

November 26, 2023
Last Sunday of the Church Year
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 25:31–46

SHEEP OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD.

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

Today is the Last Sunday of the Church Year. In our Gospel text we of our Lord's *righteous* and *final judgment* on the Last Day. For the unbeliever, talk of the end of the world and judgment is a frightening topic. They wonder: "*Will the end come from global warming, a rouge asteroid, or a nuclear warhead?*" But for the Christian, it doesn't matter. You have nothing to fear. As a matter of fact, Christ's return and Judgment Day is something that you and I ought to look *forward* to and *long* for. Every Sunday you confess with confidence in the Apostle's Creed, or the Nicene Creed, or the Athanasian Creed, that you believe that Christ will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead. And, if Christ is going to judge the living and the dead, He must first raise the dead. You can't have a final judgment without the resurrection of the dead.

For all who trust in Christ for salvation, His return and final judgment is a time of hope and joy because it's the day when the Christian's perishable body will put on the imperishable, and mortal body will put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:53) It's the day when Christ will usher in the new heaven and new earth. (cf: 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1) Death will be swallowed up in victory and all the ruin, sickness, and frustration caused by mankind's sin will pass away and we will live in Paradise with God as He originally intended. So to comfort you so that you do not fear His second coming on the Last Day, in our Gospel text, Jesus teaches His disciples of all times and ages what will happen at His coming on Judgment Day. (cf: Matthew 24:3) On that day, Christ will gather all people before Himself, the living and the dead, from all times and all places:

"... and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left." (Matthew 25:32–33)

Jesus describes a judicial scene, a trial in a courtroom before Christ our Lord and righteous Judge. The sheep represent true believers in Christ. The goats are the unbelievers and the hypocrites who reject Christ. The faithful will be vindicated, proclaimed not guilty, and welcomed into heaven. The unbelievers and the hypocrites, however, will be declared guilty and condemned into eternal damnation. The natural question that likely comes to your mind is: "*Which one am I? Am I a sheep or am I a goat? Have I done enough good to be one of the sheep? Or have I dropped the ball and fallen short into the herd of goats?*"

Don't be confused. If this text was all we had of Jesus's teaching, we would be consigned to a religion of works righteousness and salvation by human effort. We'd think that the sheep do acts of kindness so that they'll receive heavenly praise and eternal rewards – and the goats don't. This is where works righteousness preachers ground their teaching and doctrine.

But this isn't Jesus' only teaching in the Bible. If you're depending upon your works and deeds to earn salvation – you've dropped the ball and fallen short. If you're counting on being rewarded based upon what you have earned, on the Last Day you *will* be standing on the left among the goats. You might think you've done a good job – but your works, my works, and anyone else's works are imperfect. They're nothing more than filthy rags. (cf: Isaiah 64:6)

So, while you might think that Jesus teaching that mankind is saved by good works – He's actually doing quite the opposite. It is true that Jesus lists several good works, but notice that He separates the sheep from the goats **before He mentions a single word about works and deeds.** After placing the sheep on His right and 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.’” (Matthew 25:33–34)

The sheep are not sheep because they made a decision to be sheep. They're not sheep because they did acts of kindness and worked hard to become sheep. They're sheep because of one reason only – because God has made them sheep. He has chosen them and appointed them that they should go and bear fruits of faith and repentance. (cf: John 15:16) He alone makes them righteous. They're His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance so that they go out and live like His sheep. (cf: Ephesians 2:10) They go out into His creation, out into their ordinary lives, and they take care of those around them. They help the sick. They feed the hungry. They visit those in prison. They clothe the naked and do sheep things.

Sheep act like sheep; however, the goats choose a path contrary to God's plan. The goats choose to ignore God's Word and the call of the Holy Spirit. They choose to ignore the cries and needs of their fellow man so they can indulge in the desires of the world and flesh. They reject God's Word and grace – so in return God gives them over to what they choose. He gives them over to the lusts and dishonorable passions in their hearts. He gives them over to debased minds to do what ought not be done – knowing God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die. They not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (cf: Romans 1:24–32) On the Last Day the goats will reap the fruits of their labor, the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (cf: Matthew 25:41)

It's instructive to notice that in Jesus' teaching, neither the sheep nor goats are aware of the presence of Jesus hidden in the person of the neighbor, the one whom Jesus calls ***“one of the least of these.”*** (cf: Matthew 25:40, 45) Of course we expect the goats to be surprised, 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?”*** (Matthew 25:44)

If they'd known that it was Jesus, perhaps they would've waited on Him hand and foot. But that doesn't require faith. Serving someone to earn wages is merely seeking to be paid in return. In their unbelief, the goats are only interested in serving themselves. They're only going to serve others when it will in turn, serve to their own advantage. And the wages they earn is eternal death.

Also notice that the faithful sheep are also surprised. They, too, are completely unaware of the presence of Jesus hidden in the person of their neighbor. The whole time they were merely living out their Christian vocation. Not doing works and deeds for their own benefit, but doing good things in Jesus' Name for the sake of the Gospel. They're so oblivious to the connection between their works and their relationship to God through faith that the King has to explain it to them. They were serving their neighbor *for the sake* of their neighbor, out of Christian love that flows from faith. They serve, not because they suspect Jesus is hiding in the person of neighbor, but because they love their neighbor and serving is what faithful sheep do.

And so do you – because you're a sheep of the Good Shepherd. God chose you before the foundation of the world and made you His sheep. He adopted you in Baptism gave you the family Name, Christian. The Lord is your Shepherd and you are His sheep. (cf: Psalm 23:1) You belong to Him and you always will. You are bought and paid for by Jesus' precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. And so you, as His sheep, live and act like His sheep.

The faith given by the Holy Spirit is a living and active power in your life so that you bear fruits of repentance and faith, fruits of good works. God commands that you perform good works, but not that they save you. No, Christ performed all the work required for your salvation. Your works are the result and reaction to saving faith. If they're not being done out of faith and love for your neighbor, your heavenly Father will not remember them. God doesn't need your good works and neither do you – but your neighbor does. He's been put in your path for you to love with Christlike love and humility, all for the glory of God. And then everything you do for the least of your neighbors is counted as being done for Christ.

Jesus is coming again soon to judge the living and the dead. So to comfort you so that you do not fear His second coming on the Last Day, He teaches His disciples of all times and ages what will happen at His coming. He's not admonishing or begging you to be a sheep and not a goat. No, you *are* a sheep because God *chose you* to be His sheep and appointed you to go and bear fruits of faith and repentance.

On Judgment Day, you and all who're in Christ Jesus *will not* be rewarded what you *have earned*, but what Christ Jesus has earned *on your behalf*. Your eternal reward isn't based upon your actions – but based upon the actions of your Savior, Jesus. His death in exchange for your life. The difference between sheep and goats is the difference between *faith* and *unbelief*. Without faith it's impossible to please God, no matter how much good you do. But as a sheep, what you do as sheep is never wasted and never lost. Whatever you do, for the sake of those around you who need your help, whatever you do in fulfillment of your God-given vocation, whatever you do that God has given you to do, that is God's good and gracious will for your life – regardless of how unglamorous it looks or how unrewarding it feels.

As a faithful sheep, *have* you dropped the ball on occasion, sinning by what you have done and by what you have left undone? Of course you have. We all have – and it will happen again. The difference is having faith in the God/man Christ Jesus who died on Calvary's cross to secure your forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. And as faithful sheep, Jesus expects you to act like His sheep. His sheep take care of their neighbors. You serve those in need. You don't do it to earn salvation. You don't do it because Jesus is hidden in the person of their neighbor. You do it out of love for their neighbor. Jesus says:

".. when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" (Luke 17:10)

Today and every day, as faithful and forgiven sheep of the Good Shepherd, you can anxiously look forward to the coming of the Lord in His glory. On this side of heaven, Christ is hidden. He sits at the right hand of the Father and is hidden from view. But the hidden Savior comes to you where He promises to be. He's hidden in your neighbor, in the least and lowly and despised of this world, not to save you but for you to serve. But most of all, Jesus comes hidden in His Word, in the waters of Baptism, and in His Holy Supper. He's there to save you, to be your Savior, to rescue you from sin and death and to lead you into eternal life. On the Last Day you will see Him face to face (cf: 1 Corinthians 13:12) as He says:

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34)

Amen.

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