

"Sheep and Goats for the 21st Century"

Matthew 25:31-46

Seminary Student Alia Schubbe
Chilson Hills Church, Brighton, Michigan
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This is one of those Bible stories that you've heard so many times, for so much of your life, that you think you know it. This is a story Jesus told, and he even told what it means- on the surface. But if you saw Shrek, then you know Jesus' stories are like an ogre- they've got layers. Jesus never said anything, maybe never even did anything in his public ministry that didn't have more than one layer of meaning. But when we grow up hearing the parables from childhood, going to Sunday school, or parochial school, or just hear them as adults in worship, year, after year, after year, we start to hear the words in a kind of shorthand, or like a bee droning as we fight to look like we're still completely tuned in. We stop paying close attention because we've heard it so much that we think we know, but we don't know. We don't know.

With a friend, I lead a Sunday school Bible study each week, and we read this passage last November. The core group of the class was made up of a couple of engineers- very sharp analytical thinkers; a man who owns his own concrete pouring and construction company- also a very logical thinker; a former chemist who gets hung up looking at one tree and misses the forest; and two long-suffering grade school teachers who are able to put up with us only through the grace of God.

We had a months-long conversation going about this gospel. When we read it, we thought we "got it" until one of the engineers said, "Gee, I wonder why Jesus made the goats the bad guys? There had to be a reason the people then would have understood, it was an agricultural society and they knew all about those animals." The construction guy agreed, "You know, you're right, it must have meant something to them we wouldn't know about." Someone suggested that the Old Testament scapegoat had something to do with it; someone else thought it might have something to do with how desirable the goat's meat might be compared to the sheep's. Someone suggested that the sheep foreshadowed the Christ as the Lamb of God, which was an excellent insight. There was discussion of whether the goats wool was even half as useful or plentiful as the sheep's', while *someone* thought that it had something to do with the sheep smelling better than the goats. Everyone kind of moved away from me at the table then.

Fortunately, before I lost all my friends, a woman came in who lives on a farm, and enlightened us. Having raised both, she said, sheep are stupid. There's a reason that long thing with a hook at the end is called a sheep-crook, not a goat-crook. It really was used to haul sheep out of places they would wander, fall into and get stuck. Goats are more intelligent and independent. Goats would avoid those tricky places, or be nimble enough to get out. A-HA! This led us to some shades of meaning we didn't have before. The goat-people in the parable are independent- they are ignoring Jesus, they don't acknowledge their need for this Shepherd. They are, perhaps, even arrogant. Our friend's goats will leave the fenced-in pasture to go eat tasty stuff in the field outside, and are smart enough to come back when her children bring out the feed- she said the sheep would be too stupid to find their way out, and if they got out by accident, they couldn't find their way back. They need constant tending.

So-Jesus wants us to be *stupid*?

That can't be right. OK, time to think some more. Class was over, but I was not done with this ogre! I needed a 21st Century model for this parable if I was ever going to understand its deeper layers. With time and prayer, it came as I was awakening one day:

The REAL Difference between Cats and Dogs.

Now, before I say anything else, let me tell you that in our house, we have a cat and a dog, and I love them both. I am not taking sides here!

Ask a cat person- why do you like cats? *Oh, they are so independent. They know who they are. They take care of themselves. I don't have to walk my cat; I don't have to let my cat outside. I just put out the litter box and my cat knows what to do, I just have to change the litter. I don't have to worry about feeding my cat too much- it'll stop eating when it's full. He'll never eat himself sick, like a dog. I just leave the food out. Cats have dignity. They come to you when they want you. They don't fawn all over you like a dog.*

Now talk to a dog person. *Oh, dogs are great! They're always glad to see you when you come home! No matter how bad your day has been, your dog always makes you feel better; your dog is always there for you! I love to take my dog running! I need to be sure he stays out of the road, though... I love walking my dog, sure, I need to take a bag along, but... Oh, yeah, sure, it's true, I can't leave food out for my dog, or she'd eat herself sick, throw up, then eat that, - but she's so affectionate, and the kids love her! She's so gentle with them! She'll let them pull her ears, or even take her food away! Oh, sure, I have to make sure she stays away from skunks...*

What do you hear? What's the difference? The cats, like the goats, are more independent, and the dogs are more dependent- but there's something else going on there between the people and the dogs, just like there is between the shepherds and the sheep. There is vulnerability. But there is also trust. The family dog doesn't just *need* his people, he *trusts* his people. He trusts them to protect him where he is weak: to keep him from over-eating, from running into traffic, from running into skunks! He trusts his people to love him, to care for him every day of his life, and even to give him a gentle death, unless he runs into the road first. The oh-so-vulnerable sheep depends on and trusts the shepherd. The dog depends on and trusts the person. We depend on and trust the Savior.

If we want to follow the Savior, we need to make ourselves vulnerable to him. We need to trust him, just as our pets trust us, as they are vulnerable to us, just as the animals the ancients depended on for life were vulnerable to and depended on them. Think about that last phrase: when Jesus told this story, using the sheep and the goats, he used the creatures on which life the lives of his hearers depended to illustrate the attitude that they should take toward him. Not arrogant, but trusting and vulnerable; not independent, but willing to follow. If we want to follow this Savior, our acts are not enough, our attitude, toward him and toward each other, counts. Imagine a rich couple, the man in a silk suit with a diamond tie pin and gold pinkie ring, the woman in silks and furs, serving dinner at a soup kitchen. Imagine the same rich couple, dressed in jeans and t-shirts, wearing no jewelry but their wedding bands, serving dinner at the same soup kitchen. How do you think the guests feel on each of those nights? Obedience is not enough- attitude counts.

Want to go layers and layers deeper? Go to Gethsemane. There, Jesus pleaded with the Father for another way. We don't know what form the answer took, but we know what the answer was: it was no, it was some form of "Son, you have to do this." Imagine the profound trust the terrified, all-too-human Son had in the divine Father that night, to be the ultimate Sheep, to do as the Father-Shepherd asked.

Want to go to a deeper layer still? Imagine the unfathomably deep trust the human Son had in the Father to allow himself to be taken into custody, to endure the torment, to take the walk to Golgotha. Think about that physical position he took, even without the nails and the boards: imagine yourself standing here, today, with your feet tight, tide together, arms straight outright. Can you defend yourself like that, or are you helpless, just standing that way? Now imagine yourself affixed to the boards- I won't ask you to imagine the nails, because I can't do it myself. I just can't. Jesus, Jesus himself became the ultimate obedient, helpless sheep, following the Father-Shepherd's will, and became weaker than any sheep, on that cross. Becoming the weakest, most trusting of Sheep he performed the most powerful act Creation will ever know.