

The Upside Down Kingdom: Sheep and Goats

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Introduction

Good morning and welcome to KBF,

It is fabulous to have you here worshipping with us this morning. We serve serve an amazing God and what a privilege it is to be together as a group, acknowledging the blessings that he has provided to us through faith in Jesus Christ, and then returning them to God in praise.

Here at Kurume Bible Fellowship we strive to be a community that is intentional for the way in which we explore the Bible and known for the authenticity of fellowship that comes from that. If you are here visiting for the first time, I hope that you are encouraged to connect more deeply with God's word and that you would find family in this beautiful community.

This year our overarching theme has been *Salt and Light*. Our sermons have been intentionally focused on working through what it means for Christians to be salt and light in the world. How are set apart and for what purpose.

In order to explore this theme we began by going through the book of acts. Learning from the disciples who, rather than being led by Jesus, were being led by the Holy Spirit, **as a community of salt and light** they took the gospel of Jesus Christ into the gentile world.

We then turned our attention to the book of Colossians examining how salt and light is founded in knowing who God is, who Jesus is, and what that means for who you are. We were challenged to consider how we are to **steward** this God given identity and were encouraged to see all the areas of our life that are impacted by this.

We then playfully looked at the book of Jonah where we were encouraged to **get out of our own way**. Recognising that sometimes, despite the best efforts of God, it is actually our very own selves that prevent us from being the salt and light that God has created us to be.

Last month we turned our attention to the Gospel of John where we **looked at how Jesus served** which we hoped would encourage you to reflect on the ways you serve.

All of these topics are intended to promote us as a community to think very intentionally about how we are following Jesus. How are we living out the claim that Jesus made that you, yes you!, are salt and light in the world. I hope that you have been encouraged and uplifted this year by the preaching here at KBF.

This month, we are keeping with this overarching *Salt and Light* theme and we are turning our attention to the parables. Jesus frequently taught in parables, which used short stories or particular situations which allowed listeners to compare the heavenly situation with an

earthly situation. Basically allowing us to compare the earthly kingdom with the heavenly kingdom.

This series on the parables is intended to help us explore these teachings of Jesus so that we might see the differences between the situations he is teaching about versus the situations that he is depicting in story. In doing so I hope we might be inspired to apply the things that we learn in our own lives so that we might be able to follow Christ with more inspiration and intention!

Let's kick it off shall we?

The Deceptiveness of Appearance

This morning we are beginning at the end so to speak. In the book of Matthew, the Sheep and Goats are the final teaching of Jesus before the book moves into the last supper, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. There is a little debate about whether the Sheep and the Goats are a parable, which is why it might have a slightly different heading in your bible from the parables that precede it. We are going to treat it as a parable this morning and as we think about it, there is an Old Testament reference that I want us to keep in mind.

The reference comes from 1 Samuel 16:7 and it says:

“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

This passage is describing the process where King David was selected. David was not the oldest, and it seems not the tallest or most pleasant in appearance but was indeed the one God selected. Here God tells the profit the difference between what humans notice and what God is looking for.

People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

The Sheep & The Goats

With this in mind, let us paraphrase the parable quickly;

[Retell quickly with just the main points]

“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."

Sheep and Goat Quiz and a few little Trivia Points

Hmmmm deep. Jesus on a throne, separating people, some going to eternal punishment, yikes! It is quite a startling picture that is being described here. So who are you, a sheep or a goats? This question is one that I used to find very confronting.

Who are the sheep, and who are the goats? Can we tell. Before we go on, let's play a little game. Let's lighten the mood a little. The game is.... Cannnnn you pick it!?

Round 1: Can you pick it, is this a sheep or a goat?



All those who said sheep - Bingo, It is a Merino! Give yourself a point.
Now how about this one?



Goat? Yes, Jamunapari is the breed. Give yourself a point.

Let's continue.



How many said goat? Bhaaaaad guess- wrong! It is actually a Vembur Sheep breed from India. Bonus point if you knew the name of the breed.

Last Round Ladies and gentlemen.



Ok, now this is obviously a... Sheep! A Chennai Red to be precise. How did you do? Who got 100%.

Now the reason that I found this parable so confronting is because whenever I would read commentaries, I would often find discussions about why Jesus chose sheep to be on his right and goats on his left. Many of these discussions would focus on the obvious differences between sheep and goats. Goats have stubborn personalities and are independent and brash, while sheep are docile, obedient and easily led. I found this quite confronting. You might be surprised to hear this, sometimes I am actually quite stubborn. I have been known to be really independent and at times a little brash. Does this mean that I am a goat!?

Now the point of the quiz was to demonstrate something that amazed me. Selective breeding over thousands of years has given us classic stereotypes of fluffy sheep and aggressive goats as the breeds have become more and more specialized. If you go back far enough, or go to some places where the breeds have not been so intentionally separated you will discover that sheep and goats can actually look very similar, one might even get a little mixed up and call a sheep a goat and a goat a sheep!

In fact, doing some research for this week I came across some farming resources that even mentioned that a sheep and a goat can actually produce a geep, or a shoat. I am not making this up!

Rather than focusing on differences, I began to wonder, were sheep and goats chosen in this parable because of their similarities? Did Jesus refer to sheep and goats, not because he wanted to highlight the differences in the categories, like personality and behaviour, but rather he wanted to highlight two animals because of their similarities, appearances that may have been similar enough that the two categories were frequently confused by people who were not shepherds.

What We Learn About Christ

With this in mind, I started to think, what does this parable teach me about Jesus and then what could I learn about the way in which he sees the world? There were a few things that stood out.

1. The Authority of Christ

a. He will sit on his glorious throne

Angels will be with him and he will sit in front of the nations and judge them. The imagery details some very powerful authority. Authority that extends to the spiritual world (angels) and the human/political world.

b. The Shepherding Analogy

While there is some powerful authority described here, there is also a lowly picture, a humble reference to shepherding. And we see reference to the intimate knowledge that Jesus has over his people. That is, despite the power and significance of his authority he knows his flock exceptionally well.

2. The Presence of Jesus

a. In contrast to the regal descriptions of the throne Jesus also says.

- 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.

Jesus indicates that he is familiar with all the marks of suffering hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, and incarceration. He actually identifies that it was he himself that was suffering. Jesus is present in suffering.

But then goes deeper.

- Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.
- Shockingly, Jesus is including other people who suffer within the identity of himself. He is saying that the 'least of the these brothers and sisters' is equal to himself. What a powerful claim and one that shows us a little insight into the upside down kingdom. Humans can choose and respect leaders who are strong and powerful, but they don't expect those leaders to have to pay much attention to the weak and the marginalized. Jesus, as the one with all earthly and spiritual authority, however, sees the suffering and the marginalised as part of himself.

What We Learn About People

Just as we learn some interesting things about Jesus through this parable, there are a few fascinating things we learn about people as well.

1. Everyone was surprised! Including me!

They were both surprised that they either had served or did not serve Jesus. This fact always made me a little nervous, how could you not know if you were serving Christ?

a. The Sheep

Sheep are surprised because they serve regardless and do not need to see the 'least of these' as having divine status - they are surprised that the poor are the same as Jesus, because they would serve the suffering regardless. They had to clarify when they were serving Jesus despite the fact that they were always serving. It is the right thing to do regardless of whether you or the least in the kingdom or the highest - Jesus. These people are actually living out the example that Jesus set in behaviour and attitude.

b. The Goats

The Goats are surprised and say, when did we not help you? Maybe these are people who had done things for Jesus. Perhaps they were looking for status and power and wanting to associate with those characteristics. Maybe they wanted to prove to Jesus that they were good people, but really they only cared about gaining his approval. This attitude prevented them from realizing that the poor were actually Jesus, and that in this upside down kingdom the message of service is complete when you serve people who can not serve you back.

2. Judgement was not based on outer identity markers

How often do we hear 'a Christian Nation' or how often do we hear about people being described in reference to some form of outer quality? I feel like it happens more than some people would like to admit.

Remember: People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Categorization was based on their service, particularly to the way in which people attended to the needs of those who were vulnerable.

What About 'All The Nations'?

Over my life as a Christian, I have heard this parable interpreted in a few different ways. I have heard it being interpreted that the sheep and goats were distinct nationalities, I have heard it being interpreted as personalities and I have even heard it being used to explain the differences between denominations.

In each of these examples there was some attempt at trying to justify who the real 'sheep' is, and usually it included the group that the person explaining was affiliated with.

In such commentaries I feel as if there is a slight irony. Are they continuing the human way of seeing the world that we were cautioned with? Are these interpretations stuck in looking for outward, observable traits. Things that could be associated with nationality or personal characteristics.

Let me highlight one more thing here and this comes from an article by Professor Greg Carey:

the parable sets the scene with "all the nations" gathered before the Son of Man (25:32 NRSV). Many hearers will take "all the nations" (Greek: *panta ta ethne*) in a universalistic sense, as if it means "all peoples."

When Matthew's meaning is most clear, the Greek *ethne* specifically connotes Gentiles (4:15; 6:32; 10:5; 20:19, 25; 24:14; 28:19). Matthew's meaning is not always clear, but in every occurrence it is possible to translate *ethne* as Gentiles. The NRSV and other translations render *ethne* as "Gentiles" in some contexts but "nations" in others.

According to Klyne R. Snodgrass this universal understanding of the *ethne* first appeared in church tradition in the eighteenth century. For most of Christian history, the parable has been applied to the judgment specifically of Christians. Modern readers may struggle to imagine *ethne* as connoting only the church, but the parable's characterization of "the least of these my brothers" (20:40, literal translation) does lend itself to identifying the victims as believers from within the church (Stories with Intent, 551).

How you understand 'all the nations' makes a difference. If you take it:

- **Literally**, all nations, then perhaps you might still think that groups of people were being separated. (The American christian) for example. In doing so you elevate the significance of an outer 'visible' trait
- All peoples, perhaps a **universalistic interpretation**. Would this then mean that those who identify as Christian are the sheep while those who are not are the goats. Would this do a similar thing as the other interpretation?
- If *Ethne* was interpreted as 'gentiles' and was **applied to mean the Christian body** could this mean this parable is meant to speak directly to and about Christians?

In each case, it is clear, Jesus is going to preside over judgement. I think we need to be responsible and aware of this, however, how we understand this concept of 'all the nations' seems to make quite a difference to how we read this parable.

Encouragement to Serve and Love

With the talk of judgement and eternal punishment as well as reference to eternal life this parable is intimidating and beautiful.

While it does talk about eternal punishment and eternal life don't let that scare you away from diving in and seeking understanding. The scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching. I believe God desires you to read it and be encouraged and challenged by it.

At the core though, this parable is here to help us discover more deeply who Christ is and what the Heavenly kingdom looks like. We had to do some work to read through it, we made reference to Old Testament scripture and we considered some translation issues. By doing the work though, we can come to grips with the heavenly kingdom.

The kingdom that Jesus is ruler over, is one that operates in a different way to the ones that we are used to. It is not a kingdom where you are searching for approval from people of higher status, instead it is one where you offer your approval of others by serving and loving them, especially when they are in need.

Now all of this might sound a little anticlimactic. Yeah love and serve each other, we get it. I hope that is how it sounds to us all as we all strive to be better at loving and serving those around us. Imagine how anticlimactic it would be for the sheep who were invited into eternal life but they were not necessarily sure why.

While it might be anticlimactic, I think it is actually the most difficult thing that we can master. To live out a standard of service where we attend to the needs of the suffering as if they were Jesus himself and yet with the innocence and generosity to care for the sufferer enough that we do not see Jesus. Wow, now that is a high standard. One that we can all aspire a little higher too.

John 13:35 says,

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

It is my prayer that you might be challenged and inspired by this parable. I hope you understand it more deeply, and I pray that as you seek to live according to the standard described by Christ, I pray that everyone will know that you are a disciple of Jesus. May you see the beauty in Christ and his upside down kingdom and may you truly be salt and light as you strive to spread the upside down kingdom here on earth.

Benediction

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.