

## 5 *Parable of the Sheep & The Goats*

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### *The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: Does Faith Alone Save?*

Jesus tells a parable known as the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. (Matthew 25:30-46.) Jesus says that one group who calls Him Lord serves Jesus' brothers in need with food and clothing. This group goes to heaven. Another group who calls Him Lord but who fails to do so are sent to hell.

Jesus is commanding charity to his brothers on threat of going to hell if you do not do it. Jesus is promising eternal life to those who do it. Faith that is alone does not save. This parable reads:

(31) 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: (32) 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: (33) And he shall set the **sheep on his right hand**, but the goats on the left. (34) 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: (35) 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: (36) Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. (37) Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

(38) When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? (39) Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? (40) 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. (41) 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**: (42) For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: (43) 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. (44) 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? (45) 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. (46) And these shall go away **into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal**. (Matt. 25: 31-45, KJV.)

Please note that Jesus clearly divides the sheep from the goats based on works of charity. Please also note that there is no doubt Jesus equates the sheep “inherit[ing] the kingdom” with going away “into life eternal.” (vv. 35, 45). There is also no doubt that Jesus contrasts this with the fate of the goats who call Him Lord but who failed to do charity. They go into:

- “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41)
- “everlasting punishment” (v. 45.)

As Gathercole, an evangelical scholar, concedes, Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46 says “*deeds* of hospitality...are *certainly* the criterion for judgment.”<sup>1</sup> Let’s examine this thoroughly so this very important point is not forgotten.

### Jesus’ Criterion for Salvation: Charitable Works

Why the different ends of the sheep versus the goats? Is it because one believed and the other did not? Or rather is it because among those who knew the Lord some served Him by clothing, feeding and visiting the “brothers” of the King while others did not?

Or another way of asking this is to inquire why do the sheep inherit the kingdom. Is it because they are believers who are saved despite failing to do works of charity? Was their faith alone enough? *No*.

Jesus says:

(35) For 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, (36) 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.

The sheep confess they do not remember doing it for the Lord himself. The King explains: ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

Why are the goats sent to “eternal fire”? Did they lack ever having faith? No, rather Jesus says:

(42) For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, (43) I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not

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1. Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Eerdmans: 2002) at 113.

clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.

The goats confess the same error, not ever having seen the Lord in need. And the King replies:

I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. (Mat 25:45.)

The answer is that one group serves the brothers of the King and the others do not, by works of charity. ***One has works of charity and one doesn't.*** That is the dividing line in being finally saved, as told in this parable. ***Both the sheep and goats call him Lord, so both had faith.*** One was dead and one was alive.<sup>2</sup>

If you instead believe only the sheep had faith, then you have the incongruous lesson that Jesus is warning people already lost (the goats) that they better do works of charity for His brothers or face hell. This would be a doctrine of *works alone*, which appears incompatible with any of Jesus' teachings.

Because Jesus clearly says works of charity is the dividing line between the two groups, and we know *faithless* works are meaningless to God, then Jesus must be speaking to believers. Jesus insists they must have works of charity.

Thus, it follows that Jesus wants us to understand the goats who called Him Lord are true Christians (*i.e.*, had accepted him as Lord and Savior). They are goats because they failed to serve Him by works of charity to His followers. The formula is faith and works (of charity). This charitable service then becomes the dividing line in terms of who is and who is not ultimately saved among people who have faith in Jesus.

This is not surprising. God tells us He desires charity more than any blood sacrifice. (Prov. 21:3; Mark 12:33.)

More important, in Isaiah 58:7 *et seq.*, God promises “salvation shall come like the dawn” if you bring the poor into your home, give him clothes, etc.

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*Corroboration in the Epistle of James*

What helps corroborate we are reading Jesus correctly is that James clearly paraphrases this parable in James chapter two. Everyone remembers that James says that “faith alone” does not justify. However, no one seems to remember

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2. On the significance that both groups call Jesus *Lord*, fabulists of cheap grace deny it any significance. In doing so, they merely engage in *ad hoc* denial that the lost were at one time Christians. They cite no adequate proof for this reading. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*—a Calvinist text—states: “There is **no significance** in the fact that the goats address him as Lord... for at this point there is no exception whatever to confessing Jesus as Lord.” (Vol. 8, at 522.) What does this mean? The argument appears to be that this event occurs on judgment day when *according to their interpretation of Paul* everyone must confess Jesus as Lord. However, Paul *never* said this. It is a pure *myth* he did so, by amalgamating two disparate verses together. The first is Philippians 2:11. Paul says God exalted Jesus so that “every tongue *should* confess Jesus is the Lord.” Nothing is said about this actually occurring universally at the judgment seat. The second is Romans 14:11-12 where Paul says God will examine each person at the judgment seat. There “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess to God. So that every one of us shall *give account of himself* to God.” There confession of *sins*, not of Jesus, is in view. Some amalgamate the two verses to mean “every tongue *shall* confess Jesus is Lord” when “every tongue shall confess” at the judgment seat. Yet, the two verses cannot be combined without violence to the original *context* of each verse. Thus, the *Expositor's* is relying upon a commonly heard amalgamation of two distinct verses. This common axiom says every tongue *must* confess Jesus as Lord at the judgment seat. However, in relying upon this, the *Expositor's* is relying on a *myth*. There is no basis to suppose non-Christians are going to confess Jesus on judgment day. The truth is Jesus in the parable wants us to know not only that the sheep and the goats are both *believers* but also that mere *belief* does not seal your salvation.

James says such faith cannot save because it lacks *charitable works*. James is saying *identically* what Jesus says in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

In other words, Jesus' statement that charity *is crucial for salvation* is exactly repeated by his brother James. We read in James' Epistle chapter two a discussion of *precisely these same works* that a dead faith fails to do—if you see a brother in need, and you do not feed him or clothe him. James asks of such a person, “Can such a faith save him?” (James 2:14 NIV.) The form of the question calls for a negative answer. Jesus gives a big negative to the same question in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

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*Comparison of the Parable of the Sheep & Goats to James Chapter 2*

James chapter 2 is an obvious paraphrase of Matthew 25:30-46. The two passages are virtually *verbatim copies* of each other. Not a single leading commentator who mentions this. It utterly destroys the Fable of Cheap Grace to show how Jesus was understood by even His own brother — James.

James writes:

(14) What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but have not works? **can that faith save him?** (15) If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food, (16) and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful to the body; what doth it profit? (17) Even so **faith, if it have not works [ergon], is dead in itself** [*i.e.*, if alone]. (James 2:14-17, ASV.)

Now compare this faith that is not completed because it lacks works of charity and thus cannot save in *James* with Jesus' words in the Parable of the Sheep and the

Goats. In that parable, Jesus threatens damnation for lacking charity. The parallels are striking:

**Parallelism of James 2:14-17 & Parable of the Sheep & the Goats**

<b>James</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
“brother or sister without clothes...” (James 2:15.)	“I needed clothes and you did not clothe me.”(Matt. 25:36.)
<b>“brother or sister without... daily food...” (James 2:15.)</b>	<b>“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat.” (Matt. 25:42.)</b>
“faith without works....” (James 2:14.)	“Lord...when did we see you hungering...or naked....?” (Matt. 25:44.)
<b>“is dead [and] can[not] save.” (James 2:14.)</b>	<b>“Be going...into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matt. 25: 41.)</b>

Thus, we see Matthew 25:30-46—the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats—is identical in message and content to James 2:14-17. If James evidently read it this way, we should do so as well.

Jesus means that works of charity must be added to our life as Christians. Works of charity are not optional, nor mere proof of faith. Faith alone does not save. It is faith working together with our works that saves us by God’s mercy. Those works are dependent on our prayer relationship to Jesus (John 15:1-6), but they are not thereby no longer our personal responsibility.

*Why Is Charity So Central in God's Word?*

Why would charity toward others be so crucial to salvation, as Jesus says? We could do an entire Bible study on this. It appears that charity toward others is the most significant way you mark departure from your old life of sin. Daniel can tell the king “break off (discontinue) your sins...by showing mercy to the poor.” (Dan. 4:27.)

Charity in the Hebrew Scriptures was frankly one of the most elevated commands to obey. One might even say it is central to Torah. It reflects obedience to God's command to *love thy neighbor* in a concrete way. Thus, the Law of Moses said if a brother of God's people is in your midst who is “needy” then “thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth.” (Deut. 15:7-8.) Thirty-six times the Bible then commands the same charity must be shown to the “stranger” in your midst for “you were once strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (E.g., Deut. 10:19.)

The charity-principle is one of the most characteristic ways of doing justice in God's eyes. God desires it more than any blood sacrifice. (Prov. 21:3; Mark 12:33.) In Isaiah 58:7 *et seq.*, God promises “salvation shall come like the dawn” if you bring the poor into your home, give him clothes, etc. (See also page 240 fn. 12.) If you are charitable, God promises if you call on Him, then “the Lord will answer.” (Isaiah 58:9.) Thus, even the issue of whether God will speed an answer to prayer depends on how charitable you are being to the poor.

Furthermore, if you are charitable, God will guide you “continually” and make you like a watered garden. (Isaiah 58:11.) God promises special blessings to those who give charity to the poor.

Thus, there is no end of verses that elevate charity above almost every other command except to Love the Lord thy God with your whole mind, heart and soul.



*Modern Gospel Interpretation of the  
Parable of the Sheep & Goats*

Most of the time, proponents of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace ignore this parable. One Christian expresses my own experience, and perhaps your own:

In my Baptist upbringing, and even after becoming a Christian, Matthew 25[:31 *et seq.*] was NEVER touched on, mentioned, taught, etc. And you'd be surprised how easy it is to gloss over it in your own studies when your own denomination, pastor, teachers, and friends don't give it any notice, either.<sup>3</sup>

Whenever the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is actually examined, because it is James 2:14-17 stated as a parable, proponents of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace lose all semblance of reasonable interpretation.

Dillow endorses the view that the sheep are Christians who ministered with food and clothing and visited in prison **Jews**, Jesus' "brothers." However, they are not just simply any Jew of every generation, but only Jews living in the great tribulation period. (Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, *supra*, at 73.) Dillow explains that if we do not choose this interpretation which imposes 'faith plus works saves' as true for a very small future historical group, then the present *standard* 'gospel' is ruined for the rest of us. Dillow says that but for this explanation, Matthew 25:34 means "that inheriting the kingdom is conditioned on obedience and service to the King, a condition far removed from the New Testament [*i.e.*, the Modern Gospel] teaching of justification by faith **alone** for entrance into heaven." (*Id.*)

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3. <http://onefortruth.blogspot.com/2005/09/sheep-and-goats-parable-or-prophecy.html> (Ninjanun comment to 9-29-05 blog).

Thus, this spin of the parable defers Jesus' teaching on salvation by works to only those trapped in the tribulation who were never Christians pre-tribulation. Dillow believes the Modern Gospel's "faith alone" doctrine remains the valid salvation formula for us pre-tribulation.

However, James said "faith alone" does not save for the New Testament church. James understood Jesus to be giving a teaching that was true long before the tribulation.

Furthermore, consider how absurd it is to interpret a parable as having a distinct salvation message for only the tribulation period. Why would it change just for those in this seven year period?

Thus, the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace spins this passage so ends up teaching there is a separate salvation message for a small historical group that does require works of charity plus faith. Therefore, we today are comforted that we do not have to change the Modern Gospel's message until the tribulation is upon us. In this view, reconciling the Modern Gospel to Jesus is not necessary because Jesus' teaching applies when Christians 'are gone anyway.'

In this manner, this parable is neatly swept under the rug to be dusted off when the time is right for non-Christians to find it. (Please note this recognizes that faith-plus-works will one day be a non-heretical doctrine; it just does not fit our time, according to proponents of the Modern Gospel.)

This tribulation-only solution can be dismissed with just one Bible verse. Christ's 'brethren' does not mean ethnic Jews, let alone only Jews of a seven year future period. Jesus asked once "who are my brothers?" Jesus answered that his brothers and sisters should be those "doing the will of God." (Matthew 12:48-50.)

If one must escape this parable with such a nonsensical notion that Jesus' brothers are non-Christian Jews of the tribulation period, The Modern Gospel is not being held even loosely based on Jesus' words. The Modern Gospel view of salvation is being held *in spite* of whatever Jesus teaches.

### Calvin's Analysis of the Parable of the Sheep & The Goats

Another example of strained analysis is Calvin's explanation of this Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Calvin claimed that when Jesus says to one group who performed charity that they will "inherit"<sup>4</sup> the kingdom, the word *inherit* means they did not receive it by works, but by a gift.<sup>5</sup> This is a non-sequitur. It does not follow. Jesus says the crucial difference in salvation was that some did works of charity while others did not do so. Thus, the essential factor in salvation, as told by Jesus, is *charitable works*. The concept of *inheritance* cannot erase this fact.

Furthermore, Calvin mistakenly spun this to suggest the word *inherit* implies somehow salvation is contingent on God's donative intent—His intent to make a gift. However, an *inheritance* in the Law does not rely upon donative intent. Rather, one inherits based on family relationship, without any donative intent at all. (Numbers 27:7-11.) The only relevance of intent is that a parent could always disinherit a son for disobedience. We find in ancient legal codes a parent could disinherit a son for disobedient behavior. (Codex Hammurabi #160.) Likewise, God declares the same in Numbers 14:12 toward us. God says to the disobedient "I will disinherit them." In ancient traditions, this was apparently done by the expression about your own child: "I never knew you."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats was an example of a disinheritance warning. Do charitable works, and you will safely inherit eternal life. Fail to do them, and be forewarned—God will disinherit you. Thus, the dividing line in

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4. This is not necessarily a correct translation. The Greek word also means *receive* or *share*.

5. Calvin, *Institutes*, 20, 822 (III, xviii, 2) Calvin wrote: "even in these very passages [Matt 25:34-46 and Col. 3:23-24] where the Holy Spirit promises everlasting glory as a reward for works, [yet] by expressly terming it an 'inheritance' he is showing that it comes to us from another source [than works]."

6. See my prior book, *Jesus' Words Only* (2007) at 207-08.

the Parable is clearly *works*. There is nothing in the word *inheritance* that suggests even remotely that salvation is a *gift*, and that Jesus is somehow suggesting salvation is by grace without works.

How did Calvin reach the wrong conclusion? Calvin was confusing the law of wills and trusts (which does depend upon donative intent) with the law of *inheritance*. Calvin erred when he construed the word *inherit* to necessarily imply God was giving salvation as a gift to the sheep. Then with this error in hand, Calvin then somehow viewed the word *inherit* as overpowering Jesus' meaning that charity was crucial to salvation. For Calvin, making Jesus sound like Paul was the only priority that mattered. Letting Jesus correct this doctrine was an inconceivable option for Calvin.

Furthermore, while the Greek word *kleronomeo* in Matthew 25:34 (“*inherit* the kingdom prepared for you”) can mean one receives property by the *right of inheritance*, it has other meanings. These other meanings are legitimate and arguably preferable translations. The word *kleronomeo* in Matthew 25:34 means also simply *receive*, *share* or *obtain*. (*Strongs* # 2816 “getting by apportionment”; “receive as one’s own or as a possession; to become partaker of, to obtain.”) These are completely satisfactory alternative renderings. Thus, Jesus says you shall *share in*, *receive*, or *obtain eternal life* if you do these charitable works. If you fail to do so, you are sent to hell’s fire. Even if Calvin’s argument about *inheritance* were possible, it is not necessarily an accurate translation.

Even if the word *kleronomeo* meant *inheritance*, God can make our behavior a condition of that inheritance. It does not imply a gift. No donative intent is implied. God can make your sonship and right of inheritance depend on your behavior and attitudes.

- Ps. 39:9-11 & Matt. 5:5 (“the meek shall *inherit* the earth”).
- Matt. 19:29 (“every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall....*inherit* eternal life”).

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## Conclusion

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- Rev. 21:7-8 (“he that overcometh shall *inherit* all things, and I will be His God and he shall be my son, but the fearful and unbelieving...and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire.”)
- Ps. 149:4 (“he will beautify the meek with salvation”).

Thus, Calvin’s spin was clearly erroneous. Nothing in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats suggests the saved sheep receive salvation based solely on faith without works.

Finally, others like Bob Wilkin who cannot reconcile the parable to the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace insist we are forced to do so regardless of the language.

[I]t follows from the discussion above that the basis of ‘inheriting the kingdom’ ([Matt.] 25:34) is good works. Since Scripture cannot contradict itself, we know from a host of other passages that cannot mean that these people will gain entrance to the kingdom because they were faithful.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the final foxhole is the *ad hoc* denial that Jesus can mean what He says because we know what Paul teaches *must remain true*.

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## Conclusion

The best advice on how to understand is to follow Daniel Fuller’s guidance this parable. He encourages us to assess this Parable of the Sheep and the Goats without any preconceived ideas. He exhorts us to allow Jesus to challenge our core doctrines:

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7. Bob Wilkin, *Has This Passage Ever Bothered You? Matthew 25:31-46 - Works Salvation?* <http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1988/88march1.html> (last accessed 11/05).

To the objection that...Matthew 25 and Colossians 3:23-24 lead us right back to Rome and **salvation by works**, my answer is twofold. First, we must determine, **regardless of consequences**, what the intended meaning of each of the biblical writers is. We must let each one speak for himself and **avoid construing him by recourse to what another writer said**. Otherwise **there is no escape from subjectivism in biblical interpretation**. (Fuller, *supra*, "Biblical Theology" fn. 22.)

Thus, reading Jesus through the overlay of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace is wrong. You cannot press Jesus' words down so they fit that fable. Such conduct is reprehensible. In fact, the duty to construe Jesus free from other writers is an imperative. The very validity of all writers for acceptance in the New Testament turns on whether they *go beyond* or *transgress* Jesus' teaching. As 2 John 1:9 teaches us,

Whoever goes beyond and doesn't remain in Christ's teaching, doesn't have God [*i.e.*, breaks fellowship with God]. He who remains in the teachings [of Jesus Christ], the same has both the Father and the Son.

Jesus is the standard whether the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace is valid. Jesus tells us those who call Him Lord and do works of charity *inherit* the kingdom and will be allowed to enter eternal life. Those who call Him Lord and failed to do works of charity go to the eternal fire reserved for Satan and his angels. When we rely upon Jesus' words, the criterion for *inheriting* eternal life is, *among other things*, works of charity.