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## AVOIDING THE GOAT PROBLEM Matthew 25

Laurie and I have been a bit unhappy with some people who live near us. They are not in our neighborhood, but in the one that is down the hill behind us. They live directly down the hill from our next door neighbors. They've always been a kind of noisy group, but this summer they have taken a quantum leap when it comes to being annoying. They did a major makeover of their back yard. We first thought it was going to be a problem when we realized they had put a large TV out there that they played so loud we could listen to whatever show they were watching, even though we didn't want to. It meant more parties and more noise too. But it got worse. They put in a fire pit. That shouldn't be a big deal, except they made it a wood burning fire pit. This causes some concern because where they built it presents some real fire threat. But another problem is that they use it 3 or 4 times a week and the smoke rises up the hill right into our yard and our house. We found out 8 or 9 houses on our street alone are seriously impacted by the smoke from their fires. We can't sit on our patios or have the windows of our houses open. A lot of people are not happy with those folks.

How do you deal with people who seem to have zero regard for others? I am annoyed with them, to say the least. But recently I was thinking about them and I wondered how I would feel about them and deal with them if I discovered that they were somehow related to me, or perhaps relatives of good friends. Might that not change how I think of them?

Last month CBS News carried a story that seemed improbable, but it is true. There is a woman named Hillary Harris living in the town of Greenwood, Wisconsin. She had been adopted as an infant and grew up in a loving adoptive family. She is now married and when she became pregnant she felt she needed to find out about her biological family because of the importance of family medical history. She put in a request to unseal her adoption papers. She was able to read a letter from her mother and found out that her biological father had died in 2010. She learned that she had 2 half-sisters, Renee and Dawn. Hillary and her husband discovered to her shock that her neighbor, Dawn, was in fact the half sister she had never met!

Wouldn't it be strange if we were meeting and relating to someone who, in fact, is a lot closer to us than we could ever imagine? In fact, that is the case, every day of our lives. We will see that as we look at Matthew 25.

### DON'T BE A BAD BRIDESMAID

There is an arbitrary chapter division between Matthew 24 and 25. These 2 chapters combined make up one long talk given by Jesus. The logic and context flow straight through both chapters. At the end of chapter 24 Jesus spoke of the need to be ready for his coming at any moment. He picks up on that theme at the beginning of chapter 25 and tells a story, a parable, to illustrate it.

This story is about a wedding. Comedian Jim Gaffigan says that weddings are strange events. He says that they used to be crude, medieval ceremonies where women, daughters, were exchanged as property. Yet over the centuries, they got worse. I'm inclined to agree. Marriage is good, weddings, not so much. Time and time again I find myself thinking, "why do people do this to themselves?" I know I am going to sound like a typical old man curmudgeon, but I miss the ancient times when Laurie and I got married. A wedding was a much simpler event. The whole thing might last only 3 hours, as opposed to the 6 or 7 hour marathons they often are today. A friend pointed out that in Jesus' culture weddings lasted days, not hours. But let's remember, they didn't have anything else to do.

In Jesus' day weddings were preceded by an engagement that was arranged by the parents of the bride and groom and was more binding than our engagement. It lasted a year during which time the two families negotiated over the dowry. After that there was a point at which the groom came for the bride. There would be a procession of their friends, with the bridesmaids carrying lanterns as they all accompanied the couple on their way to the family home of the groom. There the couple would consummate their marriage and there would be a banquet and party that would last for days.

In Jesus' story there were 10 bridesmaids, which was a common number back then. The bridesmaids took their lanterns to meet the groom as he came for the bride. However, it wasn't always known exactly when the groom would come. In this case, the wait was longer than expected. Half of the bridesmaids, knowing that the timetable was uncertain, prepared by having a surplus of fuel for their lamps. Sure enough, it turns out that the groom was flying into town that day, and his flight was delayed. While waiting for the groom all the maids fell asleep. When he finally showed up the always prepared maids fired up their lamps and went to the party, but the other ones were out of fuel. Their lamps wouldn't light. They dashed out to

buy oil and in the process missed the start of the party. They were too late, and ended up missing the whole thing.

It doesn't take a great deal of expertise to decipher the meaning of this parable, because Jesus tells us what it is in verse 13. "Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." In case you somehow missed the message in chapter 24 Jesus repeats the truth that we are not going to know when Jesus will come back. So stop trying to figure it out. What he wants us to do is keep watch.

We are to focus not on elaborate systems of theology that outline in excruciating detail precisely how all the events of Jesus' coming will work out, and of course, how that matches up awfully well with events occurring RIGHT NOW! Instead be prepared. How? By putting your faith in Jesus and entering into his kingdom right now. By making sure if he shows up he will find you doing all that he has instructed us to do, being the kind of people he wants us to be. Yes, it has been a long wait. It has been longer than anyone anticipated. But Jesus warned us in this story that this might happen. So don't be a bad bridesmaid who isn't ready for the coming of the Groom. Be one of the wise bridesmaids, who were prepared and thus welcomed into the party.

#### DON'T BE A BAD MANAGER

Jesus tells another story to inform us about what it means to be ready and what we should do as we wait. This story involves a very wealthy man who has some managers working for him. He's going to be away for a while. So guess who this wealthy guy is. You got it. It's Jesus. He'll be gone for some time. In this story the wealthy guy entrusts some of his money to 3 men while he is away.

Our translation says the rich guy gave one employee 5 bags of gold, another 2 bags and the third just 1 bag. Literally the text says he gave them 5 talents, 2 talents and 1 talent. A talent was actually a measure of weight of precious metals. It would require 20 years for a common laborer to earn 1 talent of gold. If we use \$15 per hour as a common laborer's wage today that's \$120 for a full day's work or \$600 for a week. That comes to \$30,000 for a year. So 20 years comes to \$600,000. That means the wealthy guy entrusted his top manager with \$3 million, the next one with \$1.2 million, and the last guy with \$600,000.

The first guy, seeing that the real estate market was blazing hot, used that \$3 million to buy homes and flip them. In the course of a year he doubled the boss' money, turning the \$3 million into \$6 million. The second guy did his homework

and found a tech company that had a brilliant new product just about to come to market. He bought stock, and in the course of the year the stock doubled in price. The \$1.2 million he had been given to put to work was now \$2.4 million.

Then there was the last guy. Clearly the boss did not have as much confidence in him as he did in the other two. He only had \$600,000 to work with, and the boss probably feared that was too much to put in his charge. Number Three went right out and proved that the doubts of the boss were well founded. He dug a hole and stuck the money in it. And there he left it. When the boss got back he proudly said, “Here’s your money, boss, safe and sound. I didn’t lose a penny.” At least he wasn’t a crook. He didn’t steal the money. But he was stupid and lazy.

The rich guy was thrilled with Employee One and Employee Two. But Numero Tres, not so much. Sheesh, Capital One right now has a 1 year CD that returns a rate of 2.4%. If the dude had just put that money in CD’s it would have earned over \$14,000 in interest! The boss calls him a wicked, lazy servant because he didn’t even try. How hard would it be to deposit that money in a savings account? That is one morning’s work. How lazy do you have to be to not be willing to even take a couple of hours to deposit some money in the bank? No wonder the boss has the guy thrown out into the darkness where there’s going to be trainloads of sorrow. Indeed, he was, as the boss said, worthless.

Uh, okay, but what does that mean to us? It’s about a lot more than money. In fact, it’s not specifically about money at all. It’s about faithfulness. The message is that everything we have is entrusted to us by God. Yes, that includes our money, but it also includes our time, our possessions, our abilities, our words, even our bodies. Every single thing we have and are is given to us by God. And he asks us to use it faithfully, for his purposes not ours.

We need to recognize that what we have belongs to God. He created it, all of it, and he has given it to us. Hebrews 2:10 says that everything exists through God and for God. Whatever it is, God made it, and it is created for his purposes. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains. The world, and those who dwell in it.” So the question is, do you dwell in the world? If you do, then you belong to God. If you don’t, then, uh, how are you here today?

Early in my junior year of college I was living on campus and did not have a car. I had the sum total of about 3 dates my first couple of years in college because I just

hadn't met any girls that sparked my interest. But that year I met a girl who went to a different college in the area that I wanted to ask out. The problem was, I had no way to go pick her up since Uber was not going to show up for another 40 years or so. My roommate came to my rescue. He offered to let me borrow his car. The thing is, his car was not the typical college student beat up junker. It was a hot, brand new Pontiac Firebird, a cool muscle car. I was kind of reluctant, but he insisted. So I borrowed his car. It was fun to drive, but I must tell you that I don't think I've ever driven more carefully. I was acutely aware the entire time that this was an expensive car, and it was not mine. When I parked in a parking lot I parked far out in the empty spaces of the lot where there were no cars around that could threaten any damage to it. I was so careful because it was not mine. Isn't that how we should regard the resources we have? They aren't ours! They belong to God, and we must use them with that in mind.

You might try a thought experiment. Deliberately say today that all you have belongs to God. I am living in God's house. I use God's credit card and have money in God's bank account. In fact, I use God's money. I drive God's car. I wear God's clothes. I eat God's food. I use God's eyes, God's voice, God's hands. When I kill time I am killing God's time. My abilities are God's abilities. If it all belongs to God, and it does, then shouldn't we use it as he desires?

There is some great news in this story. That news is that God doesn't give everyone the same things. God is not a socialist. Sometimes I think this is not fair. Have you ever known a person who is ridiculously gifted, just good at everything they do? Or maybe you know someone who is good looking, intelligent, talented, charming, funny and rich. It just doesn't seem fair, does it? How come they have so much more than I do?

But the good news is if I'm the one bag of gold guy God doesn't expect me to produce what the 5 bags of gold guy does. I don't have to compare myself to other people and do what they do. God just asks me to be faithful in using what he has given me. How awful it would be if God demanded that I be measured against other people and do as much as they do, even if he has given them more abilities than he gave me. He doesn't ever do that. He says, "just be faithful with what you have been given."

There is one last important lesson in this story. You will be judged. We all sense that is true. Somehow, even when we don't like to think about it or want to admit it, we know that we are going to have to account for what we have done in life.

Everyone knows that. The band U2 was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame back in 2004. In an interview at the time they made some very interesting comments. Adam Clayton, the bass player said, "I suppose if people want to shower you with honors, the only reasonable thing to do is accept them." Drummer Larry Mullen Jr. then said, "But it does feel a bit premature. We're trying to stay focused on the big prize." He wasn't talking about a Grammy. He meant the big prize at the end of life. They know they will be judged.

The positive thing about that is if we will be faithful we will be rewarded. Scholars and pastors talk a lot about what those rewards will be. In the end I don't think we really understand what they will be because God has not spelled it out. We will be living in a way that is so different that it is really impossible for us to envision it. But there are two things in these verses that seem to be true about the reward.

The first is that it will involve approval. The master says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." That may not sound like a big deal, but I want you to notice how many awards people give out. The entertainment industry has over 300 different award shows. But at every level of human endeavor we give out awards. At the end of a school year schools give lots of awards. The military gives out awards for exceptional service and courage. Sports teams have MVP's and other awards. Corporations give awards to employees. Why does every body give out awards?

It's because human beings are desperate for recognition. We have a built in thirst for approval. That thirst is endless. We were at the swimming pool in our neighborhood and a neighbor was there with her two boys, ages 7 and 9. They've had swimming lessons this summer. It was interesting to watch them do things like doing both front flips and back flips in the water. It wasn't enough to do them. They continually would say, "Mommy, watch this." They kept doing the same things, so there really wasn't anything new. But they were desperate for their mom to see it and voice her approval. Kids do that all the time. "Watch me, Daddy. Daddy, watch!" They have that built in, insistent need for recognition and approval. No matter how much approval we get, we want more.

Yes, kids are like that, but we're adults. We've grown up. Perhaps, but we have not grown out of our desire for recognition and approval. One evening Laurie and I were watching TV while sitting on our living room sofa because we aspire to be couch potatoes. Laurie happened to look up and spotted a large spider up at the corner of the wall and the ceiling. Laurie may not have terminal arachnophobia, but she has a severe case of it. She said there was no way she would sleep knowing

this monster spider was on the loose in our house. The problem is we have 20 foot high ceilings in our living room. How was I supposed to terminate that spider with extreme prejudice that high up? We didn't have a ladder that could get us close. I came up with a plan. I had Laurie get a wet wash cloth. I rolled it into a ball then fired it up at that evil creature. I didn't get close on the first couple of tries. But I started adjusting and began zeroing in. Finally on about my 8th throw I got a bullseye. Down he came where we pounced on him and sent him to meet his maker. Laurie was thrilled. But then we had another problem. Mr. Spider had left his web up there. There was a lot of cob web. We couldn't live with that. I fired my trusty wash cloth at it in an effort to bring down all that spooky stuff. Over and over, with Laurie cheering every bit of success. There was a point at which I realized due to the strange angle I was throwing at my elbow was hurting. It was hurting quite a lot. I thought maybe I should stop because I might be injuring my surgically repaired elbow. But Laurie was so happy about my success so far. I couldn't leave the job unfinished. I kept throwing because I wanted to hear, "Well done, good and faithful Husband." I got it all down, but when I finally stopped my elbow was screaming at me. Even the slightest movement caused intense pain. Uh oh. I thought I was in for more elbow surgery. How dumb was that? Why didn't I stop before doing myself real harm? It was because at least in part I love to hear the praises of my wife. So you won't be concerned, the elbow was a bit better the next day, and eventually the pain went away. Whew.

What we are actually longing for is to hear our Creator, our Eternal Father, say, "I'm watching. Good job, son. Way to go, daughter." One of the most fulfilling things we will ever experience is to hear the Father say, "Well done." This story gives us great hope. I don't have to beat out other people and compete with them. I don't have to do more than them or be better than them. In fact, what they do is utterly irrelevant to how I account for my life. The only thing that will matter is how faithful I have been with what God has given me. I can hear the Father say, "Well done! Good job, Son." I have been longing for that my entire life, and so have you.

But notice also the end of verse 23. The master says, "Come and share your master's happiness!" The reward we are looking for, the best thing we could ever experience, is to share in God's happiness. Who is the happiest person you've ever known? I wouldn't be surprised if there's someone you know that you secretly envy. This person has everything you've ever wanted. Their life seems idyllic, perfect to you, and they seem completely at peace, content in it and truly joyful. And you wish you had their life. I suspect if you could get inside that person's life

you'd find it's not as flawless as you imagine. But here's the thing. God's life is idyllic, perfect and utterly full of joy and peace. God is infinite, and everything about him is unlimited. He has infinite power, infinite patience, infinite love, and infinite happiness. His happiness has no limits! It is the ultimate happiness. And that is what awaits the faithful servant. He invites the servant to share in his unlimited happiness. We can't even envision what that will be like. But it is what we have always wanted. All of us want to have a happiness that is without boundaries and will never end. That is what is promised to the faithful servant.

Laurie recently had one of those moments that until you experience it there is no way to understand the power of it. She was taking care of our granddaughters. Little Ella at one point hugged her arm, put her head on Laurie's shoulder and said, "Oh Nana, I love you. You're my best friend." For Laurie that moment was heaven on earth. Her heart was filled with so much joy that it felt like it was going to burst. The problem with this world is that those moments are just that... moments. They come and go so very quickly. Fifteen minutes later Ella was having a titanic meltdown because Laurie wouldn't let her wear her polka dot shirt because it was in the laundry. The thing about entering into the king's happiness is it won't be fleeting. It is unlimited, endless. It is filled with joy and doesn't stop.

### DON'T BE A GOAT

Wait, isn't goat an acronym for "greatest of all time"? So you're telling me to not be the greatest of all time. No, that's not the goat I mean. I mean a goat like Jesus described in his last story. This, by the way, is Jesus' final parable in the book of Matthew. No more stories after this. Just the climax of Jesus' life.

Jesus said that when he finally does come back there will be a judgment. Everyone will be gathered before him and he will separate people into two groups. He will do it like a shepherd who has both goats and sheep in his flock. He might divide them at the end of the day, sheep on one side and goats on the other. This leads to a lot of discussion by some people on the differences between sheep and goats. People get down on goats, and this story seems to say that Jesus is so down on them he rejects them. This would make my daughter quite unhappy. She has a curious fondness for goats. They used to have some at Disneyland, and she always insisted on visiting the goats when we went there. The last time we were in Maui with her she made it a point for us all to visit the Surfing Goat Dairy that's located there. This discussion of the relative merits of goats and sheep is yet another adventure in missing the point.



Jesus was using an illustration. His point was not that sheep have some admirable traits that we should have and goats have traits that should be avoided. He was simply saying in a way that his audience would understand that God will divide people into two camps. He could have used any animals to illustrate the point. It could have been dogs and cats, lions and tigers or giraffes and aardvarks. The point is not the character of the animals, but that there are two camps.

What determines which camp people end up in? The group that gets in took pity on him and cared for him. “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. 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 group that doesn’t get invited into his kingdom, the goats, were just the opposite. They declined to give him food or drink and didn’t invite him in when he was a stranger.

This leads to some head scratching. Both groups say, “Wait, we don’t remember that. We don’t recall ever encountering you at all, so how could we have taken pity on you or not done so?” The king answers, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Whatever you didn’t do for the least of them, you did not do for me.”

Jesus says that whatever we do for the least of his brothers and sisters we do to him. When we fail to care for that person, we fail to care for him. When we look after that person, giving food, comfort, clothing, encouragement, we do it to him. People pick up on the “least” in his statement and say that this is about how we treat those on the lowest end of the socio-economic scale. If we don’t help them in their need, we are refusing to care for Jesus himself. When we respond to their need and seek to help, we are loving Jesus himself.

Throughout his ministry Jesus displayed great compassion and love for the outcasts, the downtrodden, the poor and powerless. So that would include caring for those who have the least advantages in life. If we love Jesus, we will do that. However, I think Jesus intended this statement to be broader than that. The Greek language didn’t have a word for “even” the way we use it at times. So I think Jesus used the word “least” to indicate that. In other words, he had in mind, “what you do for even the least of these, you do for me.”

We typically regard an act of kindness toward someone on the lowest rung of the social ladder, perhaps a homeless person, as not an especially significant act. It is not world changing. In fact, it won't make any real difference in this world. It is not considered noteworthy. It is kind, but not especially important or noticeable. Jesus was saying, "Even that seemingly insignificant act is hugely important, for it is as if you did it to me, the King." His point is that every single thing we do, no matter how small it might appear, to other people, particularly other followers of Jesus, has immense, eternal importance, for it is as though we are doing it to Jesus himself! Those who end up in the sheep group are those who have expressed love to the King by caring for his people.

On one level I can understand this. When someone does something kind, or says something kind, to my kids, it causes me to feel great gratitude for that person. It impacts me as much as if they had done or said that kind thing to me. What you do to my children packs more of a wallop for me than what you do to me! God loves his children even more than I love mine, so it should not surprise us if he feels that same way.

There is an obvious theological issue presented by this story. It seems the determining factor in whether one is invited into the Kingdom is whether one loves and cares for the "least of these." In fact, there are some who say this is the crux of Christianity. If you care for the poor and actively love the disadvantaged, you are in Christ's kingdom, regardless of what you believe, and if you don't you aren't in the kingdom, again, without regard to what you believe or your theology.

It is a grave mistake to interpret one passage separate from the larger context of Scripture. In John 6:29 in response to questioning about how one becomes right with God and gets eternal life Jesus said, "The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent." That's it. Believe in him. In verse 35 he said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The key is believing in Jesus. Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it explicit. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." We are saved by God's gift of grace, not by our works of charity and kindness.

You have to remember this passage in the context of the story that Matthew is telling. In Matthew 1:21 referring to Mary, Matthew wrote, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The story of Jesus is about how he came to save us from our sin. So how did he do that? By telling is to be better at caring for people? No. In

Matthew 26:28 Jesus said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” He saved us by dying on the cross. Putting our faith in him is what saves us. This parable does not change that. It simply illustrates the fact that sheep who have put their faith in Jesus will care about loving him and will express that love by caring for his people.

What we should not miss is the arc of Matthew’s message over the past few chapters. Near the end of chapter 22 the debates with Jesus’ opponents came to an end with one final question. What is the most important command of God? What is the most important thing to do? Jesus said it was to love God with everything in you, and then in light of that to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. In chapter 23 Jesus lambasted his opponents because they presented themselves as holy, godly people, but it was all for show. It was a hypocritical act because they didn’t do the most important things. They didn’t love God and they didn’t really love people, they loved themselves above all else. They were goats, not sheep. Then came the discussion of when Jesus will finally take his throne. The main message is, “You won’t know when it will happen, so be ready every moment for me to show up.” We saw that in the story of the bridesmaids. So what does it mean to be ready? We are ready when at each moment we are being is faithful with all that God gives us, using it for his purposes as we saw in the story of the money managers. Well, okay, then what are his purposes? What does he want us to do with his resources that he has entrusted to us? Ah, so glad you asked. He wants us to use them to love people in all ways large and small, because in the act of loving them we are expressing love to the King, Jesus, closing the loop that started back in chapter 22!

## IMPLICATIONS

### BE LIKE THAT BATTERY – EVER READY

Way too many people get caught up in trying to figure out the signs of Jesus’ coming and getting fired up because surely it is about to happen. Somehow that kind of thing tantalizes us. It always has. But it ignores the main point of this 2 chapter long talk. You cannot know when Jesus will come, so be ready at every moment of every day.

I was thinking about my son, Toby. He is now a doctor working in a level one emergency department of a hospital. It is the trauma center for all of Orange County. As a first year resident he typically will be handling routine cases. If there is something life threatening or really traumatic more experienced physicians will handle it. The plan is for him to not be solo if someone’s life is on the line. But

early on while he was working they had a sudden rush of trauma cases. They had so many that the more experienced doctors were all occupied. They handed Toby a man who was having a severe heart attack. The man's life was in the balance. Suddenly nurses were coming to him saying, "what are your orders, Doctor? What should we do?" He felt that initial wave of minor panic. "This guy's life was on the line and everybody's asking *me* what to do?" The thing is, they don't schedule events like that. No one says, "Hey, we're scheduling a major auto accident with serious trauma on the 18<sup>th</sup> at 9 PM, so plan on that and be ready to deal with it. He has to be ready every moment of every day because he does not know what will come through the doors of that hospital ER. And so it is with the coming of Jesus. There is no cramming, no prepping, no figuring out when he's going to come so we can get ready. We should be ready every day of our lives.

#### USE GOD'S STUFF WELL

The reminder is that everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. So we must be faithful and use it as he desires, not just in the way that feels good or serves our purposes. That's what it means to be ready.

#### DO WHAT THE SHEEP DO

I mean not literal sheep, but the sheep in Jesus' story. Use the resources God has entrusted to you to love other people. Remember that everything we do to others who belong to God, we are doing to him. If we get kind of annoyed by someone and we tell others how annoying or terrible they are, remember we are doing that to God! Take the approach of expressing love to God by doing everything you can to bless and care for his children. Surprise, that spouse you are living with has the Spirit of Jesus in him or her, and Jesus thinks the way you treat them is how you treat him! This is also true of that brother or sister in Christ you easily find yourself impatient with! So do what sheep do. Treat them with all the respect, deference and kindness you would give to Jesus.

Not too long ago I spoke about this thirst for approval that we all have. I talked about how in my younger years I wanted to be the star athlete, the MVP, but was never even remotely close to that, and that was pretty much the story of my life. Never the best, or really even especially good at anything. Not long after that a card came in the mail. On the front were some beautifully hand designed letters that read "MVP." Inside the card said, "Most Valuable Pastor," and it was signed by two couples from the church. That was really a sweet gesture. It made me feel very loved and valued. When those couples did that to me, one of the least of Jesus' people, they did it to him. They were expressing their love for him!





