

SHEEP CHURCHES & GOAT CHURCHES

Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 13:8-14

July 4, 2021

Before I begin my sermon, I need to read this urgent breaking news report that I was just given:

***It has been reported** – that there have been five terrorist cell groups operating in many of the churches in the area. They have been identified as: Bin Sleepin; Bin Arguin; Bin Fightin; Bin Complainin, and Bin Missin.*

***It has also been determined** – that their leader, Lucifer Bin Workin, trained these terrorist groups to destroy the body of Christ – the church. Their plan is to infiltrate the church disguised as Christians, and to work within the church to discourage, disrupt and destroy. Please be on the alert for any of the members of these terrorist cell groups. If spotted, approach with caution – they are extremely dangerous.*

I want to ask you – do you ever get spiritually weary? Does your faith falter at times? Do you ever get disappointed and discouraged with the church? I can say YES to all the above, and I believe you all can as well. We all at times question our faith and our effectiveness as Christians.

In the Scripture verses that were read from Romans – we are commanded to be filled with love and never get discouraged and give up. In fact, we are told to stay awake because the time of Christ's return is getting closer-and-closer, with each passing day. And as the body of Christ, we are being reminded to always keep our eyes on Jesus, so that we will not grow weary and lose our faith. Which means that we as believers need to be living in a constant state of being alert – knowing the signs of the times and be armed and ready to battle our enemy Satan at a moment's notice! Yet throughout history, the church has had a recurring problem of falling into spiritual laziness, complacency, disunity and Satan has done a good job of getting us distracted by infighting (fighting each other so that we ignore what he is doing to undermine our society during our watch).

As we begin this new chapter at SCCC it is an ideal time to examine ourselves to see if we have fallen asleep or have become distracted or complacent in serving and following Christ. However, maybe we are awake and alert, but the problem is that we have lost our passion for our first love, or may have forgotten why God has

called us to serve Him here in Sombra and the surrounding area, or possibly we are focussing on the wrong things and in the wrong areas, or possibly we have been infiltrated by these terrorist groups that are destroying us from the inside.

So there are a few questions that we need to take seriously as the church: First, why did God come to this cursed earth and take on our weak human flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ? Second: what did Jesus Christ accomplish by His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, and what difference does it make to us? Third: what is the role of the Body of Christ (that is you and me) now that Jesus has ascended to heaven, and is sitting at the right hand of God the Father? And lastly, what time is it on God's calendar? How much time do we have left before Jesus returns for His bride? And if the time is short, then how serious should we be in reaching the lost and the hurting around us?

To try and answer these questions – we need to look at God's story, found in His Word, and we need to start at the beginning of God's story – **Genesis 1:1, "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*"** Genesis 1 & 2 tells us how the good creation was created, designed, and how it was to function. So the first thing we need to do is to believe this very basic truth – that all that was created exists in relationship to God and to glorify God. This created world was designed by God, so it belongs to God, and everything in this world finds its meaning and purpose in relationship with God. All the creation exists according to God's purpose and for His glory, and God gave a special place to us humans within His creation to fulfill His divine purposes. Made in God's image, we have been assigned the responsibility to be His caretakers (stewards) over the whole earth, and one day we will be judged on how well we carried out that task.

Everything changed when sin entered God's story in Genesis 3. Nothing in God's creation was left untouched by sin, and as result, sin upset the apple cart, turning everything good inside-out and upside-down. Angels rebelled. Humans rebelled and worshiped idols, gods made after their own likeness rather than the Creator God. Human society was broken by betrayal, deceit, and murder. The intimacy of marriage was disrupted by the demoralizing powers of lust, and because of greed humans exploited the earth and exploited each other. Everything was corrupted by sin and the earth and the creation were cursed. Romans 8:19-22 tells us that the whole creation has been groaning to be liberated from its bondage to death and decay.

Sin devastated God’s good creation and the fall was total. There was not a glimmer of hope or a single solution in this tragic human situation, the Garden of Eden was lost and there was no return, creation was doomed. But then, God promised a solution in **Genesis 3:15** – a Saviour would come into the world as the *“seed of the woman,”* and this seed would ultimately conquer and defeat the evil one, crushing his head. This promise of a Saviour introduced the story of redemption, which would be available to sinful mankind – God’s grace and the forgiveness of sins was available to all, so there is now hope. And the rest of the specific details of this story of a Saviour, of God’s grace, of the forgiveness of sins, of salvation, and the restoration of all things are found in the rest of the Biblical account from Genesis 3 all the way to Revelation 19. And within that story has been Satan’s attempts to prevent our redemption and the restoration of all things!

The promised Saviour and cross changed everything. The crucifixion and resurrection became the cornerstone of God’s redemptive work in this cursed world, and now Satan has been defeated. Jesus has ushered in the Kingdom of God, and because of Jesus, God is bringing back to a right relationship, all that was lost, both mankind and creation. God is re-establishing His good creation through Jesus. God is making all things new – a new heaven and new earth that is spoken about in Revelation 21 & 22. And once we get to these final chapters of the Bible, the dwelling of God will be with mankind, God will tabernacle, live with us, we will be His people and He will be our God, the Garden of Eden will be restored, and the curse will be reversed. And that is the hope of the church! And that is why we gather together every Sunday!

Now that Jesus has returned to heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God – He is sending us, His redeemed followers, out into this cursed world, to give others the Good News of the Gospel message that we have received. Jesus has given His church the great responsibility to live lives that imitate what the world would look like when the curse is reversed. So, that is the God given role for each one of us here today. To show the rest of the world what the Kingdom of God looks like!

We as Christians are commanded to bear witness to God’s redemptive reign. We are a sign of hope to this world that the redemptive reign of God is available and present right now for all who believe. We do not have to wait! We can have a foretaste of eternity right now in the present. In other words, the church is God’s

demonstration plot of what the world will be like when Jesus returns and the eternal reign of Christ is established.

As many of you know, I had worked in Agricultural Research for just over 30 years, and one of the roles of the research department was to put out demonstration plots for our growers. As new farming techniques, new varieties and chemicals became available, we would put out demonstration plots in various locations in growers fields to show that these were superior to what the growers were presently doing and using. Most of the growers at first were sceptical and hesitant to accept these new ways of doing things, until they could be convinced. The growers had to see the proof for themselves before they would accept them and apply them to their individual farms. That was the reason for the demonstration plots, to give evidence and proof that the new was superior to the old.

Then, once the growers had witnessed that the new way was superior to the old, they came to believe and there was no turning back. They were sold, and in fact, they were usually so encouraged that you could not convince them to ever return to their former ways. **In much the same way,** the church is God's demonstration plot to the rest of the world of how having a relationship with Christ Jesus and following God can be superior to following the world. Here at SCCC, we need to realize that our very presence in this community is an invitation for all un-believers to watch, to listen, to examine, and to consider accepting Christ and God's ways as a much superior way of living their lives, and they come to this understanding by observing the many demonstration plots scattered throughout this area. And everyone of these living demonstration plots works out of love, not only for their Lord and Saviour, but also for those that live around them.

Romans 13:8-14 unpacks this huge topic called, "*LOVE,*" because love is they key. It is what identifies us as believers. Our love is genuine. It is the real thing. Christ followers are not hypocrites, we do not just say, "*I love you,*" we get our hands dirty and sacrifice for others, because love doesn't just come from our lips, but from our heart. In **Romans 13:7,** Paul instructs us on how believers are to live out in the world, "*If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.*" Which leads nicely into verses **8-10** as Paul switches gears to how we are to deal with our relationships, "**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. God's commandments,** (Paul lists those commandments that deal with our relationships) **'You shall not commit**

adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ***Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.***” As we live in this highly materialistic, debt-ridden society – as we borrow to buy homes, cars, appliances, furniture, and take vacations, Paul reminds us that the only outstanding debt that a Christ follower should have is the debt of love for one another. That is the debt we should never try to pay back ASAP, and we can only do that when we come to realize that we are citizens of two kingdoms: we are not only citizens of Canada, but we also citizens of God’s eternal everlasting kingdom!

Then in **verse 11-14**, Paul tells us how to live as kingdom people we understand the present time, God’s timetable. We live fully awake. We live with urgency in these last days, all because night’s darkness is dissolving away and God’s light is about to shine and reveal the evil that is all around us and within us, ***“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here”*** (Romans 13:12). The day Paul is referring to here is ***“The Day of the Lord’s Return,”*** so we need to pay attention and not be caught off-guard by how the Scriptures are being fulfilled today. And Jesus gave us this sign to help us discern the time of His return, ***“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man”*** (Matthew 24:37-39). So, if we are awake to what God is doing and understand that we are living in the end times, it should make a difference in how we conduct our daily lives, and the urgency of God’s mission for us as His church. Every church needs to awaken to the fact that the final day, the day of Christ’s return and the glorification of every believer is getting closer-and-closer each-and-every day, and we need to be prepared and ready, because the Lord is looking for a radiant bride that has prepared herself for the bridegrooms return!

I have attended church for about 65 of my 70 years on this earth, and I have been both highly blessed and encouraged by the church, as well as highly disappointed and discouraged by the church. This denomination will be the 5th denomination that I’ve been part of. With this past experience, I have come to realize that there are sheep churches that follow Jesus as their Shepherd, and then there are goat

churches who have abandoned their Shepherd and gone their own way. Jesus had a great deal to say about these in His parable of the Sheep and the Goats. This parable is one of the last, in a group of 3 parables found in **Matthew 25** that Jesus gave His disciples the week before He was crucified, warning them to never slack off, stay alert and awake, always be ready for His eventual return. Jesus first gives them this warning in **Matthew 24:36-44**, *“No one knows about the day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father ... therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come ... you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”* After Jesus gives this warning, He tells the 3 parables to make His point – He first tells them the parable of the 5 wise virgins and 5 foolish virgins who missed out on the wedding banquet, and then the parable of financial stewardship over different amounts of gold coins given to his servants, and how one of the servants buried his gift and was cast out into outer darkness, and finally this parable about sheep and goats. Let’s turn to **Matthew 25:31-46** and see how it applies to both us and the church.

These three parables are all about the final judgement of believers, not unbelievers (you and me). In this third parable the setting is the divine throne room of God when **“the Son of Man,”** the resurrected Jesus will appear in His majestic glory, with all of His angels by His side, and takes His seat as King of kings and Lord of Lords. This is judgement day, and all the believers in every nation are gathered together before Him, and like a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats, we will separate all the people gathered before Him, putting **“the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”** As we read on – we find out that it will be much better to be a sheep on the right than a goat on the left. So, in this parable, how does King Jesus, the Shepherd, determine who are the sheep and who are the goat? He looks at the heart. By looking at their heart, Jesus knows if they have a heart of compassion that followed His lead, or a rebellious heart that went its own selfish way, having no love or compassion for others!

I don’t know very much about sheep or goats. I understand that sheep are dumb animals that need a lot of guidance and care because they can easily wander and get into trouble. Whereas, goats are hardier animals, more intelligent and more independent than sheep – tending to go their own stubborn ways. In the first century, I read that both sheep and goats were normally kept together in the same herd, so that it was often difficult to tell them apart to the untrained eye. But, when sheering time came, the shepherd would quickly herd the goats in one direction,

and the sheep in another. That's the background of this parable, the shepherd can look out on a large flock grazing before him, and easily distinguish the sheep from the goats.

You will also notice in this heavenly scene – that until judgement begins, there is no way of distinguishing between the individuals in this crowd. Gathered before the throne are millions and millions of people nervously milling around, waiting, oblivious to what will happen next – just like sheep and goats grazing together in one large flock. As King Jesus separates this massive crowd – sheep to the right – goats to the left, you will notice, that the purpose of this judgement is not to determine who are sheep and who are goats – that has already been determined by Christ the Shepherd long beforehand as He has observed their earthly lives. The judgement depicted here, is the separation of the two groups of so called followers, because their eternal destination will differ. In the beginning they were all together but after the judgement the two groups are separated for all of eternity. And it's interesting here that both the sheep and the goats are surprised by which way they go. They didn't seem to know if they were a goat or a sheep!

However, isn't this also true today? The sheep and goat Christians and the sheep and goat churches mingle together. We live on the same street, we go to the same restaurants, we shop in the same stores, and we may even go to the same church and attend the same Bible studies. Most of the time it's difficult to tell for sure who is in which group, just like a mixed flock of sheep and goats, we all pretty much look the same. But Jesus knows the difference, because He has been observing our lives!

In verse 34, King Jesus tells the sheep on His right, “Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” But Jesus says to the goats on His left, in **verse 41, “Depart from me, you are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** Only the sheep inherit the kingdom of God and receive the reward of heaven because their hearts were in the right place. But the disturbing thing here is that Jesus never bases His decision on salvation, or faith, or grace, or church attendance, or Bible reading, or prayer, or any of the usual spiritual things that we do and count on to please God. None of those things are mentioned! What happens to make us fit for heaven – is the condition of our heart!

How does the Shepherd know the condition of the heart? The answer is given here in **verse 40** is that He looks to see how their hearts were oriented toward **“one of the least of these brothers/sisters of mine.”** Their love and compassion for others demonstrated the condition of their heart, and not how many times they were in church or how many Bible studies or prayer meetings they attended. Jesus was looking at: how they treat people in economic need – the one that was hungry, or thirsty, or needing clothing? How they respond to the person with social needs – the homeless, the aged, the stranger, the outsider – who had little hope of friendship unless someone chose to include them? How they care for those with medical needs – the sick, the dying? And lastly, how they care for those with moral needs – the undesirable person that we tend to ignore, the alcoholic, drug addict, prostitute, the criminal – those who needed to be given a second chance? Basically, Jesus is saying here – do you love everyone equally, regardless of who they are, what they are, or how their life has turned out.

This is a sobering warning to every Christian, and each-and-every church, and I believe many will be surprised when they stand before Christ’s throne and give an account of what they had accomplished for the Kingdom of God. Many of us here have been part of or have witnessed the tragic results when a sheep church becomes a goat church, going against the teachings of Christ. Wolves in sheep clothing can easily penetrate any church and slowly turn them against the truth found in God’s Word, and that is why we need to always be on guard and stand against any false teaching. I am thankful for both the EMCC and FMCiC denominations for how they have stood on the absolute truth of God’s Word, when others have bended their knee to societal pressure, and compromised the Gospel message. However, that does not mean that we ever let up on our guard, because Satan’s agenda is to destroy the witness of every believer and close every church. COVID had been a challenge for every church, and my prayer is that SCCC will come out of this season stronger, more committed, and reach more people for Christ than ever before. Being known in this community as the church that demonstrates it’s love for each other and everyone they encounter!

I want to leave you with this challenge. Do not ever get discouraged as you see the church declining all around you. God will never give up on the sheep churches that are following their Shepherd, as Jesus told Peter that day in Caesarea Philippi, **“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”** (Matthew 16:18). We also need to pray for those goat churches – that they would repent and turn back to following the

True Shepherd, Jesus Christ! Paul also encourages us in **Hebrews 12:1-3**, by reminding us of all of those saints that gone on before us, that have paved the way for us, and are now encouraging us, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*

Remember, it’s about having a passionate heart for the Lord. Jesus healed all who came to Him and attracted multitudes to hear Him teach, but most were not committed and fell away; however, He did turn the world upside-down with a handful of committed disciples. Christ’s life transforming work always starts with a small group of disciples who are passionate about the coming Kingdom of God, becoming good demonstration plots in their community. And Peter also tells us that judgment begins with those that have heard the truth of God’s Word. **1Peter 4:17**, *“For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the Gospel of God?”* God is cleansing His Bride!

Remember, God is never interested in large numbers of uncommitted, complacent and sleepy followers. What God is looking for is a few **good demonstration plots** scattered all over this area, who show the world what the transforming work of the Holy Spirit can do in a very ordinary life. My challenge to you then is to be God’s demonstration plot where you live, where you worship and wherever you tend to hang out. And then, God will bless your efforts and unbelievers will take notice and your witness will grow by leaps and bounds. And then, on that day of judgment when our Master Shepherd will separate the goats from the sheep, you will hear those words, *“Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”* (Matthew 25:34).