

# Meeting With Christ

---

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

## AS A SHEPHERD SEPARATES THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS (1)

---

### Matthew 25:31-46

In the NT, the theme of separation is often linked with the topic of judgment. In the language of the Bible, separation means judgment. Look at these examples. In Matthew 3:12, the wheat is separated from the chaff. John the Baptist says that the wheat is gathered into the barn while the chaff is burned up with unquenchable fire, a reference to the last judgment. Similarly, in Matthew 13:30, the tares are separated from the wheat. The tares are tied into bundles and burned; the wheat is gathered into the barn. In Matthew 13:49-50, Jesus says that at the end of the age, angels will separate the wicked from the just, and throw the wicked into the furnace of fire, another reference to the last judgment. We recently saw that the foolish virgins were separated from the wise ones when they found the door locked and heard the bridegroom say to them, 'I do not know you' (Matthew 25:12). In the following parable, the lazy servant who buried his one talent is separated from the other servants when he was thrown outside into the darkness, another reference to the last judgment (Matthew 25:30).

### Two contrasting groups of people

In today's lesson, we will look at a passage where this principle of separation / judgment is again applied. Matthew 25:31-46. Here Jesus talks about the separation of sheep and goats on the day of judgment. Let's read this passage.

*Matthew 25:31. When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*

*32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,*

*33 and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.*

*34 Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;*

*35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,*

*36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'*

*37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?'*

*38 And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee?'*

*39 And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?'*

*40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'*

41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;  
42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,  
43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'  
44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?'  
45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.'  
46 And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

This is a very vivid picture, given by the Lord Jesus, of the final judgment. Here, I would like to point out a few observations.

You know that Jesus' first coming was one of self-abnegation, one in which he humbled himself. He was born, as you remember, not into a palace, but into a manger, in a barn made for animals! Here in v. 31, we see that when He comes again, it will be done in glory. Twice this verse speaks of 'His glory,' His divine glory.

Notice also that when Jesus comes, He will come with His angels. *All the holy angels with Him* (v. 31). In contrast, v. 41 talks about *the devil and his angels*. So we find here two contrasting parties: Christ with His angels; the devil and his angels. These two groups define the contrast between the sheep and the goats. Basically, there are two main groups: a) Christ, his angels and the sheep on one side; b) Satan, his angels and the goats on the other side.

The text tells us that first, there is a gathering. Then there is a separation. The gathering of the nations, followed by their separation. This is compared to a shepherd who is separating his sheep from the goats.

In Palestine, sheep and goats are often pastured together in mixed flocks. They feed together in the same pasture. But at the end of the day, the shepherd will separate them. The reason for that separation has to do with the character of the sheep and the goats. The sheep stay out in the open because they are able to keep each other warm by huddling together. The goats are not like that. They tend to stay away from each other. They don't like to huddle close together. The result is that they cannot keep each other warm. And therefore, in the night, they have to be sheltered. That is the reason why shepherds had to separate the sheep from the goats when the end of the day comes.

V. 33 speaks about the right hand and the left hand. The sheep will be put on the right side of the throne; the goats will be on the left. As you know, the right side is traditionally the place of honor whereas the left side is the side of dishonor. The favor that the sheep receive is spelled out as 'inheriting the kingdom' (v. 34). The disfavor of the goats is expressed in the words 'you cursed' in v. 41.

We read in v. 34 that the kingdom had been 'prepared from the foundation of the world,' i.e., from the beginning of time. This indicates that the kingdom of God was not some kind of afterthought, but it was part of God's eternal purposes. Even from the time when He created the universe, the kingdom was already in His mind. And He had a purpose for this kingdom: it was to establish a world in which His righteousness dwells and where His character will be manifest.

Notice that v. 34 talks about 'a kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' God has already 'prepared' who will be at Jesus' right, and who will be at His left. Depending on your theology, it is possible to read the words 'for you' in either a general sense, or in a more personal sense. Calvinist thinking favors the more personal interpretation and holds the view that the identity of the individuals who will inherit the kingdom is already decided before they are born. On the other

hand, there are theologians who understand the words ‘for you’ to mean a class of saved people. God has prepared this kingdom for a class of people who will prove to be worthy of it. Who those people will be is determined on the basis of their response to the Gospel. In our passage, it is the sheep. So what has been decided in advance is that those who prove at the judgment to be sheep will inherit the kingdom, rather than the idea that certain individuals have been pre-selected before their birth to be sheep. You see that there is quite a gap here.

## The blessed and the cursed

So on the right, you have the ‘blessed,’ the sheep, and on the left, you have the ‘cursed,’ the goats. I would like to say a few things about the word ‘cursed,’ *Depart from Me, you cursed*. ‘You cursed’ indicates that these people are under God’s curse. In OT language, to be under God’s curse means that you are under God’s judgment. ‘You cursed’ means ‘you who are under the judgment of God.’ This word ‘cursed’ appears often in the OT, usually in connection with those who disobey God’s commands.

Take this example in Deuteronomy 11:26-28. *Behold, I set before you today a **blessing** and a **curse**:<sup>27</sup> the **blessing**, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you today;<sup>28</sup> and the **curse**, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you today, to go after other gods which you have not known.* So here you can see the blessing and the curse, like the ‘blessed’ and the ‘cursed’ of our passage in Matthew 25. The blessing is for obedience to God. The curse is for those who disobey God.

Similarly, we find in Deuteronomy 28:15-19 a list of curses for disobedience to God.

*Deuteronomy 28:15. But it shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these **curse**s shall come upon you and overtake you.*

*16 **Cursed** shall you be in the city, and **cursed** shall you be in the country.*

*17 **Cursed** shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.*

*18 **Cursed** shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.*

*19 **Cursed** shall you be when you come in, and **cursed** shall you be when you go out.*

Just as obedience will bring blessings (Deuteronomy 28:2-9), so disobedience to God’s commandments will bring curses. In the context of our passage, we can say that the goats, the cursed ones, are those who, whatever they may have professed with their mouth, failed to obey God’s commands. The sheep, the blessed of the Father, are those who followed God’s commands.

## The goats

This being said about the sheep and goats, we come now to the important question of who are represented by the sheep, and who are represented by the goats.

Who the sheep are is quite obvious. Both in the OT and in the New, the sheep is consistently a picture of God’s people. The sheep is used in the Bible as an image of God’s people. That does not need much explanation.

But what about the goats? Who do they represent? The non-Christians? The unbelievers? Really? That’s what many people would say.

There are a few points that I would like to mention in connection with this question. The first one is this. Sheep and goats are basically of the same family. And in that respect, they look alike.

Superficially, the goats can be very hard to distinguish from the sheep. We said in the introduction of this lesson that the division to the right and to the left is a picture of the final judgment. Now the point of adding sheep and goats into the imagery is to illustrate that the final division will involve people who have up to that point lived indistinguishably. This is quite similar to the Parable of the Wheat and Tares where the wheat and the tares represent two groups of people in the church: those who will be saved and those who will not be saved. And the parable tells us that we cannot really know which is which until the day of judgment. It is the same thing with the sheep and the goats: two groups of people in the church which are hard to distinguish one from the other. It is only on the last day that God will separate them.

The second point about the sheep and goats is this. Because they graze in the same field, they are led by the same shepherd. We can say that they belong to the same shepherd. In our text, Jesus makes the same point. You will notice that both the sheep and the goats address Jesus as Lord, with no distinction whatsoever. In v. 37, the sheep call Jesus 'Lord.' **Lord**, *when did we see you hungry and feed you?* In v. 44, the goats address Him as 'Lord' in exactly the same way. **Lord**, *when did we see You hungry?*

A Christian calls Jesus his 'Lord.' That is obvious. But you would hardly see a non-Christian calling Jesus as his 'Lord.' The fact that they belong to the same shepherd, that they both address the shepherd in the same way, calling him 'Lord,' all that should make us think that the goats seem to represent Christians.

The third thing we need to consider when we discuss the question of who the goats represent is the criterion of the judgment. On what basis is a person put to the right and another put to the left? Well, the text tells us that the judgment is based on one thing and one thing alone: namely whether these individuals care for people that Jesus calls 'My brethren.' *V. 40. And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these **my brethren**, you did it to me.'*

And who are the people that Jesus calls 'My brethren?' 'The brethren' are the brothers and the sisters of the Christian community. In the NT, it is consistently the disciples whom Jesus calls 'My brethren.' The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 12:50, *For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is **My brother** and sister and mother.*

So the judgment is based on how a sheep or a goat treated the Christians, the brethren. Now that raises a question. If the goats represent non-Christians, then the basis of the judgment becomes incomprehensible. Because we cannot expect a non-Christian to care specifically for a Christian. Why would he care? Why would a non-Christian visit a Christian in prison or feed a Christian who is hungry? A Christian visiting or feeding another Christian, that, we can understand. But a non-Christian has nothing to do with a Christian. So if we say that the goats represent unbelievers, then such a judgment would make absolutely no sense. It would make sense only if the goats represent Christians, i.e. Christians being judged negatively for their lack of love towards their fellow Christians.

Some might say, 'What about v. 32 where we read that **All the nations** will be gathered before Him?' 'All the nations,' Jesus says. He is talking about all the nations which will come together in front of Him. Is that not a reference to unbelievers?' Well, the words 'all the nations' do not refer necessarily to unbelievers. The meaning of these words has to be determined by the context. The context tells us in chapter 24, in the previous chapter, that the gospel will be preached to all the nations. *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to **all nations**; and then the end will come.* And this whole section closes with Jesus' instruction in Matthew 28:19: *Go therefore and make disciples of **all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Make disciples of whom? Of all nations.* If you have made disciples of all nations, then of course, all the nations are going to be standing before God's judgment. When the Son of man comes, disciples of all nations will be gathered to face the judgment

of God. So you see that the words 'all the nations' in v. 32 do not have to mean unbelievers. Rather, they refer to individuals from everywhere, from 'all the nations,' who have been made disciples as the gospel is being preached throughout the world.

Let us move to the 4<sup>th</sup> point. This last section of Matthew 25, starting with v. 31, is connected to the previous one by the Greek particle *de*, which could be translated by the English word 'so' or 'but.' Many English translations have dropped it. Some, like the NAS, has it. ***But when the Son of Man comes...***

Now this word has its importance. Its presence means that vv. 31-46 is a continuation of the earlier text. We saw in the Parable of the Talents that all the servants represent Christians, including the lazy servant. We saw in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins that all the virgins represent Christians, including the foolish virgins. We saw also in the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servant that even the evil servant represents Christians. So we have a faithful servant and a wicked servant. We have five wise virgins and five foolish virgins. We have good servants and a lazy servant. They are all part of the same group of people, namely the Christians. The same thing continues into the picture of the sheep and goats, They are of the same family. They belong to the same Christian family. And like the others, some are good. Some are bad.

So to the question, who do the goats represent, the answer now becomes clear. The goats represent Christians who did not show love when they saw brothers and sisters in need. John says in 1John 3:17, *But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?* No, God's love cannot abide in him. This kind of person will find himself on the left side of the throne on the day of judgment.

## **The practice of love**

You see that the non-Christians are not within the scope of this section in the Lord's teaching. This does not mean that the Christians do not need to love the non-Christians. That would obviously be a wrong conclusion, totally contrary to the Scriptures. But the point is that this is the minimum standard. To love the brethren is the minimum standard. Because if you cannot love a fellow Christian, how can you even love a non-Christian? If you cannot love a member of your own family, how are you going to love a stranger?

This brings me to the last point. In this part of the Lord's teaching, there is a presupposition that must be clear in our mind. And the presupposition is this: in Jesus' concept of the church, the church is a new society of people with renewed heart in which mutual love, concern for one another, is of the very essence of this society, the body of Christ.

This means that in the church as taught by the Lord Jesus, love for one another is not optional. And failure to love our brethren brings with it eternal consequences. Because on the day of judgment, the first question that God is going to ask us is this: did you love My people? Did you care for them in their needs? Here we are not talking about salvation by works. We are talking about a faith which expresses itself in acts of love. The apostle John says in 1John 3:14, *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.* We know what? That we have passed from death to life. This is a reference to regeneration. How do we know that we have been born again? We know it because we love the brethren.

When you make the practice of love a priority in your daily life, you will begin to experience the Christian life with a new depth and a power that you may have not known yet.