

December 30

Lesson 5 (NIV)

LOVE GOD AND SERVE OTHERS

DEVOTIONAL READING: James 2:14–26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew

25:31–46

MATTHEW 25:31–46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 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 clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

KEY VERSE

The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”—**Matthew 25:40**

OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Unit I: God Is Worthy of Our Love

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the setting for Jesus’ sheep and goats teaching.
2. Explain what separates people into “sheep” and “goats” in Jesus’ teaching.
3. Express one way to improve his or her congregation’s benevolent outreach.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Social Justice Rediscovered
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Gathering of Nations (MATTHEW 25:31–33)
 - A. Judge Is Seated (v. 31)
 - B. Judged Are Separated (vv. 32, 33)
- II. Sheep on the Right (MATTHEW 25:34–40)
 - A. Sheeps’ Blessing (vv. 34–36)

A Drink of Cold Water

- B. Sheeps’ Surprise (vv. 37–39)
- C. Sheeps’ Justification (v. 40)
- III. Goats on the Left (MATTHEW 25:41–45)
 - A. Goats’ Curse (vv. 41–43)
 - God, Our Judge*
 - B. Goats’ Challenge (vv. 44)
 - C. Goats’ Condemnation (v. 45)
- IV. Eternal Destinies (MATTHEW 25:46)

Conclusion

- A. Justice Delayed
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Micah My-kuh.

Olivet Ol-ih-vet.

Introduction

A. Social Justice Rediscovered

Many people have a great interest in pursuing social justice. This is a common passion within the so-called millennial generation, a group that churches desperately want to reach. Church leaders find that millennials have little interest in supporting traditional church programs (especially Sunday morning services that have not changed for decades). Millennials want to do more than talk about being Christians; they want to do

Christian things, especially things they believe advance social justice.

Pursuing social justice today isn't so much about blaming those who cause injustice as it is about helping those who suffer from injustice. The church's concern for millennials and the millennials' concern for social justice have given this cause a rebirth, almost as if it has been discovered for the first time.

We are wise to remember, though, that the church has a long history of helping those in need, a history based on the teachings of Jesus and the practices of the early church. A key biblical basis for this is Jesus' illustration in [Matthew 25](#) of the separation of sheep and goats, the text for today's lesson.

B. Lesson Context

Jesus' final week of ministry, the days leading to his crucifixion and resurrection, began with his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This event is recorded in all four Gospels and traditionally is called the Triumphant Entry ([Matthew 21:1-11](#); [Mark 11:1-11](#); [Luke 19:28-44](#); [John 12:12-19](#)). The events beginning with that entry into Jerusalem, known as Passion Week or Holy Week, comprise a disproportional percentage of the material in each Gospel account—about 36 percent of Matthew, 37 percent of Mark, 28 percent of Luke, and 44 percent of John.

These eight days, culminating with Resurrection Sunday, are huge when contrasted with the other 33 years of Jesus' life. It has been said that the Gospel authors' accounts of Passion Week are the story they dearly want to tell; everything else is prelude. This is overstatement, but we should certainly pay attention to what happens during this week!

We might think that Jesus spends these last few days preparing his disciples for his death and saying his good-byes (and he does some of this), but a significant part of the week is dedicated to teaching. The longest block of teaching comes on Tuesday. This block is known as the Olivet Discourse because of its setting on the Mount of Olives, which looms over Jerusalem to the east. In this discourse, Jesus spoke prophetically about the future destruction of Jerusalem (fulfilled in AD 70), about his return in power and glory, and about the future judgment of humankind. In Matthew, this represents two full chapters: [24](#) and [25](#).

Matthew ends this discourse with Jesus' teaching on the separation of the sheep and the goats. Sometimes this is referred to as a parable, but it is unlike the majority of Jesus' parables for several reasons. First, it is not referred to as a parable (compare [Matthew 13:3](#)). Second, it is not framed as being about the "kingdom of heaven," as are many of Jesus'

parables in Matthew (see [13:24](#)). Third, it is not a made-up story used to illustrate Jesus' teaching, but is about future events presented in a prophetic and symbolic manner.

Our lesson is from the third section of [Matthew 25](#). The first section is the parable of the 10 virgins, a story about wedding attendants and their preparations (or lack thereof) for a delayed bridegroom. The second section, the parable of the bags of gold, relates how servants have used resources entrusted to them during their master's absence. The general point of both parables is to be ready, because you don't know when the bridegroom/master will return ([Matthew 25:13](#)).

These lead to the final section, which begins with a picture of the return of the Messiah.

I. Gathering of Nations ([MATTHEW 25:31-33](#))

A. Judge Is Seated (v. 31)

31. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

As Jesus speaks of *the Son of Man* coming, we are to understand this as referring to himself. Matthew uses this designation for Jesus numerous times, always on the lips of Jesus (examples:

[Matthew 9:6](#); [16:13](#); [20:18](#)). This title emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, but it is also a term for the Messiah drawn from [Daniel 7:13](#).

As in Daniel, Jesus presents a dramatic vision of the future that emphasizes *glory*, the Lord's *angels*, and a *throne* designated for the Son of Man. This throne is not a decorative antique, as portrayed in pictures we see. Rather, it is a seat of judgment, the throne of a judging (see [Psalm 9:7](#)).

What Do You Think?

What do you have yet to do in order to be ready for the return of Christ the King?

Digging Deeper

If the King were to return today, how would he evaluate your faith?

B. Judged Are Separated (vv. 32, 33)

32, 33. "All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

The audience for the judge is *all the nations*, an inclusive, worldwide term that indicates much more than the nation of Israel (see [Isaiah 66:18](#)). This is judgment of all humanity.

This scene does not depict individual

trials with evidence and attorneys. Rather, the mass of people is divided into two groups. Jesus likens this to a *shepherd* separating his mixed flock into two groups based on species. *Sheep* and *goats* might be herded together for grazing, but they are of different value to the shepherd. Both animals may be slaughtered for meat, but the other products of goats are milk and cheese, whereas sheep provide wool.

We should not be drawn into this analogy too far, however. These are not animals but people (*all the nations*) and the Son of Man (the *shepherd*) is their judge.

II. Sheep on the Right (MATTHEW 25:34-40)

A. Sheeps' Blessing (vv. 34-36)

34. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'

The sheep/goats analogy is dropped when the judge renders his verdicts. He is not just a judge, though, but *the King*. Kings in the ancient world are more than heads of state or military commanders. They are lawgivers and judges for their people, reigning and rendering judgments (example: [1 Kings 3:28](#)). The dual

roles are often attributed to the Lord, the ultimate king and judge ([Psalm 96:10](#); [Isaiah 33:22](#)).

The first verdict is given *to those on his right*, the sheep of the analogy. They are invited to *come* and claim *the kingdom* which has been *prepared for* them as an *inheritance*. This is an invitation to enter Heaven, for their kingdom has been ready *since the creation of the world*, an allusion to the truth of [Genesis 1:1](#).

Jesus' words also help us know the identity of the judge. He is surely the "Son of Man" ([Matthew 25:31](#), above), Jesus himself in all his glory. He invites those judged favorably to enjoy the blessing of his *Father*, a proper pronouncement for this king who is the judge, who is the Son of God.

35, 36. " '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, 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 king gives the basis for this favorable verdict, and it is unlike anything we would hear in a law court today. He does not cite statutes or legal precedent, but speaks in personal terms. Those the king invites to share Heaven receive this judgment because of the way they have

acted toward him. This judge lists six areas in which they have acted correctly: helping people with lack of food, lack of water, lack of housing, lack of clothes, lack of health care, and lack of visitation *in prison*. All of these are easy for us to understand except the last one: visiting prisoners.

In the ancient world (and in many countries today), jailers supply prisoners with few, if any, provisions. Food, clothing, and medical care are more likely to come from family and friends who bring such things from outside.

All six kindnesses are acts of justice. In a basic sense, righteousness is doing the right thing, as well as not being guilty of doing the wrong thing. Justice, a similar concept in the Bible to righteousness, is wanting to see the right thing done for other people.

The key to understanding this is to remember that true justice is seeing the right thing done for others from God's perspective, which is not necessarily identical to our own perspective. When we do things to relieve human suffering, we are doing God's work. We are doing justice. This is social justice, one person at a time.

What Do You Think?

What are specific ways our church can address the six needs of people given in this story?

Digging Deeper

What will be your part in correcting any identified deficiencies?

A DRINK OF COLD WATER

In the 1970s I was a missionary in Liberia, an African nation plagued with a corrupt government. Police officers were both victims and perpetrators in this unjust system.

They harassed motorists as a way of subsidizing their meager pay. In the reverse of the problem people of color sometimes face in the United States today, at times I found myself guilty of "driving while white."

Almost all light-skinned people in the country of Liberia were at the time high-paid foreign nationals working for American or European corporations that were there to extract Liberia's wealth of natural resources. Such people were obvious targets for bribe-seeking policemen, and so were missionaries.

Here is a typical scenario: I would hear a police whistle, then look to see who wanted me to pull over. The officer would say, "It's a very hot day; I need a drink of cold water." Those were code words for "I'm looking for a bribe."

When asked what I was doing in the country, I would identify myself as a missionary. At that point the talk of a

missionary. At that point the talk of a bribe would usually cease. It was common knowledge that missionaries were bringing something of great value *into* the country, and doing so on a very low salary. In this case, our bringing the gospel and Christian schooling were the “drink of cold water”!

With the knowledge that we were in the country to bless the officer’s people, his sense of injustice turned into gratitude. As Jesus said, those who serve him will be blessed!

—C. R. B.

B. Sheeps’ Surprise (vv. 37–39)

37. “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?’

This blessed group, *the righteous*, who are offered the riches of Heaven, are incredulous at the king’s response. Something does not make sense to them. They don’t recall ever serving the king in this way. When did they relieve his hunger or thirst?

38, 39. “‘When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

When did they provide housing for the king? When did they bring *clothes* to

cover him? When was the king *sick* and needed a friend to nurse him to health? When did they ever make a visit to the *prison* to provide for the needs of the imprisoned king?

That last question is the most fantastic of all. Who has ever heard of a king in a prison, reigning from his cell? Obviously, something else is behind the judging words of the king.

What Do You Think?

What methodology should our church use in prioritizing its resources for local ministries of benevolence?

Digging Deeper

Which needs are best met by cooperating with secular agencies and/or other churches? Why?

C. Sheeps’ Justification (v. 40)

40. “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

The King solves the mystery quickly by identifying the precise objects of the acts of righteousness for the blessed ones. They have been kind to *one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine*, and the king considers such benevolence to be a service to him personally. This judge, who might never need food, water, shelter, clothes, medical care, or prison visita-

tion, has a heart of compassion for the unfortunate people who need such help.

We should not understand this to imply that the “sheep” have earned their blessing and salvation. Salvation cannot be earned. And even if it could, the acts have been done unwittingly, without intent to curry favor with the king. These kindnesses have been motivated by hearts of kindness, hearts in tune with the king’s own heart.

What Do You Think?

Thinking of a time when you relieved, or attempted to relieve, the suffering of another, what did you learn from that experience for future application?

Digging Deeper

In what ways do you anticipate that assisting others will help you grow in your faith?

III. Goats on the Left

(MATTHEW 25:41-45)

A. Goats’ Curse (vv. 41-43)

41. “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

In Jesus’ world, to be positioned on the right hand of the king is the most favored position. To be *on his left* is less

favored, and this is certainly true here. The judge now addresses the goats, who have been gathered there.

The king-judge’s verdict to the goat group starkly contrasts his message to the sheep group. They are not blessed, but *cursed*. They are not invited to enter the kingdom, but commanded to *depart*. Their destination is not an inheritance waiting for them from the foundation of the world, but *eternal fire*. This is a place specially *prepared for the devil and his angels* (compare [Revelation 12:9](#)).

GOD, OUR JUDGE

I led an early morning men’s Bible study for several years. One of the regular members of the group resisted any talk of God as the judge of the world. Whenever the text we were studying declared (or even hinted at) the idea that God would judge people, the man would try to reason his way around it.

For a long time I sought to understand his objections intellectually. I would answer the issues he raised as logically as I could, citing other biblical evidence that supported the concept of a loving yet judging heavenly Father.

Then, during one morning’s study, my friend broke into tears and opened his heart to the group. He told us about the family in which he had been raised. His father professed to be a Christian, but he

was an angry, judgmental, violent, and abusive man. My friend and his siblings lived in constant fear of their father's sometimes vicious retribution. An act of the slightest disobedience could result in extreme punishment, either physically or psychologically. The children grew to hate their father so much that when he died none of them attended his memorial service.

Perhaps you have friends whose family experience has twisted their view of God. How can you help them overcome a distorted view of our heavenly Father?

—C. R. B.

42, 43. “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

The cursed group have failed in all six areas of compassion listed as part of the first verdict: hunger, thirst, housing, clothing, sickness, and visitation.

B. Goats' Challenge (vv. 44)

44. “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

The pronouncement just given seems mysterious, however, in that the goat group apparently has not heard anything said to those ones on the right a few minutes earlier. As did the righteous ones, those cursed question the king's assessment. They cannot remember any situation in which they failed to assist the *Lord*, their judge. When does a king ever need food or water? When does a mighty judge lack in housing or clothing? When does a king fail to have medical care or become imprisoned?

C. Goats' Condemnation (v. 45)

45. “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

The same standard is cited for the cursed as the king used for the blessed. They are guilty of failing to serve him because of their lack of compassion *for one of the least of these*. There were plenty of opportunities to help those in need, lots of people who needed assistance. Denial of compassion for people in the community is equivalent to spurning the needs of the judge himself.

What Do You Think?

What will others see in your life in terms of “sheep” characteristics as a result of today's lesson? How will you make it happen?

Digging Deeper

Considering 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11, what sorts of things need to be in your life to be considered a child “of the day”? Why?

IV. Eternal Destinies (MATTHEW 25:46)

46. “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Again, we should be cautioned to remember that Jesus is not teaching a system in which our works make us righteous or blessed. No one is unfailingly responsive to the needs of others. And no one is so hard-hearted as to never care about others. The point is that God, the ultimate judge, does notice what we do and don’t do. If we want to serve him, we will serve others. This is justice enacted, righteousness at work. The time for so doing is not unlimited; either *eternal punishment* or *eternal life* await all humanity.

Conclusion

A. Justice Delayed

“Justice delayed is justice denied” is a saying in the legal world. The saying advocates timely decisions by judges. This may be compared with Jesus’ parable

in which a corrupt judge keeps putting off rendering a verdict to bring justice to a cheated widow (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus likens this parable to the final judgment in language similar to that of our lesson: “When the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 25:31; also Luke 18:8), final justice will be administered.

By God’s plan, then, this final justice is delayed. Does that mean it is denied? Not at all! This is the message of Jesus in our lesson. We should not worry about our destiny at the final judgment; rather, we should attend to our attitudes in serving the Lord today. Do we truly have the heart of Jesus, the one who had great compassion for the sufferers he encountered (Matthew 15:32)? He healed diseases. He fed multitudes.

We enact God’s justice—his righteousness—on a small scale whenever we act compassionately to relieve suffering. This may take many forms. It can involve ministries of famine relief (food), drilling wells (water), building homes (housing), thrift stores (clothing), free medical clinics (health), and/or prison ministry (visitation). Some Christians may not have the capacity for physical participation, but they support such ministries financially.



Visual for Lesson 5. Point to this visual and ask your learners to take a silent minute to rank-order the needs in your area. Compare and contrast results.

Furthermore, we should understand this is not entirely an individual matter. Churches can take active roles in acts of compassion for the needy in their community and with international relief organizations.

As with the caution for individuals in these areas, churches should take care too. If social justice projects are designed to garner publicity or enhance community reputation, they will flounder. Doing justice must be motivated from a heart that loves justice (Micah 6:8). It must be motivated by the ethic of the Golden Rule: that we would treat others the ways we want to be treated.

If we were without food, wouldn't we welcome a hot meal? If we were without housing, wouldn't we welcome shelter? Benevolent acts are not self-serving, but

gain the heart of the king. We don't need to wait for his judgments; we can judge ourselves by our actions and inactions now.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we never turn our backs on the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the poorly clothed, the sick, or the imprisoned! May our hearts be like that of your Son. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Caring for others is serving Jesus.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)
Student

Into the Lesson

Display the following on a tattered piece of cardboard:

I'm hungry. Please help.

Say, "We've all seen sad-looking people holding up signs like this. What are some reasons for being reluctant to help a person holding such a sign?" Jot responses on the board during several minutes of free discussion. Then ask, "How did things turn out when you took action to meet a need in such a situation?"

After volunteers describe two or three situations, say, "Even though we may have good reasons for not attempting to help in certain ways, that doesn't mean we should give up on helping. Let's see why and how."

Alternative. Write the following on the board:

HUNGRY / SICK / HOMELESS / LONELY

Have students pair off to discuss times when one or more of these words described their lives, how it happened, and who helped (if anyone). After a few minutes of sharing, say, "After being in

such situations, people tend to be more compassionate to others in similar straits. In today's lesson we'll learn the best reason for reaching out to the hurting."

Into the Word

Ask students to open their Bibles to [Matthew 24](#). Then pose the following questions: 1-In what passage do we discover where Jesus was when he taught his disciples? ([24:3](#)); 2-What verse begins Jesus' teachings about the visibility of his return? ([24:30](#))? Use these and questions of your own to set the context for the study passage of [Matthew 25:31-46](#).

Next, have students form groups of three or four. Designate groups as evenly as possible to be representing either "the Sheep" or "the Goats." Distribute the following assignment to all groups on handouts you prepare. *Assignment:* Read [Matthew 25:31-46](#). 1-Where will the Son of Man initially place those of your group's designation? 2-What six ways to help people are mentioned? 3-Why will those whom your group represents be so surprised by what Jesus will say and do? 4-How do one's actions or inactions relate to Jesus? 5-Where will those whom your group represents end up? (*Location of answers:* 1-vv. [33](#); 2-vv. [35](#), [36](#), [42](#), [43](#); 3-vv. [37-39](#), [44](#); 4-vv. [40](#), [45](#); 5-vv. [34](#), [41](#), [46](#).)

Allow sufficient time for students to work through the questions; then have them share their answers. Make the point of why the people will be separated into each group; use the commentary to fix misconceptions.

Make a transition by asking, “How easy or hard is it for you to have the right attitude toward people who need help?” Raise the issue of [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#) if no one else does.

Into Life

If your church is involved in some type of benevolence outreach in your community (food pantry, homeless shelter, etc.), ask the person heading up the program to speak to your class about it and name ways class members can help.

If your church has no such ministry, discuss how your church can start one; list ideas on the board. Then ask, “What ministries already established by others can we support?” Allow time to discuss the subject; make plans for some type of follow-up.

Option. Several days in advance, distribute copies of the “Vignettes of Kindness” scripts to class members willing to serve as actors. These scripts are on the reproducible page, which you can download.

After each vignette, ask, “In what ways did the attitude and action of one of

the two people match and not match that of Jesus?”