

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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An Instructive Analogy: A Shepherd at Work

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matthew 25:31–46, KJV 1900)

Not only in His parables, but in His other teachings, Jesus used the simplest and most understandable analogies available. His objective was obviously to communicate His truth clearly and simply to His hearers. In the lesson we now study, Jesus used the analogy of a shepherd at work, something that His first century audience knew well.

Matthew 25 continues the lesson that Jesus began in Matthew 24. At the beginning of Chapter Twenty Four, the disciples and Jesus had a brief conversation in which Jesus made a point that the disciples questioned. They asked Jesus three questions; some commentaries make the number two, but we should not doubt that the questions were distinct, not merely a redundant duplication. By so directly telling the disciples that the magnificent temple they were viewing would become a ruin, Jesus alarmed the disciples. They had no thought of such a thing. If we attempt to find Jesus' answer to all three (Or two) questions in the twenty-fourth chapter, we will never arrive at a simple, clear answer. However, by acknowledging the obvious, that His answer continued to the end of the twenty-fifth chapter, His answers to the questions more simply and logically appear.

Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? (Matthew 24:3b)

Let's sort out the three questions and at least suggest the nature of Jesus' answer.

...when shall these things be? This question refers to Jesus' alarming news that not one stone would soon be standing on another in the temple before them. How could such a catastrophe occur? Why? When, especially when? Jesus answered the first two questions in the twenty-fourth chapter.

...what shall be the sign of thy coming? In this context, and set forth in Jesus' answer, the first thought of the disciples, if their beautiful temple were to be destroyed, the event must be part of a signal event of divine judgment. If so, Jesus would come in judgment, something that He warned the unbelieving Jews of His day was imminent in the Olivet Discourse, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." (Matthew 23:38) Not only would their house be left desolate, but it would be wholly destroyed in the judgment that their sin and unbelief brought upon them. In the twenty-fourth chapter, Jesus answered these first two questions. Daniel and other Old Testament prophets had prophesied of this catastrophic event. Rather than give a specific date, though He did give them a clear limit, Jesus answered the question with details of the event that linked it to those prophecies. And He also warned them of the time envelop that would see this event unfold. "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." (Matthew 24:34) Prior to this verse, Jesus repeatedly warned the disciples to flee into the mountains when they saw the signs of this coming judgment, a nonsensical action to take at the time of the Second Coming, but the right action when they saw the events that He described unfolding. In

both points, Jesus affirmed that they would live to see the sad fall of the temple, and of God's solemn judgment that accompanied that fall. The event occurred in March-August, 70 A. D., some forty years later.

...and of the end of the world? The third question takes us beyond the fall of the temple and God's judgment against first century Jews. Some commentaries define the "...end of the world" in this verse as the end of the Jewish world, the Old Testament era. Perhaps this is possible, but it is difficult. Jesus marked the end of the Jewish era and the beginning of the gospel era with John's preaching, not some later date. (Luke 16:16) If the Jewish era had already ended, and if the temple in Jerusalem was soon to be utterly destroyed so that one stone would not be left on another, what was to follow? What should they and future believers expect from that date till the Second Coming? Jesus answers these questions in the twenty-fifth chapter. The kingdom of God was not linked to the temple or any other material building structure, or to one race or culture of people, not any longer. At the time of this event, God's kingdom would be comparable to a wedding celebration in which some of the invited guests took the invitation seriously and prepared for the wedding, while others, the unbelieving Jews of the first century who brought that severe judgment against them, were wholly unprepared. Once the kingdom transitioned primarily from a Jewish national kingdom to a spiritual kingdom made up of all kinds of people, the kingdom of God would be comparable to a master who entrusted his servants with a treasure. Some of the servants respected their master and invested the treasure under their care wisely. Others, in contempt for their master, refused to invest the funds committed to them at all. Rather than effectively judging a whole nation, as with the destruction of the temple, in this new era of the kingdom of God, the wise and faithful servants would be rewarded, and the unfaithful would be punished and dishonored. This scenario would repeat itself and would characterize the Lord's kingdom until the Second Coming, an event that Jesus characterizes in the closing lesson of Matthew 25 with the analogy of a shepherd separating sheep from goats.

We shall linger with this lesson. It is necessary to frame the actual lesson in its extended context to grasp the clarity and the full scope of Jesus' teaching in this extended message. Today we live in the era of the Master's treasure, committed to us in stewardship, a stewardship that requires full and personal accounting directly to Him for our wise or foolish use of His treasure. We look forward joyfully to the day when He returns and separates humanity in preparation for the righteous punishment of the wicked and the eternal inheritance of the elect.

A word of caution. Analogical language is not to be interpreted as allegory, forcing every finite detail to take on symbolic meaning. Parables and general

analogies in Scripture should be interpreted with a more "Broad brush" interpretation. Look at the "Big picture" of the lesson. Let's consider just a few of the major factors that Jesus introduces in this lesson.

1. He compares His separation of humanity to a shepherd separating sheep from goats. What distinguishes a sheep from a goat? If behavior, mental or physical, is the final basis on which the elect enter glory, Jesus chose a poor analogy. The distinction between a sheep and a goat is not behavior. The two animals are distinct species. No goat has ever "Behaved" his way into becoming a sheep; nor has any sheep ever acted his way into becoming a goat.
2. The basis on which Jesus specifically assigns for the elect entering eternal glory is inheritance, not reward for behavior. "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34) In fact, Jesus actually assigns two bases for the announced and blessed verdict; 1) they are "...blessed of my Father," and 2) they are told to enter based on His inheritance. Yes, He also describes their conduct, as He describes the conduct of the wicked, but He assigns the basis for their eternal blessing as an inheritance, not as a reward or wage earned.
3. The basis on which Jesus assigns the wicked to eternal separation is indeed their behavior. He does not interject any other grounds for their final judgment other than the wicked things that they did.
4. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit alters our moral and spiritual compass. He changes our perception of values. We should avoid the attitude of setting moral or spiritual litmus tests to determine who really is or is not born again, an attitude that typically leads people to become arrogant and judgmental toward others. In principle, Jesus forbids this often self-serving arrogance in the Parable of the wheat and the Tares. It is not easy to distinguish a wheat plant from a tare plant, so the servants in the parable are liable to mistake one from the other and thereby inadvertently damage wheat plants. Leave such judgments to God who is quite capable of making the right judgment. However, we should not at all hesitate to make the point that the new birth alters a person's values, as well as their spiritual nature. According to Scripture, a born-again person becomes so by a supernatural birth, not by behavior. Based

on the Scriptures, it is as nonsensical to think that our behavior or actions cause our new birth as to think that a natural goat may simply change its behavior and become a sheep. Jesus states the basis for the elect entering eternal glory as an inheritance, followed by His description of their conduct, actions compatible with the work of grace that He accomplishes in the new birth.

5. Interestingly, and typically wholly overlooked by commentaries and Bible teachers, both the elect and the wicked react with surprise at hearing their sentence. Even the elect are surprised to hear the words, "Come, ye blessed of my Father...." Notice the note of surprise, "Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?" (Matthew 25:37-39) And we should also take note of Jesus' answer to them. "And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40) Forget playing up to your favorite believers or to those whom you hope might give you a favor. Forget courting the politically connected folks who might be able to show you a special kindness. Jesus measures and values our kindness based on how we treat those who have no ability to reciprocate or to return the favors that we show to them, "...**the least of these** my brethren." Sadly often, I have been disappointed and at times amused at the conduct of people who go out of their way to patronize someone whom they think might show them some special favor. To the extent that we go out of our way to patronize other people, whatever their ability to favor us, we demonstrate a similar lack of regard for the Lord's favor.

This lesson overflows with rich and comforting truth. We shall study it further.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor