**

**1st MARCH 2015
 ‘UNITED APPEAL FOR MISSION SUNDAY’**

## Theme: Being the people Jesus calls us to be

Sermon Notes

# Sheep and Goats

*And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ Matthew 25:40*

**Grace and good works**

‘Being a Christian his not about doing good works, it’s about trusting in Jesus.’ said the preacher. ‘It is all about grace, not works’. True, this is the essence of the Christian message. God in Christ has acted on our behalf. We could never be good enough to satisfy God’s standards. But Jesus Christ has died in our place to bear the penalty and wrath of a holy God against us, sinners, so that we might be saved. God calls us not to earn our salvation, but to trust him. This is the wonderful truth that we believe. However, when we talk about being a Christian and only ever speak about believing the right things, we are dangerously out of step with the New Testament. For the New Testament insists that being a Christian is, in fact, about doing good.

**Adopted to do ‘good works’**

Faith brings us into union with Christ, and through Him we are adopted as the children of God. (Galatians 3:26ff, Galatians. 4:4, Ephesians.1:5, John 1:12, 1 John 3:1) Adoption, Packer argues ‘*is …the highest privilege that the gospel offers; higher even than justification …because of the richer relationship with God that it involves*’. He states that in justification, God the righteous judge gives us the gift of acquittal and peace at the cost of Calvary. But in adoption (see WCF XII), God takes us into his family and establishes us as his children and heirs; and as a result our entire christian life is to be understood in terms of sonship. Adopted children who are expected to show the family resemblance in their attitudes and in their actions. In the same way as the ‘*knowledge of his unique sonship controlled Jesus’s living of his own life on earth, so he* [Jesus] *insists that the knowledge of our adoptive sonship must control our lives too.* ‘ Packer p.237 (John 6:36,38; John 4:34) Hence when Jesus calls his followers to *‘Love you enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.’* he naturally states the reason why? So ‘that *you may be sons of your Father in heaven…..be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’* (Matt 5:44ff)

Paul in the Epistles exhorts christians …’*not to grow weary of doing good*’, ‘*As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone*.’ (Galatians 6:9, 10, 1 Thess 5:15, 2 Thess 3:13). Those who are wealthy must also be ‘*rich in good works’* (1 Tim 6:18). Indeed , all ‘*those who have believed in God - be careful to devote themselves to good works.’* (Titus 3:8) James scoffs at the lifeless ‘faith; that is not accompanied by good deeds (James 2:14-17). In New Testament thought, right belief ought to be worked out in right action; “*for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.’* (Ephesians 2:8-10)

But when I look around, I see that many of us are far more concerned with right thinking than we are with right practice. Many of us who rejoice in the wonder of our justification, are failing to work out the implications of our adoption. We manage to overlook the wealth of Scriptural material which commands us to live rightly and which shows us why and how we should do so. It is perhaps as a result of this skewed vision, that we are perhaps, shocked and bewildered by a passage of scripture like Matthew 25:31-46 in which Jesus, speaking of the Day of judgment, explains the separation of the sheep and the goats in terms of their ‘good works'.

**‘Good works’ and the Last Day**

In this passage we are told that the Son of Man, (v.31) will judge the whole world and he will separate the ‘sheep and the goats’ . ‘*He will separate them one from another just as a shepherd, having run his sheep and goats together all day, separates them after them in the evening.* (Green BST p264) The sheep he will place on his right and the goats on his left. The sheep, whom he calls ‘*my Father’s blessed ones*’, are told to inherit the kingdom. Leon Morris says this verb ‘inherit’ draws attention to a significant aspect of their salvation. ‘*Something that is inherited comes as a gift, not a result of being earned or merited’.*  Grace lies behind their final inheritance. And what they inherit is the kingdom prepared by God for them from the ‘foundation of the world.’ The goats on the other hand, are to go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

The surprise comes in the ‘test’ that Jesus applies in separating the sheep from the goats. Jesus speaks of some of the things the sheep have done on this earth - their good works. Four times in this passage (v.34-44) the list ‘of works’ is repeated, in a positive or negative form…*For I was hungry and you gave me something 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.’* Jesus is not saying that these works have earned them their place in the kingdom. This is not their eternal reward. Remember they are inheritors of the kingdom by God’s grace. Rather, Jesus draws attention to their works as evidence of their adoption as children of God; children who bear a family resemblance to the One who has been at work in them.

The sheep, who clearly have not placed much store by their works, are puzzled and wonder when they did these things for Jesus. They ask the question v37. *‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 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? ‘*

Jesus answers v.40 *‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’*

**‘Good works’ and the ‘least of my brothers’’**

Commentators suggest two ways of understanding *‘the least of these my brothers*’. One is to consider that, since elsewhere in scripture Jesus’ brothers are his disciples (Matt 12:48-49; Mark 3:35, Matt 28:8-10, John 20:17 ff, Hebrew 2:12); Jesus is saying that the ‘test’ will be the way people have reacted towards his lowly followers. Those whom the world considers be the least important, are in fact significant because of their relationship to Jesus. Hence, the sheep have rightly been treating their needy adopted brothers and sisters as the would have treated Jesus. This view is supported by other teachings of Jesus. (see Matt 10:42 and 18:6, 10,14 or Matt 10:40) The other way to understand this phrase is to say that brothers includes anyone in need; and in this case the test is the way they behaved toward lowly people in general.

Calvin favours the former interpretation stating ‘*only the faithful are expressly commended to our pity here,‘* but he goes on to say, ‘*there is a common tie that binds all the children of Adam.*’ Morris argues that this interpretation ‘*does not give the follower of Jesus license to do good deeds to fellow Christians but none to outsiders. Such an attitude is foreign to the teachings of Jesus*.’ We know that in fact Jesus was very strong on this matter. He said that if we only love those who love us, if we only do good to those who do good to us, we are no different than unbelievers. Certainly we should show mercy to your brothers and sisters when they suffer. This is what true families do. But if you only love your family, if you only make sacrifices to meet the needs of your family, you are no better than an unbeliever. Our good works are to extend beyond the family. (Luke 6:28-36)

**‘Good works’ - concrete action**

Doing good requires a transformed heart, but it also demands practical application. The problem is that even with this principle in place and even possessing the best will in the world, we often need help knowing what to do and the context in which to do it. Your minister may be aware of opportunities for ‘doing good’ in your church family and community. But one way in which we together, as a denomination, take seriously this call of the gospel is the United Appeal. Through United Appeal we demonstrate our love, concern and compassion, both for our needy brothers and sisters and those who as yet do not know Jesus. As you contribute to the fund each year, you are enabling the church to carry out the vital work of gospel mission. Including, resourcing gospel ministries in Ireland and overseas. Doing mercy mission through providing food, medical care, education, hospital, prison and university chaplaincy. Helping to fund hostels for rehabilitation or residential and nursing homes or the elderly Investing in children’s ministry and the preparation of future minsters.

As disciples of Jesus we are most like our heavenly Father, who has adopted us, when we are drawn to show compassion and mercy and love.

**Books:**

1. Knowing God JI Packer

2. The Message of Matthew M Green

3. The Gospel According to Matthew L Morris