

“A Horizontal Faith”

-Matthew 25:31-46

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Matthew 25:31-46 *"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 "All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 "And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you 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 took Me in; 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, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' 41 "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting 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 take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' 44 "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

It has been said that *"The cross has both horizontal and vertical bars. This symbolizes your relationship with God which comes first, (vertical) and your relationship with one another (horizontal).*

There is no debate today that most of the time it is quite honestly hard to love people. It is a very selfish and self-centered world out there! And we ourselves rarely do better as professed Christians. Certainly we would like to ignore that fact most of the time. Especially in rush hour traffic or in Black Friday shopping. Never before in the history of mankind has humanity been so divided. It seems we are so willing to fight and argue over just about anything. Mankind is angry, bitter, and often violent simply because things do not go their way. The world despises Christians most of the time, and we despise them because they do. Charles Colson once said "Our society's obsession with tolerance leads to intolerance. Simply being a Christian today is an offense to our culture."

However we cannot ignore the fact that scripture clearly teaches that much of our Christian living has to do with the horizontal relationship we have with our fellow man. According to scripture, such dynamic clearly expresses our rebirth and spiritual restoration...and the *lack of such* also expresses clearly the opposite!

What about us as a greater community of believers? Are we given a pass on the whole "loving" aspect of Christianity because people are so difficult and hard to love? There are two things to consider here in this idea and thinking. One, *how we treat those in the world.* And two, *how we treat other believers.* Sadly, we often frankly do a poor job in both of these areas, and again according to scripture...even *this scripture before us,* such is imminently self-condemning. If we fail to love others...especially our brothers and sister in Christ, we stand in danger of hell, and truthfully we simply manifest that we are not really one of the family of God. 1John

4:20 says *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?”* If we cannot love horizontally...*especially other believers*, how do we expect we will ever really love a God who we cannot see physically? And if we cannot love a lost and dying world that does not know Christ, then we once again only manifest that we do not have the Spirit of Christ living in us...because HE certainly loves His creation, and thus we are not true Christians. Once again we are reminded of Romans 8:9 *“...if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.”*(1 Jn 2:19) Pastor and speaker Andy Stanley once said *“Imagine a world where people were skeptical of what we believe but envious of how we treated each other.”*

Having now given nearly the whole of what we know of as the “Olivet Discourse” and taught the end times events now as clear as He would have them be, Jesus moves to “wrap it up.” Still focusing on the aspect of **how we are to live** in the light of His imminent return instead of hyping the hoopla and fortune telling, Jesus will end this account with more of the same. It is the “crescendo” of the end days opera.

At this point in the story and in history Christ will *separate* the two groups of people: the “sheep from the goats.” Please note that there are **only two** groups. There will be no “sorta saved” or “barely in.” It is the sheep that have a shepherd. The goats are on their own. If you have ever been around goats you know that that analogy is quite fitting. Jesus says in John 10:14 *“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me.”* He says nothing about knowing “His goats.”

Goats are an unruly animal. They head butt and they bite. They eat anything they find, so there is naturally a lot of garbage going in there. They also insist on climbing anything in sight. They seem to just need to be higher than anything and anyone else. Indeed. That is all goat behavior of the two footed kind as well as the four-footed version.

Sheep and goats however were and are both considered clean animals by the Jewish nation. Thus we can gather from this passage as well as the context of this chapter, that Christ is addressing the sum of all those who *believe* themselves to *BE* clean. Yet a separation is coming just the same. Ezekiel 34:17 warns us of such a “separation”: *“And as for you, my flock, my people, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, separating the sheep from the goats.”*

For a long time we all have lived side by side. But the day is soon coming when there will indeed be a “separation”. Such is not a new concept. For this is a separation that He has called us to a long time ago...

We must emphasize...especially in light of the passage before us today, that we are not being asked (nor are we to seek) to “check out” of the world at large and “move into the compound” away from all those “rotten sinners.” No, we know that in John 17:15 Jesus prays *“(Father) I’m not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one.”* However we must also acknowledge that we are indeed to have a *spiritual* separation between us and the world...a clear and concrete difference between us and them which should be readily and consistently witnessed by the unredeemed world. Not a separation that says we are better than them, but one that says that we have found a better way to live. The Bible does tell us to “come up from amongst them and be separate.” 2Corinthians 6:17 *“Therefore, come out from among unbelievers, and separate yourselves from them, says the LORD.”* But ironically the greater warning seems to be that we distance ourselves from those who would call themselves brothers or sisters but fail to live according to their pledge and/or responsibilities as a faithful follower of Christ.

Romans 16:17 *“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.”*

2 Thessalonians 3:6 *“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.”*

2 Thessalonians 3:14 *“And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.”*

Some of us just have such a hard time with this. We apparently have no discernment and ignore scripture for the sake of our wants and desires...which is no different than the unredeemed world does! Many of you know people that are quite well understood to be wolves and yet they are your facebook friends and still get together with you in social gatherings. Ezekiel 33:31 speaks of such saying *“So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain.”*

According to our text, the sheep are summarily ushered into the inheritance of His Kingdom. That which has been waiting for us from the beginning of time. We must note that these are not sheep because they serve Him, they *serve Him* because they are His sheep! Yet the reality of just who or *what* we are will be manifest by our lives. It will not be a matter of *confession* alone, but that of *action*. Scripture says, *“Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith with my works”* (James 2:18).

We easily talk of love for Christ and our fellow man but let's be honest. The love for our Redeemer is unmistakably shown in our love as well as the *actions because of that love* toward our Lord's *other* sheep. Some folks never seem to understand this truth of love manifested. We can raise our hands to God in worship, pray diligently, and read our Bibles faithfully, but what about the lost souls that inhabit the world around us? What about the needs of the struggling believers at our sides?

We can live in our religious bubble and portray outward religious appearances while being aloof to those around us, even so far as being very *un-Christ* like in our interactions with them! At the root of this issue is a very fundamental misunderstanding of Christianity and the life that our Savior desires from us! Hosea 6:6 reminds us: *“For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”*

1 Peter 4:8 *“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”*

1 Cor 13:1-2 *“If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn't love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I knew all the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn't love others, what good would I be? And if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love I would be no good to anybody.”*

This all is a profound truth that is so very, *very*, crucial for us to grasp! Why is it so hard for men to understand that the change that our Lord is seeking, the change that is a surety upon true rebirth, the change that is *more than skin deep*, is **LOVE IN ACTION**?

Despite the erroneous belief that they are righteously *of* the flock, the goats will be separated *into the everlasting fire*. Again, these are not goats because they fail to manifest their vertical love for Jesus. They are goats because they fail to love others horizontally. and thereby fail to love Christ, There is a change that is an absolute occurrence in the lives of those born again. There is a radical change in the heart and mind that is translated into a radical change in the way we live our lives.

We need to note that this passage is not teaching salvation by works. The uniform testimony of the Bible is that salvation is by faith and not by works (Eph. 2:8, 9). But the Bible is just as emphatic in teaching that true faith produces good works. If there are no good works, it is an indication that the person was never saved.

So what is this passage asking of us? Should we go out and find every lost individual...every homeless soul and every jailed person and give them food, money and a place to live? I ask this because certainly that is how this passage is often received by the larger church. The crucial element to that question comes firstly from the

answer to a bigger question that must be answered righteously before we head out to the local jail or the inner city looking for the homeless. The question is simply this: “What *is* love?” Oh not the sticky gooey kind that is defined by the world. That kind of love is forever fluid and changing. No, what is *Christ* love? Well, how does He love you and me? How did He love in the gospels? Did he feed the hungry? Yes He did on occasion. A couple of times He even fed thousands. But did He do so every time someone was hungry? No. In fact, He scolded the people in John 6, saying “... *you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.*” The people had come to make Jesus the “Bread King” instead of the “Bread of Life.” Did Jesus tell us to hold loosely the material things of this world and give freely without seeking to be repaid? Yes He did!

However it would be great if we could have the answer to every situation with a blanket answer. That would make life very simple wouldn't it? But the answer to the expression of loving is that it demands discernment and care. Even with that premise, the answer herein is not ever easy it seems. Sometimes the immediate need is food or water or a roof out of the rain. But the fact remains that we can actually *hurt* people in some cases if we are not discerning. I wish I could tell you I have always done this right, but sadly I cannot say that. I once gave a woman 20\$ because she was penniless, and I found out later that she left my office, went to her car, drove to the city and bought crack cocaine.

Missions organizations around the world struggle with this issue, and a lot of thinking has been changing over the last few years as many have come to the stark acknowledgement that they are inadvertently *perpetuating* poverty by their methods! We discuss this issue each time we take a team into a developing country. I admit I have a soft spot for old widows on the streets there because I understand the social paradigm that causes woman in such situations to not be able to get out of desperate poverty because of the cultural and social dynamic in that country. But I am quite careful about such things and rarely do so *carte blanche*. Especially giving cash money. I am far more apt to buy an individual a meal if I can do it. And we as a church missionally seek to support and practice methods and ministry that has long term benefits such as educations, schools, work-programs, and of course sharing the gospel. (Note: see books “*When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*” and “*Helping without Hurting.*”)

Even here in the US we have to ask ourselves these questions! All of us have seen the folks along the exit ramps in the city with signs seeking money. I cannot get past the fact that we are currently enjoying one of the highest rates of employment in history, and jobs seem to be available to anyone with a pulse.

Is not the “showing of love” the act of doing what is best for that person at that moment? Does God always give you what you want? Not in my world! And yet I know He loves me without question and without limit. I DO know He often gives me what I do not deserve and has blessed me beyond measure. And I do know that there are times we as believers are being called to step forward and help another. Both as a church and as individuals.

The answer I am convinced lies with growing in our understanding of what love looks like in the model of Christ Himself. And I DO know we cannot love so without getting our hands dirty and without it costing us of our own time, energy, and material and financial state. Sacrifice on our part is mandatory and actively seeking to love those around us says we are different. We have been “changed.”

If you have ever been around sheep you know they are a needy lot. The need care and oversight, just as we do. Goats? Well, they seem to need nobody! We as true born again believers must truly seek to reach out beyond our comfort and *give*. Of ourselves and sometimes of our financial and material possessions. But we must depend on the shepherd for directions. And we then must hear Him when He speaks and when He directs us to be His hands and feet.

Because one thing is for sure in all of this: Love is an *action*, not just an emotion.

