sheep or goats. Teach us to live on the messy edges, among the poor, and the sick, and the lonely that we may see their need and respond in love. Amen

³ The story is quoted in Charles Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes, 516