



Date: 26th November & 3rd December 2023

Theme: God's Gracious Judgement

Bible Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

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PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to contact your group beforehand to remind them of the date, time and venue. For this session, it might be worth having available some blank sheets of paper and some coloured pens or pencils. Please make sure you have read the material and made yourself familiar with passage.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

If you have a Bible at home (or online), please read the Bible passage from **Matthew 25, verses 31-46**.

What are the characteristics of sheep and goats? How are they similar or different? Maybe while out walking, take a photo of a sheep or a goat. Which best fits your personality (sheep or goat)?

In the passage, one group of people (the goats) is rejected because of their actions towards others. *Have there been occasions when you have thought you have been judged or rejected unfairly? How did this make you feel? If you have experienced rejection or judgement, consider whether you might share your feelings the group.*

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

In small groups of 3-5 people:

Share your thoughts about sheep and goats (even share with them your photo collection, if you've been out and about). You might like to draw a picture or cartoon that illustrates the parable!

How do you feel about rejection or unfair judgement? Are you happy to share your experiences and feelings, or give an example of one occasion where it has applied to you?

A PRAYER

Gracious God,

As we turn to you, we offer you the busyness and the troubles of this day.

We lay down our burdens at your feet.

Forgive us our sins,

Give us your peace.

Help us to receive your Word and to share your insights.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd,

come to us in our frailty,

bathe us with your compassion,

warm us with your smile,

embrace us with your truth,

feed us with your living Word,

that we may draw closer to you and to each other

in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES

Read together the Bible passage: **Matthew 25:31-46**

Background Information: This parable is the last in a series of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel, focussing on what his followers should do while waiting for the end times, when Jesus returns. In our lectionary (set Bible readings) it comes as we celebrate 'Christ the King' – the Sunday before Advent.

This parable comes in the days before Jesus' crucifixion. After his stark words to the religious leaders in the temple (chapter 23), Jesus takes his disciples to the Mount of Olives. He talks to them about the Day of Judgement, the end times, and the times of waiting (which the first readers would be wondering about – *When will Jesus return? How long must we wait?*). In this passage, Jesus says that the 'Son of Man' will appear in glory, sitting on his throne surrounded by angels (similar to the prophecy in Daniel 7). 'The king' will separate out from the nations of the world those who have carried out his teaching (the sheep). They will gain eternal life. Those who have failed to do so (the goats) will be sent to eternal punishment. Judgement is based on whether or not practical help or compassion was given to those in need. Jesus says that to show kindness and consideration to others, to help them in times of need, is the same as doing it for him. He identifies with those who are poor, hungry, sick, imprisoned or alienated.

In Palestine, it was common practice to farm sheep and goats together. They were an essential part of their way of life (they may have been surprised that goats should be condemned). But the illustration would be something they could easily visualise: the shepherd separating the two for different purposes.

DIGGING DEEPER

How does this passage make you feel? Did you feel comforted or judged? What questions arise?

In verse 31, it is 'the Son of Man' who separates the sheep from the goats. In verse 34, the one who does the separating is 'the King'. What do you understand by these titles?

What is the reaction of the sheep in verse 37? What does this say about them and their motives?

Look at the answer of the goats, in verse 44. What does this tell you about them?

Who are 'the least of these who are members of my family' (verse 40, NRSV). How is this phrase translated in other versions? What do you think it means?

Is there anything in the list of praiseworthy actions which you would find difficult to carry out? What other things might need to be taken into consideration?

It might be argued from this parable that it is good works which bring eternal reward. Do you agree? How does this parable square with other teachings about the gift of eternal life?

Think back to your experiences of unfair judgement. Do you fear the judgement of God? How can a relationship with Jesus help us not to fear?

In every instance in this passage, the Greek word for 'you' is plural. When you consider that 'all the nations of the world' are gathered, what does this say about our corporate responsibility? Do we all need to do everything? As part of the church, what can we do together?

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Pray for relief for those living in 'hell on earth' today.
- Pray that, together, through the care we offer and love we show, we can express our faith and commitment to Christ in action, and help bring God's kingdom nearer.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND PRAYER AT HOME

How important do you think it is for Christians to focus on the time when 'the Son of Man comes in glory?' If we were given a precise date when we are to be judged, would it make a difference?

Billy Graham once asked, 'If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' What's the relationship between our faith and our deeds? How does God's grace help?