

Reign of Christ A  
Matthew 25:31-46  
November 26, 2023

*Sheep v. Goats*  
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<sup>31</sup>“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. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by God, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>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? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>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.’ <sup>41</sup>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; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>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.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘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.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

A shepherd was looking after his sheep one day on the side of a deserted road, when suddenly a brand-new racing car screeches to a halt. The driver, dressed in a designer suit, designer shoes, designer sunglasses, designer watch, and a designer tie, gets out and asks the shepherd, 'If I can tell you how many sheep you have, will you give me one of them?' The shepherd looks at the young man and then looks at the large flock of sheep grazing and replies 'Okay.'

The young man parks the car, connects his laptop to his mobile, enters a NASA website, scans the ground using his GPS, opens a database with 60 excel tables with logarithms and pivot tables and then prints out a 150-page report on his high-tech mini-printer. He turns to the shepherd and says, 'You have exactly 1,586 sheep here.'

Rather surprised the shepherd says, 'That's correct, you can have your sheep.' The young man takes the animal and puts it in the back of his car. Just as the man is about to drive off, the shepherd asks him: 'If I guess your profession, will you return my animal to me?' The young man answers 'Yes, why not?'

The shepherd says, 'You are an IT consultant'.  
'How did you know?' asks the young man.

'Very simple' answers the shepherd 'Firstly you came here without being called. Secondly you charged me a fee to tell me something I already knew, and thirdly you don't understand anything about my business. Now please can I have my dog back?'<sup>1</sup>

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I think I've shared some version of that story before, but I always get a kick out of it. While the consultant may have had trouble judging between the sheep and the farmer's dog, the shepherd in our reading from the Gospel According to Matthew seems to have no trouble at all judging between the sheep and the goats. Jesus tells of the shepherds plans to separate the sheep on his right from the goats on his left and then send the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Consultant and the Shepherd," Facilityexecutive.com, October 28, 2005:  
<https://facilityexecutive.com/friday-funny-the-consultant-and-the-shepherd/>.

goats to eternal punishment. What, I wonder, is God's great problem with goats?

Honestly, I have to believe that God *has* no existential problem with goats. For some reason, however, sheep seem to be preferred in the Bible. I'm not sure why, though. Sheep rely on their shepherd for everything: water, grazing land, protection, guidance, and they are notoriously dim-witted animals. Goats, on the other hand, have a certain self-reliance that makes them seem appealing. They're rugged animals and seemingly capable of fending for themselves—and they can digest nearly anything!

Despite these presumably admirable qualities, goats are separated from sheep repeatedly in the Bible—one for reward and the other for punishment. In the Hebrew Bible, the people even ceremonially cast all their wrong-doings on some poor goat and sent it into the wilderness and their sins with it on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And that's where the term scapegoat comes from.

Even so, I still have to believe that God has no existential problem with goats. In the reading we just heard, however, the sheep seem to represent God's people while the goats represent some sort of "other." Unfortunately for the goats, they're bound for judgement. There's really no way around it: in the Bible it really stinks to be a goat. It's a good thing *we're* sheep . . . aren't we?

I think that part of the allure of texts like these is that we tend to identify with the sheep, as the church has done for many centuries. We want to believe that we are the ones the shepherd seeks, and binds up, and strengthens; that we are the ones the shepherd corrals on her right hand just before opening the gate for us to heaven's eternal pasture. Believing that we're the sheep gives us a kind of moral authority to judge those we perceive to be the goats. In believing ourselves to be the sheep, we tend to take on the role of the shepherd—judging between sheep and goats, insiders and outsiders, those to be rewarded and those to be punished. "It is tempting to think of God as 'our' Shepherd, and God's pastures as 'our'

home, and then to exclude those who don't fit with 'us.'"<sup>2</sup> Today, however, I'd like to caution us against that kind of certainty.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, we must also remember that shepherds were a lowly lot—among the very lowest, in fact, by Jewish standards. Jesus—whom Christians call “the Good Shepherd” and whose Advent we begin to await in earnest starting next Sunday—Jesus came to us, according to the gospels, through an unwed mother and a frightened father, was born in a dingy stable in a nothing town, and spent his life in ministry to those very ones his society labeled as “goats.” To be the shepherd of a flock was no great honor and to stand judge between sheep and goats was no job any well-born Hebrew child would aspire to.

And yet, according to this same lowly shepherd, to be counted among the sheep, means feeding the hungry, sharing water with the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. The very same one who came to an unwed mother and frightened father as a tiny babe, born in dingy stable, in a nothing town, comes to us *as one of the* hungry, thirsty, foreign, naked, sick, incarcerated “goats” we might find ourselves quick to judge rather than to serve.

We are not called to be like the shepherd in these texts, to judge between sheep and goats, but we are called to serve, sheep and goats alike, even as Jesus did. If all this talk of sheep and goats is confusing, listen once more to the heart of Jesus' message in our text from Matthew's gospel:

*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

May it be so too with us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> John van de Laar. “Reign of Christ A,” Sacredise.com, November 26, 2023: <http://sacredise.com/lectionary-resources/christ-the-king-reign-of-christ-a/>.