

Matthew 25:31-46

Today may be your last opportunity to give food to the hungry. After today the Thanksgiving bags which you fill with canned goods will no longer be accepted. And so this may be your last chance to be placed as a sheep on Jesus' right when He comes in His glory. Don't laugh. There are people who actually believe this--that dropping a few coins into a bell-ringer's bucket, or working at a soup kitchen on their day off will ensure their place among Jesus' sheep.

But if this is true, then who needs the church? Who needs Holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and the Gospel of Forgiveness in Christ Jesus? If we take the words of Jesus in our text and pull them out of their context, separating them from the rest of the Scriptures, and read them only at face value, then we will have the understanding that we should remove our altar, and organ, and pews, and replace them with work-stations for collecting and bagging food and clothing for the poor and destitute. Then I should stop preaching the Word of God and put on an apron and start preparing food for the homeless. Then we should purchase a church mini-bus, not for bringing people here to the House of God, but for taking our members out there to visit the sick and imprisoned.

There is nothing wrong with doing all these things. And Christians, more than anyone, should be leading the way in these benevolent activities. But when the doing of these things becomes a person's religion, even trumping the hearing of God's Word and the receiving of His Sacraments, then their religion is not of God, but of man, and will help people, including themselves, only for this life, and not for the life to come.

And the life to come will be upon all of us soon. When that day comes, all lawyers, and judges, and juries will be out of business. There will be no more appeals to a higher court. Jesus, the King, will separate all people--every person who was ever conceived or born--and not one of us will have a say in it. Jesus will place His sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. All this without hesitation, and without interference from anyone. No sheep will be able to say, "Wait a minute, Jesus, my loved one over there on the left should be with us sheep!" No goat will be able to say, "You've got it wrong, Jesus! I'm not a goat...I belong with the sheep." Jesus verdict will be final. There will be no need for the NFL's instant replay to check who might have just squeaked in for a touchdown before they died. Jesus knows His sheep, and only His sheep. Everyone else is nothing but a goat.

But His sheep Jesus knows, not just on the final day; He knows them today. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them," He says, "and they follow Me, and I give them eternal life." Friend, do not fear the final verdict on the Day of Judgment. You who are Jesus' sheep today will be Jesus' sheep on that day. And you are not His sheep because of how you live and behave. You are Jesus' sheep because you hear His voice and you follow Him.

On the last day everyone will hear Jesus' voice. His sheep will hear Him say, "Come, you who are blessed by My Father." The goats, also, will hear the voice of Jesus. He will tell them, "Depart from Me." There is no guesswork here. This is not some big lottery drawing where we all hope we picked the winning numbers. Not one of us has to think to ourselves today, "I sure hope Jesus places me as a sheep on His right!" It will not be a surprise for the sheep on that day, although most all of the goats will surely be stunned.

You see, the words Jesus will say on the Last Day are the same words that the sheep and the goats live by today. Jesus will tell His sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by My Father," not because they are the lucky ones, but because this is how they lived as sheep. Sheep come to the voice of Jesus. They

follow His voice. Goats do not. When Jesus' voice is speaking today, where are the goats? They are not here where His words are heard. Goats depart from Jesus today, and so Jesus will tell them, "Depart from Me," on the Last Day. Sheep come to Jesus' voice today, and so He will tell His sheep "Come," on the Last Day.

If you are at all concerned about whether you will be placed with the sheep in the end, then stop looking at what you are doing and listen to the voice of Jesus. "Come," He says, "all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." "Come," He says, "and all who come I will never cast out." "Come," He says, "let us reason together, though your sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow." "Come," He says, "Take eat...Take drink...My body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins."

Sheep come when Jesus says, "Come." They do not offer one excuse after another explaining why they cannot come. Sheep are busy, just as busy as goats. Sheep have bills to pay. Sheep have children to take care of. Sheep do not have more time than goats have to come to Jesus. But they make time. When Jesus' words are being spoken, His sheep gather to listen. When Jesus gives His body and blood in the Sacrament, His sheep come running. "My sheep hear (and keep on hearing) My voice," Jesus says, "and they follow Me." Goats are not sheep. They do not understand why sheep feel it is so important to always gather around the words of Jesus. Goats depart from the voice of Jesus not necessarily because they hate to hear His words, but because they have better things to do.

On the Last Day the goats will be shocked. They remember all the works they did for others, but their works can help them none. In their life here on earth they had no time for Jesus, for gathering to hear His voice, for receiving His life-giving flesh and blood. The sheep will not remember their works here on earth. "Lord," they will say, "when did we do these things?" The sheep did not live by their works. They lived by following Jesus, by coming when He said, "Come." And yet their works will follow them. Jesus does not separate the nations on the basis of their works. He separates them as sheep and goats; as those who followed His voice in faith, and those who did not. Yet the works of the sheep will follow them into heaven. They will not get them into heaven--only Jesus does that. But like the beautiful train following the wedding dress of a bride on her wedding day, so their works done for Jesus will follow the sheep into heaven.

Friends, now is not the time to be arrogant. Now is not the time to be unteachable, to be stubborn in heart and mind. If any one of us is living now more like a goat than a sheep; if any one of us has a casual attitude toward the voice of Jesus--who sometimes comes to hear His voice, but most often does not come--then now while there is still mercy and forgiveness; while God is still working, before the end comes, now is the time to repent.

And if any one of us says, "I do not need such repentance; I'm the perfect sheep," then shame on you! And shame on me! The attitude of the goat lives within every sinful heart. We would all be goats, and nothing but goats, except for the mercy of God. He speaks, He calls to you, He invites all of you. Jesus, your King, became your Good Shepherd by laying down His life for each one of you. He rejects none of you. Rather, in love He forgives you--all of you.

He, your Shepherd, does not come to you today in terror. He comes through comforting words of compassion--words of pure forgiveness. He comes through bread and wine. And He comes in these things so that you hear and follow. And friend, be assured with all confidence that this same Jesus who is your King, but also your Good Shepherd, who loves you and forgives you--He is the One you

will see on the Last Day saying to you, “You are My sheep, therefore Come, blessed by My Father.”
Amen.