

## When the Sun Goes Down on History

*Matthew 25:31-46*

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“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left” (Matthew 25:31-33, *NRSV*).

*That* is how our passage opens this morning. It’s a bit ominous, isn’t it? It’s a bit dire even.

The Son of Man comes in all glory and power, surrounded by his armies of angels. He gathers all of the people in the world together and he begins sifting through them, parsing them out, separating them into two distinct groups: sheep over here and goats over here.

As most of you know, I am not a “fire-and-brimstone” preacher, but it sort of feels like it might be hard to avoid this morning. Judgment. Separation. Sheep going to heaven. Goats going to hell.

It’s an image of the final judgment, and I don’t think it’s an accident that it’s the last lesson taught by Jesus in the gospel of Matthew before he is crucified. Matthew seems to want this to be the last lesson we hear from Jesus’ mouth. He seems to want it to ring in our ears. He seems to want us to wrestle with what is going to happen when the sun goes down on history.

C.S. Lewis contended that if you know much about the theater, then you know that when the author steps out on the stage, the play is over. In this prophetic parable, the Author of history comes onto the stage and brings everything that has been said and done to a climax — leaving us to ask on which side we might find ourselves: the side of the sheep or the side of the goats?

Jesus was a deft storyteller. In part, that’s because he was so good at drawing on images from every day life to make everlasting claims.

For instance, here, Jesus took a familiar first-century Palestinian image and used it to intrigue his hearers... and then to shock them into a new understanding. It’s important to remember that Jesus lived in an agricultural society, where raising livestock and farming were some of the main ways of earning a living. First-century folk ran into and encountered sheep and goats on the streets of their villages on a daily basis.

And “in that era, sheep and goats ate the same kind of grass, so it was quite common for one shepherd to have both as part of his flock. At sundown, however, all of that changed, [because] the two species of animals have different nighttime needs. Goats did

not have very thick hair, which meant they needed shelter to protect them against the chill of the night air, while sheep were covered with a heavy coat of wool and could easily spend the night in the open" (John Claypool, *Stories Jesus Still Tells*, 142).

So separating the sheep from the goats was a common practice each night as the sun went down.

And what will happen when the sun goes down on history? The shepherd will do what he always does at sundown. He will separate the sheep from the goats.

It's an image from every day life meant to evoke an everlasting point. The question is: what is that point?

Is the point that we ought to live our lives in fear of an eternal fire? Is it what Jonathan Edwards famously proposed: that we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God?

Well, I guess I'm just not "fire-and-brimstone" enough, because I suspect the point of the parable isn't about God's burning anger or our impending punishment.

Rather, let me suggest that the point Jesus is trying to make is that human existence is a decisive affair — that we do have choices and real consequences grow out of our freedom. What we choose to do with the gift of our lives matters. How we choose to live matters. And, in some sense, what Jesus is trying to warn us about is the idea that ultimate failure *is* an option.

Baseball was the first great love of my life. I was the kid who pulled together all the neighborhood kids to play pick up games. *The Sandlot* was my favorite movie. By the time I finished in Jr. Babe Ruth, I had turned into fairly serious player. Most noticeably, I was a good hitter. I ended my final year of Jr. Babe Ruth with a batting average over .600, so my high school coach was predictably thrilled when I showed up for practice my freshman year.

We had three weeks before our first game, and based solely on my performance in practice, I quickly earned a spot on the starting roster — the only freshman to do so that year. I should have seen it as an honor, but something happened to me when I realized that I was starter on the varsity team, surrounded by all of those upperclassmen who I both admired and feared. Something deep within me flipped under that pressure. A mental block formed, and I stopped enjoying baseball and started dreading it.

The pressure to perform weighed me down. What if I missed the fly ball? What if I couldn't make the cutoff throw? What if I made an error? Or worst of all, what if I couldn't get a hit against these high school pitchers?

By the time we got to our first game of the season, I was a wreck, terrified of letting the team down. The game passed uneventfully for the most part until it was time for my first high school at-bat. I was so nervous of striking out in front of my upperclassman

teammates that I made a split-second decision: I just wouldn't swing. I'd stand in the box. I'd take the pitches, and I'd hope to get walked.

Of course, I kept this decision to myself. It's not quite the best way to inspire confidence in your coach or team to tell them that you've decided to never swing a bat in a game. But somewhere deep inside me, I'd convinced myself that it would be better for everyone if I just never took a swing.

So at-bat after at-bat, game after game, I stood in the box and took pitch after pitch – slowly growing to hate the very game that I'd loved my entire life.

10 games into the season, my batting average was .000, 0 for 35. By that point, it had become pretty obvious to my team that I wasn't just in a slump. I wasn't even swinging.

Finally, one of the upperclassman – a hulking junior who played third base and was our clean-up hitter – pulled me aside and said, "Dan, this is a game and part of that game is swinging a bat. Don't you want to play the *whole* game? I know you can hit. I've watched you do it every day at practice for weeks now. I don't know what's going on in your head, *but you aren't really playing the game if you don't swing the bat.*"

He was right. I had been given every chance in the world to play – a varsity jersey, a coveted starting spot, the abilities to play – but by choosing not to swing the bat, I'd made the choice not to play the game completely. I'd chosen something less than was intended.

I think Jesus is trying to say something similar. When it's all said and done, we are given one chance at life; one chance to make our time on earth matter. Human existence is a decisive affair. How we choose to live our lives matters.

And so, at the last, as the sun goes down on history, God will ask us that one decisive question, the answer to which will separate us to God's right or left.

What is that question? Fred Craddock suggests that it might surprise you. He says:

"That final question, the one essential question by which all are measured is a really surprising one. You may not think of it as a surprise, but I do. I am surprised by it because listening to people who are fairly deep into religion nowadays, one gets the clear impression that some other question would be the main question... The religious air is filled with questions about the end of the world, visitors from other planets, heaven, hell, and unusual gifts of the Spirit.

"When I listen to people talk, sincere and dedicated members of various churches, it is very seldom that I hear a discussion that centers upon this question, which is, in the mind of God, the ultimate question..."

“Now here is the question. How did you respond to human need? That’s it. That is the question” (*The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*, 96).

“I was alone. I had no one in the world. My husband died. My children lived far off, but I stayed in that big empty house. Did you or did you not come?”

“I was in prison, cut off from society for my misdeeds. A criminal, yes, but still a human being. Did you or did you not visit?”

“I was hungry, sitting day after day on the bench in front of your regular spot. I saw more food thrown in the dumpster each day than I’d eaten all week. Did you offer me anything to eat?”

“I was without adequate clothing, sleeping on the cold, tiled steps of your church building as the nights dipped below freezing. I needed socks for my feet and coat to break the wind. Did you offer me anything to wear?”

“I was a stranger, new at the job, new in the city, new to the neighborhood, new to my own apartment. I did not know a soul. Did you introduce me to yourself?”

The question that awaits each and every one on that day is: How did you respond to human need?

It’s a question that has less to do with tallying up good works or having the right answers to ethical dilemmas, and everything to do with a living a life of *mercy*.

There is an old Jewish legend that goes like this:

Time before time when the world was young, two brothers shared a field. They lived on either side of the field and they worked it together. And at the end of each day of harvest, they divided the grain equally between them.

One of the brothers was a bachelor, and the other had a wife and children. It occurred one day to the single brother, “It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain equally, because I have only myself and my brother has other mouths to feed.”

And so he began, each night, to fill a sack with his own grain, cross the field under cover of darkness, and empty it in his brother’s granary.

At about the same time, the other brother thought, “It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain equally, because I have children to care for me in my old age and my brother has no one to look after him.”

So he, too, every night would fill a sack, cross the field under cover of darkness, and empty it in his brother’s granary.

Each morning, both brothers would find their own supply of grain miraculously restored. And, as you might imagine, one night at the center of the field under the moonlight, the brothers met each other, each with a sack of grain on his shoulder. Instantly they realized what had happened, and they fell into each other's arms.

The legend goes on to say that God said to the angels, "This is holy ground, and on this site I will build my temple." And so, it is said that the temple of Solomon was built at this very place, for the house of God is always founded on such places as when human beings can still be astonished by each other's love.

Beautiful story. Two people discerning needs in each other, choosing to give from their own provision, each acting with mercy in light of the other's need.

And if it's true — if the dwelling place of God is always founded on such places where the love of two brothers is shared — then imagine what could happen if we decided to do the same for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

Our whole city — every nook and cranny, under every overpass, every alleyway, even the hospital, even the county jail — could become the very dwelling place of God.

Imagine... imagine what could be if we dared treat the least of these like our own brother or sister. It might not set all things right, but it would be a great start.

"And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25:40).

Amen.