

“But What if I’m a Goat” by Keeva Kase

Matthew 25: 31–46 (NRSV)

“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.”

There are few questions that hit at the heart of humanity’s interest in religion more than “when I die, will I go to heaven or hell.” Surely, each of us has pondered this eternal question at least once in our lives. When we are first dealt the question, we are often not mature enough, whether chronologically or spiritually, to deal fairly with it. How can a person who barely understands the idea of death be expected to comprehend life after it? It is hard enough to understand life before death.

In the Christian tradition, the idea of life after death is presented to young children in Sunday school settings, though sometimes at home or maybe even school. Regardless of the setting in which this eternal dichotomy is presented, children are faced with what some would consider the most important decision of a person’s life.

I remember when I first began learning about heaven and hell, eternal life vs. eternal punishment. As a child often interprets new information, I found this dichotomy in my environment: heaven was up there, where God and Jesus live with all the Christians, and hell was down there somewhere, where a red, horned, tailed, and hooved devil ran around with a pitchfork tormenting all the non-Christians.

This model worked for me, particularly when trying to make decisions based on the rules. As I understood the rules, if you do good then you go to heaven; if you do bad, you go to hell. Simple enough and easy to follow. And while I was a handful for my

babysitters and Sunday school teachers, this basic understanding of heaven and hell kept me out of too much trouble...for the most part.

As I began to learn more about the world and Christianity, new understandings about what got a person into heaven or hell began to emerge. In so many words, the rules began to change—or, at least that's how I perceived it. No longer did my behavior have any bearing on my eternal soul. All of a sudden, I was responsible for confessing my sins and asking for forgiveness as a means to get into heaven. This formula, while not as straightforward as the previous arrangement, made sense to me. My fellow Methodist youth groupers and I were moved to examine our young lives and identify all the horrible transgressions we had levied against our fellow humans; we had to humble ourselves before God, and seek forgiveness for all our trespasses.

Looking back at fourteen-year-old Keeva, quite surprisingly, I can honestly attest that I had very little sin for which to seek forgiveness. Other than regular little boy growing-up stuff, my sins were small and of little spiritual significance. Regardless, I was able to find stuff, and forgiveness I sought. Through both sincere and crocodile tears I confessed my little sins and begged God to forgive me. At this point in my spiritual development, I was pretty sure I had it figured out. It wasn't about following rules; it was about getting forgiveness. As you can imagine, that new understanding of how the world works led to trouble. My young mind devised that it doesn't really matter what I do, so long as I ask for forgiveness. And forgiveness is free. What a deal! Let's make trouble!

But as I grew and matured, the questions of eternal life and what it means to be a Christian became deeper, existential questions, growing into a passion and life pursuit. I was given a study Bible and I lived in it, reading scriptures every day. Sometimes I would read for devotional purposes, while other times it was about fighting through tough social issues like abortion, capital punishment, sexuality, and the like.

Yet, despite years of studying, praying, attending church, confessing sins, trying to do good versus bad and so on, I am still trying to answer the question: When I die, will I go to heaven or hell?

In the Matthew passage we read that Jesus “will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The division between these two very similar animals, the sheep and the goats, has played a significant role in religious traditions and it is one of the most iconic illustrations of judgment day. It stands as one of the clearest messages from Jesus concerning the end times: what will happen, why it will happen, and to whom it will happen.

Most often, the illustration of the sheep and the goats brings basic believers and schooled theologians alike to posit that the division of the goats and sheep is based purely on one's mercy to those who need it. By identifying himself with the prisoner, the poor, the hungry, Jesus makes loving service to them equivalent to loving service to him. In the passage there are two groups of people hearing Christ's message: those who visited the sick, poor, hungry, and imprisoned, and those who did not. Both groups, however, are equally confused by the story, each asking, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” The difference between the two groups is as obvious as it is easy to overlook. Late, great Christian songwriter Keith Green wrote a song called “Sheep and the Goats,” which

basically reiterates Jesus' message from this passage over a six-minute piano piece. The punch of the song is its final line, where Green sings, "my friends, the only difference between the sheep and the goats, according to this scripture, is what they did, and didn't do!"

While one may infer from this that your afterlife destination is based simply on what you do and do not do—and this is a perfectly reasonable inference—I believe it requires a deeper understanding and further context.

Let's begin simply by examining Jesus' use of goats and sheep as an illustration in the story. Any animal lover should show immediate empathy for the poor goat, who by no fault of his own, has been castigated and thrust into the role of the evildoer. At the same time, as a Christian, we must wonder why we are continuously referred to as the ho-hum, follow-anyone, sheep. Don't we have a mind of our own? Some scholars suggest that Jesus used goats to describe those doomed to punishment because goats will eat anything, no matter whether it is good or bad for them. They will eat grass as quickly as they will eat glass. In a word, goats eat garbage, things that are bad for them, without knowing it. In a way, they are gullible, akin to a person's willingness to take in and believe anything without examination. It can be argued that this illustration alludes to Adam and Eve, who naïvely ate the forbidden fruit.

Another explanation for Jesus' use of goats as the bad guys is that goats are known to have their own mind: they are stubborn, doing what they want, and they are generally tough creatures. To be sure, most depictions of Satan resemble a goat—the hooves, horns, and even goat-like goatee. I recently read a story of a man's first experience with a goat. He recounted that when visiting a farm, he stumbled upon a goat tangled in a barbed wire fence, with only its head free from the tangles and barbs. As he approached the animal, it began to struggle within the barbed wire, furthering its entanglement. The man attempted to calm the animal so that he could help it. But, the more he tried to help and demonstrate empathy toward the goat, the more it struggled, worsening its circumstance and condition. Eventually, the man had no choice but to leave the animal. The man confessed that he felt bad leaving it in that state, knowing that, barring a miracle, the goat would suffer a horrible dying process and eventual death. Even to his own demise, the goat would not allow itself to be helped. What could the man do?

Sheep, however, are known for being vulnerable, stupid, half-blind, and just pitiful overall. They follow blindly without questioning. Dissimilar to most other species, there are no natural leaders in a flock of sheep—though in Iceland, there is a rare strand of sheep known as "leadersheep," but the simple fact that there is a special name for the leadersheep only further supports the species' lack of leadership. When sheep move from one location to another, they tend to wander, simply following the sheep directly in front of them. Sheep need to be led. Sheep need to be tended. They need to be fed and cared for. Sheep need to be helped. Some might say it is a miracle that these humble creatures have survived so well, given their overall vulnerability.

For the proud man or woman, a comparison to a sheep, as we have here in this scriptures passage, seems offensive; it feels diminutive. Why not a lion? Or an eagle? *I'm tough, and I don't want to be a sheep. I want to eat those sheep! I'm smart and self-actualized—I don't follow anyone blindly. I am a noble and proud man who is above the vulnerabilities of a stupid, old sheep. Moreover, I'm not going to be a part of a group of*

other sheepish people who are in a flock together, incapable of caring for themselves. Generally speaking, I cannot blame people for their apprehension about this comparison. But, after a moment's reflection, I am forced to review my prideful claims. Am I truly invulnerable? Do I have it all under control? Do I know where my life is headed? Am I as strong as I think I am? Am I as smart as I think I am? Is my aversion to being compared to a sheep simply because the comparison is too accurate? Truly, I need help. I need to be shepherded and helped along. I want the things that come with being shepherded. Take a look at another passage, Ezekiel 34:11–15 (NRSV), which says:

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

Who wouldn't want all these benefits? Being one of God's sheep seems like a good deal. But for some reason, even with all of these great perks, we still resist the idea of being sheep in a flock. I certainly do. Yet, as I analyze this issue more deeply, my affinity for being a sheep grows more and more. First, I realize that our shepherd, Jesus, is more than just a shepherd—he is also one of us. Called the Lamb of God, Jesus is not only a vulnerable sheep, just like us, but he is the most vulnerable—a baby sheep! As a Lamb, Jesus is the most defenseless, impressionable, and innocent creature imaginable. We are reminded of Lowell Mason's famous nursery rhyme: "Mary had a little lamb, whose fleece was white as snow. And everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go." Lambs are a symbol of purity. While we are eager to depict the King of Kings as a lamb, we are nonetheless hesitant to be called sheep. We do not want to be weak. We do not want to be in need of help. We pursue strength, courage, and pride. We identify with the Lion of Judah more than the Lamb of God.

To return to our recalcitrant friends, goats have no shepherd, and according to our scripture, those who act like goats are doomed to eternal punishment, which is certainly a fate as horrible as the goat caught in the barbed wire, if not worse. They have no chance. They are doomed. In fact, not only are they doomed, but so too are the stronger leadersheep. Continuing in our Ezekiel passage, immediately after being told how our shepherd will graze us in the greenest pastures and take care of us, we learn that the goats, along with the healthy sheep, are in trouble. Verses 16 and 17 state that "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats."

So, not only are goats in trouble, but so are the fat (think muscular) and strong sheep—the leadersheep of Iceland may very well be smart, but they are also doomed. In fact, if we take the concept in this Ezekiel passage and hold it in tension with the Matthew passage, we are forced to reconsider the precise division based on species, and consider instead the division based on characteristics and behavior. It seems that the sick sheep are in better shape. One might even argue that a sick goat would be better off than a strong sheep. But that’s neither here nor there. We are not curious about the details of the metaphor so much as we are concerned with what makes one a goat or a sheep; what makes a person hell-bound vs. heaven-bound?

So what is this really telling us about heaven and hell? Before we can answer that question, we should consider what Paul says in his first letter to the church in Corinth. First Corinthians 15:24–28 states that the end comes when Christ

“hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.”

In no uncertain terms, this passage proclaims the mystery of the end times. Sometimes I return to my spatial comprehension of the universe that I had when I was a child in order to understand such things. When I think about the end times, it plays out like a movie—there’s fire and destruction, brimstone and war. It is a terrible scene. It is pain. It is hell on Earth. Often this imagery is helpful, in that it allows me to visualize the major players: God vs. Satan, good vs. evil, heaven vs. hell, and so on. Things are easier to deal with when they are locatable, in black and white, and have names. Remember, as a child, my God was up there and Satan was down there; they were separate and in distinct spatial locations, easily identifiable. But I believe the mechanics of the end times are more subtle and nuanced than a big war with Jesus destroying the bad guys. As a metaphor, it works, but in terms of the complete landscape of the Christian faith, it simply does not add up.

You see, as Paul tells us, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. It’s not the devil, or demons, or hell, or any of the other typically locatable and identifiable enemies. Rather, the last enemy is death. And of equal significance and distinction, death was also the first enemy. Remember that Adam and Eve, in their gullible and stubborn state of mind, behaved like goats and consumed what was bad for them—they had a mind of their own, believing they knew what was best. Unfortunately, the result of that story is infamous. What they did ultimately separated humanity from God and eternal life with God. This distance from God, and the reality of death, has us all tangled in a web of barbed wire in which we struggle, suffer, and inevitably die. There is no escaping the barbed wire. The more we struggle, the more we get stuck. And if you are anything like me, you are like the goat, thinking that you do not need help or that anyone can help you. Moreover, like the goat, we continue to consume whatever is put in front of us, without carefully examining what it is doing to us. And when we finally do examine, it’s too late.

We are all goats. We are all strong and muscular sheep. While we all think we know what's going on, like Adam and Eve, we do not. While we think the sheep are the ones who are dumb and vulnerable, they are the ones who rely on each other. And most importantly, the sheep's leader is the meekest in the flock.

You see, the sheep allows himself to be helped by the shepherd, which I would presume, allows Jesus to be accurately identified as a lamb; he knows that the meekest among the sheep will be helped and guided by the shepherd because the nature of the sheep is to be helped. The goat, however, will not allow itself to be helped, and thereby is destined for destruction. Goats refuse help. They refuse to recognize another authority, no matter how good it will be for them.

But this is what is great about our God. God will not let even the least of these perish. And, in a divine reversal, those who are weak are made strong, and those who thought they were strong are truly weak and are subject to God's help. So, despite the goat's unwillingness to listen, behave, or do what is best for him, God will save him.

But the Matthew verse isn't about being helped, but about helping others, right? Isn't it about a difference between the sheep and the goats, in that the sheep helped Jesus because they visited the sick, clothed the naked, and fed the hungry, while the goats did not? Like Keith Green's song, the only difference between the two is what they did and did not do...right?

Well, yes and no. This is the beauty of scripture: the layers of lessons available in each passage, when considered as part of a grander vision of the God's message to us, are infinite. It is true that this is a moral story about what you do, and do not do, to the vulnerable people of the world. Moreover, this is also a clear message that Jesus identifies with the vulnerable and weak, and if we want to serve him, we need to serve those who are most in need. No doubt, we are called to help those in the world who are in the most need. To be sure, we could leave this passage at this point and have enough to go on. But, in my opinion, we do well to dig a little deeper.

You see, the problem here is that the goats are not in trouble simply because they didn't help the vulnerable, sick, and hungry. That is too easy. They are in trouble because they do not listen to God, listening instead to themselves. From the beginning of time, God has sought to repair the divide between humans and God. God sought this repair so much that not only did the Shepherd become the Lamb, but the Lion became the Lamb. The proudest and least vulnerable animal in the jungle became the most pitiful creature imaginable. And in so doing, God allowed Christ to be in a position where humans could help him. But what happened instead? We hung him on a cross. In our desire to be lions instead of sheep, we crucified God's son. He needed help and we did not help him. You see, by Christ allowing us to take care of him, he made us Shepherds. He made us Kings. He gave us the chance to be the Lion, in a world where the Lion and the Lamb lie down together. But, in our inability to help him, we failed to help ourselves.

By not helping others, we perpetuate our unwillingness to be helped. In other words, God helps us daily by giving us opportunities to help others. And, when we do not help others, we do not help ourselves. Christ's message here is that inasmuch as you help others so too are you helped. Essentially, the daily opportunities to save others save you. When we do not listen to God on this very basic solution, we behave like goats, claiming to know what's best for ourselves and thereby setting ourselves on a path to destruction.

By subjecting ourselves to God's will, the Son serves us, and in so doing, God is all in all.

If you, like me, are having trouble with goat-like behavior, perhaps Psalm 51:10-12 will help get us on the right path: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." And if that doesn't do it, just recall the last lines of that famous nursery rhyme: "It followed her to school one day, which was against the rules. It made the children laugh and play, to see a lamb at school. And so the teacher turned it out, but still it lingered near and waited patiently about, till Mary did appear. 'Why does the lamb love Mary so?' the eager children cry. 'Why, Mary loves the lamb, you know,' the teacher did reply." Amen.