

KINGDOM LIFE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 25

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food . . .’”
(Matt. 25:34–35)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Feb. 17	2 Tim. 3:10–17	Equipped for Every Good Work
T	Feb. 18	Ps. 119:17–24	Delight in God’s Ways
W	Feb. 19	Matt. 25:1–13	Keep Awake; The Bridegroom Is Coming
Th	Feb. 20	Matt. 25:14–15, 19–30	Praise for a Faithful Servant
F	Feb. 21	Ps. 119:41–48	Choose the Way of Faithfulness
Sa	Feb. 22	Isa. 58	The Fast That God Chooses

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Sam and Grace have a small farm where they raise vegetables for farmer’s markets. They decide to expand to small animals, so they consider both goats and sheep. They learn that sheep and goats can coexist in the same field because they have different food needs. Sheep are grazers, preferring grass and weeds, while goats are browsers that eat baby trees, bushes, and bushy plants. Sam and Grace purchase a few of each—the goats for milk and the sheep for fleece and meat. They notice that the sheep and goats are herd animals, clustering together, but only with their own kind. They seem to have different “languages.” Goats rear up on their hind legs to butt heads, while sheep put their head down and run at their opponents to ram them.

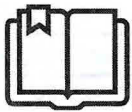
The goats need to be milked every day, so Sam and Grace have to separate them from the sheep once daily. They also have to separate them when shearing time comes, and they bring the sheep into the barn. Sometimes the sheep overgraze the grass in the shared field. In those instances, Sam and Grace move the sheep to a different field, which also requires separating them.

Sam and Grace’s small farm is similar to the subsistence farming common in Jesus’ day. The different personalities

and “languages” of sheep and goats would have been common knowledge for most people because towns were small and farming took place close by. Separating sheep and goats would have been an everyday farming activity.

Jesus draws on commonly shared knowledge in Matthew 25, as he does so often in his teaching. Stories about the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28–30), farmers sowing seed (Matt. 13:1–9), and separating sheep and goats enable Jesus’s listeners to engage because Jesus evokes everyday sights and activities.

God who cultivates the land, speak to us—both comfort and challenge—in our daily lives. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Matthew 25:31–46

25:31 “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 who 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 brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who 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

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

you?’⁴⁵ Then 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.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

MEETING HUMAN NEED

Jesus begins his powerful story with a vivid picture. The Son of Man will come in his glory with all the angels, and “he will sit on the throne of his glory” (Matt. 25:31). Jesus is the king who commands the angels. One day, he will sit on the king’s throne, and all the nations will stand before him. As king, he will separate all people into two categories.

The categories involve meeting human need. Jesus describes five specific, everyday human essentials in verses 35 and 36. All of us, every single human on earth, need food, water, welcome, clothing, and help when we are sick. Jesus mentions an additional human need that applies only in certain cases. Prisoners need visitors in order to survive emotionally and spiritually. Jesus says that some people provided for him when he experienced those situations, and that he will separate people into groups—like farmers separate sheep and goats—depending on who took care of him and who did not.

Hospitality was a core value in the ancient Near East. Hospitality to strangers was considered to be a matter of personal honor (see Gen. 18:1–8). The needs met in hospitality, similar to the needs Jesus describes in Matthew 25, are material, physical needs, yet the act of meeting them addresses deep emotional, spiritual, and social needs. We were created for relationship, inclusion, security, and significance, and addressing basic human needs contributes to our sense of wholeness. In the early church, meeting physical needs and sharing resources are significant marks of community among Jesus’ followers. Acts 2:42–47 describes the sharing of money and possessions. Acts 6:1–6 lays out the dilemma of unequal food distribution for widows, a problem solved by appointing Stephen and six others to make sure everyone was fed.

In the story in Matthew 25, the sheep—the righteous—are told they are the ones who provided for Jesus. They are baffled by this (vv. 37–39). They have no recollection of feeding, clothing, welcoming, or visiting Jesus. Jesus tells them that when they do it for “the least of these who are members of my family” (v. 40),

they do it for him. Their ability and desire to provide hospitality and care for people in need is a core part of their values and behavior. They didn't provide care for Jesus's family in order to impress Jesus. Sacrificial generosity, attributed in this story to the righteous, is the heartbeat of a life that loves and follows God, since we follow the infinitely generous and self-sacrificing God (see 1 John 2:5–6 and 4:7–8).



Describe an instance when you were totally surprised when someone said you helped them.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE KINGDOM

The Hebrew word “shalom,” translated into English as “peace,” is a rich, deep word encompassing well-being in every area of life. It includes peace, the absence of war and conflict. It also evokes social, emotional, physical, and spiritual wholeness. Shalom is the language of the kingdom of God. Jesus, who inaugurates the kingdom, demonstrates his commitment to shalom for all people within and outside Israel through his healing, interactions, nurture of the disciples, and ultimately through his death and resurrection. When he gets angry with the Jewish leaders, he reacts with passion because they deny shalom by making it harder for ordinary people to draw near to God.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the righteous are the ones who speak the kingdom language of shalom. They know that God desires well-being for everyone, no matter how challenging their circumstances. They know that food, drink, clothing, lodging, welcome, and visits in prison are physical acts that nurture wholeness of body, mind, heart, and spirit. They are committed to showing the love that God has given them. In the same way that sheep and goats don't speak the same “language,” not all people speak the language of shalom. But God desires that we learn the language of the Kingdom.

Jesus is present in the lives of all who are vulnerable because the heart of the kingdom is shalom for everyone. The righteous in the parable didn't know Jesus was there, but we do now. We can look for Jesus when we show love to anyone.

It might be tempting to see the parable of the sheep and goats as a story that encourages legalism, the idea that we must do something to earn God's approval. The great theme of the Protestant Reformation is “only grace.” We are welcomed as

God's children only by grace, shown to us in Jesus and made real in us by the Holy Spirit. As we experience this enormous grace, the triune God begins a work of transformation in us, shaping us into the image of Jesus. We learn the kingdom language of shalom. We long for everyone to experience wholeness and well-being. We provide practical care that nurtures shalom. We meet Jesus when we provide care, because Jesus is already there with and in everyone who is vulnerable.

Jesus describes the people we provide care for as his family. Sadly, family language doesn't work for everyone because human families can be the source of so much pain. However, the family that Jesus invites us into is a community of wholeness, justice, peace, and joy.

? When and where have you met Jesus as you extended hospitality or care?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Psalm 131 describes a weaned child on her mother's lap. She no longer nurses for sustenance, so she experiences no urgency to eat as she leans against her mother. She soaks up her mother's love and experiences love and well-being. The psalmist describes the peace of this experience: "But I have calmed and quieted my soul" (v. 2).

God's desire for shalom for all means that we receive nurture from God and then turn to nurture others. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, Paul describes the compassion we receive from God, sometimes given to us by caring friends, which then motivates us to offer compassion to others. A central characteristic of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated is this back-and-forth movement between receiving from God and then showing God's mercy to others. God does not intend that we offer hospitality and welcome to others every moment of our lives. If we rest in God and receive from God, then we will have something to offer.

Life in God's kingdom of shalom, then, includes moments of both rest and service. For some, resting in God's love means keeping Sabbath. For others, retreats, silent prayer, or mindfulness meditation enable them to experience calm and quiet for their soul. Many Christians meet God in nature, experiencing moments of restoration when nature speaks to them of God's beauty and majesty.

Christians sometimes use the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee as helpful illustrations for the life of faith. The Dead Sea has no outlet. The fresh water flowing into it from the Jordan River has brought minerals that have accumulated over the centuries, making the water toxic and unable to support life. The Dead Sea provides a vivid picture of a life that receives but never gives. The Sea of Galilee, a healthy lake further upstream on the Jordan River, receives fresh water but then passes that water on. Long term we cannot give food, water, welcome, care, and compassion to others if we are not receiving from God, and we will not remain healthy unless we give as well as receive.

These 13 lessons about the Kingdom of God have shown God's plan in history: God worked through the earthly king, David, as well as through prophets like Zechariah and John the Baptist, who saw ahead to the new Kingdom Jesus brought. Jesus, God made flesh, established a kingdom of justice, peace, and joy. We are invited to live in it as beloved children, called to participate in God's love for all creation.

? In what ways do you make space for God to bring living water into your life? In what ways do you most commonly share living water with others?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The "sheep" did not necessarily see their actions as relating to Jesus personally (Matt. 25:37–39); their generosity was part of how they lived life, a structure, or an attitude of the heart that they cultivated that overflowed into charity.
2. Generosity is merely sacrificing part of yourself—your time, resources, energy, emotion—on behalf of someone else's need; 1 John 3:16–18 tells us that real generosity flows out of gratitude for what we have been given and out of following God's generous example (1 John 2:5–6).
3. Generosity is also an act of trusting in God for your resources that God will supply what you need generously as you give freely (Prov. 11:24–25; Luke 6:37–38; 2 Cor. 8:12–15).