

Matthew 25:31-46

As Lutheran Christians we've been taught that we are saved, not by our own good works, but by faith in Christ Jesus alone. Holding fast to this important and precious truth of God is absolutely necessary for our salvation, but it is not an easy thing to do. Our sinful flesh constantly plagues us with doubts, suggesting that we must do our part to contribute to our eternal salvation—and that we have not done enough. The sinful world around us preaches that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. And so, we come to the House of the Lord that our battle-weary souls may feed upon the Word of Life, Jesus Christ, and be strengthened in our conviction that Jesus alone is our Savior...and we hear from His very mouth, words that on the surface suggest that our flesh and the world may, in fact, be correct—that our good works do indeed play a major role in shaping our eternal destiny. Listen carefully to His words in Matthew 25:

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 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 invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ Then they themselves 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 take care of You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that 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.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

It appears to us that on the Last Day, what we did, and did not do to those less fortunate, will determine where we spend eternity. The sheep took care of those who, says Jesus, “are brothers of Mine, even the least of them.” And the goats did not care for them. The sheep will be ushered into heaven, and the goats will be cast into hell.

If our ears are not deceiving us, it sounds like getting into heaven is as simple as sponsoring a starving child in Africa, or dropping in our change at Christmas time when they ring their bells, or caring for the sick, visiting prisoners in jail, and donating our used clothing to charities. Can it be that simple? And a more important question: Can we really earn a place in heaven by what we do? What about faith in Christ? Does that not matter in the final estimation?

Friend, Jesus is, in no way, preaching a different gospel. Let's look closer at His words. When Jesus says, "To the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me," He is not referring to starving children in Africa. He is not referring to children at all. He's not talking about our charity to those less fortunate, as though our works of charity can get us into heaven.

Who are the "brothers" of Jesus here? Whenever St. Matthew uses the word "brother" in a non-literal sense, he is referring to Jesus' disciples. When the crowd told Jesus, "Your mother and brothers want to see you," He pointed to His disciples and said, "These are My brothers." In Matthew 23 Jesus calls Himself the Teacher, and His disciples He calls brothers. On Easter Sunday the angel told the women to run to Jesus' disciples and tell them that Christ had risen! And when they met Jesus outside the tomb, He said, "Tell My brothers to leave for Galilee where they shall see Me."

It is true that, in a sense, we are all Jesus' brothers, for we are His disciples today. "Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven," Jesus says, "is My mother, and sister, and brother." But in Matthew 25 Jesus is not referring to all Christians when He uses the word, "brothers." He is referring to those who are sent to preach the Gospel to "all nations." "All nations will be gathered before Him...as He separates the sheep from the goats." The disciples were commanded to preach the Gospel to all nations, "And as you go, preach, saying the kingdom of God is near...as you enter a house, give it your greeting...and whoever does not receive you, shake off the dust of your feet...but he who receives you receives Me." (Matthew 10)

The sheep of Matthew 25 are those who received the disciples, for in receiving these brothers of Jesus, they were receiving Jesus. Many times we read in the Bible where the people who listened to the disciples took care of them. Believing the message, they responded with kindness to the messenger. After Pentecost the believers took care of the Apostles. When Peter was in prison for preaching Christ, they prayed for him. When he and the other Apostles traveled to various cities to preach Jesus, the believers welcomed them into their homes. When Paul preached to the jailer at Philippi, he took him into his home, washed his wounds and fed him a meal. "He who receives you receives Me." These sheep of the Shepherd, in caring for those who preached Christ were actually caring for Christ Himself.

At the same time, those who rejected the Apostles were rejecting Christ. Those who cared nothing for the message, cared nothing for the messenger. These are the goats. They will depart into hell—not because they didn't give to charities; not because they didn't feed the hungry children around the world—they will be cast into hell because in rejecting the messenger, they rejected the message, and in rejecting the message of Jesus they reject Jesus.

What about today? The Twelve are no longer with us. Today, however, Jesus messengers are still those who are sent to preach the Gospel. The pastors, those who fill the Office of Christ, are Jesus' brothers and messengers today. On the Last Day the sheep and goats will be divided based upon how they welcomed these brothers of Christ. Not that we pastors are, by ourselves, so special—so all-fired important—but our message is. To welcome the brother who preaches Christ is to welcome Christ. To reject that brother is to reject Christ. "He who receives you receives Me; he who rejects you rejects Me." On the Last Day the

goats will go to hell not because they mistreated or neglected Christ's preachers, but because in ignoring Christ's preachers they ignored the message—the message of Christ.

So what does this mean for you? Well...we provide for our pastor...we give him a home to live in...we provide a salary for him...we must be sheep, right? Friend, how you treat people, even a pastor, will not save you. We are saved, not by our works, but by grace through faith in Christ. You are sheep, not because you take care of your pastor—rather, because you are sheep, you take care of those whom Christ sends to preach the Gospel to you.

An apple tree is not an apple tree because it produces apples. Rather, because it is an apple tree it will produce apples. You are sheep because God has bathed you in the waters of forgiveness in Holy Baptism. You are sheep because God worked faith in your heart there. You are sheep because, through His Word and Sacrament, God nourishes your faith in Christ; because He, by His grace, keeps you trusting in Jesus alone for your salvation. You are sheep because God has called you His sheep in Christ. Sheep don't make themselves sheep. Sheep are born as sheep. In Baptism you were born again into God's kingdom of grace. That's where He made you who you are.

Because you are sheep, you welcome God's messenger who brings you the message of Christ. Are you flawless in this? No more than your pastor is flawed with sins and weaknesses of every kind. But you're forgiven! And this you believe, because this faith in your heart is of God; for you are His sheep. And so you welcome your imperfect pastor—the least of Jesus' brothers, and you know that through him, God preaches Christ into your heart; and that, though your pastor is imperfect, the message of God's forgiveness in Jesus is not. And this is because you are sheep—God's forgiven sheep in Jesus. On the Last Day, what joy awaits you when you hear your Lord say to you, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father; take your inheritance; the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Amen.