

# Taking the Matthew 25 test

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When it comes to judging livestock, some Baptists have a beef with sheep and goats. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus describes Judgment Day, with all the nations gathered around God's throne and people separated into two groups—sheep on one side, goats on the other. The sheep are invited to enter into the kingdom prepared for them, while the goats are consigned to hellfire prepared for the devil and his helpers.

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To distinguish sheep from goats, Jesus talks about feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting people in prison and other kind acts. Christ equates ministry to "the least of these my brothers" as service to him.

To some, that sounds too much like salvation by works, rather than salvation by grace through faith. But others see no contradiction—just a challenge to make sure grace produces a transformed life characterized by care for the vulnerable.

## Grace or works

"There is no dichotomy between faith and works," said Van Christian, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Comanche](#). "Good works are not an option in order to be saved; salvation is by grace alone. Good works are not an option once we are saved; whoever claims to be in Christ must walk as he walked."

Christian notes the Apostle Paul wrote about salvation by grace through faith—not as a result of works—in Ephesians 2:8-9. But in the very next verse, Paul says Christ's followers are created for good works. Works do not earn salvation, but they demonstrate it, he insisted.

"Faith in Jesus Christ is demonstrable, visible and easily recognizable," said Christian, chairman of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board.

Robert Prince, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Waynesville, N.C.](#), agrees. God saves people by his grace, received through faith, but that same salvation produces tangible evidence—good fruit.



"When we know Christ relationally, we bear the fruit of good works," said Prince, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Vernon.

The unrighteous in Matthew 25—the goats in the parable—demonstrate by their lack of concern for vulnerable people no vital relationship with Christ, he explained.

"If they had been in a relationship with Christ, they would have borne the fruit of love and compassion for those in need. The problem is that many who call themselves believers don't understand that a relationship with Christ leads to care for the poor and hurting."

Keith Herron, pastor of [Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo.](#), believes Jesus in Matthew 25 describes accountability for stewards of faith and influence.

"We don't believe there's much wiggle room in our stewardship of the faith along the lines of Matthew 25. To be an authentic follower of Jesus, we will

follow him in these ways. This is not a matter of salvation; this is a matter of being Christ's followers in our realms of influence," said Herron, moderator-elect of the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) and former pastor of Manor Baptist Church in San Antonio.

"Our realms of influence are centered and grounded in our physical location, but the world we serve is understood to be wherever we go between Sundays."

Too often, an overemphasis on piety can separate Baptist churches from the nitty-gritty needs of their communities, he asserted.

"We hide behind our piety, mislabeling and condemning our involvement as 'local politics' and implying such involvement would be crass or messy," he said. "Our stewardship of faith pulls us toward our community's needs and draws us to action."

## **Charity or justice**



Charles Carroll from First Baptist Church in Comanche served as crew chief for volunteer builders. The team constructed a home for a couple near Bastrop whose house had been destroyed by wildfire last year.

(PHOTO/Ken Camp)

Proper understanding of the kind of compassionate response Jesus describes in Matthew 25 moves Christians from acts of charity to a hunger for justice, Prince insisted.

"To help 'the least of these,' we must not only engage in individual acts of charity, but also confront systems that deprive people of the ability to care for their own needs," he said.

"Individual aid is important, but oftentimes it provides only temporary relief. The systems that hurt the poor are cultural, social and governmental. Individual aid is insufficient, as are government reform and social change. To help the poor, we need to be engaged at all these levels."

At First Baptist in Comanche, Christian said, he tries though his preaching to emphasize God's expectation that genuine conversion results in changed lives that reflect God's character.

"Just as the Pharisees followed the law without knowing God, simply doing acts of charity is not sufficient. When these acts of charity are a reflection of the changed life in Christ, however, they reflect a righteousness that demonstrates a right relationship with God. This right relationship is not limited to a few specific deeds. It is a complete change in lifestyle that reflects the nature of God," he said.

### **Demonstrate God's love**

Members of First Baptist Church in Comanche have learned to take that teaching seriously, Christian said.

"They do not see ministry as simply benevolent work. They do not merely help people for the sake of doing something good. They work as a testament to their faith in Christ and see the ministry as a gift to him, as much as a gift to the people involved," he said. "I believe this enables them to see people and projects through the eyes of Christ."

For example, when wildfires destroyed homes in Bastrop last year, members of First Baptist in Comanche helped people there recover and rebuild.

"The folks that we have focused on were elderly, poor, uninsured and unable to recover on their own. In terms of the world, there was nothing about them that demonstrated a reason for them to be helped. Yet our church recognized this is a means of following the command of Jesus and reflecting the grace by which we are saved," Christian said.

"We shared the gospel—not just in words, but in sacrificial deeds that demonstrated the love of God we have and want to share."