

## MAIN POINT

*Our deepest held beliefs must be backed up by action in our lives.*

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard someone say, “All Christians are hypocrites,” or something similar? Why do you think they believe that?

In your experience, have you found Christians to be hypocritical? Explain.

**Our world is disgusted by religious hypocrisy, and Jesus agrees. To some degree we cannot control if people think all Christians are hypocrites, but we can become people whose beliefs are backed up by their actions through the transformative power of the gospel. In the epic parable of sheep and goats, Jesus gives a glimpse of the future judgment and reveals how God sees through our words and discerns the true condition of our hearts. The parable warns us of the damage of hypocrisy, but it also helps us envision the power and beauty of integrity.**

## UNDERSTANDING

### > READ MATTHEW 25:31-33.

What is going on in this teaching from Jesus?

Who do the sheep in these verses represent? Who do the goats represent?

How does the fact that you will be judged by Jesus in the future change the way you view your life now? How does it change the way you look at others?

**These verses point to the future. Talk of Jesus’ future can make us uncomfortable today, but His return is central to His ministry on earth. In Jesus’ return, He will render a verdict based on His message; each person will be judged based on his or her response to the gospel. Distinguishing between sheep and goats is difficult, especially from a distance, except for someone who knows precisely what to look for. A shepherd is qualified. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will separate the sheep from the goats. Part of our belief in the gospel is our willingness to demonstrate our internal faith through our external actions.**

**> READ MATTHEW 25:34-40.**

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What will be the reward for the faithful?

Why do you think the righteous were surprised in verse 37?

What does it mean to you that God was preparing His kingdom for the faithful “from the foundation of the world” (v. 34)? What does this teach us about the relationship between works and faith?

What type of ministry does Jesus list in these verses?

How would the world be different if every Christian became involved in ministering to people in need? How does the demonstration of our faith show the integrity of our belief?

**Jesus teaches that works do not merit salvation. God’s pleasure in us is not based on our performance for Him, but in His love for us before the foundation of the world. Followers of Jesus serve because they are loved by God, not to be loved by God. Notice that the faithful were surprised by Jesus’ response because they simply met needs as a habit in their life. When we serve the world, we help those in need of a relationship with Jesus see that He is real and cares for them. Typically the parables underscore one facet of truth. That truth here is that we cannot overlook people in need. Service to others shows the genuineness of our faith.**

**> READ MATTHEW 25:41-46.**

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This passage essentially mirrors the previous section with a few more interesting details. How should the reality of eternal punishment affect what we think about salvation?

Did those on the left get excluded from salvation because they didn’t serve the needy, or is there something bigger going on here? Explain.

Why should judgment motivate us to meet physical needs? How does addressing physical needs allow us to meet spiritual needs?

Why do you think Jesus taught that service was a natural result of salvation?

**Jesus pointed out that the day of judgment would be a time of sorrowful surprise for the people He had put on His left. Once they are ordered to depart from His presence, they are left to face the curse that always awaits individuals who reject Christ’s offer of salvation. It is those who have a faith with integrity who are ultimately saved. Doing good works does not ensure the integrity of our faith; it simply shows others the**

integrity of our faith. When we do good works to others, the goal is not the works themselves, but to earn the right to share Jesus with people who are separated from Him.

## APPLICATION

Why should the gospel compel us to serve others? How has it compelled you to serve others?

Where is one place you can get plugged into the church for serving other people and meeting physical needs? What steps will you take to get plugged into this ministry?

Where will you give of your time and your talents for the benefit of others? How does serving others increase your intimacy with the Lord?

## PRAY

Praise God for the salvation He brings that changes the way we live. Ask Him to make you sensitive and receptive to the needs of others. Pray for a faith that demonstrates the integrity of your belief. Thank God for who He is and all that He brings.

## MEMORIZE

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." – Matthew 25:40

## COMMENTARY

### **MATTHEW 25:31-46.**

25:31. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory" points to the future and the closing era of God's plan of redemption. Jesus' return at some point in the future is often treated with slight embarrassment today by otherwise fine Christians. Their expectations have not been met even though the signs seem to line up again and again. The words "glory," "angels," and "throne" call attention to the majesty, power and authority of the second coming.

25:32. The word for "nations" can refer either to Gentiles only or to all people from every nation including Israel. The latter is to be preferred here. The emphasis is on all people as individuals, not on nations collectively. Each person will be judged based on his or her response to the Gospel and will receive Christ's verdict. Jesus "will separate them one from another." This image of judgment gives rise to several important points. First, all of human life and effort boils down to a basic choice based on Jesus' message and sacrifice. A second important point we can take from the image in this parable concerns the sheep and the goats. Distinguishing between these two animals is difficult, especially from a distance, except for someone who knows precisely what to look for. A shepherd is qualified.

25:33. The positions of “left” and “right” indicate the complete distinction. There is no middle ground. The sheep have the position on the right, the place of honor. The goats are on the left, in this case the place of rejection.

25:34. “The King” emphasizes Jesus’ dominion and power at the final judgment. His reign, which is no less real today, will be complete—all of creation will be forced to acknowledge His authority. “Those on His right” are invited to “come.” They will receive their reward for faithful service. Notice they are not about to be blessed but already are blessed by my Father. The word “blessed” emphasizes God’s action in bringing people into His desired relationship with them. The fact of our relationship to God leads naturally to the next image in the parable. “Inherit the kingdom” underscores the Christian’s place in God’s family. The Scripture often uses the imagery of an “inheritance” to describe our inclusion in God’s family and the reward we will enjoy.

25:35. The criteria for judgment is surprising, and a few preliminary words may help to understand the specific intent of the parable. Judgment is based on works in this parable, but this does not mean Jesus was describing salvation by works. He was emphasizing the importance of service, and service especially to the neediest people in our society. His strong language here does not negate the wider New Testament teaching of salvation by grace through faith. It simply highlights the results of salvation.

25:36. “Naked” may refer to someone without any clothes or someone who only has an undergarment. Ministry to the sick is always important. Only when you have benefited firsthand from this kind of kindness can you really appreciate its impact. In this context the people in prison may refer to those who fell on hard times through debt or were abused in some manner by the wealthy and influential. They were the weak and poor.

25:37-39. One of the most interesting features of this parable is the element of surprise on both sides. Our service to others must not be undertaken with the intention of piling up rewards. That kind of motivation undermines the genuineness of service.

25:40. Who are the “least of these my brothers”? Some interpreters suggest brothers refers to the disciples only, but such an understanding is far too narrow and in effect limits the application of the parable to the first century. A better understanding is the more obvious interpretation, that they are any person in need.

25:41. This passage essentially mirrors the previous section with a few more interesting details. “The eternal fire” is a detail of hell about which we can either make too much or too little. Some preachers over the years appear almost to take delight in describing their visions of hell.

25:42-43. The criteria for the rejection of the wicked is the opposite of the criteria for the inclusion of the righteous. Their sins are primarily those of omission.

25:44. You can almost hear in these words of defense, “but we never hurt anyone!” That is true, but the failure to show compassion reveals the state of one’s soul. A related plea of “if we had known it was you!” is equally unconvincing.

25:45. “You did not do” underscores the inaction of the cursed. Interestingly, their lack of service, as benign as that may sound to us, puts them in the same category as those who commit gross sins, reel drunkenly down the streets, or scream profanely. This verse highlights the danger of the “isolated moral person” who did nothing to harm anyone.

25:46. The opposite destinations underscore the finality of the verdict that is rendered at the judgment. Both are “eternal.”