

God for us

Part 2

Matthew 25:31-46

The Sheep and the Goats

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

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.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “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.’

⁴¹ “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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.’

⁴⁴ “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?’

⁴⁵ “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.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

We’re in the middle of a series on the theme “God For Us”. “God for us!” Were you attentive to the Bible Reading this morning? Part of me wonders how this Bible reading got included under the theme “God for Us”. Yes, I get it; there is wonderful news here; there is a picture of the grace and mercy of God for His servants. But **what strikes me much more urgently is the warning, the terrifying warning!** On the day that Jesus comes in His glory it won’t be a jolly church picnic day with a jumping castle and free sausage sandwiches! There will be fire and fury on the day of judgment. It will be a day of separation. Our God is not described by Jesus as some sort of heavenly Santa Claus! The author of Hebrews describes God this way: Our God is a consuming fire! (Hebrews 12:29). To use C S Lewis’ image, “Aslan is not a tame lion!” **Nations and individuals will be judged for how they have lived out their discipleship; those who have not loved will be cast out! This is a serious passage!**

So if we're gathered this morning to hear something that makes us feel good, we may be in for a rude shock. We are more likely to feel challenged, rebuked by Scripture. And so we should. Jesus is not messing around here. He's confronting us with the tough dimensions of what He wants from His followers.

The Context

It's always important to look at the context of the passage, so that we understand what Jesus intended to teach.

The context for this passage really is set at the beginning of Chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel.

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 2 "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

The disciples are, understandably, proud of the Great Temple, built by King Herod. That's not surprising. It was a marvelous architectural showpiece – something for the nation to be proud of – it was the Opera House of the Jewish nation.

Jesus' response is: "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." In some ways He is saying "Don't let yourself be too impressed by amazing buildings and material achievements!" He goes on to warn of judgment coming and of the horror that lies ahead. In the early part of chapter 25 he tells the Parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were not ready for the arrival of the Bridegroom and so were locked out. And he tells the Parable of the Talents, with its warning about the one who buried his talent instead of using it for the king. The theme is "Be watchful! Be ready! Don't get complacent! Be faithful in fulfilling your call as disciples!" Then He comes to this teaching and tells them what it will be like when He comes in His glory to judge the nations.

The Passage

There are the two parts to this passage. The first part is the judgment of the sheep and the second part, of course, is the judgment of the goats. Both are judged for whether or not they lived out the call to sacrificial service, the call to love others by their behaviour.

The Social Justice Tradition of the Gospel

We see straight away that this passage, with its emphasis on the importance of how we extend loving action to those in need, fits in with what has been called the **social justice tradition of the gospel**.

The social justice tradition did not start with Jesus. It dates back to the prophets.

Micah summarizes the call succinctly: "He has shown you, o people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Amos denounced those who "sell the needy for a pair of shoes and trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the earth and deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:6-7).

Solomon provides wisdom when he writes *“He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses” (Prov 28:27).*

Clearly, this passage of the separation of the sheep and the goats builds on the warnings of the prophets!

A Central Theme in Jesus’ Teachings

Although Matthew is the only one who records this teaching by Jesus in his gospel, **the theme is one of the large tributaries flowing into the full river of The Kingdom of God** in Jesus’ teachings:

- it is reflected in the parable of the rich fool – the man who accumulates wealth for himself but is not rich towards God (**Lk 12:13-21**)
- **It is echoed in the** parable of the rich man and Lazarus (**Lk 16:19-31**). The rich man, who ignored the beggar at his gate while he lived in luxury ends up in torment in Jesus’ parable.
- It is a dominant theme in the Epistle of **James** – *What good is it my brothers and sisters if people claim to have faith but have no deeds?* (**James 2:14**)
Don’t feel complacent about your religious commitment if it doesn’t show up in deeds of love towards the needy!

A Clash of Cultures

[There is a timeless quality to this teaching by Jesus.](#) At all times, down through the ages, there is a danger that the followers of Jesus will lose the sharpness of the call to live out sacrificial love towards the poor and needy. [There is always the danger that we will cut our cloth as followers of Jesus, not by His life and teachings, but by the culture around us. There is always the danger that we will shorten the sleeves of our giving, take in the waistcoat of our self-denial a bit, trim and adjust according to the wisdom of our day, instead of the call of Jesus!](#)

In our age, the goats represent those who, sadly, have taken on the self-focused culture of the world around them. They have been influenced by the tsunami of self-serving messages on offer to us in the West. The goats have been swayed by the sentiments we hear from the welfare slashers, the cost cutters and profiteers. They have heard the trumpeting of the world of advertisements and commercials that assault us from our TV’s every day. The goats have bought the message: “Look after No 1” “You deserve...! You’ve worked hard; treat yourself! Take your ease. Eat, drink and be merry!” [They have lost connection with the call of Jesus.](#)

The sheep are presented as those who have taken seriously the call of Jesus and have decided to try to live out of His Kingdom’s culture in costly, servant-hearted, sacrificial deeds.

Sheep or goats? What am I?

Yes, I need this reminder by Jesus!

The Separation

This teaching from Jesus makes it clear that there will be a Judgment Day, and whether we are among the sheep or the goats at the Judgment, depends on how we treat people in need. [It is a call to re-calibrate our living!! We are, undeniably,](#)

unavoidably, inescapably, irrefutably called to live out the Royal Law of Love, sacrificing our own desires in order to serve the poor and needy.

As a nation, we cannot escape the implications of this teaching by Jesus. To pick just one national issue: We need to continue to pressure our government to close the offshore detention centres and either settle asylum seekers in Australia, or take up the offer of New Zealand, or find a safe, and just, alternative placement. We need to lobby on behalf of the poor and needy, wherever we are aware of their plight.

I, like you, abhor the policies that both political parties have aligned themselves with in managing asylum seekers by establishing offshore detention centres and leaving people there indefinitely. I was greatly challenged by a Four Corners program two weeks ago, following a family of Syrian refugees, with four children, who were forced to flee their home in Syria. They were accepted into Germany, given passports, provided with a home and given a small pension to help them settle in. The children were enrolled in the local school and welcomed by the townspeople. How shameful our Australian approach is in contrast with that! When, and how, did we become a nation that, in Good Samaritan terms, not only fails to help; those wounded by the wayside, but throws stones at them as we pass by?

Corporately, as a church, we are called to continue to align ourselves by living out sacrificial lifestyles. Our community, our neighbours and work colleagues need to be know that PUC lives out costly love for those who are struggling. The emphasis is not on our words. In Jesus' teaching the emphasis is unequivocally on *what we do!*

Are you at all struck by the fact that this Scripture passage and message is occurring on the very day we, as a church, launch our **Envelopes of Influence** appeal, looking to raise money to support Our Neighbours Ministry and help the poorest of the poor in Bulaweyo, Zimbabwe? Does it occur to you how thoughtfully this has all been planned?

The only thing is, it wasn't planned by us at all!! We're not that good at planning! Originally, I was down to preach next Sunday, but I'll be away with a small team reaching out to the Biripi people up at Taree. So I had to swap from next Sunday to today. How felicitous that this passage of Scripture coincided with our Envelopes of Influence appeal. How marvelous!! What a wonderful confluence of events! Maybe we didn't plan it, but I have no doubt God did!! God loves His struggling children in Zimbabwe and He wants us to sacrifice so that their needs can be met!!

Pittwater is a generous church! Last financial year, I believe we gave a total around \$70,000 to Our Neighbours Ministry in Zimbabwe. But God is reminding us through this Scripture not to be complacent, and to be crystal clear that, when we give to the poor and needy, we give to Jesus!

Individually, it is also true that we cannot ignore the plight of human beings suffering hunger, thirst, nakedness, homelessness, sickness, or imprisonment and trust that God is pleased with us! Sure, as followers of Jesus we work in order to meet our own needs. But we also work in order to have something to give to those in need (Hebrews 13:1-3). We join with others to find ways to come alongside those who lack the basic necessities of life that we often take for granted.

I sat a week or so ago with a young couple who are applying to go to Cambodia with a mission agency for a one or two-year placement. What an impressive young

couple! He was 26 with double degrees in business and electrical engineering. He'd achieved a UAI of 99.65 in the HSC a few years ago. His wife was 24 – a trained primary school teacher. They have been married two years. What are they hoping to do? Well, they have talked about Jesus' call to care for the poor and needy and they have settled on the fact that they don't want to live an "ordinary suburban life" (their words)! He has visited Cambodia twice before for a few months at a time, but he wants to spend longer there this time, pulling together ideas on how to help folk set up businesses so that they can support their families. Their rough plan is to come back to Australia after this trip, hopefully begin a family, and then return to Cambodia, possibly as career missionaries, serving Jesus by serving the poor.

The world might say they're wasting their lives. But on that day, Jesus will say *Come, you who are blessed of my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!*

As individuals the task is for us to think seriously about the choices we make. The task is to not drift along with the current of our self-centred, First-world lifestyle, but to make specific decisions: What will I do to follow Jesus? Where will I sacrifice in order to love others with his love? What actions will I take?

Application

And so we come to our time of taking envelopes from the Envelopes of Influence board... What number will you take? Will you, as Warren suggested last week, add an extra zero to your donation? Will you take more than one envelope?

If I could tell you today that your sacrificial gift will enable a bag of maize meal and a bottle of cooking oil to be given to a struggling family with young children in Zimbabwe, how much would you give? If I could tell you that it will enable someone to buy a small supply of fruit or vegetables that they can on-sell and make a little profit, and perhaps get a start with a little business, what would you sacrifice to do that? If I could tell you that your gift will give hope to someone who has lost hope, who just wants to die, what trip would you put aside, what upgrade would you forgo, what consumables would you do without, in order to accomplish that? If I could tell you that your gift will save a life by enabling medicine and treatment to be paid for, what would you forgo, in order to give? If I could promise you that whatever you do, you will be giving to Jesus, how far would you stretch?

Well, I've been to Bulawayo, and I can tell you that these are the kinds of things our gifts will accomplish. Through the ministry of the team at Our Neighbours, God will do wonderful things! And I've read this teaching from Matthew 25, and I can tell, authoritatively, that if you think you're just giving to some folk in Zimbabwe, you're wrong! When you give, Jesus said, you are giving to Him!

Come and choose envelopes! Come and pledge!

I'm going to ask the band to come and just play quietly while we make our way and take envelopes. When we've finished taking envelopes we'll join in our final song together.