

PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Like Wool on Sheep

By Greg Albrecht

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, an allegorical fable by C.S. Lewis, the parents of a young boy named John dress him up to go see the local Steward—the title the author gives for the local religious authority. John's parents apparently feel it is high time for their son to “get some religion” (my words, not those of C.S. Lewis!).

The Pilgrim's Regress (1933) is Lewis' tongue-in-cheek response to John Bunyan's 1678 novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Lewis argues for relationship with God based on a Christ-centered life experienced by Christ-followers rather than Bunyan's mandate of continual progress achieved by blood, sweat and tears. In this, the first book he wrote after his conversion to Christianity, Lewis begins a fantasy story about the ups and downs of finding spiritual

enlightenment with a discussion of “The Rules”—the title of the first chapter.

Young John is assigned a leading role in Lewis' tale, beginning with John's initial exposure to religious decrees. The subtitle to this first chapter admonishes “*Knowledge of broken law precedes all other religious experience.*” Early in John's life the family cook pulls John aside to advise him about “The Rules.”

The cook tells John about the Landlord “who owns all the country.” The Landlord has appointed the Steward “who makes rules for all the country.” The cook then sternly warns John if he does not obey the rules then the Steward “would be very angry.”

When John's parents feel that John needs formal teaching about “The Rules” they believe the local pastor/priest/vicar would be best suited for this task. Young John is extremely apprehensive about his

visit, but when he is ushered into the Steward's office, his fears seem to diminish as they talk, at first at least, about fishing and bicycles.

But then, without warning, the Steward takes a terrifying mask off the wall, and puts it on his otherwise warm and charming face. He then tells John about the Landlord, who is very kind (an obvious reference for the God the Steward represents) but if John

doesn't keep all the rules, the Steward sternly tells John the Landlord will send him to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions.

The Final Judgment

We have all had experiences similar to young John's. Religious professionals (“Stewards” who make the rules) have told us that if we do not keep all the rules then God (the “Landlord”) will not hesitate, in the final judgment, to send us to a black hole filled with snakes and scorpions.

What exactly is the “final” judgment? By what standards are we, and will we, be judged? Will an otherwise loving Landlord send us to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions if we don't measure up?

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a

inside

Descending to Serve p2

Thanksgiving
for Everyone p5

Scaredy Pants p7

Quotes & Connections p8

Continued from page 1

shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matthew 25:31-33).

Jesus' teaching about "*The Sheep and the Goats*" (Matthew 25:31-46) is probably the biblical passage most frequently used to describe the final judgment. Jesus uses sheep and goats as symbols of all who appear before him, when he returns "in his glory" sitting on "his glorious throne" (Matthew 25:31).

Based on this teaching, we have heard frightening descriptions of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when a long line of billions of people will stretch around the world. Everyone ("all nations" Matthew 25:32) will be trembling, as they await their judgment.

There will be no jostling in this line—no one will be trying to get ahead of someone else—no one will be in a hurry to have their sins and flaws weighed on the scale of justice.

The parable describes Jesus separating the line into two groups—one consisting of sheep, and the other consisting of goats. Jesus says that the sheep will have fed him and provided him with something to drink—they will have given hospitality to him as a stranger and clothed and visited him when he was sick and in prison.

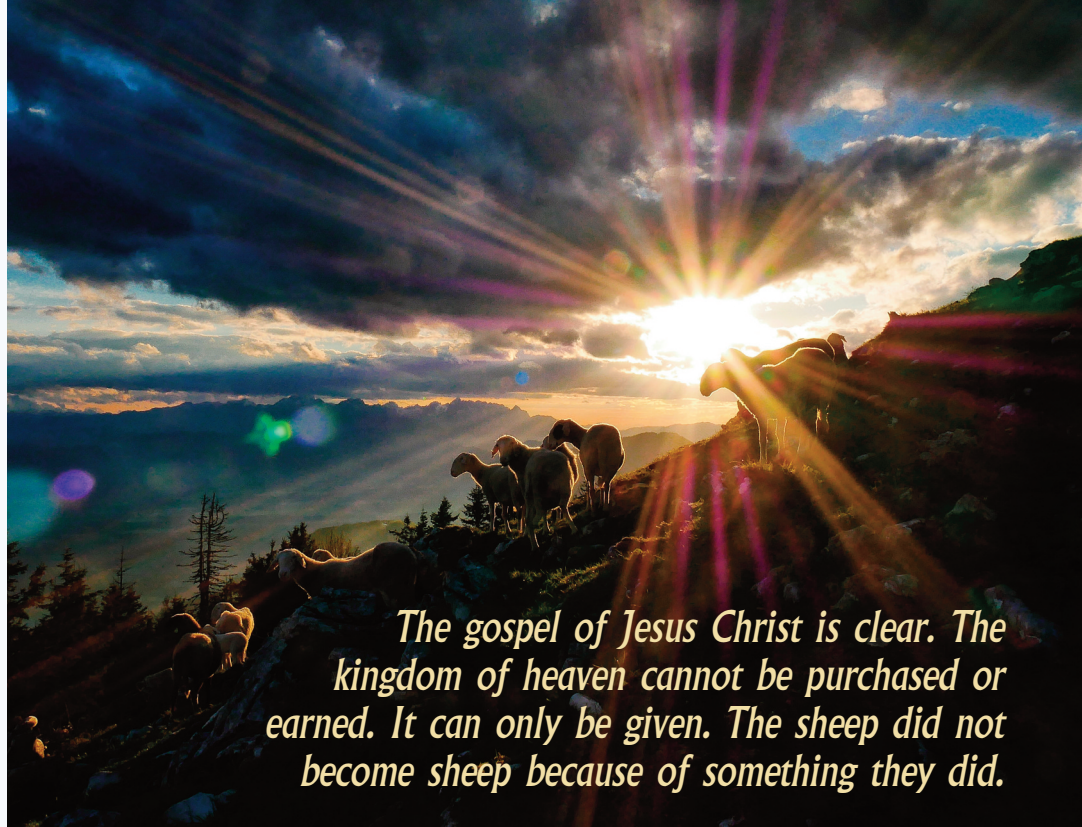
Pulpit Pronouncements About the Sheep and the Goats

Here are some actual comments explaining *The Sheep and the Goats* that have been and continue to be made from pulpits:

"How well the judgment goes for you will be based on how well you behave on this earth, right now."

"At the judgment, God will put us under the microscope of his justice and holiness, and he will drag all of our sins into the open."

"We will be judged based on how much character we have built. The sheep will have built a lot of character. The goats were



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disobedient, lazy and just goofed off."

"You and I better prepare ourselves right now for the judgment, because we are going to have to meet God one day."

"When we appear before God's throne, all of our sins will be revealed. Every deed will be exposed and accounted for in front of all the saints of God. God keeps perfect records, he sees it all, hears it all and knows it all. The things we think we did in secret will be exposed in all their ugliness."

Will God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, put on a horrible, frightening mask, tell us that he was just kidding about being filled with love, mercy, forgiveness and grace and proceed to sentence those who screwed up their lives to eternal torture?

It's true that this parable explains that the sheep are different from the goats. But here's the question: what makes the sheep different from the goats? Actually, there's an even more telling question—WHO makes the sheep different from the goats?

How Do Sheep Become Sheep?

According to Jesus, the difference between sheep and goats is

predicated on how they have served others, in his name, or failed to do. The righteous sheep will "answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:37-39).

The sheep have no idea why the King concluded that they served and ministered to him. Jesus' sheep did not live a life of record-keeping, carefully recalling all their good deeds. Jesus was the most important thing in the lives of his sheep, and they served others as a result of following him. The sheep do not believe they are worth much, but they believe Jesus is worth everything.

The goats, on the other hand, have no idea when they did not serve and minister to the King. They cannot remember a single time when they did not behave in what they consider as a right, good and morally appropriate way. The goats are shocked because they always went to church, always read

and studied their Bibles, always prayed, always performed the right ceremonies at the right time...

The goats say to Jesus: **'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me'**" (Matthew 25:44-45).

1) This passage says that one of the differences between sheep and goats is acts of kindness, compassion and generosity—demonstrated and given to people who cannot, necessarily, pay us back.

2) The passage implies that the people who are classified as sheep on the basis of these acts of kindness, compassion and generosity do not receive credit for doing so—they do not produce or manufacture these actions via their character or innate goodness. The humble sheep live out acts of kindness, compassion and generosity without expecting a reward for doing so.

3) We should also note what this parable is *not* saying. This passage is *not* suggesting that we become a sheep on the basis of giving to someone who begs or panhandles, or because we serve at a rescue mission or soup kitchen, or because we volunteer for a prison ministry. The parable is not suggesting that we buy our way into the kingdom of heaven, becoming a sheep, on the basis of what we do.

After all, ***the gospel of Jesus Christ is clear. The kingdom of heaven cannot be purchased or earned. It can only be given. The sheep did not become sheep because of something they did.***

The sheep did not live their lives taking a God mask down from the wall and putting it on, hoping to scare people to death with threats about how God will sentence them to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions unless they obey religious rules (all the while calling this activity "evangelizing").

The sheep are surprised, because

Jesus was doing things like that in their lives all the time—and as they followed Jesus, they naturally shared what he was producing in their lives. ***Jesus' followers serve other people just as naturally as wool grows on a sheep.***

But if the big, bad wolf of the nursery tale pastes wool all over himself, he is still the big, bad wolf. ***Simply having what seems to be wool is not proof that one is a sheep of Jesus' pasture.***

Jesus' followers serve other people, just as naturally as wool grows on a sheep.

We are not saved *by* our works, we are saved *for* works. Works do not ensure that we have an intimate relationship with God, nor do they ensure that we maintain it. It's all about grace. God makes wool grow on sheep just as he alone can make a tree grow.

What Makes a Sheep a Sheep

The sheep of this parable—authentic Christians—are different from the goats because they have been blessed by the Father (Matthew 25:34)—they have accepted and received the riches of God's grace.

One pastor I know visualizes standing before the judgment seat of Jesus, and the conversations that ensue go something like this:

Jesus says, "John, look up March 24, 2004 on your electronic planner or journal. Tell me what you were doing on that day."

John looks it up, and he says, "Oh yes, that's the day I gave that great sermon. The people at church said it was one of the best sermons they had ever heard."

Jesus replies, "No, the sermon you gave on March 24, 2004 is not what I am interested in. By the way, I never listened to your sermons anyway. What I was thinking about was how you walked over to the old lady you

saw at the Starbucks where you stopped before church for coffee. She was sad, you noticed her and went over to her and asked if anything was wrong. Remember that John?"

John: "Well, no Lord, I don't."

Jesus: "Well, you served her in my name. When you stopped to talk to her, you stopped to talk to me."

"Okay John—take another look at your notes. Look up January 18, 2006. Remember that?"

John scrolls back, and finds January 18, 2006. "Yes, Lord, I found it. I spent the entire day working on my book, and in fact that's the day I heard from my publisher that they were going to publish my book. Is that what you mean?"

Jesus: "No, I don't know anything about that. I never read your book. What I have in mind is that time when you stopped by McDonald's with your kids after the soccer game. You were in a hurry so you decided to order in the drive-thru line."

"I remember when you paid the cashier for your meal and for your kids, you told the cashier you wanted to pay the bill of the man behind you as well."

"You never knew how much that changed that man's life forever. He had never had anyone do anything like that for him before. When you allowed me to live in you and help feed him, you fed me. When you paid for his burger and fries, you bought me a burger and fries."

We don't know all the details of the judgment seat of Jesus. He gives us a parable here—not precise details, but broad brushstrokes about sheep and goats. But we know this:

Forget about all the spiritual and religious stuff you can remember doing that was so important—chances are it means little to Jesus.

The stuff Jesus has done in and through you and me—our daily routine that we do naturally by God's grace—is like wool growing on sheep. That's the stuff which makes us one of the sheep of Jesus' pasture. □