

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW
AN OLD PLAN TO SHAPE NEW LIVES
(5)THE MATURATION OF A NEW LIFE

Matthew 19:3-26:2

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SCRIPTURE

¹ [Jesus] left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

²Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there. . . ¹³Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; ¹⁴but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” ¹⁵And he laid his hands on them and went on his way (Matthew 19:1b-2, 13-15 NRSV).

²³The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, ²⁴“Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.’ ²⁵Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. ²⁶The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. ²⁷Last of all, the woman herself died. ²⁸In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ³²‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.” ³³And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:23-40 NRSV).

¹As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ²Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” ³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁵For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Messiah!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs (Matthew 24:1-8 NRSV).

¹“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹²But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you’” (Matthew 25:1-12 NRSV).

³¹“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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you

hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And 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.' ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:31-46 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible, can be said to represent adulthood for the new community of faith God created when he freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Deuteronomy means "second law." It is a retelling of the covenant between God and his people as told by Moses in three different speeches. It is quoted more than eighty times in the New Testament. It is a powerful and influential book that turns our hearts to the Law of God.

But it is not addressed to the first generation who came out of Egypt. That generation never quite grew up. They remained in their spiritual adolescence. Deuteronomy is addressed to the next generation who were willing to be held accountable for keeping God's Law – a sure sign of maturity. The zenith of this is found in the *Shema*.

In Deuteronomy 6:4-5 we read these words:

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deut 6:4-5 NRSV).

This passage has a name. It is called the *Shema*. This is a declaration, a core statement of faith, that God's people have repeated over and over through the ages. *Shema* means "hear." *Shema* is the first word in Deuteronomy 6:4 in the Hebrew language. *Shema*, O Israel. Hear, O Israel.

The fifth section of the Gospel of Matthew seems to correspond to the Book of Deuteronomy. It teaches us that adult believers are responsible for their beliefs and are to be held accountable for their actions. Matthew's version of the *Shema* is found in chapter twenty-two:

³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40 NRSV).

Notice that Jesus takes the original *Shema* and its love for God and combines it with the love of neighbor. According to Jesus, the two are connected. How can you love God whom you cannot see if you are unwilling to love the people around you whom you can see? (cf. 1 Jn 4:20)

The fifth collection of teaching in Matthew's Gospel is found in chapters twenty-four and twenty-five. The theme of this collection builds on this idea of spiritual maturity: adults are responsible for their beliefs and accountable for their actions. Indeed, Jesus teaches us that there will be a final accountability for all of us.

The theme, therefore is judgment. In fact, the entire section has elements of judgment. There are judgments against Jesus. Judgments concerning issues. Jesus judges his opponents. There is the predicted judgment of the Temple and then the final judgment.

Many people search chapter twenty-four in hopes of finding clues as to when the end of the world will take place. The irony being that much of the material here is a warning against jumping too quickly to conclusions that “the end” (in whatever sense) is near. What details are given apply mostly to Jesus' uncannily accurate description of the fall of Jerusalem rather than to the end of the world.

Nevertheless, starting near the end of chapter twenty-four and running all through chapter twenty-five Jesus provides various parables that shed some light on his parousia (puh-roo-zee-uh, -see-uh, or pahr-oo-see-u). Parousia is a Greek term used for the second coming of Christ at the end of history. It literally means “presence.” The idea being that when Christ returns his presence will be fully revealed. The whole world will know about it.

The only time parousia appears in the gospels is in Matthew – all four times in Matthew 24. The NRSV translates it as “coming.”

For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (24:27).

The parousia is compared to a story about ten bridesmaids (25:1-13). Ancient Jewish weddings were not only joyful but protracted, usually lasting at least a week. The couple did not go off on a trip but stayed at home and welcomed all comers. Michael Green gives us more details:

It was a relaxed affair; there was no set time when the bridegroom would come to the house of his bride, either to eat the wedding feast there or, more frequently, to take her to his own home for the wedding feast. The festivities lasted for a week or even two, and were marked by great joy, feasting and music. The [bridesmaids] waited to escort the bridegroom into the house. Once he arrived and went in, the door was shut, and there was no possibility of late access. So the foolish bridesmaids will have missed the whole week, not just one supper, in being shut out.¹

It is not hard to figure out that the bridegroom represents Jesus. He will come some day – no one knows when – to join with his bride and celebrate the marriage feast. The bridesmaids represent people in the church. All the bridesmaids had lamps but not all of them were prepared for the bridegroom. This tells us that it is possible be in church and yet be a stranger to the Holy Spirit. Your lamp looks good but there is no oil in it.

There are some things you cannot borrow. You must possess them yourself. Faith is one of those things. You cannot borrow your parents' faith or your grandparents' faith or your spouse's faith. You cannot trade for faith. You must have your own. Nobody can stand in for you. The bridegroom will come. Will you be ready?

The topic of final judgment makes most people uncomfortable. The images of judgment in the gospels and in the Book of Revelation can be especially troubling. But let us remember certain important truths about judgment. First of all, God's judgments are not arbitrary. He does not judge the way we judge. We judge others all the time. We do it on the basis of little or no evidence, deep seeded prejudice and superficial criteria. And we often judge good things to be bad and bad things to be good! God does not do this. He knows all the facts. He is completely fair. He alone can see into the human heart. His judgments are a response to evil and not a response to goodness.

Secondly, judgment comes after all other avenues have been exhausted. God has given us life and sends us blessings and warnings and times of testing as opportunities to come to our senses and return to God. God is not a celestial killjoy waiting to pounce on us. The prophet Ezekiel tells us that God takes no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezek 33:11). And Peter says:

¹Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (p. 260). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

[God] is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9 NRSV).

J. P. Moreland makes this observation:

"God is the most generous, loving, wonderful, attractive being in the cosmos. He has made us with free will and he has made us for a purpose: to relate lovingly to him and to others....and if we fail over and over again to live for the purpose for which we were made - a purpose, by the way, which would allow us to flourish more than living any other way - then God will have absolutely no choice but to give us what we've asked for all along in our lives, which is separation from him" (as quoted in Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ*, p. 173).

The final parable in this section is about the separation of sheep and goats.

"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 (25:31-32).

In the ancient Near East sheep and goats were frequently herded together. Unfortunately they do not feed or rest well together. The shepherd has to separate them for grazing and for sleeping at night.

We learn from the gospels that the term "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself. "Son of Man" sounds to us like a poetic way of referring to someone's humanity and it was occasionally used in this way but its history went in a different direction. It was a seldom used term in Jesus' day that traced its roots to the Book of Daniel (7:13-14). Jesus used this term in order to avoid the mistaken notions about the Messiah so prevalent in his day. In Daniel's vision, Daniel saw the Son of Man as someone who approached God in his heavenly throne room and was given universal authority and dominion. So the claim to be the Son of Man is a claim to divinity and sovereignty.

It's rather difficult for us Western Christians to wrap our heads around . . . concepts like king and sovereign. Our leaders are elected, and power is given to them through a social contract with everyday citizens. Not so with Jesus. This leader has been chosen by God, picked right out of the tomb and placed on the throne. Yet his rule is not tyrannical and top-down. According to Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats, this king is present in "the least of these" (25:40). Anyone who is sick or poor or imprisoned or in debt or hungry is the king. So although his authority comes from above, Jesus' identity and credibility come from below (Dave Barnhart).

William Barclay comments on this passage by giving two moving stories. They help us to see what Jesus is getting at by this insistence on practical love.

Francis of Assisi, wealthy and high-born, was out riding 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 the soldier 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."

The traditional moral of this parable is that we should all be like the people described as sheep. These people were kind to the needy and marginalized of society. Apparently, being kind to people like that is like being kind to Jesus himself.

There is nothing wrong with this lesson. We need to show kindness to the needy and marginalized of society. It is encouraging to know that if we serve others this way it is like serving Jesus himself.

However, I am not sure this is the point of the parable. The people described as sheep are completely unaware that there is a deeper meaning to helping the "least among us." They are loving and kind to everyone in need simply because it is in their nature to do so.

Notice the chief complaint of the people described as goats. If only they had known the connection between helping people and helping Jesus then, of course, that is what they would have done. They would have re-calculated their approach to match the formula: helping others equals helping Jesus. But ask yourself this question, "If I do the same thing today, start helping others because now I know it is like helping Jesus, then doesn't that make me a goat?"

I am not the first to arrive at this conclusion. Reformed scholars have been saying this for years. Any honest reading of this parable leads you to one inescapable conclusion: We are all goats!

This is quite disturbing. Jesus says that sheep get eternal life but goats get eternal punishment. Is there any hope for goats? Come back next week and find out.