

Second Sunday in End Time; Last Judgment; November 12, 2023
+ Matthew 25:31-46 +
"You Are Counted among the Sheep"

"When the son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his 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 to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. 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 did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

"The King will answer them, 'Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you did not give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, lacking clothes and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not take care of me.'

"Then they will also answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or lacking clothes or sick or in prison and did not serve you?'

"At that time he will answer them, 'Amen I tell you: Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.' And they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

"You are all a bunch of sheep!" When that statement is made, it's usually an accusation and an insult. Usually, it's thrown at people who blindly follow someone or something. But that picture of being a sheep is much different for the Christian, especially as we consider what Jesus has to say to us today in Matthew 25. After hearing Jesus' conclusion to his farewell public sermon, I think that we'd all agree that we want to be counted among the sheep. But how can we be sure that we will be among them? That's the question before us today as we contemplate and celebrate the Last Judgment.

As we find Jesus on Tuesday of Holy Week, he has just told his disciples about the things that will happen as the end of the world draws near: wars, natural disasters, false teachers, an increase of sin and wickedness, even false predictions about the end of the world. We see evidence of all of those things in our world today. And these things have been happening ever since Jesus returned to heaven. He reminds us and his disciples, **"No one knows about that day or hour."** The Last Judgment, the day when Jesus will come back, is a day that will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Yes, Jesus wants his disciples to be ready for it. That's why he tells a couple of parables: to warn them to be ready for his return. He talks about ten virgins who were waiting for the bridegroom, five who were ready and five

who were foolish. He also teaches the need to use the gifts he's given faithfully in his service until his return, which, again, could happen at any time.

And then he stops speaking in parables. He stops telling stories. You can imagine Jesus' face very serious, his tone ominous as he says, **"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."**

Can you picture the scene? It's useful to try, because this is not a parable or a hypothetical or a tall tale: Jesus comes down out of heaven in all his glory. The glory that the Old Testament believers saw in the pillars of cloud and fire, the glory that the shepherds saw as the angels announced Jesus' first coming, the glory that Peter, James, and John glimpsed on the Mount of Transfiguration – those were only tiny snips of the glory of God. ut now Jesus comes, and all the angels are with him! All of the angels are there to separate the sheep from the goats. We don't know when this great day of judgment will be, but we certainly know what to look for. And once all the people who have ever lived are separated into two groups, Jesus is going to speak to each group from his throne.

"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 to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. 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 did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' "The King will answer them, 'Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.'"

Look carefully at why the sheep are the sheep, why those on the right are where they are. It was their connection to Jesus. Before Jesus mentions a word about their works, he speaks about God's work for them. Their salvation is the blessing handed down by the Father. Salvation is a blessing, earned by someone else and given to you. God tells us in his Word that it was earned by him. He sent his Son for all sinners. Jesus came to remove the curse of sin from the entire human race and replace it with his righteousness. These sheep did many good things in their lives, but all were sinners. By their own merit, they could never enter the glory of heaven to live with a holy God. But Jesus did every good thing, only good things, and did it all for them. He always thought, spoke, and acted in perfect line with his Father's will. Then he sacrificed himself for the sin of the world, and rose to prove that the curse was cured. But the blessing of salvation did not become their own until the Spirit gave them the faith to believe it, which he did through water and word. Jesus says, **"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."** By the Spirit's grace, they believe that God the Father sent his only Son to save them. Their salvation is a blessing from start to finish – earned and given by the Triune God.

We see this in other ways, too. Jesus says that before they were even born, before the world was ever created, the kingdom was already prepared for them. And Jesus calls it their inheritance. Inheritances are given, not earned. Not only that, but the works that Jesus mentions next are ones the believers don't even remember doing. They were not looking to themselves, but to him, their Shepherd-King, for their salvation.

But their good works are important, important enough for their King to commend publicly, because these good works are evidence of God's blessing of salvation. Their works were never perfect, but they were done in faith in God's salvation, out of love for their saving King.

And that also takes us to goats on the left, who will show their lack of saving faith with their lack of works done for Jesus. Many of the goats on the left will have done things that appear good. But they will not have done those apparently good things out of thanks or love for Jesus, which is what makes them good to him. And it's that factor, the unbelief of the goats, that has them on Jesus' left on Judgment Day. **"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you did not give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, lacking clothes and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not take care of me.'** **"Then they will also answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or lacking clothes or sick or in prison and did not serve you?' "At that time he will answer them, 'Amen I tell you: Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.'"**

It is worth nothing that God did not originally form hell to send these people there. He made it for the Devil and his angels. So then why must they depart to a place not originally intended for them? Why do they deserve the curse of all curses? What did they do? Nothing for Jesus. They did nothing out of faith. The deeds Jesus lists as undone are the exact same deeds he listed for the sheep. They probably did many fine things in the eyes of other people, but not in the eyes of God, because they were not done in faith or love for him.

And notice how unspectacular these works are in our estimation. Nothing that would earn you any praise from the world. Just the simple things. Things that go unnoticed. Jesus lists these things to show that it's not the splendor or size of the works he's concerned about, it's the faith that motivates them.

Perhaps at this point you're still feeling a little uneasy. You look at the list of deeds and you realize that you always haven't been generous, you haven't always been hospitable, you haven't always done what you could do to help. You know deep down that your motivation hasn't always been pure. Perhaps you're wondering if you shouldn't be numbered among the goats, too! Friends, I can't emphasize this enough. Jesus doesn't list these works as the reason why the goats are on the left and the sheep are on the right. These works are listed as evidence of why Jesus' verdict is correct. The sheep are on the right because they have been blessed by God, they have been given the inheritance already prepared for them before they were even born. God is the one doing the blessing. God is the one doing the giving. He gives this inheritance as a gift. The reason the goats are on the left is because they rejected all that God did for them. They didn't believe it was true. And their faithless works proved this.

Jesus' words in this Gospel are not a parable; they are a prophecy. If you hear a teacher or preacher purposely call the story of the sheep and goats a parable, turn and run; they are treating the Last Judgement as something that won't really happen. But here's a story that is a parable. It's not from the Bible, but it is good to teach the central point of this Gospel. It's a story about an old shoemaker

who had a dream one night. In that dream the Lord himself appeared to him and told him that he would come to his cobbler shop the next day. When the shoemaker woke up, he rushed extra early to his humble little shop to be ready for the Lord's arrival. But as the day wore on, hardly anyone came in.

Midmorning, there was an old farmer, whose work boots were coming apart and the soles were flip flapping. He needed them fixed right away! And so the shoemaker cobbled them back together immediately. Although the shoemaker had little money himself, he waved the poor farmer away without taking payment. Then there was a snooty rich lady, who was full of complaints about the fancy shoes she had purchased last week. He tolerated her rude behavior and traded the shoes in for a different pair. Then in the late afternoon, there was a little boy in worn-out clothes who had no shoes at all, and no money either. So, the cobbler found a pair that would work, and told him, "For payment, just tell your rich friends about my shop."

It was time to go home, and the Lord hadn't shown. Maybe it was just a dream after all. So, the cobbler went home, full of disappointment. That night, he had another dream, and it was the Lord again. "Why didn't you come to my shop, like you said?" the cobbler asked. "Oh, but I did. I was the farmer who needed your help in order to go to work that day. I was the rude lady whom you treated with grace. I was the little boy who needed your gift. Well done, my good and faithful servant."

God sees in us the righteousness that Jesus earned for us and has given to us as a gift. In that righteousness, God sees the gift of faith clinging to the salvation that Jesus won. There God sees his love overflowing into the little things done for others, not for personal glory or gain, but reflecting the love that God has shown us. That is why Jesus says, **"Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me."**

Christians, Christ has an announcement for you today that you will hear again: **"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."** Jesus offers you this blessing, this inheritance through faith in his perfect life, innocent death, and Easter resurrection. He offers you an inheritance in heaven, an eternity with God that he says is unable ever to fade, perish, or spoil. That gift is yours! Believe it! Believe that Jesus has done all of this for you! Let the love of Christ shine forth in all you do, even in the little things for forgotten people. For the day is coming soon when Jesus will return in all his glory, with all his angels. We celebrate that truth today, because we are blessed to be counted among the sheep, and blessed to show it until our King returns. Amen.