

**Turkey and Lamb, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. <sup>28081123</sup>**  
**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 and Matthew 25:31-46**  
**Elon Community Church, 23 November, 2008**

We think a lot about turkey at this time of year. Some families eat lamb, but most eat turkey on Thanksgiving day. Whatever the menu, we usually stuff ourselves and initiate the dreaded phenomenon of holiday poundage.

Looked for the word “turkey” in the Bible, and couldn't find it, but today’s Bible readings speak about lambs— or at least sheep. There are three hundred thirty-three references to lambs and sheep in Bible, but none to turkeys. There is one reference to rooster, one to chicks, and one to a brood of chickens. Turkeys were unknown. They lived here in North America, but not in Israel.

It was Benjamin Franklin who thought the turkey, not the eagle, should be the national bird. Today, turkey has a negative connotation. It implies people who are not very bright. Turkey and lamb might provide a helpful sort of dichotomy for us. The Bible’s dichotomy is sheep and goats. Lambs represented humility. They were valued animals in the Bible. By law, they were to be sacrificed in thankfulness for well-being. Goats, on the other hand, were to be sacrificed for forgiveness of sin.

Lamb was significant in the Passover, insuring the Hebrews would not be harmed by the plague that killed Egyptian firstborn. Jesus became the new Passover lamb according to John's symbolism. The book of Revelation portrays Jesus as the lamb.

The Bible says God cares for us as a loving shepherd takes care of sheep. Sheep need to be tended to. The shepherd’s job was to keep sheep safe and well-fed.

It feels good to be cared for. Not simply to have someone provide us with a roof over our heads, food on our table and a warm bed to sleep in, but also to have someone who asks us how we’re feeling and then listens to our answer. It feels good to have someone understand our needs, our goals, and our hurts. But, humans can not meet our deepest nagging needs. Only God can: our need for meaning and our need for love.

God is the ultimate shepherd. Part of God’s shepherding is to warn us to care for each other. When in high school, I remember hearing for the first time the parable of the last judgment found near the end of Matthew. That parable taught me that salvation is also an issue of works and of actions. Sure, my fourth grade Sunday school teacher had me memorize John 3:16: “for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” But, this parable about sheep and goats really got to me. It was a stinging indictment of my behavior and that of everyone else. The son of man will be the judge between the sheep and the goats as God was the judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep in the Ezekiel passage.

Jesus is very clear about our need to care for others in his parable of the last judgment. There is an element of surprise on the part those people who are welcomed into God's kingdom. They are not necessarily the ones who confessed Jesus Christ as their savior. They are the ones who welcomed. They gave food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty. They welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison. They are called “righteous” people. They did not know they were doing anything special— they simply were kind to people in need. Jesus was saying that the way we treat the least of the members of his family is the way we treat Jesus. The rest are accursed. They will depart to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

This is a scary passage. We are given clear choice about how to act as humans. It is a dichotomy. We can be like sheep or goats, lambs or turkeys. Choose the straight and narrow or the easy and dangerous. We can be rich and fat and selfish, or humble and lean and kind.

The prophet Ezekiel said God will destroy the fat and the strong. Being fat in Biblical times meant you were rich and well fed. Ezekiel implied that the fat got fat because they shouldered others out of the way in their rush to get food. “You pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide...”<sup>1</sup>

This sounds like some of our sporting events. They may provide better images for us today. Picture a football game or a NASCAR race. I remember a Detroit Pistons basketball game years ago! The fat sheep sound like Isaih Thomas and Bill Laimbeer. Thomas broke his hand because he slugged his own teammate. We don’t need that kind of role model in today’s world.

Anyhow, the fat sheep got fat because they kept the food for themselves. There are times we act like the fat sheep– like goats– like turkeys. We selfishly gobble up the food ourselves, not caring for our neighbors. Turkeys don’t consider the needs of others. They just gobble down their own food, right in front of others. Maybe Ben Franklin was prophetic about what Americans might become.

Turkey does not have to be our role model! We are better than that. I offer you another role model, Jesus Christ, who loved, taught, healed, and who ultimately gave up his life for others.

Thanksgiving day reminds us of how well-fed we are. We have much for which to be thankful. But, we must move beyond simply *saying* we’re thankful to *acting* in ways that show our thanks. We will not be able to address every need we see; I suggest we pick out one need in particular. Choose one person or project on which to spend energy and time. It could be a welfare parent, a child who needs tutoring in a school, hospital volunteering, or an older person living alone. Work with that person or situation and make just one person’s life better.

Ezekiel tells us that ultimately, we have nothing to worry about. God, like a good shepherd, will seek out the lost and strayed and will bring them back and bind up the injured and will strengthen the weak. One time it might be us in need, and another time, God will act through us to help the needy.

We can be glad because God is the great shepherd. All things are under God’s control. The choice is ours: sheep or goat?

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<sup>1</sup>Ezekiel 34:21