

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 58: 6-12
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25:31-46
January 1, 2023

“A Goat is Not the Greatest of all Time”

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Why exactly is it a problem telling the difference between sheep and goats, and I mean real goats, not Greatest Of All Time GOATS. How could they *possibly* get mixed up? Don't they look very different? I mean even I can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat. So of course, I did a little research.

While our goats and sheep are easily distinguishable from one another, that is due to centuries of breeding. In the ancient world, and in many parts of Asia and Africa today, goats and sheep look almost identical. Only their shepherd can tell them apart. And what really separates them is BEHAVIOR.

Even today's farmers warn about keeping goats. Goats have been described as Jack Russells with hooves. They can climb anything. They destroy fences climbing on them. The expression used for fencing is that if it can't hold water, it can't hold a goat. Furthermore, goats don't graze, they browse. They will eat just about anything with a special talent for eating the things you don't want them to eat, like vulnerable trees and the vegetable garden. Goats are opinionated. They are stubborn and very curious. They have large egos and will even butt cars.

Sheep, on the other hand, are led by a shepherd. Without a shepherd sheep get nervous. They will follow a shepherd. Goats follow no one except the loudest most dominant male in the group, the one who smells really bad and will attack if approached. A shepherd leads his flock. A goatherd follows his flock and does what he can to keep them out of trouble. He has little control over where they go. Today people sometimes resort to water pistols, hoses and loud noises. It's definitely not a one-person job. Goats love to escape any fence put there to keep them in. One person summed it up this way. Shepherds protect sheep from their environment. Goatherds protect the environment from their goats. It's not that they're not useful. They're very good at eating poison ivy.

The person who is a goat may look like a sheep but they are headstrong, destructive and consistently refuse to be led by anyone, let alone God. Sheep are team players. Goats are definitely NOT team players. Goats are out for themselves.

This scripture concerning sheep and goats has been called a parable, but it's really not a parable. It just uses a powerful image, one that would have made sense to Jesus' audience, because at a superficial glance all sheep and goats looked alike. Only the shepherd who knew them could separate them. And the difference between the two was most easily revealed **by their behavior.**

Jesus is the king in this story, the Son of Man who has come in his glory with all the angels. From the throne all nations will be gathered and he will separate the people out, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The shepherd knows the flock. But interestingly enough, the sheep and goats in this case apparently don't know that they are sheep or goats. The sheep are just living the way God wants them to live because they love God and it is the natural thing to do. The goats lack self-awareness because all of their energy and attention has been focused on accomplishing goals, achievements that have nothing to do with service. Even if the act looks religious, the motivation is self-interest. It's like running a charitable foundation in order to be praised for running a charitable foundation, or the person who does a good deed only so they can post it to Instagram to make sure EVERYONE knows they have done a good deed.

The king says to the sheep on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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."

The sheep are amazed. They had no idea they had done these things for the Lord. They just did them because it was the right thing to do. They asked, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?³⁸ 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?"

And the king replied, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

As shocked as the sheep were to learn of their status, the goats were more so. After all, they thought they were religious! But the king said to them, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 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 sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

But they answered, "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?"

And he replied, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

It's important for us to note that the sheep do not "earn" salvation by doing these things. They reveal who they are by doing these things. And the goats do not "earn" condemnation by not doing these things. They reveal their true identity by turning their backs on those in need.

We have recently heard of acts of grace and mercy during the storm in Buffalo with people taking in complete strangers, but there is another story out there, far more disturbing. When trapped by the storm and freezing Jay Withey went to ten homes, offering each \$500 to spend the night on their floor. All of them turned him away. He was in fear for his life, and they closed the door.

He found others in the same situation, many of them elderly. Mercifully Jay was then able to locate and break into a school, where he was able to offer shelter to these people, ten in all, one with a dog. It was Christmas Eve and they settled in the school overnight, scavenged for cereal and apples in the cafeteria, managed to turn off the alarm, and found mats in the gym to sleep on. On Christmas morning, Withey and some of the younger members of the group were able to use snow blowers from the janitor's closet to free the cars from the mounds of snow. As they were working one of the men who had turned him away approached Withey in tears, telling him that he had been unable to sleep since turning him away. That one was a lost sheep. The others were likely goats.

How we treat one another has always been of central importance to God. Those who love God love others. The Old Testament Law included care for the poor and needy. The law required farmers to leave the edges of the fields unharvested so widows and orphans might glean food from them. Workers were to be paid daily, because they needed that income every day to eat. And the law forbid people from taking advantage of widows and orphans. The prophets took these principles and built on them. Isaiah urged the people "share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, clothe them, and (do) not turn away from your own flesh and blood. . . do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, . . . spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed." (Isaiah 58)

Put simply, it is not possible to be a true follower of God, a true Christian, and turn your back on those in need. Faith is incompatible with a hard heart. If we love God we will be like God. We will have a heart for those most vulnerable, those Jesus calls "the least." They are the ones who we cannot expect will ever be able to pay us back. Our motive should be pure mercy and grace, not self-interest. Politicians use the poor as props or weapons. We help those who have no one to help them, because we recognize our shared humanity and their worth as God's children.

These basic categories of mercy, meeting the needs of hunger and thirst, clothing, giving shelter, healing the sick and visiting those in prison are given not to limit how we exercise mercy and compassion, but to open the door. Kindness to a stranger, sitting and listening to someone in distress, helping with a flat tire, paying for groceries, opening the door in a storm and welcoming a stranger in. It does not have to be a great and dramatic act. When we live the way Jesus wants us to live it flows out of us naturally. And anyone can do this. It is not necessary to be rich or educated or clever. Anyone can show mercy and grace. When we love God, God's love flows through us. Amen.

Isaiah 58: 6-12

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?"

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. ¹¹ The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. ¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation 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 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.’

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 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

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.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire 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, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “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?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

