

# Sermon preached at Gisborne, 22 November 2020

*Lord God, thank you for giving us the Bible. Thank you that through reading it we can learn more about you and learn to love you more. Send your Spirit to help us understand your Word and to help us grow. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

## Separating the sheep from the goats

Whenever we read Matthew 25:31-46, a question may arise: what Jesus has got against goats? Why does he use goats as the metaphor for those who neglect the needs of his people? We'll explore these questions with the theme of the separation the sheep from the goats as it primarily defines individuals' faith lives in Christ.

Sheep and goats were equally valuable in ancient Palestine. Abel, Abraham and Isaac all herded sheep and goats. Jacob received a flock of goats from his father-in-law, Laban.<sup>1</sup> For the Passover, either a lamb or a kid – a baby goat was acceptable for the sacrifice.

Sheep and goats are similar in many ways — both are herd animals, both are ruminants (multi-chambered stomachs), and both eat plants. Both belong to the same subfamily — Caprinae — though they are different species and don't interbreed.

Sheep and goats were both used for food, milk and skins. Both were considered signs of wealth and both were used for other sacrifices as well as the Passover. Goat hides worked better for wineskins, while sheep's wool was preferred for weaving.

Skins of both animals were even used to make two of the four coverings of the sacred tabernacle - the earthly dwelling of God - when the Israelites travelled in the desert before the Temple was built by Solomon.<sup>2</sup> So how did goats get the bad reputation?

Sheep's main characteristic is that they flock: they group together, stay together and follow a leader well. This instinct makes sheep easy to herd and very social in nature. Also, since sheep have great hearing, they can follow one shepherd easily as Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

Goats are also herd animals. However, they are much more independent and need more work to herd. Goats are also curious and love to climb - which makes it hard to keep them penned or behind fences. Even though there are differences between sheep and goats, it doesn't necessarily make goats as symbols of 'bad guys.' At this point, we'd like to see what 'separation' mean from the point of God in Ezekiel 34:17-21. It reads;

As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?<sup>3</sup>

We first notice that God as the shepherd is concerned about 'His flock,' and the judgement will also happen within His flock. The separation will be done between sheep and sheep and between rams and goats that belong to His flock. God continues to say;

See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 30:35

<sup>2</sup> <https://owlcation.com/humanities/The-Purpose-of-the-Wilderness-Tabernacle-The-Covering-Materials>

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 34:17-19

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 34:20-22

What is notable for here is that judgement is *not* based on the type of livestock, but the behaviour of each. Matthew 25 appears to be making the same kind of distinction. So what is going on here?

Goats reproduce faster than sheep, and if a herdsman is going to keep his flock properly balanced, then as a matter of course, he will need to cull the male kids (baby goats). Otherwise, they will outnumber the sheep, and with too many males, he will not have a supply of milk. When we look at Matt 25, we see that the word translated 'goat' is *eriphos* in Greek, the male term for a baby goat. So Jesus' reference to the separation appears to be drawing on a well-known and regular occurrence in herding - the separation out and culling of the young male goats the herdsman would do as a natural part of their work. The process of separation will happen within God's flock, and it is not based on the different types of animals. Here we'd like to think about Matthew 25 again.

In the context of Jesus' teachings in Matthew, which was written for the Jews especially, this parable addresses not serving all the poor but receiving the gospel's messengers. In Matthew, disciples are called as Jesus' brothers.<sup>5</sup> They delivered the good news to village to village. Therefore when the king judges the nations or Gentiles who have received the word of God, separation is foremost based on their response to the gospel of the kingdom.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, separation the righteous from the condemned seems to be based on their visible work such as feeding the hungry, offering water to the thirsty and comfort who are in need. But it's not that simple. The sheep are no less surprised than the goats when they heard the king's judgement. That is, goats do not see themselves as goats, but neither do sheep recognize themselves as sheep. What does it mean?

For Matthew, ethical behaviour indeed responds to Jesus' commands. But it does not result from the effort, from trying hard - so-called from work. Instead, Matthew points out that good fruit comes from good trees naturally. John the Baptist also warns of trees that fail to bear good fruit.<sup>7</sup> Good trees, Jesus explains, cannot bear bad fruit, nor can bad trees bear good fruit.<sup>8</sup> John and Jesus alike warn that the bad trees will be cast into the fire. Trees are known by their fruit.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, good soil produces good fruit.<sup>10</sup>

Also, Jesus does not instruct disciples that they should become the salt of the earth or the light of the world. He tells them that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus said, "but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Jesus does not command his followers to hunger and thirst for justice, pursue peace, and so forth. He blesses those who do.<sup>12</sup> Judgment brings out a reality that has been present all along. That is, the life of the disciples/followers' of Jesus Christ is realizing this reality here and now.

So what this separation the sheep from the goats mean to us as the church today? It plainly asks us if we are living the reality that is in Christ. It examines our faith lives with the penetrating look of Jesus if we regard ourselves as sheep while behaving like goats; if we live Christ's life not by effort but through the whole being.<sup>13</sup> The questions are asked, and we may have to be accountable to the king, when he comes to judge. The judgment has already begun when the crucified lord was raised in Easter. What will our answers be? May God help us live by these questions daily and be honest to ourselves as we are preparing for Advent for the coming of the Lord. Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 12:50; 28:10

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 3:10

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 7:17-18

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 12:33

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 13:23

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:1-16

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 2:6, Galatians 3:27, Romans 8:2-8, Luke 6:46