

Isaiah 58 begins with God diagnosing a problem in His people. They worship Him, but they only worship Him to be seen. They hope that if God sees their worship, He will respond. God responded that if they were truly worshipping, their love for God would be evident in their care for the poor and oppressed. Words and phrases like “yoke,” “chains,” “poor,” “homeless,” and “naked” all signal God’s concern for the poor. The Israelites needed to remove the yoke of the law under which many people labored like animals to serve the selfish wants of others. God desired His people to follow Him and care for others as He did. Jesus made a similar connection in one of His teachings.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 25:31-40.

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

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?

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 feeding the hungry, you are serving Jesus?

Many of the sheep are understandably surprised. The text says that they were surprised because they did not understand how they had ministered so directly to Jesus. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrated His compassion for the helpless by meeting people’s physical needs, and in this parable He helps us see that when we do the same, we live out our love for Him.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 25:41-46.

In these verses Jesus shifts His analogy to the goats. How are the sheep and goats similar?

How are they different?

How did Jesus summarize the parable? How does that conclusion help you better understand the need to speak up on behalf of the hungry and helpless?

Jesus turned to the goats and said, “Depart from me.” He called them “cursed” and sent them into “eternal fire.” They were condemned to hell. They were sent there because they had not done what the sheep did. Like

the sheep they did not see the King in the needy, but unlike the sheep they did not help them. The message here and in Isaiah is clear: God expects His people to meet the needs of the most needy, and doing so is one of the clearest signs of our love for Him.

Application

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

With Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25 in mind, what can we conclude about God’s heart for the hungry? How would you summarize His expectations for us?

What can you do to serve the physical needs of those in your community before reaching their spiritual needs?

Pray

Thank God that His heart is for the hungry, the needy, and the lost. In gratitude, thank Him for finding you and for making you the sheep of His pasture. Ask the Lord to show you tangible ways you can meet the needs of those around you who are lost.

Commentary

| Isaiah 58:6-7

If ritual fasting was simply boosting one’s own religious ego, what was the key to divine blessing? What was acceptable to the Lord? God called for concrete action, helping others in need. Again the emphasis is on overcoming injustice with righteous acts. God does not want anyone under someone else’s yoke. Here is the beginning of the fight against slavery of every kind. God hates oppression. He wants his people to set oppressed people free. God’s people are dedicated to providing the basic needs of life to those who do not own them. We feed the hungry and provide shelter for the poor, homeless wanderer. We clothe those who cannot afford proper clothing, and we make sure we take care of our own flesh and blood.

God does not accept excuses from people who try to hide themselves and pretend needy family members do not exist (see Deut. 22:1-4). Note that you here through verse 14 is singular, pointing to individual blessings and responsibilities. The singular “you” is directed at each member of the people of God, so that the collective group becomes what each individual becomes.

| 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.”