

Appendix 3

(Cross refer to Chapter 11)

The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–33)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.”

This passage, taken from the NRSV translation, is often referred to as the ‘parable’ of the sheep and the goats. But this is no parable. It is a factual statement of the future using picture language. A parable is a story with a meaning. Or to put it another way, a meaning with a story. But the passage in Matthew 25 has no hidden meaning. It is a very clear guide to Christians to understand the Lord’s priorities for our lives. Jesus is teaching that how we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ, and whether or not we meet their basic needs, will form the basis of how *we* are judged by God.

The shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats in today’s passage, is of course Jesus — the Son of Man. The sheep are the righteous and the goats the unrighteous. Sheep and goats is an allegory, or an illustration, that Jesus used a number of times. What Jesus is describing in this passage is the last judgement, with all the angels present and all the nations gathered. Matthew’s gospel has been described as *pre-eminently the gospel of judgement* — and a number of other passages also speak of separation — so we have the separation of the wheat from the chaff, the sincere from the hypocrites, wise builders from foolish, good fish from bad and profitable from unprofitable servants. Each uses

picture language, but tells of a sober and factual reality. One day there will be a judgement. One day there will be a separation.

The great misinterpretation of this passage is to assume that Jesus is teaching about our care for the great mass of humanity rather than, as Jesus says specifically, His own brothers and sisters. Remember, Jesus' body is today the church (see references at the foot of Appendix 3). The idea of **“the least of these brothers of mine”** has been controversial — especially in recent times — where church based people have used this as a justification for their so-called social gospel, Christianity's otherwise legitimate concern for wider society and especially the world's poor. Christians are certainly required to display a care for the wider world (Proverbs 19:17 – Proverbs 21:13). We are commanded by Jesus to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:31). Jesus elsewhere explained whom our neighbour is (Luke 10:30–37). Our neighbour is *not* our brother or sister in Christ, in whom we are to see the face of Jesus our Lord. We have a different relationship, and a different responsibility to our brethren, as Jesus stated quite clearly: **“ . . . the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’**

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:37 – 40, NRSV.)

For non-Christians who have the wherewithal but consciously and with a stiff neck refuse to help — for

example, worthy secular charities, rather than Christian ones, which may of course be a stumbling block to them — there will be a real and deserved judgement. They, along with Christians, have a responsibility to their neighbours. This is because people know that they should help the sick and the poor — and the needy in general. People know those things because ultimately their consciences tell them so. And their consciences tell them so because God has written his Law on their hearts. In Romans chapter 1 Paul explains that humans *are without excuse* because . . . **what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse** (Romans 1:19–20, NKJV). And then he goes on (in 2:14) to add: **for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.** (Romans 2:14–15, NKJV.) As the Lord Jesus quite clearly made this distinction between sheep and goats, Christians need to note that they have a special duty to their own brothers and sisters in Christ — to their own flesh and blood. The apostle Paul emphasised this same point in his great lesson likening the Church to a body with many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12–31). Jesus is especially concerned about those parts of His body that suffer:

God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part

suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

1 Corinthians 12:24–27

When people kneel before the judgement seat of God, as inevitably we all must do – one day – then if they have failed to do the basic things required by the law, things demanded by their own consciences, God will rightly and justly condemn them on that basis. There may of course be other things for which God will also condemn them. But the sober fact is that they will have, as Paul said, ‘no excuse’. For Christians there will also be no excuse for failure to help their brethren over and above, in a real sense, their neighbours — where circumstances demand it. The apostle Paul wrote in this Galatians 6:10: **Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.** (My emphasis.) One day Christians should expect to give an account to God of how we have looked after our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Other scriptures concerning the Church being the body of Christ:

One body and each member belongs to the others. (See Romans 12:5.) The Holy Spirit works in each member. (See 1 Corinthians 12:27.) Christ is head over everything and the Church is his body. (See Ephesians 1:22–23.) The objective is to prepare Christians for works of service so that the Church may be built up. (See Ephesians 4:12.) Our sufferings are made for the sake of the Church. (See Colossians 1:24.) No Church will grow without help from God. (See Colossians 2:19.) There is one body . . . (See Ephesians 4:4.)