

“The Good Shepherd Separates the Sheep from the Goats”

Liturgical Date: Last Sunday of the Church Year (A)

Primary Text: St. Matthew 25:31-46

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, The Last Sunday of the Church Year, is the Gospel lesson appointed for today from St. Matthew, the 25th chapter. The title of the sermon is “The Good Shepherd Separates the Sheep from the Goats”. The Gospel lesson is one that can be difficult and one that some Lutheran Christians are at a loss to explain, as on the surface it may appear to teach salvation by works. Of course, that is not the case as we are saved by grace through faith. In looking at the passage closely, in light of Scriptures as a whole we see that God does in fact know those in the true faith and those in Christ need not fear this Day of Judgment. THE GOOD SHEPARD KNOWS HIS SHEEP SO THAT HIS PEOPLE ARE SAVED FROM ETERNAL DESTRUCTION.

The lessons for the last few Sundays of the Church Year focus much on the end times. In our text from St. Matthew, Jesus is teaching his disciples in what is often referred to as the “Olivet Discourse”. This is toward the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry and right after chapter 25 we see the Passion narrative beginning. Mark and Luke also contain Jesus’ teachings about the second coming, but the language about the sheep and goats is unique to Matthew. The theme of judgment, as well as of God’s people being sheep, is seen throughout the Bible. In Daniel you can read of the throne and the Father (Ancient of Days) and the Son (Son of Man) at the judgment and the establishment of an everlasting kingdom (dominion). Ezekiel speaks of the Lord seeking out His sheep, feeding them, and taking

them to good pasture. God will judge between the “lean” and the “fat”. St. Paul points us toward the resurrection of the Last Day, when all of the enemies of God are put under His feet. The promise of the Scripture is the promise of eternal life for the Christian and eternal destruction for those who have rejected Him. The prophet Joel also refers to this day as the “great and terrible (or awesome) day of the Lord.”

When you remove God’s grace and love, the passages about the end times can be downright scary! There is much talk about judgment and destruction of the wicked. In verse 41 of St. Matthew 25 Jesus says, *“Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”* Furthermore, an incorrect reading of the text has led many to believe that the eternal destination of the goats and sheep is based on their behavior. Those that have been kind and hospitable go to heaven, those who haven’t to hell. In addition, we see in verse 44 that the goats seem genuinely surprised of their fate. They do not see themselves as not caring about God. They try to justify themselves. This can lead people to ask questions like, “Have I done enough? Am I good enough? How can I know that will enter heaven rather than hell? Can I even know?” The truth is that we cannot do enough to earn God’s favor. No amount of good deeds and service to God and others can earn us forgiveness. Our good deeds cannot cover the many transgression of God’s Law that we have committed.

Our hope is not in what we have done and our fear is not in what we left undone. Rather, our salvation is based on Christ and what He has done. But doesn’t St. Matthew 25 say that our eternal fate is based on works? Jesus says *“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me .”* This passage is a prime example of

why we must take the Bible as a whole. We cannot take passages out of context and apply them independently from all that God has revealed to us in His Word. We know that the Bible teaches over and over that we are saved by grace through faith-not by our works. Romans 1, 4, 6, and 11, Ephesians 2, Titus 3, Galatians 2, Acts 3, the Words of our Lord, and about the whole Book of Hebrews all proclaim that it is not by our works-just for starters. So what do we make of St. Matthew 25? How do we answer those who would say that works do have something to do with our salvation? And most importantly, how do we rest in the assurance of God's gift of salvation through Christ apart from what we have done and left undone?

As you can imagine our Lutheran forefathers had to address these questions from their Roman opponents. Philip Melanchthon wrote a stirring defense of justification by faith in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Articles IV-V. First of all notice, that Jesus separates the sheep to the right hand and the goats to the left. In Middle Eastern culture, even today, the right hand is seen as the place of honor and purity. (Morocco illustration of eating only with the right hand) My apologies to my left handed brothers and sisters, including my mother, wife, and youngest son! The point is that Jesus knows who has true faith and who doesn't. In verses 34 and 41 He states who is saved and damned BEFORE He goes into the description of what they have and haven't done. This is very significant. If people are judged by their works, it would make sense that their offenses are laid out first and then the verdict is pronounced. But that is not what happens, they are already saved or condemned prior to this. **THE GOOD SHEPARD KNOWS HIS SHEEP SO THAT HIS PEOPLE ARE SAVED FROM ETERNAL DESTRUCTION.**

Even today, Lutherans are accused of being people who don't care about doing good works. This is not what we teach. The Bible does teach that works are important, but that they FOLLOW faith. Good works flow from faith. A true Christian will produce good works. As Jesus said in St. Matthew 7:17, *“Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”* Those in Christ will do good works, and they will help those in need. The distinction is that the fruit does not come before the tree. The fruit grows from the tree. This also shows us that even if someone does things viewed as “good” apart from Christ, it is not fruit that flows from the true vine of Christ and therefore not pleasing in His sight. Article V of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states this well, *“When eternal life is granted to works, it is granted to those who have been justified, only justified people, who are led by the Spirit of Christ, can do good works. Without faith and Christ as Mediator, good works do not please, according to Hebrews 11:6 ‘Without faith it is impossible to please God’”*. So in summary, the works of the sheep and goats are only a reflection of what they *already* have or lack: faith in Christ.

The reaction of the sheep and goats is also telling. We see the sheep and goats are both surprised. However, the sheep are humble and do not see their works as meriting favor from God. The goats are pride-filled and making excuses, essentially saying if we saw you in need and knew it was you we would have helped you. James 4:6 says, *“God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.”* An interesting exercise is to read the Gospels with this truth in mind. When someone approached Jesus in humility, knowing that they were sinful He spoke to them kindly-giving them grace. But when those, such as the Pharisees, approached Him with pride Jesus had the harsh words of the Law for them. Those of us in Christ should have a

humble spirit, knowing that we have been given something that we did not earn or deserve and loving others-even our enemies-because He has first loved us.

Make no mistake about it. The final judgment is coming and is real. Hell and its eternal punishment are real. Many pulpits today are silent on these matters, avoiding topics like the Law and wrath of God. The famous British preacher of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon said, *“Now observe, brethren, if I, or you, or any of us, or all of us, shall have spent our lives merely in amusing men, or educating men, or moralizing men, when we shall come to give our account at the last great day we shall be in a very sorry condition, and we shall have but a very sorry record to render; for of what avail will it be to a man to be educated when he comes to be damned? Of what service will it be to him to have been amused when the trumpet sounds, and heaven and earth are shaking, and the pit opens wide her jaws of fire and swallows up the soul unsaved? Of what avail even to have moralized a man if still he is on the left hand of the judge, and if still, “Depart, ye cursed,” shall be his portion?”* I would ask that God remove me from the pulpit if I did not have the courage to speak of the Law of God and the condemnation that it brings. If I have not the courage to speak of these things for fear that they may offend someone then I am not being faithful to my call.

However, I also would not a faithful preacher of the Word if I did not proclaim the Good News of the Gospel forgiveness in Christ. As Luther writes, *“We should hope for the judgment and pray ‘Thy Kingdom come, they will be done’”*. We hope for this day not to see the destruction of the wicked as God wants everyone to be with Him in heaven. In verse 41, we see that the eternal fire was not prepared for mankind-but for the “devil and

his angels”. The goats are NOT people who are victims of an unloving God, but those who have refused His gentle rule. The Good News this day, and everyday, before Jesus returns is that forgiveness is available. Christ has died and risen again defeating sin, death, and the devil. He has paid the penalty for our sin. Through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit brings to us that sweet forgiveness. **THE GOOD SHEPARD KNOWS HIS SHEEP SO THAT HIS PEOPLE ARE SAVED FROM ETERNAL DESTRUCTION.** In this we take comfort. In this we proclaim Christ and Him crucified. In this our eternal hope rests.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.