

# GOING DEEPER

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

June 1, 2014



# Discussion Guide

## **(Why) Not Today**

*Matthew 25.31-46*

### **Connecting:**

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

### **Getting Started:**

10 minutes

- Do you think that how a person lives matters? Could you elaborate?

### **Diving Into the Text:**

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes and comments to explain the larger context for Matthew 25.31-46.
- Read Matthew 25.31-46 aloud slowly. Read Matthew 25.31-46, once more, seeking to imagine the scene unfolding before you.

- In what ways are the sheep and goats different? Try to find as many answers in the text as possible.
- If you could sum up Jesus' point about those who are truly his followers, what would it be?
- What do people typically identify as those things which mark a person as a follower of Jesus?
- Which of these are considered optional and which are considered necessary? Could you elaborate?
- In what ways are these similar or dissimilar to what Jesus seems to be saying? Would you explain?
- What, if anything, might draw you toward the way people have defined a follower of Jesus rather than how Jesus describes his followers?
- In light of Jesus' words, reflect on the following statement: How we live in the present matters for eternity.
- What, if anything, hinders you from taking up the life of God and joining him in his kingdom work as Jesus describes?
- Should you decide to take up God's own life, what steps might you need to consider? How willing are you to consider these steps? Could you elaborate?
- Conclude your time by praying for your group and for Union Center.

## Context and Background

### *Second coming of Jesus*

The second coming of Jesus is the idea that at some future point Jesus will physically return to establish his kingdom upon earth. The concept of a return of Jesus is rooted in Jesus' own teaching. Jesus himself promised that even though he was going away, he would return and take his disciples to be with him so that they could be together (John 14.3). In addition, Jesus promised that his return would consummate his role as king (Matthew 25.31-46). This concept of Jesus' return was echoed by two angelic figures at the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1.11) and figured prominently in the early proclamation of the Church (Acts 3.21; 1 Thessalonians 2.19; 3.13; 4.15-17).

The second coming of Jesus reconciles seemingly contradictory Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah. For example, the Messiah is portrayed as both a suffering servant (Isaiah 53) and a restoring leader (Isaiah 61; Malachi 4). If the Messiah comes but once, then these two portraits are irreconcilable. However, if the Messiah comes twice, then he can come as both the suffering Messiah and reigning Lord. When Jesus came the first time, he came as the suffering servant, and with his coming the work of the Kingdom of God upon earth began (Mark 1.14-15). With the ascension of Jesus, the Kingdom of God was present but not in its fullest form. It was rather like a small seed that had been planted, waiting to grow into something much larger (Matthew 13.31-35). God's Kingdom will come into its fullness with Jesus' return (Matthew 25.31-46) which will result in a final judgment and assignment of eternal experiences for all people.

## The Text

### **Matthew 25.31-46: *Our life matters***

Jesus' parable about sheep and goats forms the conclusion of a longer teaching by Jesus about how God will consummate his Kingdom. This teaching begins with a discussion between Jesus and his disciples about the future state of the Temple, which his disciples interpret to be a sign

of the end of time (Matthew 24.1-3). The disciples ask Jesus to explain the signs of the end of time and Jesus obliges, beginning with an extended elaboration of signs which he then follows with a warning that the disciples will never be able to discern the signs. Rather, the time and the hour of these events are unknown to all but the Father (Matthew 24.4-41). Because the signs are present but the disciples will not be able to know their exact meaning, Jesus uses three parables to encourage his disciples to engage in a spirit of watchfulness and to take up the kingdom work of their Father (Matthew 24.42-25.30). Each of these three parables ends with a judgment scenario which focuses on the rewards for those who obey and the harsh outcomes for those who refuse to be watchful or to take up the Father's kingdom work. The resulting thematic thrust of these parables emphasizes the importance of how the disciples live in the present (theology of Christian praxis). This forms the crucial question around what it means to be watchful and to labor: How are the followers of Jesus to live?

Jesus answers this question in his final parable about sheep and goats. In this parable, Jesus speaks of a future time when he will return. (*See Second coming of Jesus.*) Unlike his incarnation (first coming), this second coming is marked with glory and the presence of the entirety of the heavenly host. Rather than lying in a manger, Jesus now sits upon a throne to rule all nations. The image is clearly that of Jesus taking on the role of king over all things. This image is underscored by the gathering of all nations before Jesus. However, this gathering is not to pay homage but to be judged.

Jesus next turns to the other group of people: the goats. To these people he issues a rebuke and casts them from his presence which is the very place prepared for the devil and his angels. These people are destined not for what God intended for humanity but for what God intended for the rebellious heavenly host. His reasoning rests upon their refusal to minister to him in tangible ways in his times of weakness and poverty. Not unlike the sheep, the goats express dismay at ever having refused to minister to Jesus.

However, Jesus notes that in their refusal to minister to the poor and weak they had refused to minister to Jesus. Once more the echoes of Isaiah 58.6-12 are prominent, but in a negative sense.

The point of the parable focuses on appropriate life choices (Christian praxis) for the followers of Jesus. Those who inherit life as God intended (Heaven) are those who experience God as they take up a ministry to the weak and poor. Those who do not inherit this life are those who refuse to draw near to God by refusing a ministry to the weak and poor. While some may interpret this parable from a works viewpoint—that is, Jesus is talking about earning one’s salvation—this need not be the case. The motivation of the sheep and the goats is foundational to what is going on. If works-based salvation is in view then this motive should appear, but it is absent. Neither the sheep nor the goats have any awareness of their choices or of the impact of their life choices. Rather, they seem to be living quite naturally. It is probably better to interpret the works seen as an indication of what is already present, an active or absent relationship with Jesus. Thus, those who know and experience Jesus naturally care for the weak and poor in tangible ways. This is the work of the Kingdom as Jesus’ followers await his return.

## Application:

What does God want of us? His desire is that his people pick up his way of life, partnering with him in what he is doing in the world. However, knowing this and living it are often separated by a wide gap. We have many reasons to offer as to why we do not take up the life of God. We are overwhelmed by life and our schedules. We are underwhelmed with a motivation to change our life patterns so that we might join with God. We are not convinced that God really does desire that every one of his followers pick up his life. Whatever the reason, the bottom line is that we are not convinced that how we live as the followers of God really matters. According to Jesus, how we live does matter, for how we live demonstrates our true nature. When we take up God’s life we demonstrate that we are not only seeking to be like God but we are experiencing his presence. Those who know God in this way are those, and only those, who experience life as it was meant to be for eternity.

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake’s blog at [BlakeShipp.blogspot.com](http://BlakeShipp.blogspot.com)



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