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Matthew 25:31–46—Sheep and Goats in the Chorus of a Pop Song

The alternative rock band Cake offers an obvious nod to Matthew 25 in their hit song “Sheep Go to Heaven” from the album *Prolonging the Magic* (Capricorn, 1988).

The verses of the song have nothing obvious to do with religion or the Bible—they describe the cynical attitude of someone who is in a bad mood or having a bad day, who doesn’t want to laugh or smile or go out on Sunset Strip.

There are some vague references to death, and then the narrator decides, “As soon as you’re born, you start dying / So you might as well have a good time.”

For some reason, these verses wrap around an insanely catchy chorus repeated over and over again: “Sheep go to heaven, / Goats go to hell.” The refrain alludes to Jesus’s words in Matthew 25:31–46 (see below), where he indicates the fate of persons at the Final Judgment. But what in the world do the sheep and goats have to do with the main lyrics to the song? The composer (John McCrea) has offered no explanation.

The verses seem to express reticence at fulfilling social expectations: laughing, smiling, going out on the town when one doesn’t feel like it). Instead, they seem to encourage doing whatever

one pleases: playing the panpipes, drinking some wine—ancient symbols of hedonism. The “sheep and goats” chorus, further, invokes an image of judgment—in this case, perhaps, an image of judgmental people who might approve of inauthentic social niceties and disapprove of people wanting to just be themselves. Further, sheep may be those who follow blindly, doing whatever is expected of them, while “goats” may be the social outcasts who don’t care about such approval and don’t fit it.

The narrator would rather be a goat judgmental people consign to hell than an oblivious sheep who gets praised to the heavens for not being disturbing.

This analysis is only my opinion. I have no privileged insight into the song, though I did work as a rock critic years before I wrote *Introducing the New Testament*. If my analysis is even remotely correct, the song borrows its judgment motif from Matthew’s Gospel in a generic manner, without allusion to the social justice theme that formed the basis for that judgment in the original vision of Jesus (Matt. 25:31–46):

“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.”