

I Don't Wanna Be a Sheep

Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV) *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

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. 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.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 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?'
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.'

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. 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.'
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?' 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.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Anyone here ever spend much time with sheep?

Me, neither. I remember seeing a few at petting zoos or at the fair, but I don't really know much about sheep.

We hear a lot about sheep in the Bible. A lot.

And a lot of that makes perfect sense, as sheep were integral to the society, culture, religion and economy of Israel.

From the days of Abraham, who was known for his wealth of livestock, in sheep and in goats...

to the offerings to God brought to the temple by people from all walks of life...

to David starting as a shepherd in the fields before his anointment and elevation to king...

To the lowly shepherds to whom the angels first appeared to tell of the great joy of Jesus' birth.

Sheep are everywhere in Palestine. And they are in so many stories in the Bible. So many descriptions of prophets and kings, of parables and tales, involve sheep.

So our Sunday School curriculum is always pretty darn sheep-heavy, too. Right?

The kids learn about shepherds and sheep, even though very few if any of them will ever be a farmer or be around live sheep more than a handful of times in their lives.

They may have a wool sweater or wool socks, but that may be the closest they get.

Yet we tell our children about sheep because it was a common way for Jesus to connect His message to his people in a way they would be able to understand.

The children (and you probably did this too) make little crafts with sheep in Sunday School. There is always an abundance of cotton balls in any kid craft area at church, because there will inevitably be a lesson that involves gluing cotton balls to construction paper to make a beautiful, white fluffy sheep.

But we need to know a little bit more about sheep than that.

Especially if we want to know what Jesus is telling us here.

What's the Deal with Sheep

When I was about Ezra's age, my family switched to a new church that had started by meeting in

a school. It was my junior high school, actually, which was weird to go to school all week and then go to church in the same gym and have classes in the same classrooms on Sunday too.

The church I went to didn't have "youth time" during service, though.

We had Catechism class. And it was after worship. You had to do the whole service plus more.

For those who did not get to do Catechism class, and many churches did this style of education once you reached middle school and high school — and many still do — Catechism class was the time to learn the "other" stuff about church.

You had always learned the Bible stories and were part of worship time and sang the songs.

But Catechism was when you got to learn about doctrine and theology and those bigger Christian words you were easily bored with.

And the class was usually taught by an older man who seemed really serious all of the time.

One day, my Catechism class started meeting - oh, and our church was very small, so there were 2 of us. 2 youth in the middle school age. So it was like 3 desks in a classroom turned to face each other. The 2 of us and our boring teacher.

To our surprise, he pulled out a tape recorder. Those rectangle ones that laid flat on a table and had one small speaker for the sound to come out and a handle on one side. It wasn't a boombox, but the you know the kind.

And after we opened with prayer, the teacher simply pressed play on the tape.

After weeks of studying questions and answers in the Heidelberg Catechism, which even we as Presbyterians use as part of our Book of Confessions, too, by the way, it was refreshing as an 8th grader to hear something other than my teacher talking to us.

The tape was another man speaking.

About sheep.

But there was something different about it. It wasn't a droll and boring lesson. It was comedy. You could hear people laughing.

We sat up and leaned in to hear more.

The comedian was talking about how Jesus wanted us to be his sheep and follow him. And the man thought this was ridiculous because sheep were stupid and boring and couldn't think for themselves. He kept repeating the same line between every little observation:

But I don't WANNA be a sheep.

Sheep just follow along with what everyone else is doing.

But I don't WANNA be a sheep.

Sheep can't think for themselves.

But I don't WANNA be a sheep.

Sheep are led someone and can't be unique and different.

But I don't WANNA be a sheep.

But then his tone changed a little bit...

But Jesus calls us his sheep.

But I don't WANNA be a...sheep?

Jesus said he'll protect us as his sheep.

But I don't WANNA be...a sheep?

Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep.

But I don't...WANNA be a sheep?

Jesus teaches us that we'll either be a sheep or a goat.

But I...don't WANNA be a sheep?

Goats Have All the Fun

I'm a contrarian. I tend to go against the grain. I know, shocking, right?

I hate the imagery of sheep, because I see it as a derogatory thing to call someone.

You're such a sheep, you just believe everything that politician, celebrity, community leader, sports figure, organization champion, pastor, elder...says.

Think for yourself, don't be a sheep! We use "Baa" as an insult.

Right?

Many call all of us that. They say Christians don't think. They can't possibly understand the world we live in because they are blindly following some guy from 2000 years ago. How in tune can they be today?

And they are right. Kind of.

But before I unpack that, let's talk about goats.

I love goats. The pygmy ones at the zoo, those little guys are so awesome. My kids have always loved the pygmy goats. You can feed them, they are nice, though sometimes a little mean, but mostly nice and super cute.

When I was a kid in the country, a neighbor of mine had a goat. While it was very ornery, I helped care for it occasionally and even milked the goat a few times.

We had goats at the barn at the camp where Jen and I worked too. The campers loved them.

Goats are loud, independent, brash, mischievous.

Goats are pretty cool. They are like the rebels of the hoofed, barnyard animals.

I want to be a rebel. I don't want to be a sheep. I mean, Jesus is totally a rebel. Why can't we?

Goats do what they need to do to survive. They aren't stuck in a flock.

Think about it: When a sheep is alone, we say it's LOST. When we see a goat alone, we don't even remark about it. Sheep belong to a flock. Goats belong to a... ?

Flock? Herd? I actually had to look it up. It's a Tribe.

Why don't we know that? Because we don't think of goats as a group like we do with sheep.

If Jesus says we are to be the sheep here, is he asking us not to think? Is he telling us to just not worry about anything and be in church and follow him and everything around will be fine?

Sheep eat grass primarily, and they graze. So they are always looking down and focusing on just what is in front of them.

Goats eat twigs, shrubs, bushes. They are looking out and up, seeing ahead and going toward what they want to eat.

Should we just keep our heads down and eat like sheep? Or put our eyes up and look ahead like goats?

Loving Your Neighbor Sheep

Okay, you've probably had enough of sheep and goats already.

Let's go to the meat of this text here. Where Jesus tells us about WHY the King classifies some people as sheep, and some people as goats.

Even the sheep don't really understand what they did to be in God's "good graces"? Even after Jesus (the King) tells them.

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.’

We know Jesus is the King because he tells of His Father’s inheritance.

But these sheep, the righteous, wonder when they did any of this for Jesus. They may have helped others, but never Jesus himself. What is going on?

And this is where we step into very familiar territory. And this is like a progressive Christian hall of fame passage? Helping the poor, the hungry, the sick, refugees, prisoners, the whole thing!

This is what we live for.

Let’s remember who Jesus is talking to here in this passage. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks to a variety of different groups, and the Gospel writers do a nice job of letting us know the context each time.

Sometimes Jesus is speaking to a huge crowd on the hillside, which he did many times, most famously in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

Other times Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees or other religious leaders who are trying to “catch” him in doing things against the law or to poke holes in his message.

In this part of Matthew, Jesus is talking just to his small band of disciples, on the Mount of Olives. This is before the time of the Passover and his arrest and crucifixion.

So some things he says to just his disciples could be taken a little differently, right?

Earlier Jesus told the Pharisees about the greatest and second greatest commandments. They had been trying to stump or trick him into saying things that would endanger people’s view of him as a great teacher.

Jesus’ reply was to Love the Lord Your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

And also to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.

He told this to the Pharisees and the crowd that had gathered around.

But now when he's talking to his disciples, he puts these commandments together a bit. Jesus says that how you treat your neighbor is how you have treated me.

Jesus combines the greatest two commandments here. How you love your neighbor SHOWS how much you love your God.

I'll say it again. Jesus is telling us: How you love your neighbor SHOWS how much you love your God.

A Bold Move / An Easy Choice

Well, that's it, then. I'm going to be a sheep. I love people, and I will help those in need. This is amazing. I will do what I'm already doing and I can ensure my salvation.

It's that easy, right? Jesus said that to be a sheep, I need to DO all of these things and if I DON'T, I'm a goat and I'll be destroyed.

So I better put all of my effort into helping others because those in need are essentially Jesus and we should get more food for people, more education, and I'll support all organizations doing great things in our community and not only will I help those people and we'll all be a better community and country...I'll get to be a sheep and live in heaven with Jesus.

Awesome!

What About Faith?

Wait a minute...I might have missed something here. Jesus told us that His Grace is sufficient to save us. All we need is faith. Paul followed that up and said it too in his letters.

Salvation is free.

All we need to do is believe.

So no matter how hard we try, no matter how much good we do, our salvation comes only through our faith.

So WHY is Jesus telling us we will be judged by how we treat “the least of these”?

We need to talk a little bit more about sheep and goats first to make some sense of this.

Separating Goats and Sheep Not as Easy as It Seems

Back in Jesus' day, most flocks of sheep had goats tagging along too, the animals kind of all stuck together. They kind of sound alike and are about the same size. They look mostly alike in a big group and it's hard to tell them apart.

Unless you really look, and not just about how they look, but how they act. Then you can start to sort them out a little better.

That's what shepherds did after bringing their flocks in, they separated the goats from the sheep into their own pens. But to do this the best way possible, they knew the behavior of goats and sheep and could separate them more easily by their differences.

It's all a matter of motivation.

Goats, while looking up and out, rather than down, tend to be very independent and single-minded. We might even call it selfish. I need to eat, so I'm looking for something to eat. There's something to eat, I'll head over there and eat it. Regardless of what any other goat is doing.

If you've been around goats at the petting zoo or a farm, like I spoke about earlier, you've seen it. Those goats will butt each other and push to get the food.

Sheep, on the other hand, are looking down a lot and kind of blending in. But while they aren't necessarily going outside the flock too often, they are looking around a lot to see how everyone is doing.

You okay? You need something? You look hungry? Let's get you over to this grass over here. You look tired, we'll stick together until we get back to the barn.

There's a much greater sense of community with sheep.

They don't look to gain anything extra or better by making sure there are more sheep that make it back to safety or more sheep who are healthy.

You could argue that having fewer sheep makes it easier to get food or have more space.

So why would a sheep do it? They look out for each other because a bigger flock is better protection for everyone. A stronger flock is a greater good for every sheep.

Who Are the 'Least of These'?

So maybe I DO want to be a sheep after all. The good things about being a sheep at least.

Looking out for those around me, seeing the greater good, seeing what I do for the "least of these."

Now there's some debate on what Christ means by the "least of these" in this passage. Is it the least of these...Christians? Jews? Gentiles? Humans?

Based on how Matthew uses the words here, he certainly means more than just the disciples themselves, as he uses a different word when he refers to the disciples. He calls them "little ones" in other parts of the book.

Some argue that Jesus means for us to take care of our own, the sheep already in the fold, watch out for and care for people who are already Christians. These are the least of these, and how we treat other Christians, other sheep, will be how we will be judged.

We already do that here in this church. We lend a hand to each other every week, every day. We've been blessed by the generosity and care of each other.

It makes a lot of sense, right?

Especially because Jesus says "the least of these of my brothers and sisters," a common way to talk about other believers at the time.

If this one text is used as a reason to only convey benevolence or help to other Christians by a church or group, I think people may be overemphasizing a single word or phrase, however.

If Jesus wanted us to care more thoroughly for Christians than for others, wouldn't he have been more specific about it elsewhere too?

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.

Not Love Your Neighbor if they are a believer as yourself because you are also a believer.

Jesus wouldn't and shouldn't ask us to treat Christians differently or better than other people for one simple reason: It's not our job to figure out who is who. It's his.

He is the King. He knows the difference between sheep and goats.

We are likely to be confused and choose poorly.

We already do.

Someone who does not yet know the love Jesus has for them isn't unworthy of our care and attention because they aren't a believer.

Even if we think it's obvious.

Sheep aren't always fluffy white like those kids' crafts with cotton balls.

Sheep get dirty. They work hard or simply get pushed around.

If we withhold that care and attention because we aren't sure if they are a Christian or not, or we "think" we know they are definitely not, aren't we putting ourselves on a throne that doesn't belong to us?

What About Sheep Who Look Like Sheep?

It might seem easy to sort the sheep from the goats, but Jesus may be echoing something

Ezekiel said in the Old Testament. That the sheep will also be separated and why.

Ezekiel 34, starting at verse 17

17 "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. 18 Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? 19 Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? 20 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, 22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

25 "I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety... 28b They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid.

30 Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the Israelites, are my people, declares the Sovereign Lord. 31 You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord."

Only Jesus the King can separate the goats from the sheep, the good sheep from the bad.

It's interesting to see even a group of sheep behaving badly.

While the Lord will judge the sheep who drive away the weak sheep, he doesn't say they are condemned. There's still hope for the bad sheep.

But it is a warning to those who have fattened themselves at the expense of other sheep.

The bad sheep, the fat sheep, aren't helping the greater good.

They are acting a little too much like goats.

The bad sheep who trample the pasture in their haste to get what's best for them and leave the

others to eek out a meal. The bad who muddy the waters for others once they've had their fill.

Sheep of all kinds need clear pastures and clean water. Our earth is our pasture and even as Christians we can trample it and poison the waters to get "ours."

Our brothers and sisters at Standing Rock and in Flint know that even more than we do.

Are we going to stand for the least of these? How will we treat them?

What Do We Do Now?

Lastly, let's tie this all together.

1. Jesus calls us to action.
2. We know our salvation is one of faith alone and cannot be earned.
3. Our treatment of the least of these is a reflection of our treatment of Jesus.

So what do we do?

It's not necessarily WHAT we do, or even HOW we do these things Jesus is praising here.

It's WHY.

It's always WHY.

Eduard Schweizer was a 20th century Swiss theologian and scholar who said it this way (I paraphrase) - The "least of these brothers of mine" is key to this teaching of Jesus. It's not a recipe for reward. Salvation does not come because of the conduct of a person, but the conduct of a person is a REFLECTION of what is within. Our salvation requires us to help others as Jesus commanded, it gives us the reason to Love the Unlovable. Our actions reflect Christ.

We say that God is Love. Jesus just told us how to show it. And why.

If we live out our calling, if we truly believe that Jesus is our salvation, we have no other way to live than to treat each person with the love we would show to Christ. We show our gratitude through our attitude. We love because he first loved us.

Sheep - A Good Way to Live

Which brings us back to goats and sheep.

We may look like a sheep, we may talk like a sheep. But are we really acting like goats?

Are we letting our personal glory or our own selfish needs and desires take precedence over the needs of the flock?

Are we saying one thing, speaking out for the rights of those less fortunate than us, speaking out for the "least of these," and doing things that say the opposite?

Are we goats in sheep's clothing?

Let us make LOVE our New Year's resolution.

Let us connect with the love we share in Christ Jesus, let us love one another, let us exalt each one we meet as if he or she is the least of these, as if he or she is Jesus.

Let us all know what it is to be the least of these. We've all been there. We might be there again. Maybe we are there right now.

Let us seek the reason WHY we are compelled to do what is right and fair and just. Let us do it because we LOVE Jesus, not because we want to earn our salvation.

Let us LOVE unrelentingly, unceasingly, and without condition.

Let us seek the safety of the entire flock. Let us LOVE those who have come before, those we are and those who will be. Let that LOVE be what grows the flock of Jesus.

I want to be a sheep.

As long as Jesus is my shepherd.

Amen.