

Parables usually focus on one main point and the bite of this parable is to do with Judgement. The Christian Gospel is more nuanced than Jesus explained in any one parable, and in considering Sheep and Goats we need to remember God's grace.

For **REFLECTION**: *"When a person works an eight- hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award – yet receives such a gift anyway – that is a good picture of God's unmerited favour. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God."* G W Knight

Rewards in the kingdom of heaven are given to those who serve without thought of reward. There is no hint of merit in our Matthew passage, for God gives out of grace, not debt.

William Barclay quotes the following two stories. Where might you be in danger of such an encounter this week? Any similar or related experiences in your Group?

Francis of Assisi, wealthy and high-born, was riding out one day and met a man disfigured by leprosy. Francis was moved to dismount and hug the poor man. As he did so, the face of the leprosy sufferer changed into the face of Christ.

Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One freezing day a beggar asked him for alms. Martin had no money, but, seeing the man blue with cold, he ripped his soldier's cloak in half and gave one part to the beggar. That night he had a dream. He saw Jesus in the courts of heaven, wearing half his cloak. He heard an angel ask, 'Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?' And Jesus replied, 'My servant Martin gave it to me.'

PARISH PROJECT

What progress have you made as an individual in researching your Home Group's project topic? Share with the rest of the group some of your thoughts or findings?

How might you share these thoughts in an Evening Service during August - information, intercessions, music, interviews, visually...?

STUDY 5

Justice and the reality of Judgement



Remember: **"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."** Talk for a few minutes about how grateful we should be because God is just and merciful; use your reflections to phrase opening prayer(s).

CHALLENGE: The core message of this study is that a Christian should be visible through who they are and how they seek out and respond to those in need, that their faith has daily consequences.

QUESTION: How would you define the word "consequences"?

"If you were ever accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

QUESTIONS:

Have you observed or experienced any particular positive or negative acts this week that have had obvious consequences?

What have those acts revealed about the people involved - their motivation, their ambitions, their concerns...?

Numbers chapter 14 verses 18 & 19 tell us: "The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Every action or lack of action will have its consequences. We have been warned! To what extent do people try to trade on God's mercy and love without appreciating his desire for love and justice in us?

RECAP: "Delay of justice is injustice" (Walter S Landor). How did your group define "justice" back in Study 1?

EXPLORE: Use a bible word search on "Judgement". (Skim through the highlighted verses in the Poverty & Justice Bible; if you can, try www.ibs.org/niv). Which 2 or 3 references help most to define these words?

Can you improve on:

"a formal utterance of an authoritative opinion. The process of forming an opinion or evaluation by discerning and comparing"

Make your own suggestion and try and come to a Group definition of Judgement.

(If you have time, discuss what is meant by "authoritative opinion".)

QUESTION: How does this definition differ when we consider the Christian definition of "Judgement"?

READ: Matthew chapter 25 verses 31-46, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

Start by listing all the allusions to Jesus and his role.

QUESTION: What feelings does this passage raise for you? Comfortable or uncomfortable? Why?

Superficially the passage seems to be all about a "gospel of works" rather than faith. But the passage also challenges about "relationship" and the sort of "faith proved by action" that we recognise from James' Letter. The passage raises issues about Jesus' role, the fact of Judgement, the relationship and response of everyone to the King, and the fact of Jesus' return (and follows a series of other parables on the same theme). It is certainly not about everyone ending at the same place!

QUESTION: In what ways are "sheep and goats" accountable and to whom are they accountable? Are there indications as to why?

QUESTION: What are we told will happen, specifically in verses 32 & 33? How does this link to the box on the adjacent page?

(NB. This separation would be a typical task for a shepherd, as the goats would prefer to keep warm at night while the sheep would prefer to be out in the open air.)

QUESTION: What or who do the two groups represent?

(NB. Sheep also cost more than goats and because of their greater utility and value were nearly always more numerous on a farm.)

QUESTION: What have those on the right done to differentiate themselves from those on the left?

QUESTION: What will be the consequences of each of the group's actions?

On a scale of 1 (little) - 10 (completely), how "sheepish" are you? How "goatish" are you?!

Sheepish:

Goatish:

What factors did you take into account; how might improvements be made, even this week? Share and discuss your marks and ideas!

READ: 1 John chapter 3 verses 14 - 18: Love One Another

QUESTION:

What will be the basis for judgement according to these verses?

QUESTION: How can we ensure we put this into action? In our Church? In our Community? In the World?