

Second to Last Sunday of the Church Year (Trinity 26)

The Lord Harvests His Fruit

Matthew 25:31-46

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“From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.” This is what we confess. Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. The idea of a final judgment is laughed at by most. Not that people don’t believe that we will be judged. A common refrain is that *history* will judge us if we do not cast off our old Christian values and accept the new morality. What they mean by *history* judging us is that our children and grandchildren after being indoctrinated will look back on us disapprovingly for not believing as they do. But that is not the judgment we should fear, but rather God’s judgment. God’s judgment is real. And Jesus Christ, our God and Lord has authority to judge the living and the dead.

Yet, by what merits will we be judged? How will we be judged righteous and enter into eternal life? Jesus tells us in his lesson. “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.’” This is all grace, that is, God’s undeserved love for us. Come, you who are blessed! God blesses us by grace apart from our works. He does this by forgiving our sins and clothing us with Christ’s righteousness. “Inherit the kingdom.” An inheritance is a *gift* passed on from a father to his children. Moreover, he says this kingdom was, “prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Think of that! From the foundation of the world, before you were born, before you had done anything good or bad, God prepared a kingdom *for you*. That is what grace is. It is a gift of God, not of works. You inherit the kingdom by grace.

This is exactly what St. Paul says in the Spirit in Ephesians chapter 1, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” So here, Scripture states that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that he adopted us as sons through Christ, and that

we are redeemed through the forgiving blood of Jesus. So, before the foundation of the world, before God said, “Let there be light” he chose us in Christ Jesus, he planned our full salvation to forgive our sins through Jesus’ death and resurrection, and to make us his children through faith in Christ, so that we might inherit our Father’s kingdom. This is grace!

Yet, to those on his left the King says, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Notice that the king does not say “prepared for you.” The kingdom of heaven is prepared for us as an inheritance from the foundation of the world. But the eternal fire was not prepared for mankind. It was prepared to punish the devil and his angels. Scripture says, that God “desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4) No one can blame God for his own unbelief and damnation. Those who are damned can only blame themselves. While those who are saved can only give credit to God. Why some are saved and others are not is a mystery that God has not revealed to us. What God has revealed to us is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from our works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Yet, the large chunk of our Gospel lesson does not speak simply of grace, but of the wonderful works of mercy that the sheep on the right have done for their Lord. “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me.” These are indeed marvelous works, which God will praise for all eternity. Yet, they are not the works which save us. Rather, they are the fruits of saving faith. It is as Scripture says in Ephesians 2:10, after saying that we are saved by grace through faith apart from our works, declares, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” These works are real. They are fruits of faith. And Christ Jesus will reveal them on the Last Day.

It is much like that parable which Jesus tells in Matthew 13, where the master plants good seed in his field, but an enemy comes by night and plants bad seed. The master tells his servants to wait until the harvest to separate the bad darnel from the good wheat, lest they pull up the wheat with the weeds. The darnel looks like wheat at first, but when the ear appears the distinction between the wheat and the weeds

becomes obvious. At the harvest, the laborers bind up the darnel and burn it and the gather the wheat into barns. The wheat is good, because it came from good seed. But it is its fruit which reveals itself.

But there is another detail you must notice. The sheep on the right are ignorant of their good works! “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?” That we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them is an article of faith. We believe it, even when we do not see it.

This is kind of like how we confess that we believe in one, holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church. We believe that there is *one* united Church, the body of Christ, because Scripture clearly tells us there is. Yet, there are many who operate under the assumption that we must be able to see that the Church is united in order for it to be united. So, the Roman Catholic Church has historically claimed to be the one holy Christian Church on earth and has solidified this unity by submission under the Pope. Yet, the Roman Catholic Church is not truly united, but has factions and divisions throughout it. Of course, the greatest scandal of the Roman Church is that it denies that a sinner is justified by grace through faith alone apart from his works and rather teaches that one is justified by faith *and* works.

The Protestant Church has operated similarly. Although there are many factions among the Protestants, there has been a continued effort to unite the Protestants under one Protestant Church. But to do this, they insisted that Protestants compromise what they believe on important issues such as election, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution. So, instead of building a Church on the teachings of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus being the Corner Stone, they built a visible church with a unity that depends on not listening to what the Apostles and Jesus actually say.

And so, it is for those who try to see here and now these works that Jesus will praise on the Last Day. They try to earn God’s praise with their own works that they can see and tabulate, so when Christ says to them that they did not feed him or clothe him or visit him, they are shocked and say, “When did we see you in need and not minister to you?” They tried to see what you ought to believe in through faith. Just as we do not see the one, holy, Christian and Apostolic Church on earth with our eyes, but rather a divided church filled with scandal, yet we believe that Christ’s Church is nevertheless united and holy and

can be found where Christ's Word is purely taught and his Sacraments are rightly administered. So also, we don't see our works with the spender that Christ does. They seem insignificant and imperfect. Yet, we believe that they are pleasing to God for Christ's sake.

Christ tells the sheep, "As much as you have done it to the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me." With these words, Jesus identifies himself with every Christian and with his ministers. Jesus tells his disciples that whoever receives them receives him and that whoever gives one of his disciples a cup of cold water, he will by no means lose his reward. Jesus intends for Christians to show mercy to one another and to look after their needs. When you see your fellow Christian hungry, feed him; thirsty, give him something to drink. Jesus also indicates that Christians will suffer for being Christians. They may be naked or in prison. So, we should keep watch to see if our brothers and sisters are suffering persecution for the faith and defend them and support them in any way we can.

Christians also serve Christ by serving Christ's ministers. St. Paul writes, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and "The laborer deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18) So when Christians support the preaching of the word by taking care of their pastors, Christ says that they are caring for *Him*.

"As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me," says Jesus to those on the left. It is true that without faith it is impossible to please God. So, even if the world finds something to be the most spectacular and noblest work, God is not pleased with it if it is not done in faith. So, all the works these goats would present to Christ are worthless in his sight. Yet, it's not just that they didn't do these works in faith. These unbelievers didn't do them at all. Why? Because they separated themselves from the body of Christ. If you do not have fellowship with the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters, then you will not be showing mercy to them. Jesus' words are an indictment against those who separate themselves from his Church on earth by neglecting the preaching of his Word, receiving the Sacraments, and showing love to Christ's sheep. If Christ is going to be your Savior, he must be your brother. And if Christ is your brother, then you must be a brother or sister to his brethren as well.

Judgment Day is real. Jesus will judge and some will go to heaven and some will go to hell. How do you know whether you will go to heaven or hell? Through faith in Jesus. You are saved by grace as a gift through faith in Jesus and not by your works. Yet, works always follow faith. Those who love Christ gather to hear his word and they love their brothers and sisters in Christ. And as much as they do for their fellow sheep, they do for their dear Lord Jesus, who has rescued them from all sin, from death, and hell. Dear brothers and sister in Christ, let us love one another and in so doing show love to Christ. Amen.