

Goats

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Recently, I heard some people talking at church and they described this one man that we knew as a goat. And I thought to myself, a goat, what do they mean? And this man is intelligent. He is articulate. He is friendly. Why would he be a goat? Well, those of us who have never been around a farm, grew up on a farm, been around farm animals, sometimes we are at a disadvantage when it comes to fully understanding some of Christ's parables and some of the metaphors that are in the Bible.

Now we have heard and read much about sheep and their traits and the symbolism there for a Christian. You know that sheep are symbolic of patience and meek and submissive. But I thought to myself, what are the characteristics of goats? And why should we even care? Well, we should care, I found, because there are numerous instances in the Bible where God has used the goat to symbolize evil. Zechariah 10:3 would be a good place to start.

Zechariah 10:3 My anger is kindled against the shepherds, and I will punish the goatherds.

Then in the New Testament we have the parable in Matthew 25, verses 31 through 46. That is where the parable is. I am not going to read all of those. In this parable Christ tells of His return and of judging the nations.

Matthew 25:33 "And He [Christ] shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left."

He then goes on to explain that the sheep will be given eternal life, but the goats are going to go into the Lake of Fire. Just from these two verses, I think it should be very clear to us that we want the attributes of sheep and not those of goats. So what is it about goats that would cause God to use them in such a negative light?

Now goats are intelligent. They are sensitive, if an animal can be such. That is what I read. They are playful, quick to respond to individual attention and affection. Nothing wrong with any of that. It sounds good. But there is more.

Goats are capricious. They are subject to whim. They are impulsive and unpredictable, devious and contrary. Some of you may have seen goats grazing. Some of you may have had goats. You have probably, at least if you are like me, driven down the road and seen a goat putting his neck and head through a fence trying to get to that blade of grass on the other side. It has been said that goats have slit eyes to enable them to see around corners where the grass is greener.

Or maybe you have seen them in a pasture stretching to get a leaf off of a tree. They are up on their hind legs stretching just as far as they can go to try to get that morsel that is just out of reach. They are never content with what they have. I found that goats are expert at opening gates and squeezing through small gaps. They do not like to be confined. Fences that will hold sheep, cattle, horses, they will not hold goats. Consequently, goats are not very good followers.

There is a term that people who work with animals have. It is called gregarious behavior. All gregarious behavior means, well, it is a term, and it refers to the flocking or herding instinct. Gregarious behavior is very strong in sheep. It is very weak in goats. Meatpackers use the gregarious instinct in sheep by having an old goat, that is appropriately called Judas, lead group after group of sheep to the slaughter. A well-trained Judas will do this all day long, group after group of sheep up to the slaughter.

Now that we have some attributes of sheep, that is a little bit on the dry side, I guess. Let me try to give it a little bit of life by using a few anecdotes. What I did is I asked some people in Atlanta what they knew about goats, and luckily hit upon a few that had more experience with them than I do.

Martin Collins told me of a time that he tried to move a goat. He said he grabbed the horns and he pushed it. He pulled it. He tried to go sideways with it. It would not budge an inch, could not move it. If he pushed, then the goat came the other way. If he pulled, the goat pulled back. He said he could

not move it, not even an inch, but the moment he stepped back, letting go, the goat trotted off. The goat only wanted to go where the goat wanted to go.

Some of you know Ben Ambrose down in Atlanta. Ben grew up on a farm, and around the farm they had some goats that pretty much ran free, and he and his brother and sister turned some of them more or less into pets. It was a farm and of course on a working farm you would have a big meal at noon. The hands and the workers would all come in for the big noon meal. So on one of their typical working days, they had a big noon meal, and afterwards Ben's mom took he and the kids on down the road a little ways to the grandfather's house, and they were going to come right back. So she left everything on the table.

When they came back from the grandfather's house, there was the biggest of the billy goats right in the middle of the table amidst all the dishes and leftovers and just having a big time. The screen door was just no match for Billy.

At this time when Ben was growing up on this farm, they did not have electricity, so he said they used the lamps with the oil at the bottom that you would light. And so you have to kind of put that picture in your mind that at nighttime they are walking through the house with the lamp out in front of them and so it only illuminates a small area. So his mother one night went to the back bedroom in the house and she had this lamp out in front of her. And they heard her scream from the back of the house.

She started screaming and she ran back out. There is someone in the bedroom. There is someone in there. So his dad grabbed a pistol, ran back to the bedroom. And sure enough, it is that same billy goat. He is in the bed. He is under the covers, and the only thing she saw was his eyes sticking out.

Like I said, goats are intelligent and goats are playful. But they are very impulsive, unpredictable, and devious. I think you have a little better picture for those of you that did not already know about goats. You have got a little better picture now of what they are like.

Now they are not evil but they have characteristics that if those same characteristics are found in a Christian could well be deadly. What would

you call a Christian that is unpredictable or perhaps thinks they are above it all? Maybe they are independent, maybe they do their own thing. The Bible says they are a goat. What would you call a Christian who wants to, say, take over or has trouble functioning in a group or does not want to be led? Again, I would say it is pretty obvious that they would be a goat.

The apostle James in chapter 3 of his epistle had some interesting words for those among us who would be leaders. Now James cautioned these people about the higher standard that God would hold them to.

James 3:13-14 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

There is a Bible commentary called Halley's. A lot of you may have that. It is very old. As a matter of fact, my copy, my mom gave me many years ago. He had a very interesting quote in there on this passage from James on page 660, and I will quote here.

This passage seems to be aimed at certain loquacious teachers [loquacious merely meaning talkative] who bigoted over some pet doctrine with little personal affection for Christ, and ambitious to be considered brilliant in argument, were producing only jealousy and faction.

I thought that was very interesting.

Now as I learned more about goats, I came to the realization that I shared many traits that goats have, some good, some bad. I am sure many of you are thinking the same thing either about yourself or about me, but I knew these things already about myself. But knowing and understanding about goats and what Christ says about them helps me to put things in a little bit better perspective. Knowing what God says is going to happen to the goats puts a whole different light on these things.

You know, last week in Mr. Ritenbaugh's sermon, he led off with a statement, "A Christian is not expected to stand still." Now when he said

that, I thought of the story that Martin had told me about trying to move that goat. He could not do it. He could not move that goat. Sheep, he could move. The goat is hard to lead. The goat thought that he knew best what direction he needed to take.

You know, movement is not necessarily growth. It has to be movement in the right direction and on the right path. It is amazing to me when I look into these subjects that I previously did not have a lot of knowledge on. It is amazing to see the depth of these comparisons and I have really just scratched the surface. But you might do like I did. You might ask yourself, am I a goat? Hopefully not.