

“Faith and Its Reflection”
Matthew 25: 31-46

November 26, 2017

Last Sunday in the Church Year

The mirror is a wondrous device. When you look into a mirror, it can show you some wonderful things. A mirror can also show you some pretty bad things, depending upon the state of your face and body when you look into it. The one constant thing about a mirror is: it can only reflect images that are already there. It cannot create new images. For example, if you hold up a mirror to your face, it won't show you a beautiful movie star or a handsome athlete. A mirror will show you as you are and will only reflect your true identity. The same is true when it comes to our life of faith and good works. One reflects the other. But which one? This is an important question to remember as we commemorate today the Last Sunday in the Church Year and a Final Judgment.

Many people fear the thought of a final judgment. While an increasing number of people believe there will be no final judgment or that God simply allows anybody and everybody into heaven, the Bible often speaks of the “day of the Lord” as a time of judgment for all people who have ever lived. If Judgment Day cannot be denied or ignored, then the most important question needs to be answered. On what basis will Jesus Christ judge the living and the dead? What are his criteria?

I think we are afraid of judgment day because we fear that Jesus will judge us in the same way that we judge one another. We judge other people on the basis of what they have done. We accept people and call them “good” if they have done good things. We condemn people and call them “bad” if they have done bad things.

This happens in many situations of everyday life. The students who have studied hard and gotten good grades will be rewarded with academic honors and with scholarships to prestigious universities. Those students who have not studied hard or were simply not able to do such things will get no honors. The athletes who are in best physical condition and who have the greatest athletic skills will be the ones who start on their teams, get the publicity, and get athletic scholarships to major universities (if they are amateurs) or get paid the most money (if they are professionals). Those workers who do a good job, accomplish great things for the company, and are faithful in their work will get the promotions, the pay raises, and all the perks.

It's all quite simple. We judge and are judged on the basis of what we do or what we do not do. It's no wonder then that people assume our Lord Jesus Christ will judge in the same way: on the basis of what we do or what we do not do. They will even use our text for today as proof for this way of thinking. However, does God judge us on the basis of our good works? Does he condemn us on the basis of lack of good works? Does this parable teach these things?

If these things are true, then we are in great trouble. God requires more of us than simply a lot of good deeds done. In the Word of God, he says time and time again that He requires perfection of us. We cannot do *some* good things in order to get into heaven, but we have to do *all* good things in order to get to heaven. Scripture and human experience show clearly that none of us are anywhere close to perfection. We

have all sinned – daily and much – and fall short of the glory of God again and again. None of us deserve heaven on the basis of what we have done. All of us deserve hell for what we have done and what we have failed to do.

But God does not judge us in the manner that we judge one another or even judge ourselves. God saves people on the basis of grace alone – His undeserved favor toward us – for the sake of Jesus Christ, His Son, and His “good works”. Jesus not only withstood the anger, condemnation, and judgment against us for our sins, but Jesus did all of the good works which are required of us. He obeyed all of God’s Law perfectly in our place. He perfectly paid the price which God’s justice demanded of us. Jesus offered up His perfect life as the payment for our sinful lives. His final words on the cross, “It is finished!”, show that there is nothing left for us to do. He has done everything.

All of that – the shielding from God’s wrath and condemnation; Jesus’ perfect righteousness; the forgiveness for all of our sins; and the canceling of our debt before God – is received by faith alone. In trusting Jesus Christ and all that He has done, we have all that He has earned for us. God gives this is a free gift. In fact, even the faith to believe what Jesus has done and what God has given is a gift given freely by God. As the Word of God says in Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Therefore, God looks at people on the basis of faith, apart from and before any good works have been done or taken into account. Those who have faith in Jesus Christ will go to heaven and live with Him there for all eternity. Conversely, those who do not have faith in Jesus Christ will not go to heaven, but will go to hell and live apart from Jesus Christ for all eternity.

But, people will say, doesn’t this parable teach that Jesus judges according to what people have done? Aren’t good people rewarded because they did good things? Aren’t bad people condemned because they didn’t do good things? No, not at all. We just need to read the parable a bit more carefully. The judgment does not occur when Jesus is talking about good works or lack of good works. The judgment occurs when the people are divided as a shepherd divides sheep and goats early in the story. Nothing is said about good works when this division is made. The sheep are sheep when they get to the judgment. Nothing changes for them. The goats are goats when they get to the judgment. Nothing changes for them either.

The judgment has already occurred. In His preaching, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24) When you and I hear the Word of God and believe, we already have eternal life at that point. We do not come into judgment, but we pass from the death of sin to everlasting life.

In the same way, those who refuse to hear the Word of God or hear the word of God and refuse to believe, they come into judgment at that very moment. They remain in the death of sin and forfeit any hope of everlasting life.

What about the good works Jesus commands the sheet for in our text? We often may forget about that. However, the passage from Ephesians, which talks about

salvation through grace and received by faith, ends with these words, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10) God has created us to do good things and prepares the opportunities to do so.

Getting back to the illustration of a mirror, as a mirror reflects the physical identity of a person, so do good works reflect the spiritual identity of a person. Good works are the reflection of faith. Just as a mirror cannot make you look any better than you already are, so good works cannot make you look any better before God than you already are. Good works cannot create faith or win salvation. Good works only reflect a faith that already exists and the salvation already possessed.

Conversely, the lack of good works reflect a lack of faith and a lack of salvation. It is not the lack of good works which sends a person to hell, but a lack of faith. And, while unbelievers may do some outwardly good works which are civically and morally good, they are not the good works which please God. Only good works done as a reflection of faith are pleasing to God. The Bible says, “And without faith it is impossible to please him.”

Jesus’ commendation of the sheep and the sheep’s reaction further show that salvation and eternal life are not earned by doing good works. The passiveness of Jesus’ declaration shows that the sheep’s salvation is God’s doing and not they’re doing. First, Jesus greets them, not by saying “Come, you who have earned my Father’s reward,” but “Come, you who are blessed by my Father.” It is the Father who is blessing them, not paying them back. Second, Jesus speaks of “inheriting the kingdom.” By definition, an inheritance is something freely given by the writer of the will and not something earned or merited by anyone. Thirdly, his kingdom has been “prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” This inheritance belonged to the sheep a long time before they were even born or did their first good work. They are being restored to creation as God always intended for it to be.

The sheep’s reaction is one of surprise. They had not been trying to earn God’s favor, nor had they been keeping track of their good works. They were simply doing what sheep – the people of God – are supposed to be doing. One commentator said, “Jesus knew that they were sheep because they were doing ‘sheepy’ things.” Having been saved by grace through faith, they had been loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving their neighbor as they love themselves. They were not doing good things because they had to, but because they wanted to. They were not doing good things in order to merit God’s favor and be saved. They were doing good things because they already HAD God’s favor and were saved.

It is a much different story for the goats on Jesus’ left hand. They are cursed by God for not having faith that was reflected by good deeds. They are sent by Jesus, not to a place prepared for them, but to a place prepared for the devil and his angels. Hell was never something intended for people. However, if people reject God and separate themselves from Him, then they will go to the place prepared for the original rebel, Satan. Their reaction to Jesus’ condemnation seems to be one of surprise. They act as if had they known that they could’ve avoided hell fire by doing good things, then

they would have. This, of course is a sad pitiful misunderstanding of faith and the place of good works.

The End Times or the Judgment Day and the time leading up to that day should never frighten us. Nor should it be a time to scurry about doing more good works in the hope of impressing Jesus. Rather, it is a time to continue living the life of faith as always. We continue to fully trust Jesus for the salvation promised to us in Holy Scriptures; won by him on the cross; guaranteed by Him through the empty tomb; given to us in Holy Baptism; and renewed in us through the Lord's Supper. We continue to live the life of sheep: loving the least of these brothers and sisters of Christ; serving them (and all people) with food, drink, clothes, a welcoming attitude, medical care, visitation, and in many other ways. If done by faith with humility and in response to God's grace in Jesus Christ, you won't even notice that you are doing anything special. You, too, will be surprised on that final day as the sheep in the parable were. And you will be joyous beyond all measure when you hear Jesus say to you, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Amen.