

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“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.’”

No matter how many times we listen to this reading from Matthew, we get a little uncomfortable because as good Lutherans anything that remotely smells of a salvation by works, we wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. Yet here this reading is before us, and Jesus shows us what the future will be. He calls us to listen and see what he teaches. So, let’s look at what Jesus is proclaiming.

This image before us on this penultimate Sunday of the Church Year is the Last Day. This scene is all people standing before Jesus on his throne and he will separate all as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. This courtroom image though is something a little different than what we may think of in our American context when judgment is decided and rendered. In ancient Judaism courts didn’t always operate this way. One commentator writes, “Strictly speaking, these court scenes do not *determine* the guilt or innocence of the accused, since the parties typically enter already with labels such as ‘sinners,’ ‘righteous,’ ‘elect,’ or ‘enemies.’ Such a forensic determination of a status heretofore unclear does not appear in early Jewish texts until the late first or early second century. Instead, forensic judgment publicly reveals and confirms the status of groups and individuals.” In other words, it was not uncommon for judgment to already have been determined and then this would be made public in this setting.

A similar thing occurs with the judgment on the final day. All is made public. The sheep are revealed to all as sheep and the goats revealed to all as goats. Jesus said, “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, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

Your Lord, Jesus, exhorts you to pay attention. He tells you exactly what will happen. He’s not hiding this coming judgment from you, nor is this some secret you must discern. He lays before you the eternal comfort and reward for those who have done as he has said. Likewise, he reveals the eternal wrath and agony for those who despised his word.

Just as his coming judgment is not hidden, it’s not hidden why they are divided and why the sheep enter eternal joy and the goats into eternal condemnation. The sheep served Christ, but the goats did not. The sheep are commended for their good works; the goats are condemned for their failure. That’s the plain sense of the text. It’s what God’s word says.

Confronted with this fact that works seem to be what jumps out as the difference, we’re left scratching our heads and placed into a corner with no escape. The law of God has a way of doing that, doesn’t it? Every mouth and tongue are stopped. Yet we see, like so many things in theology there is a tension in what Jesus says because we look at the whole of the Scriptures. We don’t view passages like this in isolation rather we take them into account in view of and with the whole counsel of God.

Looking closer we see other passages of the Scriptures are read with this one in Matthew. What does God’s word say? We all know the passages well, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, lest no man should boast.” Again, it is written, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In Romans 3 it is written, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” The list goes on; there’s no shortage of these passages and there is no doubt what God teaches on this matter. Salvation is a gift received through faith, and this is delivered through the means of grace. Martin Luther

rediscovered this from the Scriptures and a key passage which set in motion the Reformation was the short passage, Romans 1:17, which quotes from the Old Testament Prophet Habakkuk, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” The Bible teaches us about the righteousness which avails before God. The righteous don’t live by their works, they live by faith.

This is what the Scriptures teach and what Scripture also teaches is something else. In John 15:5 Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Colossians 3 says, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.” Romans 2 also teaches, “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.” There are many other passages that say these things as well. It’s with these passages, and the others, that the Athanasian Creed ends with the confession, “At His coming all people will rise again with their bodies and give an account concerning their own deeds. And those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire. This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.”

So, we are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone? Absolutely. So, God rewards us for our good works? Yes, he does. Both of those statements are true because the Bible teaches both of those things. There is no contradiction. Let’s, then go back to the Gospel reading and listen closely to what Jesus says and doesn’t say. “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, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

Jesus commended those on his right for their works, but what didn’t he bring up? Well, let’s listen to the rest of the reading. “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, 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?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Jesus doesn’t hold the sin of the sheep against them and only recognizes their works. In Romans 4 God says, “David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’” The sheep are covered in something; it’s the righteousness of their Shepherd. They are called as such in the text as well, they are the righteous. Their lives are lived by faith and the works they do come as fruit from the vine to whom they are attached as the branches.

The goats, however, stand condemned in their sin. Their lives are lived apart from faith. Their response to Jesus and the question they ask of Jesus is a tell-tale sign as well, “‘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?’” They wanted to live their lives with the expectation they could be in control and do something for Jesus had they known this was the case. Rather than a fruit of faith, they saw their

works as the root and tree of their faith in which they trusted as their foundation. When confronted with their sin, too, their response is not to confess it but to try and justify themselves. They think they are the victim who didn't know they were to do these works and serve Jesus.

Dear people of God. Hear this all today and know what your Lord says in this word before you. Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead and on in his judgment he divides people. When is this day? You don't know when, but you do know the day is surely drawing near. Look at your sin and your life and repent. When you persist in sin, you are rejecting the Lord's forgiveness and wanting Jesus to judge you by it. You are not living in faith but living a life outside the Kingdom of God. The blood of Christ covers your sin and puts it on to him who has paid the price for it, but when you want to persist and cling to your sin you are clinging to the very thing which will condemn you. Repent.

When faith is confronted by sin it confesses it and repents. It doesn't try to make excuses in your life but answers God's judgment with "You are right Lord, I have sinned. Lord, have mercy." Take this seriously and see the future in this Gospel reading. Judgement is coming. But here's the thing as you sit here right now, you know what God will say to you. This word keeps you and guards you in the faith which is why is so eternally deadly to stop hearing what Jesus says now. Sheep hear and follow their shepherd; it's not complicated.

What is that judgment you will hear on that day? This is where you have a great comfort. Look and listen dear saints of God. You are sitting in this place with a baptismal font in front of you which reminds you of what God has done for you in your baptism; your sin was forgiven; you were rescued from death and the devil and given eternal salvation. What will you hear when you stand before Jesus? "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.'" How do you know this? Well, you've already heard it and will keep hearing this morning. "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." You will taste what God will say to you as you take into your mouths the Body and Blood of Christ given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. You know what God will say to you because he is already saying it and giving it.

Your life is hidden in Christ as you have been crucified with him. You are righteous before God's throne because of Jesus, his life, his death, and his resurrection. His righteousness is counted to you through faith. See your life differently then as one who has been saved by grace through faith and has been prepared by God to good works for your neighbor. And yes, dear Christians, God will reward you and say "well done, good and faithful servant" to you on that day of judgment because he doesn't look at your sin. Covered with Christ all he sees is his righteousness. Your works in this life then are the beautiful and luscious fruit he produces through his word. You are who you are in Christ and listen to his commandments and desire what he commands. Let his word be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path. Let his word show you the way through this life which is a life lived in faith toward him and in love toward your neighbor. Put away all that is false and put on the new life you have been given in your baptism.

Take delight too in where God has placed you in this world and do not spurn these callings. First and foremost, you are hearer of the word of God for without God's word you do not have Christ and his benefits. Then look at where you are in your families and listen to the instruction of God about what it means to be a husband, father, brother, sister, or whatever station you have in this estate. Finally look at your neighbors around you outside of your family and see where God has placed you to serve him and confess the faith as salt and light in the world. Do all these things intentionally as ones who know Christ and know what has been won for you.

Dear Christians, dear sheep, look to and don't fear the future judgment because it's preached to you now. What will God say to on that day he speaks about in the reading? You know what he will say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." God will no longer see your sin just as he doesn't hold your sin against you now. He will commend you for the good works you have done, even those you were not aware of in this life. There will only be good works to judge you by on that day because you have the righteousness of Christ covering you even as it covers you now. You will inherit what has been won for you. How do

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you know this? It's because of what God says to you now in the present that you know your future. God says to you now, this very day, "Your sin is forgiven. You are baptized into Christ. Here is my body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. You have eternal life because here is Christ and what he has done, it's yours."

Thanks be to God for this image of the sheep and the goats. Thanks be to God that he comes again and we wait for that day with patience and yearning. Jesus has accomplished it for you, his sheep. He is the Son of Man who was promised, has come, comes now through his word and sacraments, and comes again in glory on the Last Day. This is your God and you are his people, "his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom on that shall not be destroyed."

Look forward to the final day when the Lord doesn't look at your sin but says to you, "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, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

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