

Turning a Goat in a Sheep

Sermon Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

³¹When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His throne of glory. ³²And gathering together before Him all the nations, He will separate them from another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

³⁴Then the King will say to those on His right, "come, the blessed of my Father, receive the Kingdom prepared for you from the Creation of the world. ³⁵For I hungered and you gave to Me to eat, I thirsted and you gave water to Me, I was a stranger and you gathered Me in, ³⁶naked and you clothed Me, sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me."

³⁷Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hunger and feed You, or thirsting and give You water? ³⁸When did we see You a stranger and gather You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹When did we see You sick or in prison and come to You?"

⁴⁰And answering, the King will say to them, "truly I say to you, whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did to Me."

⁴¹Then He will say to those on the left, "go away from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I hungered and you did not feed Me, I thirsted and you did not give water to Me, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not gather me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me."

⁴⁴Then they will answer, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hunger, or thirsting, or stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison and not serve You?"

⁴⁵He will answer them, saying, "truly I say to you, whatever you did not do to the least of these, you did not do to Me."

⁴⁶And these will go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous to everlasting life.

Lord sanctify us by your truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

The 25th chapter of Matthew contains three parables that all deal with the Second Coming of Jesus and the Final Judgement, the parable of the Ten Virgins, the parable of the Talents and the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Over the last two weeks we have discussed the parables of the Ten Virgins and the Talents and how they relate to faith and the living out of faith. Now today with the parable of the Sheep and the Goats we will again discuss the topic of faith and good works.

The key feature to understanding this parable of the Sheep and the Goats is understanding the relationship between faith and good works and how good works relate to salvation.

In this parable Jesus foretells the Final Judgement when He will return in glory with all His angels to divide humanity as a shepherd divides the sheep and the goats. The sheep will go to His right and into everlasting life in Heaven, while the goats will go to His left and into the everlasting fire of Hell.

In this parable Jesus turns to the sheep and says, "come and receive everlasting life, for you fed Me when I was hungry, gave Me water when I was thirsty, gathered Me in and welcomed Me when I was a stranger, clothed Me when I was naked, visited Me when I was sick and came to Me when I was in prison." He goes on to explain that the sheep did these things for God by doing them to their neighbour. By loving and serving those in need they have loved and served God.

Then Jesus turns to the goats and says, "go away from Me and into the everlasting flames of Hell, for you did not feed Me when I was hungry or give me water when I was thirsty, etc." It appears that Jesus is judging the sheep and the goats based on their works, the sheep are those who loved their neighbours and the goats are the selfish ones who did not love their neighbours.

Now, there is a reality that at the Final Judgement we will be judged according to our works. This is taught repeatedly through the Scriptures, for example, in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans chapter 2 verses 6-8 Paul wrote that God will render each one according to his deeds, rendering eternal life to those who patiently sought glory, honour and immortality through doing good, but rendering wrath to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth.

We even confess the idea of a judgement according to works in the Athanasian Creed, when we confess, "At the coming of Christ all men shall rise with their bodies and give an account of their own deeds, those who have done good will enter eternal life and those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire."

Now, this concept of judgement according to works seems controversial to us Lutherans who teach justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and yet there is this Scriptural reality that on the Last Day we will be

judged according to our works. But in order to understand the true relationship between faith and good works, we need to understand the two different uses of the word “for” or “because”.

The word “because” can be used either causative or evidentially. The causative use is where “because” is used as the reason for something happening, e.g. The ground is wet because it rained. The evidential use is where “because” is used to determine what happened, e.g. I know it has rained because the ground is wet.

Henceforth, when we view the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in this light we can determine two different interpretations of the text: 1. The sheep are saved because they did good works, or 2. We know who the sheep are because they were the ones who did good works.

The first interpretation teaches that good works are the reason the sheep were saved, while the second interpretation teaches that good works are the evidence that the sheep were already saved. Now only one interpretation can be right, so which one is it?

Well St. Paul says on multiple occasions (Rom. 3:28, Eph. 2:8-9, Gal. 2:16) that we are saved by grace through faith apart from the works of the Law. We also know that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), and that which does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Christians are not saved through their good works, instead we are saved by faith alone.

However, as we have mentioned over the past two weeks, faith without works is dead (James 2:17), that true faith is followed by works and that if works do not follow faith, then that faith is not real, saving faith.

Our good works are evidence of our faith. Our works are an outward sign of our inward belief. Therefore, faith can be determined by observing a person’s outward life. How does the shepherd determine the sheep from the goats? By looking at them. The shepherd knows what a sheep looks like based on its appearance.

When Jesus judges the sheep and the goats according to their works, He is not saying that the sheep were saved because of their works, what He is saying is that He knows who the sheep are because their works are evidence that they had faith. The sheep are not saved because of their good works; instead the sheep are those who did good works because they were already saved by grace through faith.

Jesus is able to determine who the sheep and the goats are because of the lives they lived. The goats are the ones who rejected the forgiveness of sins and in turn chose to remain bound to their sins. The goats are stubborn, selfish, self-seeking and self-righteous. They do not heed the Word of God, they do not strive to keep His Law, they care only about their own individual needs, and when they sin, they do not turn to the Shepherd in repentance. The goats are so self-centred and self-righteous, that they don’t even notice their own sins. They don’t even notice that they haven’t served God or their neighbour.

But as for the sheep, they are the ones who have been set free from slavery to sin. They are those who have received the forgiveness of sins through faith, and as a reaction to that forgiveness strive to live out that faith in service of God and neighbour. The sheep are those who selflessly seek to put the needs of others above themselves. The sheep are those who having failed to keep the Law come to the shepherd in repentance, seeking His forgiveness. These sheep are so conscious of their need for a Saviour, so aware of their own fallen sinfulness that they don’t even notice the good deeds they have done.

But it is not the good works that saved the sheep, but the faith behind those works; the faith that led them to repent of their sins and to come to the Shepherd in humility.

Without faith it is impossible to please God, just as it is impossible to turn a goat into a sheep. We cannot be saved by our own doing, God alone can save us, just as it is God alone who can turn a goat into a sheep. For each of us was born a damned sinner, each of us was born a goat, doomed to go to the left of Christ and into the everlasting fire. By our own will and strength we could not turn ourselves into a sheep, it was impossible to save ourselves. Without Christ we are dead in our trespasses, slaves to sin and unable to do anything to save ourselves. Without Christ we are trapped in our sinful flesh, our old selfish nature. Without Christ we are stubborn, self-seeking, self-righteous goats. We do not follow the Shepherd, we do not work together as a flock, we care only about ourselves. And without Christ we are trapped in our old sinful goat flesh. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves, our own works won’t turn into a sheep. We can chop off our horns and throw on a woollen coat, but that still doesn’t make us a sheep.

So the Shepherd becomes a sheep for us. Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd became the Lamb of God who died in our place, taking our sin upon Himself. He was sacrificed on our behalf, to receive the punishment that we deserved. And three days later He rose again from the dead. The Lamb of God, who was slain for sins of the world, was resurrected. He did this not for Himself but for our sake. He died and rose again, so that we too could become sheep. That we too could become lambs of God and belong to God’s flock. Sheep follow a leader, and Jesus became that lead sheep, so that we could follow Him into salvation.

But before we can follow the Lamb of God as part of His flock, we must first become a sheep. We must first be

cleansed of our sinful nature, we must be cleansed of our “goatness.”

It is impossible to turn a goat into a sheep. You can't just glue wool to it and start calling it a sheep. But what we call impossible, God calls possible, for through Christ all things are possible (Matt. 19:26, Phil. 4:13).

When Christ calls us into His flock, He removes our sinfulness and He clothes us in His righteousness, He removes our sinful goat body and He reshapes us using His own holy sheep body. But this renewal in Christ is not skin deep, it reaches down into our heart into our very soul and spirit.

In Psalm 51 (:10) we pray to God to create in us a clean heart and to renew in us a steadfast spirit. We plead with God to rip out our sinful, selfish, stubborn heart of stone to replace it with a loving, gentle, soft heart of flesh. We plead with God to remove our wicked human nature and to replace it with a new faithful, repentant, believing Christian spirit.

In order to enter Heaven, God must remove the Old Adam from within us and replace it with the New Man. He must strip away our goat body and replace it with a sheep body.

By our own power we cannot turn ourselves into a sheep, but by the power of God alone it is done.

In the third Narnia book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, we are introduced to a character named Eustace. He is a selfish, stubborn, self-righteous brat of a kid who through his own wickedness is turned into a dragon.

In the story he is given the chance to remove his dragon body and once again become a human. He attempts to remove the dragon scales himself. He manages to shed a layer scales. But underneath them are even more scales, and the more layers he shed, the more layers he finds. He is only transformed back into a human when Aslan the Lion, who is the figure of Christ in this story, removes the scales from him. When Eustace describes the experience, he says that, as Aslan removed the dragon skin from him, the tears were so deep that they went down to his heart.

Our sinful human nature is not skin deep but goes all the way down to our very core. The sheep and the goats do not only look different, but they are two different animals. Just as a goat cannot become a sheep by simply changing its outward appearance, so too an unbeliever cannot become a Christian by simply looking like a Christian. Good works are the outward appearance of a Christian's inward faith. But as Jesus says even an unbeliever can love their neighbour (Matt. 5:46-47, Luke 6:32). Good works are only skin-deep. Good works do not make you a Christian. In order to be a Christian you must be transformed for the inside, your entire being, body, soul and spirit must be renewed.

And this renewal comes not by our own doing but by the work of Jesus Christ. He comes to us and gives us His Holy Spirit. He renews us and creates in a new heart and a new spirit. Through Christ alone, we are made into sheep.

Now even though we are sheep our old sinful goat nature will continue to rear its ugly head. We will sin daily and daily our flesh will desire to be transformed back into the goats we once were. That is why we must come to God daily in prayer and through reading Scripture, we must come to the Shepherd in repentance and faith, so that we may continue to be renewed on a daily basis. For through Word and Sacrament Christ continues to come to us and renew our nature constantly.

And as for good works, now that we are sheep we act like sheep, we will look like sheep. But this is only the outward affects that shows the inward change that Christ has done in us. We are not saved because of our good works, but we do our good works because we are already saved.

As St. John said in his First Epistle chapter 4 verse 19, we love because Christ first loved us. God doesn't love us because we first loved our neighbour, but we now love both God and neighbour because of the love that Christ has for us. We forgive because God has forgiven us. We are merciful because He has shown us mercy.

We do the good works of sheep, because God has transformed us into sheep. We feed the hungry because Christ feeds us with His Body and Blood, we give water to the thirsty because Christ saved us through the waters of Baptism, we welcome strangers because Christ welcomed us into Heaven when we were still His enemies, we clothe the naked because Christ clothes us with His Own righteousness, we visit the sick because Christ has healed us of the disease of sin, and we go to those in prison because Christ came to us and rescued us from the eternal prison of Hell.

Come, you who are the blessed of the Father, and receive the Kingdom prepared for you from the Creation of the World. Amen.

And may Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd bless you and keep you in His care. Amen