

# Sheep Go to Heaven

By John Nunes and Gloria Edwards

Open with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to open your hearts to the incomprehensible depth of God's mercy.

## Opening

Read **Matthew 25:31–46**.

## Are We Sheep or Goats?

*"Sheep go to heaven, goats go to hell."* For many Christians, that's the condensed version of Jesus' "least of these" parable from the Gospel of Matthew. A comforting thought if you consider yourself a sheep.

Read **Romans 3:23**. Maybe we can't jump to the conclusion that we are sheep. Our act of Confession in worship reminds us of just how goat-like we are. Take a moment silently to confess to God your own goat-ness. How many of the "least of these" have we failed to help? How many strangers have we failed to welcome? How many millions of sick have we failed to care for?

Now reread **Romans 3:23** and continue to **verse 24**. To Jesus' disciples of the day and to us, His now called and sanctified, Christ invites a different reading of the "least of these" parable — one focused not on the barnyard animal we presume to be, but on the identity of the Shepherd who calls us into service. The separation of sheep and goats takes place before any works are mentioned. It is based solely on Christ's work for us on the cross of Calvary where He did for us what we cannot do for ourselves through His death and glorious resurrection.

## The "Least" and the "Most" in Caring for Creation

In **Luke 1:46–55**, Mary sings, *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the humble estate of his servant ... He has ... exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things."* (ESV) Mary was speaking of the gift of Jesus, but who are the lowly whom God lifts up and feeds today? How do we see them in our day-to-day lives?

In the beginning, there was no sin, no least, no lowly. Read **Genesis 1:31**. How does God feel about His creation? But that's not where the story ends. Following the fall into sin, at the center of God's concern for creation is His redemptive and merciful activity made incarnate in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Read **Genesis 3:15** and **Galatians 4:4–5**. God's redemptive power covers all, no matter how "least" or "most," no matter Jew or Gentile (**Romans 1:16**). How can we imitate Jesus who, throughout the Bible, extends mercy to "the least" and loving restoration to the broken, calling believers to commit their time and their resources to lift up those who are disadvantaged, downtrodden, and oppressed?

Look at **1 Samuel 17:38–40**. Have you encountered an experience or situation similar to David's? Like Saul, whose intent was to help the adolescent shepherd David, our intention to help those who suffer could easily become a burden to the very ones we wish to help if we try to rely on our own knowledge and assumptions.

Read **1 Thessalonians 5:24**. Compelled not by fear of our "goatishness," but by the saving promise of the One who calls, we work through many means to share the Good News — pastors and partners, medicines and micro-loans, bed nets and bedtime stories — to reach those most in need.

*May our work in His name — and all that we are called to undertake — ever be an affirmation of our sanctified sheepishness and a confession of our faith in the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

