

WORD AND DEED!

The Last Sunday of the Church Year 11-20-11
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Matthew 25:31–46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, 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 no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, 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."

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today we examine the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. On the surface, it may seem simple enough. It's a parable of the Final Judgment, when the righteous are delivered into heaven and the unrighteous are condemned to hell. But there's a strange note, it seems that the righteous get into heaven for helping the underprivileged, while the unrighteous are condemned for their failure to do the same. If so that would mean that we are saved by our works and not by faith. We know better than that. There must be something more going on here.

When we encounter a difficulty in understanding God's Word, we know what to do: We let Scripture interpret Scripture. We look for other portions of the Scriptures to help us out. And that's why our sermon actually begins in Matthew 10.

In Matthew 10, Jesus is sending out His disciples to preach to Israel that the kingdom of heaven is near; and as they proclaim His Word, they will also heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons.

Before the disciples depart, Jesus tells them in Matthew 10 verses 9 & 10, ***"Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food"***.

So Jesus is sending out His disciples to preach the Gospel, and the disciples will carry no supplies. They may get hungry and thirsty along the way, and their clothes and sandals may wear out. Jesus even warns them that they may be arrested and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel; they may grow sick. How will they eat? How will they replace worn clothing? Who will take care of them? Believers of the Gospel will feed them, give them water, care for them in sickness, visit them in prison if need be. They will do so in response to being forgiven, in thankfulness as they await the Lord's Second Coming and eternal life. On the other hand, many will reject the Gospel and the disciples who preach it. What will happen to them? Jesus declares in Matthew 10:15, ***"It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city"***. At the Final Judgment, they will face a sentence that makes fire and brimstone look like a vacation in the desert.

We should note two more things from Matthew 10, as Jesus concludes His instructions to the disciples. He tells them, **"He who receives YOU receives ME"** (Matthew 10:40). They are His representatives, proclaiming His Word. To receive them is to receive (✠) Him. To care for them is to care for (✠) Him. To reject them is to reject Jesus, because they proclaim His Word.

And finally, Jesus' says: **"And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward"** (Matthew 10:42). Jesus praises those who will give water to His disciples because they are His representatives; and in that praise, He calls His disciples "little ones." They are not little children; but as servants of the Servant, they are among the least of all.

So, let's recap of Matthew 10:

1. Jesus calls the disciples "little ones;" these brothers (Matthew 12:49-50) of His are among the least.
2. Those who believe the Word will care for them. Those who do not believe will not.
3. When people receive the disciples on the basis of the Word they preach, they receive Jesus. When they reject the disciples, they reject Jesus.
4. Believers have the joyful hope and certainty of eternity in heaven; unbelievers face an eternity worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We have spent quite a bit of time in Matthew 10, but today's Gospel lesson is Matthew 25:31-46. There is a reason for this: I propose to you that Matthew 10 is the best commentary you will find to explain the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

In that parable, all people are gathered for the Final Judgment, and the believers are separated from the unbelievers. The believers enter into the kingdom of heaven and eternal life; the unbelievers depart into everlasting fire.

By what measure will they be judged? They are measured by their treatment of the **"least of these."** To the believing sheep, Jesus says: **"I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."** (Matt. 25:35-36) When the sheep express confusion as to when they did this, Jesus responds, **"Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to the least of these of My brethren, you did so unto Me."**

He then condemns the unbelieving goats for their failure to do the same. When they object, He says to them, **"Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do so unto the least of these, you did not do so unto Me."**

Here it is once again, Jesus' words from Matthew 10: Just before He calls His disciples "little ones," He tells them, **"He who receives YOU receives ME"** (10:40). In this parable, He tells the sheep, **"inasmuch as you did so to the least of these My brethren, you did so unto Me."**

What is my point? I think we must very seriously consider these questions, "What is this parable about? And what is it not about?"

This parable does not teach that the sheep save themselves by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or visiting the sick or imprisoned. We know this already. For if believers are saved by feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, then they are saved by personal works and not by the death of Jesus. However, this is often how this parable is preached: Help the one in need and go to heaven; ignore them and you'll be condemned forever. This is a popular application of our time: The teaching that the Gospel is all about helping the underprivileged, and not about forgiveness and eternal life.

We must be clear what else this parable does not teach. This parable does not teach that believers are saved by how well they treat the apostles, or even the pastors who continue the apostolic ministry. While this might have some attraction to ministers, this too is condemned by all of

Scripture. If believers are saved by making sure that the pastor is fed, held up and revered, then they are saved by their works-not by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what does this parable teach? It teaches that people are saved because they believe the Word. Really believe! It goes like this: Jesus sends forth His apostles as His representatives who deliver His message-they preach His (†) Word. Those who hear the Word and do not reject it, receive it. Those who receive the Word are saved-not by their work, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. When they receive the spoken Word, they receive Christ, the Word-made-flesh who told His disciples, **"He who receives YOU receives ME."** In response to that, they receive the one whom He has sent and they care for him. In the case of the New Testament Church, it is the believers, who feed, clothe, visit and cared for the apostles who proclaimed the Gospel; and they do so out of thanksgiving for the Gospel, so that it might be proclaimed to all nations. Believers support the mission of the Church; unbelievers do not!

The sheep, the believers, are saved because they believe the Word. Believing the Word, they want it to continue to be proclaimed to all nations. This desire will lead to deeds, and they will take care of those whom Jesus calls and sends to do the public proclaiming. They will support the ministry of the church both physically and financially.

Again, I need to emphasize that this parable is not meant to elevate pastors as somehow superior to others. If anything, it is a reminder to pastors of their solemn duty to declare only the truth of Jesus to you. It's an observation of how the Church works: Christians who believe the Word care for those who proclaim it; they are saved by their faith, and the care is the fruit thereof. Those who do not believe the Word do not support those who proclaim it. Do you support things that you don't believe in? They are condemned; not because they do not support, but because they did not believe.

What about Now! How can we apply this parable to our present day?

First there is this plain truth: Judgment Day is coming. As Jesus announces in this parable, He will return in glory to judge all nations, to deliver believers to heaven and unbelievers to hell. Judgment Day is coming, but **REJOICE!** You have nothing to fear. Consider for a moment, the One who sits on the judgment throne on the Last Day; you can have no better one sitting there to do the judging.

Another thing, He has not always sat in heaven, waiting for judgment. Indeed, He has done much to prepare you for a favorable judgment. At times, He was hungry, He was thirsty, He was a stranger. And at times, He was naked, for the soldiers stripped Him bare before they drove the nails into His hands and feet. He, too, was sick - He bore your sickness and infirmity to the cross. And though He was not imprisoned, He was in the brutal custody of Roman guards who scourged Him before His death. As He suffered all these various torments, who was there to help Him? No one! He did not undergo such agonies so that we might do something for Him. He suffered them to do something for us: To present Himself as a holy sacrifice, to deliver you from sin. Oh, the Judge has suffered much to prepare you for Judgment Day.

As well as His suffering, consider His death: You were under the sentence of everlasting death for your irrefutable sins against Him. But mark the practice of this Judge: He suffers the sentence of death for you, in your place. Do you know of any judge who serves out the sentence of the guilty who stand before Him? There is only one who has ever done it, and He has suffered execution in your place.

The Lord of this parable is often pictured as a merciless hammer of justice, no excuses. But could you imagine a more compassionate Judge to sit on that throne on the Last Day? This Judge declares, "You deserve a death sentence, an eternal death sentence for your transgressions and sins. But, so that I will not have to condemn you, I sentenced Me to your death. There is no double jeopardy in this court: the price for your sin has been paid in full, and I will not compel you to pay it again for yourself. I declare you not-guilty, because your guilt has been suffered already."

What great cause for joy as we anticipate Judgment Day: The Judge has arranged the trial so that you are innocent. There is only one way that you can still be condemned: You can insist on being condemned anyway. This is the curse of unbelief, for the unbeliever says "I do not believe that I have done anything wrong; or else I don't believe the Judge has died for me, so I don't need the pardon He offers." It's a frightening demonstration of the blindness of sin, which so many in the world cling to.

BUT REJOICE: As you anticipate Judgment Day, you already know the verdict. The Judge says, "You are not guilty," and He most certainly is the supreme Judge; there is no one who can overturn that verdict.

This is your joy and certain hope; therefore, as you wait for His coming, you are set free in thankfulness to do good works, according to your vocation. Serving your neighbor is certainly what Christians are set free to do. In the vocations of father and mother, parents care for those who are hungry, thirsty and sometimes sick. In the vocation of child, adult children may find themselves doing the same caring for aging parents. In the vocation of friend, people help one another in need. As a neighbor and citizen, there is always opportunity to assist the poor, the indigent, the unemployed and downtrodden. You are set free to do these things because the Lord has served you with such compassion. You don't need to do these things to become a believer; you do these things because you do believe, because you have heard the Word. And the Word leads to the deeds.

What a message we find in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats! There is the warning that Judgment Day is coming. But for you dear believer, there is no fear. Yours is not a life of terror in this in between time; instead, it is one of joyful service and grateful obedience to Him. This is because you already know the outcome of the Final Judgment for you. The Judge who sits upon the throne declares, "I have suffered your sentence for you. The price has been paid in full. You are not guilty - because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And because of this we are bold to pray, come Lord Jesus come, come quickly, in Jesus name, Amen and amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.