

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: EPISODE 4

SPEAK UP!
LOCAL FAMILIES
MATTHEW 25:31-46
03/05/2017



MAIN POINT

When we serve those in need, we serve the Lord Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When you encounter someone begging for money, what do you typically think and why? How do you typically respond? How do you feel afterward?

How do you think Jesus would respond to a beggar? Why?

Almost all of us have seen people panhandling or begging. When we see people doing things like this, our thoughts and emotions range from compassion to cynicism. As Christians, we know that we need to serve the poor, but we also want to help in a constructive way. In the passage we're discussing today, Jesus talks about the necessity of serving the needy in view of a final judgment day: the day when Jesus distinguishes between His foes and His followers.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 25:31-40.

How would you explain the message of the sheep and goats in your own words?

Given that Jesus is the One dividing sheep from goats, what does that imply about our ability to distinguish between them?

Palestinian shepherds frequently had to separate their flocks similar to the way Jesus describes. Sheep and goats freely intermingled and often looked quite similar in appearance, at least from a distance. Similarly, we could probably not guess from superficial knowledge and external appearance who are truly God's people, but Jesus knows.

Why do you think Jesus chose to use sheep to represent believers and goats to represent unbelievers? What qualities or purposes do these animals possess that make them a good choice for Jesus' teaching points?

Why does Jesus bless the sheep in this passage? What did they do to receive Jesus' blessing?

What basic human needs are met by the sheep? In what ways are you meeting these basic needs for others?

Wool made sheep more valuable than goats, so naturally Jesus chose the sheep to represent those individuals who are blessed by God and inherit His kingdom. The sheep are blessed because of their good behavior. They cared for Christ, feeding Him when He was hungry, giving Him drink when thirsty, providing adequate clothing when He was ill-clad, showing Him hospitality when he was a foreigner, and visiting Him when He was sick or imprisoned. Here are three basic human needs, apart from salvation—food, shelter, and companionship.

What are the sheep surprised about (vv. 37-39)?

How are you impacted knowing that by serving the hungry, homeless and lonely you are serving Jesus?

Many of the sheep are understandably surprised. No doubt several of these conditions did characterize Christ at various stages of His earthly life, but the vast majority of the “righteous” will not have been present then and there to help Him. So how did all this happen? The texts says that they were surprised because they did not understand how they had ministered so directly to Jesus.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 25:41-46.

In verse 34, the sheep are told that the kingdom of God had been “prepared” for them. In verse 41, what place has been prepared and who has it been prepared for?

Why are the goats given to the eternal fire if that place was not prepared specifically for them?

It is interesting that the fire was not prepared for the goats but for the rebellious angels. No Scripture ever indicates that the fallen angels had any subsequent chance to repent, but people do. So no one need join the demons in this fire. Still, some will opt for hell by rejecting Christ. When they do, they have no one but themselves to blame.

How are the sheep and the goats similar? How are they different?

The goats ask the same kind of question as the sheep did, and Jesus offers a parallel reply. These people are condemned for sins of omission as well as commission. Improper response to Christian witnesses leads to damnation.

How did Jesus summarize the parable? How does that conclusion impact the way that you see Jesus? How does it impact the way you see and serve the needy?

There remains no more pressing priority in this life than to respond properly to Jesus and His messengers by becoming disciples through faith in him. Then we must demonstrate Christ’s lordship in our lives through acts of service.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

This parable of Jesus can be convicting when we consider our faith and our actions. Jesus had stern words for some and welcoming words for others. How do we fit into the two types of people that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 25:31-46?

How would the world be different if every Christian became involved in ministering to people in need?

What opportunities does our church provide for ministering to people in need? How can you participate?

How does the fact that you will be judged change the way you view your life? How does it change the way you look at others?

What are actions we as a group can take to help those in need?

PRAY

Close in prayer, asking God to give you a heart for the poor and needy. Praise God for His wisdom and ask that He would show the people of our church ways to help people in our community. Thank God for His saving grace and for the glimpses of His majesty that He gives us in our world.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 25:31-46

25:31. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory" points to the future and the closing era of God's plan of redemption. Jesus' return at some point in the future is often treated with slight embarrassment today by otherwise fine Christians. Their expectations have not been met even though the signs seem to line up again and again. The words "glory," "angels," and "throne" call attention to the majesty, power and authority of the second coming.

25:32. The word for "nations" can refer either to Gentiles only or to all people from every nation including Israel. The latter is to be preferred here. The emphasis is on all people as individuals, not on nations collectively. Each person will be judged based on his or her response to the Gospel and will receive Christ's verdict. Jesus "will separate them one from another." This image of judgment gives rise to several important points. First, all of human life and effort boils down to a basic choice based on Jesus' message and sacrifice. A second important point we can take from the image in this parable concerns the sheep and the goats. Distinguishing between these two animals is difficult, especially from a distance, except for someone who knows precisely what to look for. A shepherd is qualified.

25:33. The positions of "left" and "right" indicate the complete distinction. There is no middle ground. The sheep have the position on the right, the place of honor. The goats are on the left, in this case the place of rejection.

25:34. "The King" emphasizes Jesus' dominion and power at the final judgment. His reign, which is no less real today, will be complete—all of creation will be forced to acknowledge His authority. "Those on His right" are invited to "come." They will receive their reward for faithful service. Notice they are not about to be blessed but already are blessed by my Father. The word "blessed" emphasizes God's action in bringing people into His desired relationship with them. The fact of our relationship to God leads naturally to the next image in the parable. "Inherit the kingdom" underscores the Christian's place in God's family. The Scripture often uses the imagery of an "inheritance" to describe our inclusion in God's family and the reward we will enjoy.

25:35. The criteria for judgment is surprising, and a few preliminary words may help to understand the specific intent of the parable. Judgment is based on works in this parable, but this does not mean Jesus was describing salvation by works. He was emphasizing the importance of service, and service especially to the neediest people in our society. His strong language here does not negate the wider New Testament teaching of salvation by grace through faith. It simply highlights the results of salvation.

25:36. "Naked" may refer to someone without any clothes or someone who only has an undergarment. Ministry to the sick is always important. Only when you have benefited firsthand from this kind of kindness can you really appreciate its impact. In this context the people in prison may refer to those who fell on hard times through debt or were abused in some manner by the wealthy and influential. They were the weak and poor.

25:37-39. One of the most interesting features of this parable is the element of surprise on both sides. Our service to others must not be undertaken with the intention of piling up rewards. That kind of motivation undermines the genuineness of service.

25:40. Who are the "least of these my brothers"? Some interpreters suggest brothers refers to the disciples only, but such an understanding is far too narrow and in effect limits the application of the parable to the first century. A better understanding is the more obvious interpretation, that they are any person in need.

25:41. This passage essentially mirrors the previous section with a few more interesting details. “The eternal fire” is a detail of hell about which we can either make too much or too little. Some preachers over the years appear almost to take delight in describing their visions of hell.

25:42-43. The criteria for the rejection of the wicked is the opposite of the criteria for the inclusion of the righteous. Their sins are primarily those of omission.

25:44. You can almost hear in these words of defense, “but we never hurt anyone!” That is true, but the failure to show compassion reveals the state of one’s soul. A related plea of “if we had known it was you!” is equally unconvincing.

25:45. “You did not do” underscores the inaction of the cursed. Interestingly, their lack of service, as benign as that may sound to us, puts them in the same category as those who commit gross sins, reel drunkenly down the streets, or scream profanely. This verse highlights the danger of the “isolated moral person” who did nothing to harm anyone.

25:46. The opposite destinations underscore the finality of the verdict that is rendered at the judgment. Both are “eternal.”