

The Sheep and the Goats

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Preacher: Warwick Grant

[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on February the 22nd, 1998. The preacher is Warwick Grant.

His sermon is entitled, The Sheep and the Goats, and is from Matthew chapter 25, verses 31 to 46. Amen. I'm going on a camp tomorrow with Doncaster Secondary College with 180-year-seven children.

I think there's one year seven I can see in the front row, so I better not say anything about what that experience might be like. But 180-year-seven kids, if they're all like Ryan, I think will be really good. But I need to get ready because I'm going on this camp. And whenever you do anything, like going away, a holiday or a camp, whether it's the SEBS or the Girls Club or the Youth Group or even our parish camp coming up next month, we need to get ready.

[1 : 2 9] We need to be prepared. You can't just get in your car and go. You've got to take all your stuff and work out what you need. Do you have any responsibilities? Have you prepared for them? We need to get ready and attend to all the details.

Well, in the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus exhorts us to be ready. We need to be ready. He says, you need to get ready, guys, because I am going to return.

And you need to do some things to be ready for that. Indeed, a few passages before this, Jesus has been saying a number of things about being prepared, about being ready for when he returns, being ready to meet him.

So there are certain things that he might be saying in our lives that we need to address in order to be ready to meet him. I think what I'm trying to emphasise here is that no one will be able to stand before Jesus and say, you never told me that.

You never told me I had to do that. Or, I didn't know that. Jesus is telling us in this passage and in others what we need to do to be ready to meet him. And we do well to hear Jesus' words.

[2 : 3 8] Well, if you'd like to follow with me, we're on page 807 of the Bibles in the seats in front of you. Page 807.

Let's listen to what Jesus might be saying to us this morning about being ready to meet him. And it's chapter 25, verse 31.

Jesus says, When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. The Son of Man, as you may know, is a title for Jesus.

Now some people scoff at the whole idea of Jesus returning. It's an event which is occasionally caricatured. But Jesus is serious.

He will return. It's a promise that he's made. And he'll keep it. Because Jesus has a reputation of keeping promises. He said to his disciples on a few occasions that he would die.

[3 : 4 6] He would be crucified. And three days later he would rise again. He said that to them a number of times. And indeed that is exactly what happened. So when Jesus makes a promise that is yet to be fulfilled, I await its fulfillment because Jesus is reliable when it comes to keeping his promises.

He will return. He will come back to the earth. But his second coming won't be like the first one. When he first came, he was born in an obscure village such as Bethlehem, in a manger, and it was all sort of in its little obscure corner of the world.

But when he comes again, it will be obvious and clear that he has come as sovereign lord of the whole universe, the judge, and he will come to set up his kingdom forever.

This Jesus, nailed to a cross, buried in a borrowed grave, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven, to this guy has been committed the judgment of the whole world.

And that judgment includes Christians as well as non-Christians. Everyone will be judged by him.

We told him, verse 32, that 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.

[5 : 11] This is a picture that would have been really familiar to Jesus' hearers. Sheep and goats would often graze in the same field during the day. But when dusk came and the night, the cold nights began, the shepherd would separate the sheep and the goats so that the goats could be more protected.

The sheep could tolerate the cold weather more, but the goats needed more shelter, and so that's why they had to be separated at night time. So this is a picture which is very familiar to Jesus' listeners.

This is what Jesus says he'll do with the sheep and the goats. He will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. The right hand side was often seen as the favoured sign.

If you were invited by a ruler to sit at his right hand, that was a position of incredible honour and to be at a left side was much less favour. And so Jesus is putting the sheep in this position of honour. He's on the throne and the sheep are at his right hand side. So all the people are separated into either the sheep or the goats. We'll all be classed, every one of us, as either a sheep or a goat.

[6 : 29] There's no middle ground here, there's no fence sitting, there's no badgers or zebras or giraffes. You're either a sheep or you're a goat. So let's allow Jesus to challenge us as we see what he says.

Are you a sheep or are you a goat? Well, what characterises these sheep that are sitting at Jesus' right hand side? Well, Jesus describes them in verse 34 as blessed by my father.

Then the king, and this is the only time that Jesus ever refers to himself as a king. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, come, you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Now note that these sheep aren't receiving eternal life because of all the good things that we've heard that they've done. They're receiving eternal life because Jesus is giving it to them as an inheritance.

The kingdom was one which was inherited by them and prepared for them since the foundation of the world. We know that we are saved by grace, and grace is God's unmerited favour to us.

[7 : 42] We don't earn our way to heaven by doing a whole lot of good things in order to gain God's approval. We are given the gift of eternal life by God when we put our faith and trust in Jesus and his work on the cross for us.

The thing about these sheep is that the good things that they do show that their faith is fair dinkum. They do have a vibrant faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So they're not receiving eternal life because they did all these things. They gave food to the hungry and drinks to the thirsty, etc. They're receiving eternal life because God has given it to them.

And we can see their faith is vibrant and lively because of these good works that they do in their lives. This is what Jesus says that they did in verse 35 and following.

Let me just speak about a couple of those things.

[8 : 58] In New Testament times there wasn't golden chain motels or flagons. If you went to a town you were dependent on the hospitality of those who were there who lived there permanently for some lodgings and hopefully you got a bed for the night and so often people might have to welcome a stranger.

The description of someone who was naked was because they didn't have the adequate money to buy clothes. They were clothed in rags it was simply because they couldn't afford anything else.

So the giving of clothes was an act of compassion. And also prisons like some prisons today were the ghastly places where prisoners were treated almost as subhumans.

To visit a prisoner was an act of great compassion. But note that these things that Jesus lists aren't particularly difficult things to do.

Anyone can do them. You don't have to be a significant politician or a community or church leader don't even have to be wealthy to do these things. Anyone can do them.

[10 : 08] Nor can we say well I'm not aware of people who are hungry or thirsty or who need shelter or those other things. Our TV screens are full of such people every night.

There are even people in our own church family. We have a very long list at the moment of people who are ill and there are people in our own church family who we are seeking to love and care for and I know many of you are doing that.

So there are needs all around us and you've got needs in your family that I'm not aware of and there are needs everywhere. We know that. But these needs are all things that are easy relatively speaking to address.

Jesus isn't saying become a diplomat and work for peace in the United Nations. He's just saying simple acts of compassion and kindness that all of us can do.

So Jesus is challenging those of us who call him Lord and Lord, Lord to be fair dinkum about our faith, to put our money where our mouth is or as we sometimes say to the kids to walk the talk, put in action what you profess with your mouth and to care for people the way that he does.

[11 : 21] James who wrote a letter in the New Testament which Ruth read for us this morning puts it very succinctly. He almost puts it so bluntly it's actually quite funny but he makes a point very strongly.

James says I think his tongue is very much in his cheek. What good is it my brothers and sisters if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them go in peace keep warm and eat your fill and yet you do nothing to supply their needs what is the good of that?

So faith by itself if it has no works is dead. Do we just give Jesus lip service or can people tell from our lives that we really do follow Jesus?

He's challenging all of us. Are we ready to do acts of kindness to get our hands dirty to put ourselves out to be inconvenienced in order to show practical acts of love to others?

[12 : 39] I think we all have an inbuilt resistance I know I do to doing these things and in preparing this sermon I've been very challenged by what Jesus has said to me. And listen to what the righteous these people described as sheep at Jesus' right hand what they say to Jesus in verse 37 and then the righteous will answer him Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave 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?

Jesus' response is astonishing and the king will answer them Jesus is the king 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 so an act of practical kindness such as Jesus describes which is done to one of the least of these members of my family is probably best understood as fellow disciples of Christ fellow Christians but of course that doesn't let us off from caring for everyone does it?

That is what Jesus would want so if we serve others in need we are in fact serving the Lord Jesus himself conversely if we neglect to serve others we are neglecting to serve Jesus ourselves I think we would all say if Jesus was here and he had some needs we would all be just really zealous to meet them after what he has done for us dying for us well he says I do have needs in my people and you need to help me meet them this is really well illustrated in a couple of stories I have come across about two notable Christians through the centuries one was St Francis of Assisi I'll read this read this to you he was wealthy and high born and high spirited but he was not happy he felt that life was incomplete then one day he was out riding and he met a leper loathsome and repulsive in the ugliness of his disease something moved

Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this wretched sufferer and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ and the other was a chap called Martin of Tours and he was a Roman soldier and a Christian one cold winter day as he was entering a city a beggar stopped him and asked for arms Martin had no money but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold and Martin gave what he had he took off his soldier's coat worn and frayed as it was cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar that night he had a dream and in the dream he was in the heavenly places with all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak one of the angels said to Jesus Master why are you wearing that battered old cloak who gave it to you and Jesus answered softly my servant

Martin gave it to me so when we're serving others we are indeed serving the Lord himself well that's the sheep that those who are blessed of my father that Jesus says on Jesus right hand side that position of honour and favour what about the goats we see what happens in verse 41 this is Jesus speaking then he will say to those at his left hand you that are accursed depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels for I was hungry and you gave me no food I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink I was a stranger and you did not welcome me naked and you did not give me clothing sick and in prison and you did not visit me then if you remember from

the earlier part of the reading

[17 : 08] Jesus said to the sheep he said come come you that are blessed of my father what a wonderful thing that would be to be with the Lord and to hear him say to you come I think that would be just a wonderful thing to know that the Lord wants you to be with him but what does he say to the goats he says depart depart from me I think that would be the most horrendous words that the Lord could ever speak to you depart from me and they are going off to be separated from Jesus forever which is something which is just not worth contemplating and Jesus says that the eternal destination of these people describe as goats is where Satan and his associates are so it's a very very strong thing that

Jesus is saying it's almost unpalatable for us to talk about and yet we must be true to what Jesus says and heed his warnings to be prepared and it seems that the people that didn't do the good acts of compassion and kindness were people who didn't have a lively faith because their lives didn't show it for a Christian person it's not enough simply to stay out of trouble to be someone who says well I don't harm anyone I'm a good person generally for Jesus that's not good enough we need to be proactive and seeking to do acts of goodness and kindness to others a lot of people think Christianity is just a whole list of do not commands do not do this do not do that etc but sure there are some commands which are to that effect but many of the commands that Jesus makes are more do this do that go out and do this and we need to obey those commands we need to not neglect those things it's not adequate to simply keep out of trouble

Paul in his letters often exhorts his readers to be about doing good works whenever there's an opportunity for good to do it to grab hold of it it's not enough to keep out of trouble we need to be looking for ways to serve others as Jesus has served us and in doing this we will indeed be serving the Lord himself if we don't serve others Jesus tells us in verse 45 truly I tell you just as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me the consequence for these people on the left hand side described as goats is that they go away to eternal punishment now whatever the nature of that punishment we do know it means separation from God forever but the righteous will enjoy life forever with God and what a wonderful thought that is

Jesus describes those sheep as come those who are blessed of my father what's Jesus saying to us that we need to do what's he saying to me what's he saying to you could you be doing more in your life could I be doing more in my life could we be giving more to Christian organisations such as cheer Australia in their work among the poor and destitute overseas could we perhaps bring some more groceries for the plus one program if you've not heard of the plus one program we encourage you to when you go shopping buy an extra grocery put it in the box in the fire and periodically those groceries are taken to St Mark's Church in Fitzroy where they're distributed to the needy of the inner suburbs could your home be more open to meet the needs of those who have no home I know that's a very significant price to pay to open one's home but is that something perhaps God is calling you to do do you put your pre-loved clothes in the brotherhood bins in the car park so that others can benefit from them could we care more for those who are ill

I know many of us are doing that really lovingly and caringly but there are many many sick people in our church and indeed outside of our church and we always have need for more carers have you thought about visiting those in prison and I could provide you with information from the prisons fellowship if you would be interested to do that as a ministry so could God be calling you to serve him in any of these areas or is there another area that I haven't mentioned that's not in the list that Jesus gave the lonely the bereaved the elderly it seems that we can be so busy in our lives filling them up with all the little things we have to do that we neglect these simple little acts of compassion and love I know in my life my diary gets full of things to attend to and sometimes I stop and think well how important really is this do I need to make some radical changes to my schedule Jesus words in verse 45 need to ring in our ears just as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me so let's show how real our faith is by the acts of kindness and love that stem from our relationship with Jesus let's resolve to live active caring

[22 : 46] Christian lives to be found amongst the people described as sheep that Jesus describes who sit at his right hand living lives having served him by serving others how would your life need to change how would my life need to change for these things to happen let's spend a few moments just as I finish just reflecting on what Jesus might be saying to each of us this morning don't be scared of that silence but just let God speak to you and let him show you what he perhaps would have you do in this area let's do that now see a still this into oh