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Sheep and Goats and Hell, Oh My!

The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25) sure looks like some hard core judgment of God and condemnation to hell, doesn't it? Maybe it's not what we think it is and maybe perichoresis is a clue to the truth about what Jesus is saying.

“Perichoresis” is the word the church fathers used to describe the mutual indwelling nature of the persons of the Trinity. The Father is not just “with” the Son, he is “in” the Son. This is the reason the three persons are one God, not three gods – because each lives in the other and allows the others to live in him.

When God created us in his image he created us to share in that kind of life, so that the Son is in us and we are in the Son. All creation lives in Christ and Christ lives in all creation. The Trinitarian Gospel is the good news about humanity's adoption into this perichoretic life.

So, when Jesus says that anything we do to others we do to him, that makes sense. Since Christ lives in all humanity the way we treat other people is the way we are treating Christ.

That's exactly what Jesus calls people into account for in Matthew 25. Notice that both groups are ignorant of Christ's perichoretic union with humanity: “when did we ever see you, Lord?” they both say. But one group, yielding to the Holy Spirit's direction in their lives, showed love and care to strangers. The other group didn't.

Our human nature naturally leads us to care for those that we perceive to be part of our group, family or tribe. If my wife came to me hungry or thirsty I would take care of her because she is part of me and I am part of her. When a stranger comes to me hungry or thirsty I have to yield to the Holy Spirit to feel love for him and to care for him.

Jesus does not judge the “goats” because they failed to do enough good deeds to earn his Father's love. He judges them because they failed to perceive that all human beings are their brothers and sisters. He can overlook our inability to understand why that is true (the “sheep” didn't really get it either) but he cannot overlook our self-righteous, legalistic attempts to divide humanity into two tribes labeled the “saved” and the “condemned”. He cannot overlook our work to care for and love our friends while we nuke our enemies.

Why can't he overlook it? Because the Kingdom of God is founded on perichoresis. We are in Christ, along with all other people in the world, but if we persist in not believing in this perichoresis then we are fighting the very nature of reality.

This disbelieving attitude is like that of the older son in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It says to our Father in heaven “I may be your child, but I will never accept those ‘sinners’ as my brothers and sisters.” That attitude does not undo our salvation or change our status as adopted, saved children of the Father in Christ. (Remember, the father in the parable says to the self-righteous son, “my dear son, you are always with me” and “everything I have is yours.”) But that attitude cannot be overlooked because it causes us to exclude ourselves, out in the darkness, where we are weeping and gnashing our teeth.

The parable of the sheep and the goats is not Jesus calling us to do good deeds in order to earn his Father's love and our place in heaven. It is Jesus calling us to live out the Trinitarian Gospel. He is calling us to believe that in Christ all humanity is made right with God and given eternal life and therefore all humanity is part of our tribe and worthy of our love and acceptance.

~ Jonathan Stepp