The Parable Of The Sheep And The Goats: Does Faith Alone Save?

Jesus tells a parable known as the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. (Matthew 25:30-46.) Jesus says that one group who calls Him Lord serves Jesus’ brothers in need with food and clothing. This group goes to heaven. Another group who calls Him Lord but who fails to do so are sent to hell.

Jesus is commanding charity to his brothers on threat of going to hell if you do not do it. Jesus is promising eternal life to those who do it. Faith that is alone does not save. This parable reads:

(31) When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: (32) And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: (33) And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. (34) Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: (35) For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: (36) Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. (37) Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?
(38) When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? (39) Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? (40) And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (41) Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: (42) For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: (43) I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. (44) Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? (45) Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. (46) And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matt. 25: 31-45, KJV.)

Please note that Jesus clearly divides the sheep from the goats based on works of charity. “[H]e rebukes not because they have not believed in Him, but because they have not done good works.” (Augustine, Fide et operibus, Cornish:61.) Please also note that there is no doubt Jesus equates the sheep “inher[i]ng] the kingdom” with going away “into life eternal.” (vv. 34, 46). There is also no doubt that Jesus contrasts this with the fate of the goats who call Him Lord but who failed to do charity. They go into:

- “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41)
- “everlasting punishment” (v. 45.)
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As Gathercole, an evangelical scholar, concedes, Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46 says “deeds of hospitality...are certainly the criterion for judgment.”¹ Let’s examine this thoroughly so this very important point is not forgotten.

Jesus’ Criterion For Salvation: Charitable Works

Why the different ends of the sheep versus the goats? Is it because one believed and the other did not? Or rather is it because among those who accepted Him as their Lord some served Him by clothing, feeding and visiting the “brothers” of the King while others did not?

Or another way of asking this is to inquire why do the sheep inherit the kingdom. Is it because they are believers who are saved despite failing to do works of charity? Was their faith alone enough? No.

Jesus says:

(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.

The sheep confess they do not remember doing it for the Lord himself. The King explains: ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

Why are the goats² sent to “eternal fire”? Did they lack ever having faith? No, rather Jesus says:

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² There is no negative connotation to the label goats. “The goat was not in evil repute in the East, as contrasted with the sheep; on the contrary, the he-goat was a symbol of dignity, so the point of analogy is merely the separation between the sheep and the goats.” (The Gospel According to St. Matthew (ed. A.Carr)(Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1893) at 195.)
Parable Of The Sheep & The Goats

(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.

The goats confess the same error, not ever having seen the Lord in need. And the King replies:

I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. 
(Mat 25:45.)

The answer is that one group serves the brothers of the King and the others do not, by works of charity. One has works of charity and one doesn’t. That is the dividing line in being finally saved, as told in this parable. Both the sheep and goats call him Lord, so both had faith. One was dead and one was alive.

If you instead believe only the sheep had faith, then you have the incongruous lesson that Jesus is warning people already lost (the goats) that they better do works of charity for His brothers or face hell. This would be a doctrine of works alone, which appears incompatible with any of Jesus’ teachings.

Because Jesus clearly says works of charity are the dividing line between the two groups, and we know faithless works are meaningless to God, then Jesus must be speaking to believers. Jesus insists believers must have works of charity or otherwise they are sent to hell with unbelievers.

Thus, it follows that Jesus wants us to understand the goats who called Him Lord are sincere Christians (i.e., had accepted Him as Lord and Savior). They are goats because they failed to serve Him by works of charity to His followers. The formula is faith and works (of charity). This charitable service then becomes the dividing line in terms of who is and who is not ultimately saved among people who have faith in Jesus.
This is not surprising. In Isaiah 58:7 et seq., God promises “salvation shall come like the dawn” if you bring the poor into your home, give him clothes, etc.

**Corroboration In The Epistle Of James**

What helps corroborate we are reading Jesus correctly is that James clearly paraphrases this parable in James chapter two. Everyone remembers that James says that “faith alone” does not justify. However, no one seems to remember James says such faith cannot save because it lacks charitable works. James is saying identically what Jesus says in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

James chapter two is an obvious paraphrase of Matthew 25:30-46. The two passages are virtually verbatim copies of each other. Not a single leading commentator mentions

3. On the significance that both groups call Jesus Lord, fabulists of cheap grace deny it any significance. In doing so, they merely engage in ad hoc denial that the lost were at one time Christians. They cite no adequate proof for this reading. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*—an evangelical text—states: “There is no significance in the fact that the goats address him as Lord... for at this point there is no exception whatever to confessing Jesus as Lord.” (Vol. 8, at 522.) What does this mean? The argument appears to be that this event occurs on judgment day when according to their interpretation of Paul everyone must confess Jesus as Lord. However, Paul never said this. It is a pure myth he did so, by amalgamating two disparate verses together. The first is Philippians 2:11. Paul says God exalted Jesus so that “every tongue should confess Jesus is the Lord.” Nothing is said about this actually occurring universally, nor is there any indication this talks about the judgment seat. The second is Romans 14:11-12 where Paul says at the judgment seat “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess to God. So that every one of us shall give account of himself to God.” There confession of sins, not of Jesus, is in view. Some amalgamate the two verses to mean “every tongue shall confess Jesus is Lord” when “every tongue shall confess” at the judgment seat. Yet, the two verses cannot be combined without violence to the original context of each verse. Thus, the Expositor’s is relying upon a commonly heard amalgamation of two distinct verses. There is thus no basis to suppose non-Christians will ever confess Jesus.
this. The reason is obvious. If one knew how James understood and applied doctrinally Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, this would simply cement the falsity of the Fable of Cheap Grace. James writes:

(14) What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but have not works? can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food, (16) and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful to the body; what doth it profit? (17) Even so faith, if it have not works [ergon], is dead in itself [i.e., if alone]. (James 2:14-17, ASV.)

Now compare this faith that is not completed because it lacks works of charity and thus cannot save in James with Jesus’ words in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In that parable, Jesus threatens damnation for lacking charity. The parallels are striking:

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Hence, we see Matthew 25:30-46 — the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats — is identical in message and content to James 2:14-17. If James, the Lord’s brother, evidently read it this way, we should do so as well.

**Why Is Charity So Central In God’s Word?**

Why would charity toward others be so crucial to salvation, as Jesus says? We could do an entire Bible study on this. It appears that charity toward others is the most significant way you mark departure from your old life of sin. Daniel can tell the king “break off (discontinue) your sins...by showing mercy to the poor.” (Dan. 4:27.)

Charity in the Hebrew Scriptures was frankly one of the most elevated commands to obey. One might even say it is central to Torah. It reflects obedience to God’s command to love thy neighbor in a concrete way. Thus, the Law of Moses said if a brother of God’s people is in your midst who is “needy” then “thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth.” (Deut. 15:7-8.) Thirty-six times the Bible then commands the same charity must be shown to the “stranger” in your midst for “you were once strangers in the Land of Egypt.” (E.g., Deut. 10:19.)

The charity-principle is one of the most characteristic ways of doing justice in God’s eyes. God desires it more than any blood sacrifice. (Prov. 21:3; Mark 12:33.) In Isaiah 58:7 et seq., God promises “salvation shall come like the dawn” if you bring the poor into your home, give him clothes, etc. If you are charitable, God promises if you call on Him, then “the Lord will answer.” (Isaiah 58:9.) Thus, even the issue of whether God will speed an answer to prayer depends on how charitable you are being to the poor.

Furthermore, if you are charitable, God will guide you “continually” and make you like a watered garden. (Isaiah 58:11.) God promises special blessings to those who give charity to the poor.
Thus, there is no end of verses that elevate charity above almost every other command except to Love the Lord thy God with your whole mind, heart and soul.

Cheap Grace Interpretation Of The Parable Of The Sheep & Goats

Most of the time, proponents of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace ignore this parable. One Christian expresses my own experience, and perhaps your own:

In my Baptist upbringing, and even after becoming a Christian, Matthew 25:31 et seq. was NEVER touched on, mentioned, taught, etc. And you’d be surprised how easy it is to gloss over it in your own studies when your own denomination, pastor, teachers, and friends don’t give it any notice, either.4

Whenever the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is actually examined, because it is James 2:14-17 stated as a parable, proponents of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace lose all semblance of reasonable interpretation.

Dillow mentions the view that the sheep are Christians who ministered with food and clothing and visited in prison Jews, Jesus’ “brothers.” However, they are not just simply any Jew of every generation, but only Jews living in the great tribulation period. (Dillow, Reign of the Servant Kings, supra, at 73.) Dillow explains that if we do not choose something like this interpretation which imposes ‘faith plus works saves’ as true for a very small future historical group, then the present standard ‘gospel’ is ruined for the rest of us. Dillow says that but for a faith-alone explanation, Matthew 25:34 means “that inheriting the kingdom is conditioned on obedience and service to the King, a condition far removed

Cheap Grace Interpretation Of The Parable Of The Sheep & Goats

from the New Testament [i.e., the Cheap Grace Gospel] teaching of justification by faith alone for entrance into heaven.” (Id.)

Thus, this spin of the parable defers Jesus’ teaching on salvation by works to only those trapped in the tribulation who were never Christians pre-tribulation.

It is absurd to interpret a parable as having a distinct salvation message for only the tribulation period. Why would it change just for those in this seven year period?

Thus, the Modern Fable of Cheap Grace spins this passage so it ends up teaching there is a separate salvation message for a small historical group only in the future who will be required to have works of charity or suffer hell. (Incidentally, their forefathers in this fable tried a similar solution. Back in the 1800s, cheap grace taught the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats was true only from 33 to 70 A.D.)

Therefore, according to the latest cheap grace views, we today are comforted that we do not have to change the cheap grace gospel message until the tribulation is upon us. In this view, reconciling the ‘faith-alone’ gospel to Jesus is not necessary because Jesus’ teaching on works and salvation applies in the future when Christians ‘are gone anyway.’

In this manner, this parable is neatly swept under the rug to be dusted off when the time is right for non-Christians to find it. (Please note this recognizes that faith-plus-works will one day be a non-heretical doctrine; it just does not fit our time, according to proponents of cheap grace.)

This tribulation-only solution can be dismissed with just one Bible verse. Christ’s ‘brethren’ does not mean ethnic Jews, let alone only Jews of a seven year future period. Jesus asked once “who are my brothers?” Jesus answered that his brothers and sisters should be those “doing the will of God.” (Matthew 12:48-50.) (Please note Christians are not defined as believers by Jesus, but rather as doers of God’s will.)
If one must escape this parable with such a nonsensical notion that Jesus’ brothers are non-Christian Jews of the tribulation period, the cheap grace gospel is not being held

5. The older school of Protestant theologians had a similarly astonishing solution. They limited the parable’s validity to only the period of 33 A.D. to 70 A.D. Whittemore summarized the support for this. He canvassed all the opinions from major theologians that endorsed this idea. He was arguing that this parable was fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem. Whittemore claimed it therefore had no further moral meaning for any Christian thereafter. “We think, then, we must have shown to the satisfaction of every individual who shall peruse those pages, that this whole parable was completely fulfilled at the time of Christ’s coming to the Jewish state [at the temple destruction in 70 A.D.].” His proof is the temple destruction took place “within forty years after the crucifixion” and this is when the goats were supposedly punished. (Thomas Whittemore, Notes and Illustrations of the Parables of the New Testament (Boston: J.M. Usher, 1855) at 347.) Even though Jesus speaks of this judgment for the goats being with the same “fire” for the diabolos (devil) and his angels, Whittemore claims the diabolos can mean simply an “adversary...very often...human beings” and that fire can mean simply temporal affliction, not hell. (Id. at 350.) Whittemore says the diabolos is a reference by Jesus to the Jews of 70 A.D., and the fire to the temple destruction that same year. There is a cascade of non-sequiturs to all of what Whittemore claims. This likely explains why what was once a popular ‘faith-alone’ solution to this parable has withered. Yet, it is worth listing off a few of the non-sequiturs to give this idea its proper burial. **If nothing else, it is worth mentioning this old idea just to prove once again how much pressure this parable puts on faith alone advocates.** Whittemore’s ideas prove how far into nonsense faith-alone advocates have been willing to reach to solve this particular parable. The first non-sequitur is: Jesus never speaks of the destruction of the temple as a coming back. Even if He did, why is the moral of this parable about charity limited to the supposed coming of Christ in 70 A.D.? Moreover, the parable says the verdict of eternal life or damnation is at a particular coming where one group is thrown in the “fire of eternal damnation reserved for the devil and his angels.” (Matt. 25:41.) To suggest this is temporal affliction of Jews in 70 A.D. is fantastically silly. Instead, this particular coming in final judgment of Jesus is one Jesus spoke frequently about. (See Matt. 12:42-50.) Obviously, that coming, which is in our future, is the only coming in view in Matthew 25:41. Clearly, all of Whittemore’s nonsense was an extremely strained reading so as to reign in a parable directly destructive of the fable of cheap grace. After all, it is James chapter two stated as a parable.
Conclusion

even loosely based on Jesus’ words. The modern view of salvation is being held in spite of whatever Jesus teaches.

Bob Wilkin — President Of The Grace Evangelical Society

Finally, others like Bob Wilkin who cannot reconcile the parable to ‘faith alone’ insist we are forced to do so regardless of the language.

[I]t follows from the discussion above that the basis of ‘inheriting the kingdom’ ([Matt.] 25:34) is good works. Since Scripture cannot contradict itself, we know from a host of other passages that cannot mean that these people will gain entrance to the kingdom because they were faithful.6

Thus, the final foxhole is the ad hoc denial that Jesus can mean what He says because we know what cheap grace otherwise teaches must remain true.

Conclusion

The best advice on how to understand the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is to follow Daniel Fuller’s guidance. He exhorts us to allow Jesus to challenge our core doctrines:

To the objection that...Matthew 25... lead[s] us right back to Rome and salvation by works, my answer is twofold. First, we must determine, regardless of consequences, what the intended meaning of each of the biblical writers is. We must let each one speak for himself and avoid construing him by recourse to what another writer said. Otherwise there is no

escape from subjectivism in biblical interpretation. (Daniel Fuller, “Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith,” Unity and Diversity in N.T. Theology (Eerdman’s 1978) at 195-213 fn. 22.)

Thus, reading Jesus through the overlay of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace is wrong. You cannot press Jesus’ words down so they fit your favorite fable. Such conduct is reprehensible. In fact, the duty to construe Jesus free from other writers is an imperative. The very validity of all writers for acceptance in the New Testament turns on whether they go beyond or transgress Jesus’ teaching. As 2 John 1:9 says:

Whoever goes beyond and doesn't remain in Christ's teaching, doesn't have God [i.e., breaks fellowship with God]. He who remains in the teachings [of Jesus Christ], the same has both the Father and the Son.

Jesus’ words are thus the standard whether the Gospel of Cheap Grace is valid. Even if it cites Paul, this does not resolve the issue. Balaam was once a true prophet of Christ — he gave the famous Star Prophecy of Messiah (Numbers 24:17). The Magi relied upon it (Matt. 2:1.) But Balaam still later became a false prophet. Jesus says Balaam taught doctrines subversive of the Law given Moses by “I Am.” (Rev. 2:14). Jesus said He was “I am.” (John 8:58.) By going beyond Jesus’ principles in the Law (Matt. 5:19), Balaam went from Christ’s prophet to a false prophet. (Deut.13:3.) Thus, Paul is not better than Balaam. His validity, just like Balaam’s, rests on consistency with Jesus.

Here, Jesus’ meaning is as plain as day in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Even advocates of cheap grace concede the meaning. Jesus tells us that those who call Him Lord and do works of charity inherit eternal life in the kingdom. Those who call Him Lord and failed to do works of charity will go to the eternal fire reserved for the Devil and his angels. All the efforts to squirm out of this parable (which refutes faith alone) were disrespectful of Jesus and tortured.