

SHEEP & GOATS

Matthew 25:31-46

This sermon outline can be used at a Suffering Church service or meeting. It can be read out as it stands or you may want to add some illustrations of your own or take some from the information on pages 8-18. You might also find helpful material in the **small group Bible study** on page 22 or the **eight-day devotional booklet**. Alternatively, the outline can be used as a framework for your own ideas and applications.

1. Introduction

Christians have a “duty of care” for each other. We are called to minister to each other’s needs, both spiritual and practical. Matthew 25 contains teaching by the Lord Jesus about the Last Judgment. This includes the parable of the sheep and the goats (v. 31-46) where the focus is on the importance of caring for our fellow Christians which is, in fact, caring for our Lord Himself.

2. Who are Christ’s little ones? (Matthew 25:40)

The lynchpin of this parable is verse 40 where the King explains to the mystified sheep when it was that they had shown Him the care He is praising them for. What they had done for Him was whatever they had done for “the least of these my brethren”, as the King James Version expresses it. Other Bible translations speak of “brothers and sisters of mine” or “my people” or “members of my family” but the point is that the King says those helped were **His**.

Some interpret this parable as the King looking at help given to anyone. But it is clear from Jesus’ words that He did not mean this. In this parable, He is talking about help given to His followers, whom He calls His brothers and sisters. Matthew has already told us (Matthew 12:46-50) how Jesus defines His brothers and sisters – they are His disciples, those who do the will of His Father in heaven.

The Greek word for “brothers” is *adelphoi*, literally “of the same womb”. The Church is a community based on a shared origin. There is a bond so strong that it unites two brothers or sisters from the same womb. It is the unbreakable bond that holds together the family of Jesus, a bond that transcends race, class, colour, culture, tribe, ethnicity or nationality.

The early Christians were so bound together that they were like a new race. Around 196 AD, a

Christian from Edessa (in modern Turkey) wrote of “the new race of us Christians, whom Christ at His coming planted in every country”.¹ Non-Christians also saw Christians as a separate race – neither part of the dominant pagan culture nor Jews. Writing from North Africa, Tertullian said that Christians were being talked of disparagingly as “the third race”.²

The beneficiaries of the help were not people of status, respected in the eyes of the world. Quite the opposite. Various Bible translations call them “the least”, “the least important”, “the least significant”, “the smallest”, “the humblest”. They were lowly and despised.

3. What did the “sheep” do?

This parable “opens the way to glory to the simplest people”. For the help that the sheep gave was basic everyday care. Anyone could do it.

The sheep were totally unaware of the significance of their actions. They did not expect praise. They did not even pat themselves on the back and secretly bask in self-esteem. Their generosity was just love for their Christian family, shown in natural ways, as opportunity arose.

a. You gave me something to eat

Food is essential to life, and throughout the Bible God feeds His people. The Garden of Eden was filled with fruit trees for Adam and Eve. Quails and manna appeared daily for the Israelites in the desert. A raven brought food for Elijah.

Jesus knew hunger. He fasted in the wilderness before He began His ministry (Matthew 4:2) and, as a travelling preacher, He must have often been hungry. When He fed the five thousand, who had grown hungry as they listened to Him all day (Mark 6:34-36) or the four thousand, who had been with Him for three days (Matthew 15:32), He too must have shared that hunger.

It was in this context that Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35).

b. You gave me something to drink

“I thirst,” said Jesus on the cross (John 19:28).

An adult human body is about 60% water and we need constantly to replace the water that is lost in normal bodily functions. Without water we soon die.

But water is also a symbol of spiritual life. Jesus gives living water, a spring that wells up to eternal life (John 4:10,14), a water that satisfies all our desires.

But many of Christ’s “little ones” today are thirsty. They lack clean drinking water. In Guinea, Muslims and followers of traditional African religions in some villages banned the Christian minority from using the village water source. But Barnabas Fund financed the cost of a well for the Christians in each village. The Christians had enough water for their needs and also shared the water freely with those who had been persecuting them.

c. You invited me in

Refugees are some of the most vulnerable people in society. During His infant years, our Lord Jesus Himself became a refugee in Egypt, when Joseph and Mary took their little son and escaped the murderous wrath of King Herod (Matthew 2:13-23).

He was homeless again during His years of ministry. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20).

Indeed, Jesus’ whole life on earth was a kind of homelessness, as His real home was in heaven. He came to “dwell” among us (John 1:14), but the Greek word indicates a temporary home, like a moveable tent.

d. You clothed me

Jesus knew what it was to be naked, for the victim of a Roman crucifixion did not wear a loincloth.

Many persecuted Christians are in need of clothes. Those who flee from violent attack may reach safety with nothing but the clothes on their backs. When Syrian Christians, held hostage for months by Islamic State jihadists, were released, Barnabas Fund gave them clothes, for they had only what they happened to wearing when they were kidnapped.

Beautiful clothes are a Biblical way of portraying how God has covered our sin and shame (Isaiah 61:10).

e. You looked after me

We do not know whether Jesus, truly human yet divine, was ever sick. But we do know that He would grow tired after long hours of ministry, that He sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane before His coming death, He was cruelly flogged, and that He endured on the cross not only the agony of the

most painful execution method the Romans could devise, but also the crushing spiritual weight of the sins of the world (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus is our healer. On earth, a touch of His robe brought health and wholeness (Matthew 9:20-22). Three times He raised the dead. By His wounds we are healed of our sins (Isaiah 53:5).

f. You came to visit me

When Jesus was taken into custody, no one came to visit Him. His friends and followers deserted Him. They could not have changed His situation, but they could have brought Him comfort – just by being there.

The Apostle Paul often found himself in prison. How precious to him were the visits of his friends. “May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.” (2 Timothy 1:16). Through the centuries, many Christians have known what it is to be imprisoned for their faith, and it continues today, for example, in North Korea, China and Iran.

4. How does it all end?

In Jesus’ parable, the people gathered before the throne will be separated by the King into two groups: sheep and goats. In some parts of the world, sheep and goats look very different from each other, but in the Middle East they look quite similar and it takes some skill to distinguish them. The King knows how to tell them apart and He separates them, setting the sheep on His right and the goats on His left (v. 32-33).

He sends the goats away. “Depart from me” (v. 41). First they are separated from the sheep and then they are separated from the King. Theirs will be an eternity of suffering that cannot be reversed (v. 41,46).

The sheep, however, will enjoy eternal life in the Kingdom which the Father has prepared for them since the foundation of the world (v. 34,46).

Is Jesus preaching a doctrine of works? Is He saying that we enter heaven because of our good deeds? No. We have received God’s free gift of eternal life in place of sin’s wages of death (Romans 6:23). Our passing from death to life (1 John 3:14) is expressed in love for our brothers and sisters.

On the Day of Judgment, love for our fellow believers will be seen as evidence of our relationship with Jesus, who has enabled us to pass from death to life by His redeeming work on the cross.

¹ Bardaisan, *Dialogue on Fate*.

² Tertullian, *To the Nations*, chapter 8.

Endnotes

¹ Bardaisan, *Dialogue on Fate*

² Tertullian, *To the Nations*, chapter 8