

The Sheep Of His Hand

Matthew 25:31-46

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

November 22, 2020 – Last Sunday Of The Church Year



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. This morning's Gospel sets before us a rather thorny subject – a subject most would prefer to ignore. That subject is Judgment Day. Here in this text our Lord Christ completely dispels the commonly-held myth that no one will ever be sent to hell. Here we learn that a Day *is* coming when the Son of Man will return on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory to judge both the living and the dead. On *that Day* no argument, excuse, or stubborn refusal to believe will change the facts. On *that Day* the Judge of all mankind will take His seat at the bench of Divine, eternal justice, and the final verdict will be handed down once and for all.

But there's one thing you must carefully avoid when reading this text, and that's seeing Christ's words as nothing more than a laundry list of things that *you* must do if you're to have any hope of entering into eternal life. Indeed, if you understand Christ's words in this way, you will ultimately have to admit that you are altogether lost and hopeless – just one more goat in what would otherwise be a worthless herd of goats! If you desire to stand before the Judge of all on the basis of your own merits, there can be no room for error – no allowance made for even a single slip-up. If you've ever failed to feed the hungry, welcome strangers, or visit the sick, then, says Jesus, you have not done these things to Him either, and you are lost.

The Law, you see, demands absolute perfection. That's why Christ's words must be taken with deadly seriousness – because the consequences of failure means eternal death in the always-burning fires of hell. And those who think this is just a joke will find nothing to laugh about on *that* day. Thanks be to God that the Law's deadly condemnation isn't the entire story – as even the words of this text say. For this text isn't so much about you and what you are to do, but even more so about Christ and what He has already done *for us all*. For although our old sinful Adam always wants to put *us* in the spotlight, if you ever hope to properly understand our Lord's words here in this text, you must first focus on Him and His Cross.

You should hear in these words not a description of what you are to strive for, but rather what *His* life and love toward all of us is like. He is the One who not only visited *us* when we were sick and in prison, but by bearing our sins and infirmity He healed the sickness of our sin and freed us from the jailhouse of our sinful-

ness. But perhaps the most significant thing you might note here is our Lord's reference to those “on His right” and “on His left” at the coming of His Kingdom – for there are two other places in the Gospels where these same descriptions are used. The first was when James and John came to Jesus with a request that in His kingdom one of them be allowed to sit “on His right” and the other “on His left” – to which Jesus responded, saying that they had no idea what they were asking – for *His* Kingdom would come in a cross and Suffering. The other reference is in Luke's description of the crucifixion where our Lord was hung on a cross between two thieves – one “on His right” and the other “on His left.”

So, what does all this mean? It means that the separation of the sheep and goats has already taken place at the cross – and that our judgment hinges on what took place *there* in the sacrificial death of God's Only-Begotten Son. It's from our Lord's cross that everyone must eventually hear one of two things: either the promise of Jesus to the thief who believed: “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” – or the judgment of the thief who mocked Him: condemnation and an endless separation from God in hell.

Now it's clear from the words of Scripture that you and I were not created for hell, but eternal life – and that heaven was prepared for us to enjoy. Hell was created first for Satan and those who followed him in their rebellion – and later for all who blindly refused to heed God's voice – choosing instead to follow the deceiver. Thus we should understand full-well that our Lord has no desire that any should perish, but that all might come to repentance and a knowledge of salvation in the healing wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. His heart breaks over every sinner who refuses to repent. Indeed, although Jesus has been sending workers out into the harvest field of this world to make disciples of all nations by the proclamation of His Word, calling sinners to repentance, clothing them in the garments of salvation, washing them in the blessed water of Holy Baptism, feeding them with His holy body, and quenching their desperate thirst with His cleansing blood and the promise that He would be with such as these even to the end of the age, still many steadfastly refuse to believe.

These are the “goats” – those who are eternally condemned for their stubborn refusal to find their life in

Christ – who continue to reject the forgiveness, life and salvation He’s earned for us all. These are they who have chosen to face the final Judgment on their own – even though no one has even come close to measuring up to God’s standard. Apart from the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, these “goats” will have nothing to show for their labors – just as you have nothing of your own to bring before the Lord other than what He’s given you in Christ. That knowledge is at the center of the Christian faith – the faith by which even the youngest infant has as his own the genuine good works of Christ as evidence of his standing before God at the Judgment.

That’s why you must never think that the deeds described here in this text are the part “you play” in your own salvation – for these are nothing more nor less than the gracious works of Christ Himself – the things *He did* in our place during His thirty-plus years here – works He has continued to do throughout the history of His Church in the lives of His Christian people. Now in Christ God has credited His works to your account so that you need not worry when the Judgment comes. For not only have the life and works of Christ already been added to your ledger, but even now Christ is working in and through you in ways you’ll never see to perform works of mercy for others – even for “the least of these, His brethren.”

By identifying Himself with those who are “the least, the last, and the lost,” our Lord reveals that His Cross and Crucifixion are for them, for us, and for all. To be sure, it was on the Cross in particular where Jesus was hungry and thirsty as He went through His trial in preparation for His crucifixion. It was on that very same cross where He became a Stranger – was betrayed and deserted by His closest friends, and forsaken by His own Father. There He hung naked before the entire world as His clothes were divided among His enemies. There He was “sick” to the point of death – executed as a Prisoner at the hands His own. Thus, we see in Christ not only the desperate needs and wants of those around us, but also our own hopeless without Jesus. And this is because He chose to take all those things upon Himself – to bear them in His own body there on the Cross. By His sacrificial suffering and death our sins have been forgiven, and the kingdom of heaven opened to us. That’s why, when we care for and support others, we’re actually participating in the life and work of Christ Himself.

And it’s precisely because of our Lord’s life and work *for us* that we – as His sheep – are continually seeking to reflect Christ’s love and mercy. We’re not trying to make ourselves *into* sheep by doing deeds of

kindness – in fact, quite the opposite. The good deeds we do are done precisely because we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd – and for no other reason. Did you notice that the sheep weren’t even aware of the good deeds they had done – while the goats didn’t realize they *hadn’t* done them? The sheep – because their good deeds come so naturally – didn’t know they were doing them and asked: “When did we do these things, Lord?” But the goats – because they tried to do these works apart from Christ – cried out defiantly: “When *didn’t* we do these things?” And that, you see, that’s where the rubber meets the road for you – because everything you are and ultimately do revolves around, and finds its final meaning in Christ – even as Saint Paul testifies, when he writes: “Your work, produced by faith, your labor, prompted by love, and your endurance, inspired by hope, are *all* in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Regardless of who your neighbor might be, you live toward them the life Christ has already lived and died for us all. Receiving the clothing of His forgiveness and perfect righteousness, you then give that clothing to others. Nourished by the food and drink of Christ, you then feed and give drink to those around you who hunger and thirst – filling their bellies on the one hand, but also nourishing their soul and spirit with the Gospel of Christ on the other. Healed of your infirmities and delivered from the prison-house of sin, you attend to those who still yet suffer under such burdens – welcoming them with open arms as strangers who have yet to receive the adoption of sons which is already ours in Christ Jesus.

The basic rule by which we live our lives then, is quite simply: “We do unto others, as Christ has done for us.” Christ is our Good Shepherd, and as the Psalmist testifies, “We are the people of His pasture – the sheep of His hand.” We live our lives as “sheep” because our Shepherd has bestowed on us His own righteousness – a perfect righteousness that boldly speaks for us before the Throne of God. His work has been credited to our account in the Book of Life, and it’s that work which reverberates in the living of our lives. Seeing us as sheep who have gone astray,” our gracious Good Shepherd went out of His way to find us, carry us home, shelter and protect us, feed us from the Sacrifice of His Cross, and nurture us for life in the Kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world. To Him alone be glory forever and ever. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.