

The Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31-46

One Sunday morning, the Sunday School teacher was telling her students the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. She was describing how Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. All of a sudden, little Jimmy interrupted and said: *“My mommy looked back once while she was driving, and she turned into a telephone pole!”*

In a cute way, that story reminds us that if we don't pay attention when we're driving, if we don't watch the road and heed the signs, we could be headed for a crash. And yet, as devastating as that may be, there is something even more tragic; namely, when people don't pay attention to the warning signs of God's Word and die without faith in Jesus Christ. That is the ultimate fatal crash! For that reason, Jesus spent many of His final days on earth talking to His disciples about the end times. Our text for today is the classic example – the picture of the Shepherd, separating the sheep from the goats on Judgment Day. In effect, it's a strong declaration of God's Law – His fierce anger against the deadly danger of sin. And it's designed to move all people, including you and me, to repent! But it's also a gentle reminder of the Gospel, Jesus' unconditional saving loving, which promises that whoever believes in Him will not perish eternally in hell, but will live forever in heaven!

Now, it's important to note that Jesus borrowed this metaphor of the sheep and the goats from the book of Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel described the heathen nations as goats, because goats were basically viewed as worthless animals –stubborn, belligerent and destructive. In fact, ancient shepherding customs indicate that during the day the sheep and the goats would often mingle together in the pastureland,

grazing on the tender grass. But at night when the shepherd called his sheep home to the security of the fold, the goats would not respond. They ignored the call, while the sheep followed it, because they knew the shepherd's voice.

God Himself spoke about that in our Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel, when He said: "I WILL RESCUE MY FLOCK; THEY SHALL NO LONGER BE A PREY. AND I WILL JUDGE BETWEEN SHEEP AND SHEEP. AND I WILL SET UP OVER THEM ONE SHEPHERD, MY SERVANT DAVID, AND HE SHALL FEED THEM: HE SHALL FEED THEM AND BE THEIR SHEPHERD." This prophecy was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. For He is the Messiah, the Son of David, who came to tend and nourish us with forgiveness and salvation, by dying on the cross to rescue us from the sins and fears that prey upon us.

For that reason, Jesus used this metaphor to describe the relationship between Himself and His disciples. Those who are Jesus' followers know His voice. By the Spirit's power, they receive His free gift of salvation in humble repentance and faith. They also read the Scriptures hungrily, digesting them daily in private devotions and weekly Bible Study, in Word and Sacrament. In other words, they submit themselves to His teaching and follow it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, turn a deaf ear to Jesus' voice. They not only don't study His Word, they also reject His Gospel because like stubborn, belligerent goats they think they can control their own lives. Which is why, at His Second Coming, Jesus the Good Shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats – in order to rescue His people from being left out in the cold, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. In short, He will come back again to save us from death and hell.

Unfortunately though, when many people read our Gospel lesson for today, they misunderstand it. Because the Shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and then lists the good things they've done, some people mistakenly think this is saying we're saved not by Jesus the Good Shepherd, but by our own works, that the judgment is based not on what Jesus has done, but on something we must do, that the only way to remove our fears is to do enough good things to make ourselves pleasing to God, instead of resting in the assurance that Jesus has already made us pleasing to God.

However, nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible clearly teaches that we are saved only by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. For instance, Ephesians 2:8-9 states: "FOR IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED THROUGH FAITH, AND THIS NOT FROM YOURSELVES, IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD, NOT BY WORKS, SO THAT NO ONE CAN BOAST." And Romans 3:28 says, "FOR WE MAINTAIN THAT A MAN IS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, APART FROM OBSERVING THE LAW!"

Therefore, the good works spoken of in our text are not the means of our salvation. Instead, they are the evidence that we have received the gift of saving faith in Christ. This is brought out in our text by the fact that, the works aren't even mentioned until after the separation takes place. In other words, the gift of heaven is first bestowed and then the works are viewed. It's a reminder that good works are not the cause of our salvation but rather a natural outpouring of it. As Martin Luther used to say: they are not the root of grace, but the fruit of faith.

In other words, if we believe in Jesus as our Savior and have received His gift of forgiveness, then we will show that love for Jesus, by loving Jesus' servants – even the least of them, as Jesus mentions in our text. Whether it's helping the poor and needy,

or providing food, clothing and shelter for the homeless. Whether it's visiting our sick and shut-in, or being a Stephen Minister. Whether it's serving in our congregation, or looking for opportunities to share our faith with others. These are concrete ways to demonstrate our living faith in Christ. But more importantly, it's the way for us to express our gratitude to Jesus for the free gift of salvation.

Which is why in our text, the attitude of the believers and the unbelievers is quite different. The believers are filled with humble trust. In humility they ask: "*Lord, when did we do all these things?*" You see, in repentance and faith they realize that nothing good dwells in them. It dwells only in their Savior Jesus Christ and His righteousness. But the Good News of the Gospel is that the righteousness He won for you and me on Calvary, that He purchased with His blood, is the righteousness He clothes us with in our Baptism to blot out all our sin and guilt. And for that we humbly thank Him! The unbelievers, on the other hand, are so blinded by their own pride, that they cannot even see their sin. They must have Jesus show it to them: "*Lord, when didn't we do all these things?*" they arrogantly ask. Consequently their prideful unbelief is what brings them under the curse of hell. And for that reason the unbelievers have only bad things spoken about them.

In sharp contrast to that, the believers have only good things spoken about them. Why is that? Is it because once you become a Christian you're no longer a sinner? Absolutely not! The Bible plainly teaches that we're just as sinful as the rest of the world. The only difference is that we're forgiven. No, the fact the nothing bad is said about us is a sign of God's kindness and compassion. Because of Jesus Christ our Savior, God the merciful Judge buries all our failures in forgiving silence and remembers our guilt no more. As the noted Lutheran theologian Edward Koehler so

beautifully put it: *“For the believers the sentence of condemnation. . .is suspended and changed into a sentence of pardon and justification, because by faith they have appropriated to themselves the saving merits of Christ. Their sins are not investigated and published; they are not even mentioned. The Judge does not look at the rags of their sins, but sees only the perfect garment of righteousness, which He offered them in the Gospel, and which they put on by faith!”*

Dear friends, it is for that reason that Jesus says to us: **“COME, YOU ARE WHO BLESSED BY MY FAATHER; INHERIT THE KINGDOM PREPARED FOR YOU FROM THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.”** Notice that we’re not blessed by our works. The text says that we’re blessed by our Father – blessed with the forgiveness of our sins, salvation from death and hell, and eternal life in God’s Heavenly sheepfold. And all of that as a free gift, which is why Jesus refers to it as our inheritance. After all, an inheritance is not something you earn. It’s a gift that’s bequeathed to you by someone who loves you, and it’s put into effect when that loved one dies. Well, Jesus our beloved, loved us so much that He died on the cross to erase all our guilt and shame. And at His death our inheritance was put into effect. We have inherited the blessing of His eternal pardon and peace. And when He comes again in glory, we will receive the best blessing of all – He will invite us to come into the mansion He has prepared for us, the Heavenly Sheepfold, where there will be no more pain or sadness, no more fear or death. That’s the inheritance that is ours, as a free gift through faith in His name!

While on one of his expeditions to the Antarctic, Sir Ernest Shackleton was once compelled to leave some of his men on Elephant Island, with the intention of returning for them and carrying them back to England. But he was unavoidably delayed, and by

the time he could go for them he found to his dismay that the sea had frozen over and his men were cut off. Three times he tried to reach them, but his efforts ended in failure. Finally, on his last attempt, he discovered a narrow channel through the ice. Guiding his small ship back to the island, he was delighted to find his men not only alive and well, but all were fully pack and prepared to get right on board. After the excitement of the homecoming died down, Sir Ernest inquired how it was that they were ready to leave so promptly. His men told him that every morning their leader rolled up his sleeping bag, and said: “*Get your things ready, boys, because the boss may come back today!*”

How much more important it is for the Christian to always be ready, because our Great Leader may be coming back today. And the only way to prepare for that is not by looking to ourselves and our own plans and resources for security, but resting confidently in what Jesus Christ has done to save us. He has freely bestowed upon us the greatest treasures of all – forgiveness, life and salvation. Out of thanks for all of that, may the Holy Spirit empower us to express our gratitude, by doing loving works of faith in Jesus’ name to the least of His servants, until He comes again in glory. And may He enable us to prepared for His coming, whether it be in death or in glory, by waiting for our Shepherd, listening to His voice in Word and Sacrament, and heeding it with the full assurance of faith, unto life everlasting. Amen.