

In the Fold With Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31-46 | 11/20/2011

If you had to be an animal during Bible times, it would be preferable not to be goat. For one reason, there's that whole scapegoat thing. The scapegoat was the goat over whose head the high priest confessed the sins of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement. Then the goat, symbolically bearing their sins, was driven out into the wilderness, where it probably became dinner for a hungry lion.

Of course, one might argue, being a sheep could be equally as dangerous. A sheep, after giving up its wool, often appeared on the dinner table, or in the stew, or on the altar as a sacrifice. That said, goats in the Bible clearly are not viewed as sympathetically as sheep. When talking about the final judgment, Jesus speaks of separating sheep from goats, and it's clear that the goats are the losers in this sorting.

For a shepherd, separating sheep from goats is not difficult. Though both species are often pastured together and can be similarly colored, they are easily distinguished from each other. Goats are thinner than sheep. They have different eating habits (goats browse on leaves, shrubs, twigs and vines, while sheep graze on grass and clover). Goats are curious and independent by nature, while sheep prefer to stay put with the flock. Goats have hair, but sheep have fleece. And a goat's tail stands up while a sheep's hangs down.

Of course, as Jesus goes on with his discourse, it's quickly evident that he's not actually talking about animals. He's using sheep and goats as an analogy for humankind, which is likewise sorted into two groups at the final judgment -- sheep-people on the right and goat-people on the left.

The ones on the right are welcomed into the kingdom of God. The ones on the left are told to depart from Christ's presence forever. The criteria for the sorting, however, have nothing to do with which way one's tail points. Rather, they have to do with whether or not one has been merciful and helpful to those in dire straits. Those on the right, Jesus said, have actually ministered to *him* by their compassion toward those in need. Those on the left have actually ignored *him* by ignoring the needy.

One of the striking things from this account is that unlike sheep and goats, those who have loved their neighbor and those who have not can ultimately only be distinguished by the Son of Man, who serves as the Great Sorter in the story. Even the doers and non-doers of good deeds don't easily recognize which are which, and the members of both groups are quite surprised to learn which one they've been sorted into. As commentator George Buttrick put it, "The loving folk were so lowly that it did not occur to them that their daily kindnesses could ever have been a personal service to the King, or that they had done anything worthy of reward. The unloving were so callous, their religion so perfunctory, that they never thought of Jesus as being linked with [humans] in love, or as asking from anyone any forthright deed of compassion."

There are several things we can hear for ourselves in the judgment story. One is to recognize that our sins of *omission* can be just as serious as our sins of *commission*. The passage reminds us that what we don't do can be as great a reflection of our commitment to follow Jesus -- or lack thereof -- as what we do. Others may hear this story as a call to serve others in a specific way. Every Christian can hear in these words of Jesus a reminder that the doing of good deeds is an essential part of faith.

Biblical commentators sometimes point out that this account, as Jesus told it, gives a one-sided view of the Christian life, making it sound as if the whole of it is doing good deeds. The final judgment as described here seems to look only at whether or not one loved one's neighbor. It says nothing about whether or not one loved God, sought forgiveness of sins or embraced Jesus as Savior. Judging from this passage alone, a nonbeliever who is compassionate to his neighbor in need is on the same footing as a believer who does the same.

But, of course, Jesus wasn't trying to give a full description of the final judgment, but rather to make a point about not ignoring the poor, economically depressed and oppressed among us. At least part of what this account implies is that having our sins forgiven should result in a greater willingness to love our neighbor. Certainly, the doing of good deeds does not eliminate the need for forgiveness of sin, but there can be no lasting faith, no love of neighbor, without actual acts of doing good deeds.

This judgment account reminds us *that the arena of faith is daily life*. We need to hear that because most of life is not played out on the big stage, in the kinds of events that make headline news. Rather it happens in the smaller things -- the chance meetings, the routine places, the circumstances where, when we do a good deed, it seems to us so ordinary that we think it's hardly worth mentioning, and certainly not worthy of earning us a place with sheep.

One more thing to hear from this account is that *God has provided some directions for living*. These words of Jesus *are* instructions about what to do -- at least in circumstances where we see someone in need: We should think of what we would do if that person were Jesus, and then do that, for in helping that person, we really are helping Jesus as well.

There's an old story -- probably invented by some preacher -- but it illustrates the spirit of this passage pretty well. It's about a boy living in a children's home. For grace at the dinner table, the superintendent usually prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, let this food to us be blessed." After this happened several times, the boy said to him, "You always ask Jesus to come, but he never does. Will he ever come?" The superintendent said, "If we really want him to, he will." The boy thought, "I really want him to, so I'm going to put a chair beside me tonight so he'll have a place to sit when he comes."

That evening, during supper, there was a knock on the door, and standing there was an old man, poorly clothed, cold and hungry. The superintendent invited him to join them for supper, and he pointed to the empty chair. The man sat and, and the boy gladly passed food to him and even shared from his own plate.

Later the boy said, "Jesus must not have been able to come himself, so he sent this man in his place."

Exactly. Our good deeds are not by themselves a means of salvation, but they do put us in relationship with Jesus, whether we recognize it or not.

One thing we should not hear from this account is the idea of God as a Cosmic Scorekeeper, keeping some sort of database where he tallies up the exact number of our good deeds. Truthfully, the story tells us that we are sheep everytime we act like children of God who love Jesus by loving our neighbors, and that we are goats everytime we don't.

Jesus was not trying to scare us by talking about judgment either. More likely, he was trying to get our attention in a dramatic way and communicate that God really does want us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He really does want us to keep working at it, to not excuse ourselves, to not assume somebody else will do it and to not act as if it doesn't matter.

It does matter. That's probably why Jesus used such dramatic language in this story. To those on his right, he says "Come ... inherit the kingdom." To those on his left, he says, "Depart ... into the eternal fire." *Depart* is a terrible word; *come* has all heaven's light and love.

Depart and come are strong words, but rather than lose ourselves in them, the ones better to remember from this story are these: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Good deeds really do matter, not only to the recipients, but also to God.

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