

November 20, 2011  
Matthew 25:31-46

Proper 29A  
Discipleship: All about the King

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Imagine these three scenarios for me. The first one: A king comes back after a long time away with all glory, honor, and power. He comes with his servants and messengers all around him. He comes and sits on his royal throne.

The second...the king comes so gently and humbly. Actually he comes in the midst of an infant. He is born in a cattle shed. He seems to be almost an afterthought. Not much fanfare for the birth of a king.

And the third...the king comes riding on the donkey. He rides into town in meek and humble attitude. If you were there you would hear the chant of "Hosanna". There were no royal horses...no huge parade...just a lowly king riding on the back of a donkey.

Who do you want as your king? Who do you want to lead you? I have my pick...do you have yours? You probably already have picked up on it, but all three of these describe the same King. This King is your baby Jesus, this King is your Palm Sunday Jesus, the King is your second coming Jesus.

Today in our Gospel text we hear the last words of Jesus' fifth and final sermon in Matthew. We hear how our King is going to come again with all glory and power with his angels around him and is going to sit on his throne. We hear how he is going to separate the sheep and the goats. How he will take the sheep to be with him and that he will send the goats into the eternal fire.

We are also seeing a judgment scene...the last judgment when all nations are gathered before him. Every person that has ever lived will be before the glorious throne and he will separate the sheep and the goats. So what will he look at to determine who is a sheep and who is a goat.

When you take a quick read through this text, the natural inclination is to say... "It's what we do that makes us sheep or goats! We are the ones that decide that. I can choose to be a sheep; I can choose to be a goat." The text does say that the sheep are blessed for what they do and the goats are damned because of what they failed to do.

My question though is if all I have to do is be good to be saved why did Jesus come to the earth and die? If that is the case then Jesus died in vain.

However, let's take a closer look at this text. When the blessed sheep were taken with Jesus did they ever boast about what they did? Did they ever take credit for what they did? Did they uphold their good works for their salvation? No...they answered Jesus saying, "When did we do these things for you?" For we know that we are justified by

faith apart from works. And it is by grace we are saved, through faith. And this is not of yourselves, but the gift of God, not a result of works that no one should boast.

So do we get one of the great contradictions of the Bible? No...because there are no contradictions in the Bible. This is yet another area where saving faith and God-pleasing works go together. To say it another way...this is yet another area where saving faith and discipleship go together.

For let me ask you this, how many of you know someone who is not a Christian but yet do very good things for the sake of society? Where they feed the hungry, visit the sick, give clothes to those who are naked. I know I do. Let's go back to the text though...what do you see first...grace or works...you see saving faith and then the God-pleasing works. It's natural – saving faith naturally and with no effort precedes the God-pleasing discipleship acts. Our friend Martin Luther made an analogy that our Christian faith is like an apple tree. The apple tree doesn't bear the fruit in order to be considered an apple tree. It bears fruit simply because it is an apple tree. You don't see an apple tree scheming up ways to be recognized as an apple tree. For the fruit naturally springs forth, without any effort from the heart of the tree.

So now I ask the question...what makes a sheep-a sheep? What makes a goat-a goat? Looking at these two pictures it makes it easy to tell the difference. What about the next set? And what about the next set? Sometimes it's hard to tell what is a sheep and what is a goat? But from what I've learned this past week shepherds or farmers are familiar and can tell the difference and that they behave in different ways. Sheep naturally bow their heads looking humble, while goats naturally keep their heads erect and proud. The tails of the sheep naturally are pointed downward in humility while the tail of the goat is almost always pointed upward. Sheep flee danger to the comfort of their shepherd while goats are curious and inquisitive. If you have something at all edible in on your clothes in the petting zoos and the goats are around...you are the goat's best friend. There are some biological differences as well that naturally make a sheep a sheep and naturally make a goat a goat.

But really what makes a sheep-a sheep and what makes a goat-a goat? In the case of this parable of the end, what makes a disciple a disciple? Frankly it comes all from the King. For this is also Christ the King Sunday, so shouldn't we be talking about our king.

The sheep in our Gospel text had no idea they were serving Christ...in fact they were just doing simple acts of love and charity toward their fellow man. These God-pleasing works that they did that God praised them for --- they knew nothing about! Is there true humility there? Did their works save them or were those discipleship acts a result of the saving faith?

But as I've said we all know someone personally or know of people who are really goats but yet do marvelous things. In the text...we are not told that these "goats" never did any good deeds. We are told they didn't perform them for Christ. There is a difference. They are doing great and tremendous acts of charity and yet don't believe in Jesus

Christ as the way, the truth, and the life. These great acts of charity if done apart from the saving faith of Christ...they count for nothing in terms of salvation. In Christ's eyes they are unrighteous goats. In the King's eyes they are not worthy of the Kingdom.

Another question might be...why the goats do their deeds. What's their motivation? Is it power, fame, recognition, rating, money, etc.? Be not deceived my fellow sheep...even "good Christians" fall into this trap. How many of you have done something to get the picture in the paper, the pat on the back? How many of you let people know "how much" you do for the church? By framing it in that way you can see the difference between the sheep and the goats. Quite frankly...we were all born as goats...but yet Christ chose us to be sheep.

I can tell you, I was tempted to go on and on with tons of examples of how to be better disciples...how to be better Christians. That is not what this gospel reading is about. This gospel reading is about our King. This text is often times used for the purpose of guilting people into being better disciples...doing more acts of charity. On this last sermon in this discipleship series, I am not going to tell you how to be better disciples...I'm going to tell you the reason you are sheep, the reason you are disciples. Frankly...I can't change you into sheep or change your attitude.

I am going to tell you that Jesus Christ, your King, your shepherd laid down his life for you and every person in this world on a cross meant for a criminal. He suffered God's righteous wrath for you in your place so that you would never have to suffer those things yourself. Your sins are completely paid in full by the redeeming blood of Christ. Eternal Life is yours! Now if that good news doesn't make you naturally bow your head and your tail in humble and thankful service to the Lord, your Savior and King your shepherd...there's nothing that I can say that will make a difference. As I've said I can't change you into sheep or change your attitude...only God can do that...and he does it through faith alone in the promise that we are already redeemed because of Jesus Christ our Savior ALONE.

In Jesus Name. Amen

*Now may the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.*