

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The law is very natural for humanity. Man views the law favorably, even if, at times, he does not always like what the law has to say. By the law, man interprets his surroundings. By the law, man understands the way things are supposed to work. Through the law, man relates to all of creation. Do this; don't do that. It's simple, and as he understands it, it is manageable.

By contrast, the Gospel is completely foreign to him. That what man has he receives from outside of himself, apart from his work or merit, from another, completely by grace is difficult or even impossible to understand. In fact, it is even offensive: to be told that you receive something that you do not deserve is insulting—on the one hand, you are being told that what you have done is not enough, not good enough, to earn what you have; on the other hand, it completely contradicts the notion that you have to do something to earn something.

This is turning the Gospel into the law. There has to be a reason that God is good to you, when He's good to you, and that reason has to be something that you've done. That's the law that you like; that's the law the humanity understands; that's the law through which man relates to all of creation: to get something, you have to do something. However, the law of God also declares that you are totally lost in your sin, unable to free yourself from this bondage by anything that you do, and that even the works that you do that you think are good are contrary and an offense to God. (cf. Isaiah 64:6)

By the grace of God, you often come to this realization. When you examine your life according to the Ten Commandments, you see exactly what you have done and not done plainly laid out for you. You complain and grumble, are jealous and envious. You spread gossip, refuse to speak to another, and hold grudges. You constantly tease, quarrel, and nag; you even hate someone else, openly or secretly. You are disrespectful and disobedient toward your lawful authorities—parents, teachers, or other officials placed over you by God for good order. You permit sleep or pleasure to interfere with regular church attendance, thinking lightly of God's Word and Sacraments. You use profanity or God's name in such a way that would bring Him dishonor. In all of these, you put yourself in God's place—you have made of yourself a God. The law convicts you of sin and tells you that you are unable to break the bonds that chain and enslave you; by His grace, you cry out, "Lord, have mercy."

And He does.

God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (Galatians 4:4-7)

The Word of God took on human flesh, was given the name Jesus—for He will save His people from their sins—and He took the sins which so easily ensnare you, breaking the bonds which enslave you, setting you free. For according to His flesh, He died on the cross—shedding His blood, the propitiation for your sins, and not your sins only but for the whole world. (cf. 1 John 2:2) By His sacrifice, and the Word and Sacraments' work on you, you are covered by His blood—forgiven, redeemed, restored. This is the alien work of the Gospel—the work of the forgiveness of your sins which comes to you from outside of yourself—undeservedly, without any worth or merit in you. Jesus Christ is your alien righteousness!

You often come to this realization, but not always. You still struggle with your sinful nature, though it is not always the struggle that the New Man in Christ would want. That is to say, you still view the law as very natural—a set of do's and don't's which "make sense."

For instance, if I were to ask you why Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden, what would be your response? If you said, "To tend it or take care of it," or something similar, you would be right. But,

if that is all that you said, your response would be incomplete, and incorrectly entirely focused on one thing: the law. Genesis 2:15 plainly states, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it," but answering my question solely with this verse ignores everything that preceded it. Genesis 2:7-9 states,

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Notice who the one doing all of the verbs is there. **YHWH** formed the man. **YHWH** breathed into his nostrils. **YHWH** planted a garden. **YHWH** put the man there. **YHWH** made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. So, why did God place Adam in the Garden of Eden? There, YHWH had made for him a home and given him food to eat. There was no reason that God would do such a thing for Adam, except that God loves him and wants to care for him. The work that Adam did to tend and keep the Garden flowed out of the grace that God had shown him first. Did God desire and require this work? Absolutely, but His desire for Adam was greater, you could say.

Dear hearers, this gravitation to the law is not unique to you who are sitting here this morning. Look at the saints in today's Gospel reading. There, Jesus is returned to earth; it is the Last Day. A separation takes place—those who are saved are separated from those who are not. To the Judge, the difference is as plain as that between sheep and goats to a shepherd. He turns to the sheep, the ones who are righteous on account of Him, and declares, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."

And how do the sheep respond? "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" Even on the cusp of eternity, the saints are preoccupied with the law. Jesus is ushering them into the kingdom for eternity, and they wonder when they did all of these things.

Now, it's a valid question, I suppose. There's a point to be made that the saints don't tally their good works. As soon as one does that, it becomes a law unto itself, and the temptation to point out the tally becomes great. "Lord, look what good works I've done, and how many." It's a temptation faced by the saints all over this fallen world.

There is another danger for you focusing on these statements of law in this passage, and that is to burden yourself with a list of chores with which you need not be burdened. That is to say, to come away from this text thinking that you earn the kingdom for eternity by feeding Jesus, giving Jesus a drink, taking Jesus into your home, clothing Jesus, visiting Jesus when He's sick, or going to Jesus in prison are what you need to do to earn salvation—or, as Jesus put it, doing those things to the least of His brothers. Reading the text like that, though, ignores the fact that the righteous had no idea that they had done these things. I imagine it worked much the same way for Adam tending the Garden of Eden before the fall: he joyfully went about it without a thought as to whether or not he was doing a good work or something God-pleasing—Adam didn't keep score.

The goats receive an opposite sentence worded in a similar way. "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Like the sheep, their focus is also on the law, albeit a bit differently, essentially stating, "Lord, if we had seen you like this, we would have done the good work." But they never fed Jesus, never gave Jesus drink, never took Jesus in, never clothed

Jesus, never visited a sick or imprisoned Jesus—they never did these things to the least of Jesus' brothers.

That is the danger, dear hearers, of focusing on the law in today's text. In doing so, you look for a way to please God, you look for a work which will earn His favor. That's what Old Adam always wants; it is natural for him to gravitate to the law, especially a law that he can fulfill himself.

Notice again, however, that the righteous are called blessed before any works are mentioned, and the unrighteous are called cursed in the same manner. Adam was placed in a home with good food before any mention was made of his duty to care for the Garden; likewise, the sheep are called blessed before any mention of good works done is made. In other words, the sheep are sheep because they are blessed, and they see to these good works because they are sheep. Adam was placed in a good home with good food because God cares for His creation, especially him, and he saw to the care of the Garden because of the love of God for him.

So, what separates the sheep from the goats? Answer: faith and trust in Jesus. The sheep are righteous because they see no righteousness in themselves, but rely solely and entirely on Jesus Christ and His works for their forgiveness, life, and salvation. Then and only then, based on this trust and righteousness, they care for those whom Jesus places in their lives, especially those whom Jesus sends to them to proclaim to them the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins—the least among His brothers. Do not be confused, it's not the works that separate sheep from goats, but Jesus and faith and trust in Him.

Goats don't have that. Goats do not believe in Jesus nor have any use for Him. It follows, then, that they would not show the same kind of care and concern for the least among Jesus' brothers as the sheep would. And, in fact, since they have no desire for the Word, they would hold those who proclaim it in disdain.

But that's not you, dear hearers. Your being here, confessing your sins (including the sin of wanting to rely on your works), receiving absolution and the Lord's Supper, and gladly hearing the proclamation of the Gospel are signs that you are to be counted among the sheep. Goats don't do that. Now, I could take time and recount the ways you have been a blessing to this least of Jesus' brothers, but there would be no point to it, and you may not even realize that you've done anything. Suffice it to say, that which you have done to the least of Jesus' brothers, you have done unto Him. You do this not seeking any merit or worth from it, but because you are a sheep.

You are one for whom Christ died, and you rely solely on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. Your robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb; He is the propitiation for your sins. Therefore, on the Last Day,

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, [you among them] "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Just like Father Adam before, being placed into the Garden of Eden as his home filled with good food, you will be ushered into the kingdom of glory by the Son of God, a sheep of the Good Shepherd, your eternal home where there will be an endless "[F]east of choice pieces, A feast of wines on the lees, Of fat things full of marrow, Of well-refined wines on the lees" (Isaiah 25:6b, c), because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.