

Our Life with the Bible: Exclusionary Texts Confuse Us

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen on October 22nd, 2023

Good morning. Last week, when we looked at that confusing and strange book of the bible called “Revelation,” I talked about how we best situate the book of Revelation more broadly within the Prophetic literature of the Bible, literature that was not concerned with predicting the future as it was with announcing God’s desire for shaping the future to lead it to God’s intended restoration and fulfillment. To be sure, prophetic visions like John’s in Revelation did make predictions about where the future was headed on its present course: they saw violence, greed, injustice, and immorality as leading towards destructive ends – even towards destruction of epic proportions. But, as I mentioned last week, prophetic visions also told forth what the prophets saw as God’s redemptive possibilities for the world if repentance was chosen; if violence, greed, injustice, and immorality was traded for works of righteousness and justice. Not surprisingly, however, given that us humans are stubborn creatures; given that we can get pretty set in our ways, often prophetic words were issued in quite forceful language; language that was intended to stop people in their tracks, to wake them up and warn them, to ask them to reconsider the life they were living, and to begin to imagine a different way.

In Jesus’ day, this strong, prophetic language was often also accompanied by a vision of a more significant day of judgment at the end of the present age– a day when no one, not even the person most adept in life at avoiding consequences of unjust living, would be able to avoid facing up to their actions. In Revelation, as in most of the prophetic literature of the Bible, language of a day or an *age* of divine judgment appears numerous times. One quite evocative moment in Revelation chapter 11 paints this picture of this coming age of judgment:

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth. (Revelation 11:18)

Ouch. “Destroying those who destroy the earth.” This language is harsh and, at least on the surface, it seems to suggest that God will ultimately enact retribution upon those who destroy the earth. Such “destroyers” will be “destroyed,” excluded from life in the age to come.

Exclusionary texts like this one are hard to read, and yet they appear often in Prophetic literature that speak of a time of Divine Judgment at the end of the present age.

This same kind of language of judgment and exclusion appears in the parable of the sheep and the goats from our scripture reading for today. In this parable, Jesus speaks of an age to come when there will be a separation of the nations into two categories, the sheep and the goats. The goats, in Matthew 25, are said to be sent away to “eternal punishment,” while the sheep, the righteous, will inherit the kingdom, they will go into “eternal life.” And of course, these types of passages show up throughout the New Testament, including in Paul’s letters. In one particularly striking passage from 1 Corinthians 6, Paul spouts off a long list of ethical and moral failings, including everything from greed, defrauding each other, drunkenness and sexual immorality and then pronounces: [No one who does these things] will ever inherit the kingdom of God! Again, ouch.

Based on the responses that I got from all of you in my email inquiry, I think it’s probably safe to say that we are quite uncomfortable with, even offended by these types of exclusionary visions of divine judgment – visions that divide humanity up into categories like “the saved” and “the damned,” “the righteous” and “the unrighteous,” “those who will inherit the kingdom” and “those who will not inherit the kingdom.” I suspect we are especially uncomfortable, even offended, with exclusionary language like this given the way that it has frequently been used as a weapon of judgement against our neighbours, be they Christians or not, and against each other. I’m sure many of us have had negative experiences of exclusionary

scriptures used to coerce people into faith, for example. “Hellfire and brimstone” is the old expression used to describe that old style of preaching that employed images of a god of judgment and wrath to coerce people to come to faith. I’m sure we’ve also had experiences of exclusionary passages of scripture used in the community of faith to unjustly shame people or exclude them from fellowship because they didn’t fit the mold determined by one narrow viewpoint or cultural expectation in the community. Thankfully there are many good examples of Christians who reject the use of scripture to exclude, judge, and condemn others in these ways. Thankfully there are many Christians who center images of God that correspond more with that image of the lamb we looked at last week – a God of divine suffering love, who refuses the retributive violence and judgment of the world and instead embodies love in creative and powerful ways to overcome evil and empower the flourishing of good. This image of God is a God who is gracious and merciful and patient. This is an image of God as the God who pursues the lost, and who rescues them from the pit, who refuses to lose even one who has strayed (cf. Matt. 18:12).

However wonderful this latter image of God is, and however wonderful it is that many Christians have centered this image of God, we are still left with those exclusionary-sounding texts of scripture. Much like the sermon from a few Sundays ago that looked at the confusion we have when we encounter violent texts of scripture, when we encounter exclusionary texts we might find ourselves asking, “if we are going to reject the image god as a god of retributive violence and judgment, a god who after all the patience and love ends up saying, ‘I gave you your chance and now off with you forever,’ if we are going to reject that image of god, then what are we to do with texts that do nonetheless seem to speak of God in this way?” Are we to simply

dispense with these texts entirely or are there alternative ways to understand and use them to become better disciples of Jesus?

While a more fulsome answer to these questions really would require a whole worship series in itself, I will offer two basic suggestions, some starting points, this morning for how these passages can function positively for us as followers of Jesus, even if we still will have misgivings with them and even if we must wrestle with interpreting them. For the remainder of my sermon this morning, I want to refer to Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats to make these two suggestions. I hope that they give us ideas about how we might read "exclusionary" sounding passages more constructively for our discipleship today without getting bogged down in doctrinal arguments about final judgments, or about who's "in" and who's "out." So, without further ado, here are my suggestions:

1. Use passages (like the parable of the Sheep and the Goats) that speak of divine judgment for self-transformation in the present rather than speculating about the judgment of others in the future (First take the log out of your own eye...).

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, what is significant is not that we learn all about the precise mechanics of how the judgment of God will work in the age to come. We are not privy to that information and for good reason. Despite the many speculators out there, we don't know, for example, what the phrase "eternal punishment" means for certain. The word "eternal" itself can also be translated more along the lines of "the age of," in other words, "the age of punishment," or "the age of life," for example.¹ Jesus is not providing his hearers or us his

¹ The word in question here in Greek is the adjective *aionios*. The word it derives from is the noun *aion* which simply means "age." Scholars thus note that the usage of the adjective *aionios* could be said to correspond to an extended or indefinite period of time, ie. an age. This would link up with the Hebrew word *olam* which could variously be rendered as: world, existence, lifetime, and eternity. The Hebrew phrase *olam habah* means "the world to come" and was often used to refer to the future age of God's reign. If *aionios* has more of this sense in Matt. 25, one could faithfully render verse 46 as David Bentley Hart has: "And these will go to the chastening of that Age, but the just to the life of that Age." This translation is appealed to by Christian universalists who argue, on the basis of scripture and the writings of church fathers, that while there is indeed an age of Divine chastisement, it does not last forever but is restorative (rather than retributive). This is the Christian universalist position. For a full

readers with a clear-cut doctrine of the afterlife or the final judgment – that’s certainly not what parables were for – and if it were, they wouldn’t have been very useful for faith. Rather, being a good prophet, what is significant is that Jesus used this and other parables to shock and upset conventional expectations about what makes one righteous or unrighteous *in the present* as much as in the future. We do well to remember, after all, that the kingdom Jesus speaks of inheriting is not just a future kingdom – it is a kingdom that has drawn near, a kingdom that we welcome or that we refuse to welcome *today* through our actions. The gates to the kingdom, to refer back to the children’s time, are open today, but the question is, do our actions move us towards them – are we crossing the threshold, or are we staying outside, or even worse, are we preventing others from going in?

How would our reading of Jesus’ parable change, if we drew the power of its words into our present, if we assumed that Jesus was not just speaking of a far-off judgment-day, but was speaking of inheriting the kingdom today? Of the kingdom coming today? Being a good prophet, I think Jesus wanted his hearers to change *that* day; to begin inheriting the kingdom that day, and I think Jesus’ hearers came to understand that, even if it made them uncomfortable. And uncomfortable it did make them, because Jesus revealed to them that a log that remained in their own eyes. Like any story depicting an “in” group and an “out” group, we like to imagine ourselves in the “in” group and I don’t doubt that many of the disciples initially saw themselves as the sheep in the parable. But, this is where Jesus’ surprise judgment upends the imagination of the disciples – and they come to realize they may actually be acting more like the goats of the parable.

argument of this position, see Gregory MacDonald’s book *The Evangelical Universalist* (Cascade 2012). MacDonald is actually a pseudonym for an editor at Wipf and Stock publishers named Robin Parry.

There is a kind of parallel, I think, between Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats and the story that the Prophet Nathan tells King David in 2 Samuel 12. In 2 Samuel, you'll recall, Nathan sets up a story (a parable, really) about a grave injustice being perpetrated by a rich man against a poor man and David can't help but position himself in the place of the righteous judge who will condemn the rich man for this injustice. We know what happens next, though. Nathan surprises David, saying: "You are the man that you condemn!" This is a story about you! In his telling of the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus is like a Nathan figure who gives a similar shocking reveal at the end of his parable of the sheep and the goats. The goats come to discover that they are like David in 2 Samuel – they are the ones who, in their blindness, failed to do justice for the least, and Jesus must expose to them the root of their failure. Jesus revealed to them that their failure was not a failure to believe the right dogmas about Jesus or belong to the right religious sect or denomination; rather, their failure was that they did not take care of the poor or visit the sick or the imprisoned or give the thirsty something to drink when they encountered them and by failing them, they failed Jesus.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that part of what reading the parable of the sheep and the goats for our transformation looks like is being willing to see ourselves as embodying, *in the present*, the attention to justice of the sheep as well as the lack of attention to justice of the goat. We are both. Rather than use these labels to speculate about the *future* inclusion or exclusion of others in the Kingdom of God, we instead can read this parable to acknowledge that we embody the sheep and the goats in our lives - we sometimes do what the Lord requires of us, and we sometimes fail to do what the Lord requires of us. Which will we choose today? When we get so focused on the parable's discussion of who will be excluded on the day of judgment, we can lose the forest for the trees. After all, the Kingdom that Jesus speaks of is *not just* a future reality but a

present reality, a reality that Jesus notes we embrace or reject in our actions *now*. What Jesus aim to do with his parable, then, is transform those who feel most self-assured, so that they can increasingly become disciples who do justice *today*; so that they can welcome the kingdom of God as it draws near in the present, rather than trying to secure for themselves a place in the kingdom in the future. So, my first suggestion: let us use passages that speak of divine judgment first for self-transformation, not ‘other’ transformation. Let us take the log out of our own eye before we try to take the speck out of our neighbor’s eye. What about the second suggestion?

2. Use passages that speak of divine judgment to speak a prophetic word against injustice *today* (...then you can take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye). And pray for the transformation of the world.

Here things get muddier, because we know how easy it is to use prophetic judgments as weapons to unjustly shame or exclude others, inside and outside of the community of faith. The complexity of discerning moral judgments in different situations came up in our weekly online bible study – how do we deal with those times when we do feel a word of correction is needed? How do we hold each other accountable to our baptismal vows when we see those vows being broken? We know how easy it is to see ourselves as sheep and others as goats. And yet, I do think if we’ve taken the first suggestion fully to heart, if we’ve acknowledged that we are both sheep and goats, if we’ve committed to take the log out of our own eye first, we can begin to take the risk of this second suggestion with more confidence. There will always be a need for discernment and humility and patience whenever we speak prophetic words into each other’s lives and into the world, to be sure. But I think we are missing something crucial in our discipleship if we refuse to speak prophetic words at all; if we fail to take the risk of admonishing and correcting each other and speaking into situations of injustice we see in our

community and in our world. Jesus spoke prophetic words and so must we. But let us remember the end-goal of such prophetic words: transformation today.

So, the power of the prophetic word is not, then, that it is a word about how one day some people—the unjust or the unrighteous—will be excluded from God’s kingdom. The power of the prophetic word is that it exposes how people *are* excluded and *being* excluded from God’s kingdom today – excluded by acts of injustice and a lack of kindness, excluded by lack of charity and love. Might I take the risk, then, in suggesting that the parable of the sheep and goats should not summon for us an image of two line-ups of people as they prepare to go either to the kingdom or to the fire in some far-off future. Rather, the sheep and the goats should be for us images of people embodying the reality of the kingdom *or* the reality of hell on earth today. As I wrote these words down, I couldn’t help but think about those aid trucks that sat, just until yesterday, at the Egypt-Gaza border with food and water and medicine – and who knows how much longer it will take for more to get in. On the other side of the border sit the sick, the naked, the thirsty, the hungry, and the dying. How does Jesus’ parable hit us today when we consider that image? With such a picture in our mind, I think we need to be ready, with boldness, to proclaim the judgment of God against powers that cast innocent people into the darkness and fire of war and destruction. To be sure, we don’t speak a word of judgment so as to assure ourselves of our rightness. Such prophetic judgments must themselves be turned on us too as we ask right here in our own community, “who do we daily shut the door on in our communities? Who have we failed to feed or cloth and by doing so where have we missed the face of Christ?”

This morning I have given two suggestions for how to deal with exclusionary texts of scripture, especially as they relate to the parable of the sheep and the goats. First, to read exclusionary texts as occasions for self-transformation in the present and second, to then use

exclusionary texts as inspiration for speaking a prophetic word against injustice in the world today with the hope of the world's transformation. These two suggestions are, admittedly, a very meagre starting point for us to think about how difficult, exclusionary texts in the bible can function positively for our discipleship. There is so much we do not know and perhaps it is best that way. But might we then hold all the more to what we do know? And what do we know? From the parable of the sheep and the goats we know that Jesus is found in the least of these. And so, what is required of us: To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8). AMEN.