

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

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Am I a sheep or am I a goat? Is she a goat? Are they the sheep? Do you find yourself asking something like that when you hear this Gospel reading? A well-crafted metaphor like this one can capture the imagination. Such an image can also become so powerful that it floods the mind and stimulates our anxieties until we miss the point.

The people that Matthew’s Jesus is speaking to have an advantage: they know something about sheep and goats as well as the people who tend them. Consequently, this potent image was far less distracting for them.

You can still see people in Israel and Palestine tending sheep and goats together. Both are valuable sources of food, wool and skins. And unless you stop and watch them grazing, the goats and sheep are difficult to tell apart from each other. They are similar in color and size, and when they are all in a group, one of the few cues I could find is that the goats’ tails stick up like a hairy little flag and the sheeps’ tails hang down.

As evening comes on, the shepherds *do* separate the sheep from the goats. Not because one animal is good and the other evil. They separate them because sheep are hardier animals that can withstand the cold. Goats need the warmth of shelter.

So, what is Jesus talking about? Well, Jesus offers one hint that you couldn't be expected to know. Matthew is an educated writer of Greek and he has used a word at the end of this reading that we hear translated into English as "eternal punishment." Matthew's Greek word, "*kolasis*," came from the practice of pruning plants and it originally referred to "being held in check." It is a slippery little word.

Matthew could have chosen another word that referred exclusively to punishment. There are a few in Greek. He didn't. The word that he *did* choose also shows up in the first letter of John where it refers to the suffering of a person who is afraid because they are not yet perfected in charity.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory," in other words, he will separate the goat-folks into catch-pens. Because, unlike the more resilient sheep-folks, they need the warmth of a shelter where God can correct and perfect them.

The main point of Matthew's Jesus is not the comparison of sheep to goats. His larger point is that the *one judge capable* of making the appropriate distinction – the one eternal shepherd king – will separate the two. God is the one who decides which of us are righteous sheep and which of us are goats in need of further fine-tuning.

I don't know about you, but I find great relief in that notion. I have long suspected that, despite my aspirations, I am still more goat than sheep. And there are people more than willing to point out my goatliness, at least as it looks from their perspective. And if I can squelch my own self-righteousness or smugness long enough, I find both hope and great news here.

Let me tell you a story: When I was running the communications department of a consulting company some years back, management asked me to take over the in-house graphics department. Now, I am not a graphic designer, but I do know about behaviors that put a company at risk, so I told them I would do it only if they would allow me to clean house.

Management agreed and I got started. I helped one designer find another position inside the company. Then I hired Jennifer from our

Information Technology department. She had just completed her master of fine arts degree in graphic design.

Shortly after that, one of our senior designers told me that another company wanted to hire her and she threatened to quit if I didn't match their offer. Given that I was preparing to fire her anyway, letting her leave was the obvious move. Then I gave Jennifer, our newest designer, a raise and more responsibility.

Another month or so went by. I had been working on removing the former director of the department, who was also the most senior person by far. Some her past behaviors could have exposed us to litigation if she had been caught. She knew it and I knew it. I gave her a fair exit package and then promoted Jennifer once again. She was now the senior graphics designer.

When I gave her the news, she said, "Hey! Now you're the boss of me!" And for years after that, she referred to me that way. "Good morning, boss-of-me" or "Hey, boss-of-me, I have a question."

Now, we both knew that my title meant one thing on paper and another in practice. She reported to me and I either got her what she needed or got things out of her way. She granted me influence and I supported her professional development. Our relationship was based on mutual accountability, not control. The truth is, I never *had* to be the boss of her because we both recognized that our roles were in service of something a little larger than the two of us.

That same pattern shows up more intentionally in religious life.

Episcopal priests and deacons, at their ordination, promise to obey their Bishop. The Bishop holds a place in the line of apostles as a follower of Christ in an obedient life of service. And at a Bishop's ordination, the Presiding Bishop prays for God to pour out on the bishop-elect the power of the princely Spirit that God bestowed upon Jesus, the same Spirit with whom Jesus endowed the apostles.

God not only put the power of that princely Spirit to work in Christ but also, as the author of Ephesians wrote, put the Risen and Ascended Christ "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."

In short, Christ is the boss of me and of you – the boss of bosses, for that matter, who has jurisdiction over everything and everyone, now and forever.

And so, today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, the One whom we recognize as having ultimate authority over us. And in doing so, we withhold that level of authority from anyone or anything else, even if they have influence on our lives, for good or ill.

The people that we might choose to obey without granting them *total* authority over our lives includes Presidents, kings, nations and any form of earthly government; CEOs, managers, supervisors and anyone with positional authority; and, yes, even bishops, priests and religious authorities as well as spouses, parents, children and any other family member.

We do not grant total authority to political affiliations or to our personal agendas and aspirations; not to our gender or sexual orientation; not to our vulnerabilities or our wounds, whether physical, psychological or spiritual. These may influence who we are, but they are not the boss of us.

True obedience, you see, is not blind or forced compliance; not simply doing what we are told. Chosen obedience is a difficult balance that requires practice, focus and discernment. Chosen obedience is the consent to sacrifice for the sake of the seeking of God. In that way, every expression of true obedience is a manifestation of the total subservience we owe to God alone.

True obedience is also not dependence. Asking for advice is one thing: Always seeking the approval or permission of others to justify our actions or to do what we know should be done, or otherwise passing on to others the burden of decisions that should be our own is not obedience, but immaturity or stunted development.

True obedience is interdependent, mutually respectful “kingship.”

To claim Christ as King is our refusal to give any other person, situation or characteristic complete authority over us. Even if they can exert influence or suffering on us, we deny anyone or anything the right to rule us in ways that rob us or the world of humanity. They are simply not the boss of us.

To claim Christ as King is our consent, a pledge of obedience, to the Holy One. We grant all authority to the Risen and Ascended Christ to challenge us, to build us up, to teach us humility and compassion in our

hearts, and to shape who we most genuinely are. In return, Christ the King shows us what it means to have a “self” that fills the world with self-giving love. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick and so forth.

The Christ we enthrone as King in our hearts and in our lives is not a cruel boss of bosses, some capo di tutti capi, who sends us goatlier folks off to fend for ourselves. No, Christ *our* King is the good shepherd who leaves the flock of safe sheep to gather up one lost lamb.

Or even a wandering goat teetering in the darkness on the edge of a cliff. Yes, Christ our King will even gather those of us who need a little extra shelter and warmth and loving correction.

And thank God for that!

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Works consulted:

Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. London: Yale Press, 2017.