

## Matthew 25:31-46 Sheep and Goats and Gratitude

The story I am about to tell causes me hesitation because I have never told it before and it is a personal story of old friendships with whom I have never talked it over and don't know how they remember it or how they might feel about me telling it. I won't tell you their names and only tell it because I expect you will never meet them nor will they ever hear it.

I only tell my memory of it and what it has meant to me. It is about a couple of my HS cross country teammates. For oddly different reasons, we were all misfits. I guess maybe all runners are.

One of my teammates, I will call him Friend One, was a devout Catholic. He insisted that we pray before each race, only it was the "Hail Mary," that we prayed and in the four years of racing with him I never managed to make out the words of the prayer beyond, "Hail Mary, Mother of God . . . "

For a time his uncle was the Archbishop in St. Louis, which is a really powerful position - the last two Archbishops are now Cardinals in Rome - but we rarely discussed religion and I viewed things Catholic through the jaded lenses of my Baptist upbringing which had a very low opinion of the Catholic faith.

I do not want to get into his peculiarities, only to say that there were some. He was not popular and did not seem to know it - or care.

The other teammate in this story, I will call him Friend Two, was a year younger than we were and we did not meet him until we were in the 11th grade (our high school was 10th -12th grades). I do not want to say too much about him either, I do not know the particulars.

We knew almost nothing about psychology at the time, no explanations were ever given, and we never discussed it. He had spent about six months in a psychiatric hospital and was released just in time for the new school year.

Knowing what I know now, I would say that he suffered from an acute case of social-anxiety disorder. I did not know that term then. He did not function socially. In the two years we were teammates, he never spoke.

To me, he was forbidding. I was afraid to talk to him, unsure if I would say something that would send him to the hospital again. It never occurred to me to do anything other than keep my distance.

One day, Friend One came and said, "you have to come with me, I have something to show you." I did not want to go, but he insisted so I did.

We went to Friend Two's house. His parents were glad to see us and invited us in. He was in the basement, they led us to the stairwell. We descended to find him talking on the phone . . . buying a car. He said, "hey guys, great to see you, be with you in a minute."

We listened as he negotiated the price down on a blue, 1972 Dodge Charger to \$3,300. We asked him where he got the money (he was 15 at the time). He said he had to sell one of his trucks. Friend One said, "I think he runs a used car lot out of his basement."

I said, "you're only 15, you don't even have a driver's license. He replied that he would have one soon. He was charming, relaxed, but very outgoing. We stayed about 20 minutes and then his mother said that dinner was ready and invited us to stay. Instead we declined and left.

On our way out to the car, Friend One was beaming, smiling from ear to ear. He said, "he is okay inside his house, it comes over him like a cloud when he walks out the door.

I assumed the coaches had told him about it and wondered why they told him and not me. I asked him how he found out about it.? He said, "I went to visit him." It never occurred to reach out to Friend Two in any way.

I said, "why did you do that?" He seemed surprised by my question. His demeanor changed and he was serious. He was almost never serious. He said, "haven't you ever read the bible?" And then he quoted from the 25th chapter of Matthew, "and I was sick . . . and you came to visit me." He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Mark, Friend Two is sick, so I went to visit him."

I have never forgotten how it was his natural instinct to do that, when it had never occurred to me. Later, Friend Two got better. The two of them went to the same college and ran together on an NCAA D2 national champion cross country team.

I later found out that Friend One had done the same for others. One / was sick and he came to visit me.

"And I was sick, and you came to visit me."

## The Parable

The parable envisions the heavenly court where God (the King) will judge the nations, separate the sheep from the goats, putting the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

The sheep are rewarded with eternal rest because of what they have done:

Fed the hungry

Quenched the thirsty  
Welcomed the stranger  
Clothed the naked  
Cared for the sick  
Visited the ones in prison

They did not understand because the way Jesus tells it, the father is presented as being the hungry, the thirsty, stranger, the sick, and imprisoned. They did not remember God being there.

“As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

Then the goats are cast into the fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. They are punished because they did not care for the hungry and sick. They also did not understand, as if surely they would have helped if they had known, they did not remember not helping.

“Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Keith Green

I am reminded of Keith Green, the late 70's and early 80's Christian musician whose social ministry began when he took in strangers at his suburban home because, as he would say to his wife when they came

to the door for help, “Look honey, Jesus has come to visit.” How could he turn Jesus away?

Works Salvation

Never mind that if one excises this text from the rest of the bible, it *appears* to advocate a works righteousness that is incompatible with the larger biblical message.

But if it is not a works salvation, then how can we take it? By way of answer, let us consider the meaning of their lack of awareness, both the sheep and the goats.

They were not aware that their actions had eternal significance. They did not know that there was a reward to be sought or a punishment to be avoided. They were simply being themselves, whoever they were.

On the one hand, some were paying attention to what was going on around them and when a need was seen, it was met, instinctively.

On the other hand, some were not paying attention, or not caring, but just as instinctively, did not come to help, whatever the reason.

The sheep and the goats, the right and the left, the kingdom and the fire. When grace does its work in a person's life, the product will look something like the sheep; seeing, caring, helping, serving.

## Goats Like Me

What hope to goats like me have? What hope is there for those of us whose instincts are too selfish to be like these sheep?

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Savior, there is hope. We can pray for our redemption, and for the renewal of our minds, and for a new heart and spirit so that we too might find ourselves on the Lord's right with all the other sheep, whose lives have become conduits to others of the grace they have been given.

We are all goats on a journey becoming sheep, together, with thankfulness in our hearts because of this grace.

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