



THE 2 FLOCKS

You could be forgiven for thinking the only issue the world has had to face over the past 12 months is COVID-19.

In reality, there are other situations that are equally terrible, for the people they affect: war, famine, persecution of religious minorities, human-rights abuses, exploitation of workers, exploitation of developing-world communities, drug-trafficking, people-trafficking, destruction of natural habitats, government corruption ... the list goes on and on. And around the world there is a cry for help. Justice. For things to be put right.

And the promise of the Bible is, "That day will come."

But there's a sense in which that day is already here, for one very simple reason: us. God has planted His Kingdom in the midst of us (Luke 17:21), and He calls us to live as though that Kingdom is here – right now.

All of which is the point of Jesus' final parable:

The Mysterious Story of the 2 Flocks.

Matthew 25:31-46

Some of you will know I'm a bit of a John Grisham fan. And if you've ever read his stuff, you'll know most of it involves a court-case, a good dose of humour, and a heart for the poor, too. And just like a John Grisham novel, this parable is something of a courtroom drama.

So, who's on trial? Very simply: everyone! Now this was not a new idea: for centuries the OT had promised that God would one day judge the nations. Only here it's Jesus, the Son of Man (or *Bar Anash*, an Aramaic nickname for the Messiah) who's doing the judging.

And it will be a bit like a shepherd separating his flocks:

- **A flock of sheep** (those who truly belong to Him).
- **A flock of goats** (those who don't).

And He puts the sheep on His right and goats on His left, because the right hand of a king was a place of honour, and the left a place of dishonour – right? Not necessarily. In the ancient world, both right and left were seen as a place of privilege (which is why James and John were vying for those places in eternity, and John and Judas were allowed to sit there at the Last Supper).

The point being: the Shepherd loves them both. But the sheep act on it ... and the goats don't.

So, what happens at this trial? In a sense, the usual:

1) A Charge Is Read. What's the charge? Based on what is said here, I reckon it's a question, in the form of 4, simple, words:

"Do you love Me?"

That's the question Jesus will ask every person who has ever lived. Now notice the issue is not, "Does Jesus love *us*?" All we'll need to do is look at the scars in His hands and feet to know the answer to that one. No, the issue is, "Do we love *Jesus*?" You can see it in the Shepherd's words to the sheep (vs35-36):

*"I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat.
I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink.
I was a stranger and you invited Me in.
I needed clothes and you clothed Me.
I was sick and you looked after Me.
I was in prison and you came to visit Me."*

Or didn't, in the case of the goats.

So, first and foremost, Jesus will look at our attitude towards *Him*. What we believe about the King is vital if we are to be citizens of *His* Kingdom. But then He adds an unexpected twist ...

2) The Evidence Is Presented. Both groups respond with the same question: "When?" And Jesus replies with these words: "Whatever you did / did not do for one of these little brothers of mine, you did / did not do for Me."

Now some have interpreted "these little brothers" to be a reference to Christians. However, given the fact the parable is being told to Jesus' disciples, it probably makes more sense to see this as a reference to the poor in general. And this link, between God and the poor, is nothing new. Consider these verses from the book of Proverbs:

"He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God" (14:31).

"He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and He will reward him for what he has done" (19:17).

"Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case" (22:22-23).

I.e. if we really love Jesus, it'll show - in our compassion towards the oppressed; the neglected; the marginalised; the exploited.

They mean the absolute world to God – and they should mean the absolute world to us, too.

3) A Verdict Is Given. The sheep are led into the Kingdom of God, prepared for them since the beginning of time (the inference being: this is where we're *supposed* to be). But the goats are led into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels (the inference being: this is *not* where we're supposed to be; this was never meant for us!).

I.e. we all belong with God. How heart-breaking is *that*?

And I don't really want to get into a debate about how God could allow any kind of suffering to go on for eternity - except to say that what the Bible is really describing when it talks about eternal punishment is spending forever without Jesus (as opposed to some kind of medieval torture-chamber), and whatever our eternity looks like, it will be the one *we* have chosen. God will simply honour it.

But that's not the point of the parable, really.

The point is: "If you truly love Me ... you will truly love others."

The Moral Of The Story ...

And that's the moral. "Love Me, love those I love."

Now, I realise this is a potentially dangerous sermon to preach, because some people might assume they can earn their way to heaven, or imagine that all charity could be seen as a love for God, or use it as an excuse to judge others (as though *we* are God). That's not what Jesus is saying. He's simply saying, "This is what following Me looks like." Because this is what *He* looks like.

A journalist was once conducting an interview with Mother Teresa, shadowing her as she went about her work in the slums of Calcutta. And on one occasion, she was sitting by the bed of a little girl who only had a couple of hours left to live. And the journalist asked, "What's the point of doing this?" Her reply was profound: "I cannot help it. This child is a disguise – a wonderful disguise of the divine."

May we all come to see God's disguises in the 'little brothers and sisters' we see around us; in the situations; in the circumstances; in the opportunities.

May we learn to be sheep, rather than goats.