

Living Way Lecture
Wednesday, March 8, 2023
Faith, Works, and Judgment

In reading Matthew 25:31-46 it would be easy for someone to conclude that we are saved by what we do. For example:

³⁵ 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, ...

It would also be easy to conclude that we are condemned as a result of what we fail to do. For example:

⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, ...

The lesson also involved reading another account of the judgment in Revelation 20:11-15, where the very same conclusion could be reached by the reader:

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

Lutheran Response

Whenever we are faced with a passage that leaves us wondering and scratching our heads, the first thing we should do is ask ourselves, “What else does God’s Word have to say on this topic?” A

foundational principle of interpreting the Scriptures is, “*Let Scripture Interpret Scripture.*” In other words, we interpret the meaning of verses in the light of other passages that treat the same subject.

Elsewhere, Scripture is clear to state that we are not saved by our works, but strictly by God’s grace (undeserved, unmerited love) through faith in Jesus Christ. For example:

Ephesians 2:⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Romans 3:²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

So how do we square these seemingly contradictory conclusions?

The works that are credited to believers are the good works that flow from faith in Jesus Christ. Only those works which proceed from faith in Jesus Christ are pleasing in the sight of God (1 Cor. 12:3). The order is faith, then works flowing from that faith. Furthermore, it appears that God only keeps a record of the good works done by believers, since the sins of believers are “remembered no more by God:”

Jeremiah 31:³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Quite the opposite is the case with unbelievers. They have no faith in Christ and thus have no good works that flow from faith. All that their record contains are their evil works or the good things they failed to do.

As the sainted Dr. Louis Brighton states:

“The last phrase of Rev. 20:12 implies that *all* ‘the dead,’ both the wicked and God’s own saints, are judged on the basis of what is

recorded in the 'books,' for all stand before his judgment throne. But while the wicked are found guilty and sentenced because of their 'works' recorded in the books (20:12-13), God's own people are acquitted—declared innocent and righteous—*not* on the basis of their works, but on the basis of 'another book,' because their names are recorded in the book of life (20:12, 15)."

"While Christians sin and thus could have had their sinful deeds recorded in the "books" of God's judgment in [Rev.] 20:12, other passages suggest that God keeps a record only of their good works, the deeds done out of faith and by the love of Christ (Mt 25:34-40). So then, John not only sees the books of judgment, but also 'the book of life.' All whose names are written in 'the book of life' are recorded in the heart of God as ones who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 3:5; 7:9-17). For this reason in the books of judgment only their good deeds are recorded and not their sins, for their sins have been blotted out of God's mind and so will not be the object of his righteous anger and judgment. God lists the good deeds of his saints, and they will be recalled as visible demonstrations of saving faith in his grace, wrought for them by Christ, the victorious Lamb (cf. Mt 5:16; 7:15-20)" (Brighton, *Concordia Commentary: Revelation*; CPH, 584).

All people are living in one camp or another, among those who are saved, or among those who are condemned, as a result of whether or not they have faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior:

John 3:¹⁸ Whoever believes in him **is not condemned**, but whoever does not believe **is condemned already**, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Our eternal destiny is finalized at the point of death. There is no "crossing over" from hell to heaven after that. On "Judgment Day," all appear before the throne of God and all are sentenced to their final destination – the place where both body and soul will spend eternity.

Galatians 3:11

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."

John 15:4

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.