

Sorting Sheep and Goats

Hespeler, November 26, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Reign of Christ

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 95:1-7a, Ephesians 1:15-23, [Matthew 25:31-46](#)

The passage that Allison read to us this morning, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, has got to be one of my favourite parables. I have returned to it again and again down through the years as I reflect on questions about how we ought to live as Christians and how we ought to find the presence of Jesus in this world.

But, as I reflected on the parable this time, I was struck by something. I've always focused on the things that the Son of Man says to the two different groups about what they have done or failed to do. But I've never really paid much attention to what happens before that. Before the Son of Man speaks to them, he does something very important. He sorts them out into two groups: the sheep and the goats.

How to Sort the Animals

I always assumed that that part of the story didn't matter much. It was just sort of the setup to what was going to follow. But maybe I shouldn't have made that assumption. I don't really know what is involved in separating sheep from goats. But the people who would have listened to Jesus tell the story, would have been much more familiar with both animals. Would they have read more into that sorting than someone like me?

You can sort sheep from goats by using their different physical characteristics. Goats tend to have straight hair while sheep have woolly fur. The horns, if they have them, grow differently – straight up or curling back. Goat tails go up while sheep tails go down. Presumably, the shepherd would use these physical traits to sort the animals.

More than Appearance

But surely, you would think, this parable can't just be about a difference in appearance. Because that would mean that this parable starts with the Son of Man profiling people on the basis of how they look. And that can be quite problematic, can't it? We have all seen how such profiling has often contributed to racism and other alarming prejudices. I have a bit of trouble with the notion that, when Jesus judges the people of this world, he would make use of anything like such an approach.

So, I don't think that this parable begins with appearance. It's got to be about something else – some other difference between sheep and goats. Many of us, with our lack of experience of such things, don't see much difference between sheep and goats beyond appearance. But they are, in fact, very different animals.



Differences in Behaviour

The only thing I know about goat behaviour is that, apparently, Bill Grogan's goat was feeling fine one day and he ate three red shirts right off of the line. I don't know if you know that song, but I certainly learned it when I was growing up. But that old camp song, actually does hint at something that is true about goats. They will eat just about anything.

They are particularly adventurous in searching for their meals. They will step out quite alone and go far afield looking for some tasty tidbit. As such, they do often get into a fair bit of mischief. So, think of goats as the great individualists of the pastures. They tend to behave as if it is every goat for him or herself.

For the sheep, on the other hand, it is all about the herd. Sheep stick together. They know that they are safest when they are close to one another and look out for one another. They always graze close to the ground on tasty grass and clover and are not adventurous in their diets. If one sheep goes off in a particular direction, the rest are very likely to follow. Sheep are the great communitarians of the pastures. And I think that there is something of relevance in that to the whole parable.

Judging Based on What They Did

When the Son of Man comes, you see, we are told that he will judge between the sheep and the goats based on what they did: **"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."** And those are all very laudable and praiseworthy actions, of course. But the very notion that such actions lead to salvation or access to the kingdom of God for the sheep raises some theological questions.

Teaching about Salvation

The teaching about salvation in much of the New Testament, especially as it is laid out by the Apostle Paul, is quite clear. Our good deeds and best intentions, as wonderful as they might be, are not what earn us salvation. We are just not able to attain the standards of God's goodness and righteousness on our own power. But that is okay because God offers us whatever salvation we need as a gift, something that is obtained for us by what Jesus has done for us. This is called grace, and it is activated in our lives by faith – not by us believing certain things but by us choosing to put our trust in Jesus.

This teaching is foundational to Christian theology. And yet it seems to be contradicted in this parable when the sheep are told that they will inherit the kingdom because of what they have done. That's why I can't help but wonder whether there might not be a little bit more than just that going on in this parable. Perhaps it's not just about what these grazing animals have done or failed to do. Maybe it has something more to do with the differences between sheep and goats. Maybe it has something to do with their nature.

Charitable Deeds

The sheep in this parable engage in what we might call good deeds and specifically in charitable deeds. They have been giving of their time and talent to visit people who are struggling. They have provided food and clothing to those who need them. And such charitable deeds are certainly good and praiseworthy. But I also think that we are becoming more and more aware that such charitable giving is sometimes little more than a band-aid, and not a solution to the real problems of poverty, isolation and exclusion.

We have certainly seen that through our experience here at St. Andrews, but we also see it all across this country in the wake of the economic troubles of the last few years. The number of families using resources like food banks is growing constantly. The numbers doubled in Toronto over the last year. But simply giving people emergency food, though absolutely essential, doesn't solve the underlying problems of low wages, underemployment and unaffordable housing.

Why They are not Necessarily Enough

Charitable acts are good, of course, especially when responding to immediate crises and when helping people to survive in an unfair world, but if all we are doing is giving food to the hungry, clothing to the naked and visiting those who have been unjustly imprisoned or who have fallen ill because of all of the ways in which the world is just not right, nothing will ever change. By keeping the most disadvantaged from becoming so hopeless that they rebel, we might even be helping to maintain an unacceptable status quo.

What is needed is a whole new mindset, a different way of thinking about the problems. And this parable seems to suggest that a goat's mindset is not going to do it. Goats are only interested in taking care of themselves. It is a constant scramble to find what they desire or need. But so long as that is all we can think about – and we are constantly being told in our society today that that is all that we should think about – the deep underlying problems will not be tackled.

Thinking Like Sheep

No, what I think this parable is suggesting is that the sheep's approach of looking out for the whole community and working collectively on our problems is the only way that anything can possibly change. Obviously, a change in mindset is only the beginning, a lot of work needs to be done to bring about actual change in how society works. But I would suggest that it must start with a fundamental shift from thinking like goats to thinking like sheep.

And, if that is part of the parable and the message that Jesus is trying to give, then doesn't that cast the whole question about gaining entrance into the kingdom into a very different light? Perhaps what he's really saying is not that the sheep have earned their way into the kingdom by their good deeds, perhaps the meaning is that they are already part of the kingdom because of the way they have chosen to look at the world, a worldview that has led them to behave in certain ways, doing such things as feeding the hungry and clothing the naked.

A Different Way of Seeing Things

For me, that brings this parable much closer to the teaching about salvation that we find elsewhere in the New Testament. It is about grace, and it is about responding to that grace with faith and trust. The point of the parable is that, when you do respond like that, it does tend to make you relate to the world in different ways. If you have come to understand all that God has done for you in and through Jesus Christ, if you understand how Jesus laid himself down for the sake of all of his people, how can you just continue to approach the world like a goat? How can you only be concerned with feeding and taking care of yourself without thinking about the needs of those who struggle?

And when you understand it that way, you can see that it is not that the sheep have earned their way by means of their good deeds. It is rather that their good deeds have shown them up for who they truly are, just as the failure to respond to need has shown up the goats for who they truly are. The sheep are those who have learned to trust in God's grace, and it has changed the way that they have lived. And so, you see, the Son of Man has not sorted the two groups based on appearance. I told you he wouldn't do that. But the way they have acted and behaved and the way that they have related to their world, have been the very criteria that the Son of Man has used to recognize those who were already his.

Eternal Punishment

This parable ends with the goats being sent **“away into eternal punishment.”** And that is indeed a very troubling image. The idea that God would condemn a group of people to eternal punishment just for failing to respond to people in need does not particularly sound like a gracious act. But remember that this is a parable and not a literal description of what is going to happen at the end of all things. And it is not about what people have done so much as it is about how people have come to see the world.

I tend to understand it this way. Those who have learned from Jesus and his example of perfect service and sacrifice and so have come to see the world like sheep, are already living into the reality of the kingdom of God. That is why they show it in their actions.

Those who stubbornly hold to a goatish worldview have essentially cut themselves off from the kingdom here and now. Their way of seeing the world means that they will never encounter the living Christ in this world because they cannot see him in the face of the hungry, naked, sick and captive.

Living in the Kingdom Now

This is less about what happens to us when we are dead than it is about what kingdom we choose to live in here and now. I happen to believe that, after we all die, we will simply find ourselves in the hands of the gracious God who has been revealed to us in Jesus. I do not fear the punishment of such a God, no matter what my failures or shortcomings might be.

It all starts with choosing to trust in him. The more we live into that faith, the more it transforms us and the more the world is transformed through us.