

**THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS**  
**-OR-**  
**“GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME”**

**Matthew 25:31-33** - *When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.*

This passage has been used over and over again, especially if we're involved in any evangelical style church or ministry gathering, as a teaching for eternal separation. The typical offering gives us the following prognosis based on the evaluation of the text.

- The sheep are the believers
- The goats are the unbelievers
- The believers go to heaven
- The unbelievers go to hell

These four conclusions are cemented in many minds, but if we are willing to (as Christ often did) play with the text a little, take a breath and a step back from it, and look at it a more intently, I believe we'll see something a little more that Christ is offering than a simple issue of eternal destination. Jesus rarely offered a simple sermon without dressing it up in metaphor. Even Matthew says that Christ spoke nothing that wasn't in parable form to the crowds<sup>1</sup>. Obviously we can see at first glance that Jesus isn't referring to literal sheep and goats, but is making a play to the people He's speaking with. But to whom is He speaking? Jesus tells us in Matthew "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>2</sup> Is Jesus telling us that His salvation is only for the Jews? No, He's telling us His ministry on this earth was first to them. His teaching and healing ministry, though at times encompassing Samaritans and surrounding gentile peoples, was first and foremost to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But who were those lost sheep?

The Lost Sheep were, according to Jeremiah, those who had lost/forgotten their place of rest.<sup>3</sup> According to Jeremiah, it was the fault of the shepherds that they had forgotten this place of rest. What we see in Jesus' statement then is that He is not sent for the "lost" as we would view them through our 21<sup>st</sup> century evangelical lens – those unbelievers – but rather sent for the "lost" as Jeremiah put it, those who had been led astray and forgotten their place of rest. This place of rest is what David spoke of in Psalm 23; the green pastures the Father, the good shepherd, leads us to

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 13:34

<sup>2</sup> Matt 15:24

<sup>3</sup> Jer 50:6

in order that we may lie down. Lying down is an image of rest. Jesus, the wonderful rabbi that He was, would have known this passage well, and might have been thinking of it when introducing the parable of the sheep and goats.

### **A Pictorial View**

His use of sheep and goats would intentionally play on the imagery of the Hebrew mind. Their ability to see objects as representative would surely have come into play while hearing the master teach. Just as the Passover lamb would have a significant representation to them beyond a simple lamb, the sheep and goat from His parable would have a meaning beyond the bare text. The goat to the mindset of the Jew would represent the sin offering under the systems of sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> The sheep would represent the offering of peace (a state of total tranquility).<sup>5</sup> As they heard Him speak, possibly the thought of what these two animals represented came flooding into their minds. The goats, the offering for sin, were set off to the left, and the sheep, the offering of peace – of which Jesus title as the Lamb of God would encompass – off to the right.

In this pictorial view we see that the interest of the judgment and separation is about separating the offering for sin away from the hearer's peace. The two never need be in the same room again, much less eternally abiding together. Sacrifices for sin and the sacrificial (self giving) life of the lamb for peace were not to be linked together. Does this view do away with Jesus' dealing with sin? By no means, but His dealing with sin had little to do with peace between God and people, and more to do with healing the conscience of humanity. The writer of Hebrews says that our conscience needing cleansing, not our actions.<sup>6</sup> If our actions needing cleansing, then that is what would have been dealt with, and we would most likely see better ethical choices taking place today. It has never been about action, it has always been about conscience. The story of the two trees in the garden doesn't show us good versus evil, but rather the dangers in a conscience of evil (the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil). It is knowing good or evil that creates issues of conscience. (Please note I'm not condoning having *no* conscience in how we deal with one another, rather I'm stating that the purpose of dealing with sin was to cleanse our conscience of separation anxiety due to that same sin).

This view occasions a broader scope of the text than is commonly understood. Christ separates sin from peace, removes sacrifice from the equation eternally, and casts that idea into the fires of eternity, forever separating sacrifice and offering from peace. As David said (and the writer echoed in Hebrews) "sacrifice and offering you *did not* desire".<sup>7</sup> The desire of the Father was never sacrifice,. Rather His desire was peace between God and man, without the necessity of sacrifice.

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<sup>4</sup> Lev 4:24, 9:15, 16:9, 16:15, 16:21, Num 15:27, 28:22, 29:28, 31, 34, 38 – etc.

<sup>5</sup> Lev 22:21

<sup>6</sup> Heb 10:22

<sup>7</sup> Ps 40:6, 51:16, Heb 10:5, 10:8

## A Royal View

Another view of the parable would revolve around typical royal positioning. According to Hermas, the Holy Spirit stands on the left, and Christ on the right of the Father.<sup>8</sup> To the Jew the first and primary position was the middle, most often occupied by God. The next position of power would be immediately to the right, and the third position would be immediately to the left. (Keep in mind that this is not to say Jesus is more or less powerful than the Holy Spirit – as a viewer facing the throne would have the opposite left and right from the throne itself). In this scenario, the left and right are both positions of power, with the greatest (second only to the giver of said power) being to the right – the position those who “believe” or “visit the poor” find themselves. Using this view, we see an image of separation that isn’t used for eternal destination but rather to display how it is we can find power. It is as though Christ is saying to the listener “do you want power?” “Then visit the poor, care for the outcast, minister peace”. In peace is power according to the royal view of this parable.

Another royal view of the parable comes in the relationship of King and Queen. In the royal court, a king who is legitimately king is seated to the right, with the queen on his left. His highest position of power would be to his own right hand. When the queen is queen regnant, she is seated to the right, and the king on the left. With this view, what we see is that the right hand is again, the position of power, and the left hand, though a lesser power, is still the king’s bride. She is still a royal, still in a position of great importance.

In either view of the parable, we see something more than simple eternal destination sorting. We see a greater picture of what Christ is saying. Understanding the metaphor with which He would have been speaking, we see that Jesus isn’t simply telling us we’ll “go to hell” if we don’t visit prisoners, He’s telling us that there’s great peace found in caring for the outcast, and that the greatest position of power is found in caring for those who, according to the parable, would be found on the left side.

In either view, we also are left with a niggling question.

What of those we did or did not visit?

On which side do they fall?

Is Jesus telling us that we are only judged based on our visitation of the sick, the prisoner, and the hungry?

What of those hungry people, are they sorted to the left or to the right?

What of the prisoner, is he sorted to the faithful or the unfaithful?

What of the sick, is she sorted as a believer or an unbeliever?

Maybe we need to look on to the “punishment” that is to be inflicted on those we believe to be “out” of the fold.

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<sup>8</sup> 9:35

## Everlasting Punishment?

We've dealt with separate viewpoints on the separation of the sheep and goats, but what about the sending of the goats into eternal punishment? The word for eternal is *aionios*. There are several sources claiming this means "for an age" and that could very well be. My only problem with taking the word this way is the same word *aionios* is used for "eternal life". So if punishment is only for "an age" then life would have to be the same "for an age" contextually speaking. However, if we focus instead on "punishment" I think we'll find out what is really being said in this occasion. Punishment as used by Christ is *kolasis*. *Kolasis* refers to both correction and punishment, so which are we to understand He means in this context?

## Retribution or Restoration?

The question of "God's Judgment" is one that has the ability to divide the lines of Christian theology. From my personal tradition, I do not believe the Father *is going* to judge the world, whether it be for sin, or otherwise. I believe He "*gave all judgment to the son*".<sup>9</sup> For whatever this means to us today, my view of judgment is one that allows for it to have happened in the past through the working of the Son. There is not room in this particular writing to deal with all the viewpoints of judgment, so this is where I'm going to start. We should look at the biblical view of "God's Judgment" and how it pertains to what Jesus is speaking about.

There are three "judgments" of the Old Testament that are probably the most notable: the first being human removal from the Garden of Eden, the second being the great flood, and the third being Sodom and Gomorrah. These will suffice to show the lens through which we can view judgment, whatever your personal stance may be on the judgment of God.

### Firstly, the removal of humans from the Garden.

For the sake of time we won't cover all available bases here, but the main point is: Adam and Eve eat something they shouldn't have, and then judgment comes to them. This judgment comes in the form of removing them from their home. Often we hear that God was punishing them for this mistake, but is that what is really going on here?

*And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. **Gen 3:22-23***

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<sup>9</sup> John 5:22

God removes humans from the garden for their protection. *Lest they eat of the tree of life and live forever* is only a problem when we know good and evil, or are able to make a separation in our minds of *who* and *what* would fall under those headings. This is not ours to decide. More devastating than knowing good and evil is to live forever, knowing good and evil.

We could then state that this first “judgment” of God is *protective*. Protective judgment makes a decision based on the best interests of the defendant’s future. Much like a father today would issue protective judgment on his own children to keep them from driving the family car under the influence of a controlled substance, the Father issued a protective judgment to prohibit humanity from operating eternal life under the influence of a controlled substance, the ability to determine good from evil. This ability is a controlled substance; it intoxicates us on our ability to determine who and what is *in* or *out*.

## **Secondly, the Great Flood**

There are many theories as to the historical accuracy of the Noachic flood. Whether it be myth (historical metaphor sprinkled with fact), parable (metaphor only) or literal (no metaphor), there remains a truth to be seen in the “judgment of God” in this setting as well. One of my favorite things to point out in this story is that the bible says *every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*<sup>10</sup> yet we never see it say *except Noah*. Noah “found grace” in the eyes of the Lord, but certainly was far from perfect. But let’s stay on topic. The flood comes, the people die, and judgment and gloom is all around. And then the end. Noah comes with his family and the animals out of the ark, and the Father issues a decree.

*...and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. Gen 8:21*

God makes a promise that never again will living things be destroyed for the problems of humanity. This judgment could be seen then as birthing a *promise*. Much like a *protective* judgment, a *promise* bearing judgment proves to be for the benefit of those who have been judged. It is not for their destruction, but rather for their good. God saw evil, (according to a strictly literal view) dealt with evil, and then promised that no living thing would ever be destroyed again for the problem of evil.

*(I should interject that I do not hold to a strict literal viewpoint on the flood, my personal belief is that something happened, and mankind gave the credit to God, rather than God taking credit for the mass genocide of His beloved children, but that is not what we are dealing with in this essay.)*

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<sup>10</sup> Gen 6:5

## **Lastly, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah**

Probably far more popular than even the Noahic flood is the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. If we have sat through any length of service, children's church, or bible class we will have heard this story and had it explained to us. The people are caught up in violence and rape, and a variety of sexual and violent behaviors. Destruction comes, and after destruction – something I don't think we fully understand at times.

*I will restore their fortunes, the fortune of Sodom and her daughters and of Samaria and her daughters (and I will restore your fortune along with them), that you may bear your shame and be disgraced for all the comfort you brought them. Yes, your sisters, Sodom and her daughters, Samaria and her daughters, shall return to their former state (you and your daughters shall return to your former state). Eze 16:53-55 (NAB)*

After hell fire and brimstone comes something that most probably don't admit. *Restorative* judgment. God promises *I will restore their fortunes*. Restorative judgment is really the heart of the matter. For whatever we believe about the "judgment of God" in relationship to the world today, it must be said that the only judgment found in the bible is that which leads to restoration. This is of supreme importance because it will forever change how we view the Abba of Jesus, our Heavenly Father. In punitive judgment we have destruction at the end. Punishment (legally speaking) is tit-for-tat. It is *this much punishment for this crime*. The greater the offense, the greater the destruction wrought. However, the judgment of the Father throughout the Old Testament can, and must be, seen as restorative. Restorative judgment is aimed at furthering a relationship or person. Retributive judgment is aimed at ending a relationship or person.

So, God's "judgment" is either:

- Protective,
- Promise-Bearing, or
- Restorative

In either case, these are the ideas that must come forward to the parable at hand. When Jesus speaks of those goats being cast into something, it must be seen as either protective, promise-bearing, or restorative. We can rest assured that the Savior is not simply offering a message of eternal separation, but rather eternal correction and thereby restoration. What could be better for a heart hell bent on excluding the outcast than to be corrected? And what could be better for a heart committed to the outcast than to be shown that the position of power the exclusionist sought to obtain was in fact found in being committed to the outcast? Nothing, and that is the nature of the gospel, to be committed to the outcast, to the downtrodden, to the broken.

I realize that in playing with the text we can often times read too much into it. My intent is not to create a new theology or to simply “buck the system” but rather to help us take a less literal approach in applying the parables of Jesus to our own time in history. In many of our own lives, we have a sort of morbid curiosity that leads us toward focusing on the negative side of any circumstance. For many, it isn’t enough to see an accident, we begin to wonder and even speculate as to whether someone died in the accident, usually basing our speculations on the appearance of an ambulance or paramedic. This is all too often how we treat the gospel as well. We see an instance wherein Jesus is seemingly making a separation of “believers” and “unbelievers” and our focus tends to be drawn towards the fate of the unbeliever rather than what is spoken about those He would call “sheep”.

| If instead, we would focus on the right hand and the goings on of those sheep, I believe we could find a bit more importance. Those sheep find rest and peace at the right hand, and find it because they are willing to care for the outcast. In caring for the outcast, “sheep” beget “sheep”. Our focus is to be loving one another, caring for one another, and providing for one another, not making a determination on who is “in” or who is “out”.

Michael Hardin has (in my opinion) summed up this idea best in an article from his website saying:

*“A great contemporary debate in America is whether or not we are a ‘Christian’ nation.’ In the light of our parable we must ask whether the moral trivialities we fight over are evidence of our character. How can a nation spend \$500 billion on a war and neglect the poor and suffering around the world?”<sup>11</sup>.*

How indeed? I believe we can justify it because we have for too long been focused on the wrong side of the story, the left hand if you will, and in focusing on the left hand, we have missed the point of the story – namely the right hand, to care for the hurting, the oppressed, the outcast, and the poor.

## **Final Thought**

One final thought to consider comes from Robert Capon’s book *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment – Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Mr. Capon talks about *Left-Handed* and *Right-Handed* power.<sup>12</sup> An interesting concept, Capon states that right handed power is the power that uses force to meet its needs, while left handed power is as Mr. Capon puts it *paradoxical power* that is; *power that closes no doors to interpersonal relationship from our side*<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.preachingpeace.org/lectionaries/yeara-lastpentecost/>

<sup>12</sup> *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment* pp 15-25 (2002) Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p7

What does this mean in relationship to the parable “at hand”? This creates yet another vision within which we can make a determination on the left-vs-right hand scenario painted by the Savior. For the Jews, Jesus represented a paradox. Their God had been one who not only seemed to prefer *right handed* power, but also used little other means to accomplish His ends. Jesus however, comes on the scene using precisely the opposite, and has the gall to say “*if you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father*”. His determined *left handed* power left the door open to all humanity.

Looking at this parable then through the lens of left and right handed powers, it could be said that Jesus is making a play at this very idea. That those on the right, the ones who are doing the will of the Father by visiting the downtrodden, are exacted with swift force, placed as good and faithful servants, and no more movement is needed. Those on the left however, are met with this paradoxical power, the power that leaves a door open, open to reconciliation, open to forgiveness, open to correction. The right hand of the King receives a swift judgment of a “stamp of approval” of sorts, while those on the left hand of the King receive a judgment that is not so swift, one that leaves room for change, for repentance, for contrition. Whether they ever take advantage of that or not is not to be taken from this parable, but is interesting to think about to say the least.

## **Conclusion**

It may well be that this parable reframes standard views of judgment found e.g., in I Enoch and the Dead Sea Scrolls where judgment is predicated upon holiness codes or election. Whether we see the parable as strictly literal (a heaven/hell issue), partially metaphorical (sin offering vs peace offering), strictly metaphorical (the bride to the left, with the position of power to the right) or even as a play on two types of power (right vs left handed power), we see a marvelous thing unravel; namely, the parables of Christ continuing to play out in our own place in history. This, I believe is the greater point of His parables. There is no one single answer to “what they mean” but rather they stand to mean something different to every reader.