

The Seventh Sunday after Michaelmas
St. Matthew 25:31-46

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

"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." This text can be one of great terror for you or one of great comfort. It all depends on how you hear it. And how you hear it depends on whether you are a sheep or a goat.

For, when Jesus returns on the Day of Judgment, all people will be divided before him, like sheep and goats. Jesus will welcome the sheep on His right into everlasting life. The goats on His left, on the other hand, will be commanded to depart from His presence into everlasting fire.

This alone is very comforting to the sheep. They will live forever in the glorious presence of Jesus. The Apostle John describes what that will be like as he was given a vision of it:

These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:14b-17)
Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3b-4)

Jesus tells the sheep that they treated Him well—feeding, clothing, visiting, and generally all of the things a person would do to take care of another whom they love and cherish. It's a task that comes naturally, as indicated by the question the sheep ask Jesus: "When did we do these things?" Of course, the other thing it indicates—the part that Jesus answers—is that they never realized they were caring for Jesus. "That which you have done to the least of these My brethren, you have done to Me." That what you have done to the ones Jesus sends to you to proclaim the free forgiveness of sins to you in His name, you have done to Jesus.

Think about it. How do sheep respond to a shepherd? How do those who receive Jesus and His forgiveness receive the ones He sends to proclaim that forgiveness? They feed them, clothe them, visit them, and generally do all of the things a person would do to take care of another whom they love and cherish. It's not that they necessarily do these things for the benefit of the person who is among them, but because they hear from this person the good news of their salvation and want to hear more of the same. The natural response of the regenerated person is to care for this messenger.

For the goats, however, on the Day of Judgment there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They will burn in everlasting torment in the place prepared for the devil and his angels. Once again, John lets us in on the vision he had:

The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. Then Death

and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:10-11, 14-15)

Jesus tells the goats that they treated Him with contempt, denying Him the things that the sheep gladly gave Him. Like the sheep, they wonder, but their wondering is different. They ask a similar question to the sheep, but only to say that if they had known, they would have done a good work. And Jesus gives them a similar answer. "That which you have not done to the least of these My brethren, you have not done to me." That what you have not done to the ones Jesus sends to you to proclaim the free forgiveness of sins to you in His name, you have not done to Jesus.

This all makes sense in light of Jesus sending of the disciples earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel. There, He tells them not to take any provisions. He warns them that there will be many who will do anything they can to persecute them, all because of the message He is giving them to proclaim, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." But there will also be some who will receive them and their message and the peace with God that they give in His name. And in closing His instruction to the disciples, Jesus tells them,

He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward. (Matthew 10:40-42)

Right there at the end, Jesus refers to His disciples—the one's He is sending out without provision to preach the gospel—as His little ones: the least of His brethren. (cf. Matthew 10)

"He who receives you receives Me." "That which you have done to the least of these My brethren, you have done to Me." For sheep, this is a no-brainer. When one comes along proclaiming to that sins are forgiven for the sake of the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, all without personal merit and righteousness, a sheep will do everything they can to keep hearing that message, caring for the messenger. When they do that to the messengers, they do that to Jesus. That's what He's saying in today's text.

Now, you could say that there may be a group of people hearing this who may wonder if they are sheep or goats; if they don't know, it's a sure bet to say that they are goats. Like the goats, they would wonder when they had ever seen Jesus, because they would certainly have done something for Him if they had. Sheep are only shocked at the fact that they are told that they had done something; goats are shocked that they had seen Jesus—even if only in His messengers—and never knew it. Sheep don't keep track of what they had done, as it shocks them to find out that they had done something; goats always look for something to do.

That's why I said before that this text can either be one of great terror or great comfort. If you're a goat, even if you don't know it, you will hear the text as something you must do in order to be in the glorious presence of Jesus for eternity. You will hear Jesus talk about clothing Him, feeding Him, visiting Him, etc., and hear Him tell you that these are the things He demands of you in order to gain His favor, that He expects you to do this to His messengers, even to all people! If this were the case, then everyone would be a goat, because no one of their own volition will ever do the things Jesus says the sheep do.

But there is in this also a temptation for the sheep. It stems from a confusion of Law and Gospel and an error with regard to a false understanding of free will, which we confess exists in name only after The Fall. The temptation is to hear Jesus telling the sheep that they have done these things, and to believe that they must be done in order to *remain* a sheep and be granted a place in eternity.

The thinking goes that it is Jesus, by way of His Holy Spirit, that make one a sheep—this part is true—but then it is incumbent upon the sheep to do what they can in order to remain a sheep—and this part is the error.

Here is the Law, dear hearers: the demand is present to regard everyone as if they are Jesus Christ, especially those He has sent to you to proclaim the good news to you, because everyone is someone for whom He has died. You see it in the second table of the Ten Commandments which tell you what you are to do and not to do with, to, and for your neighbor.

- Don't anger or despise parents and other authorities; serve, obey, love, and cherish them.
- Don't hurt your neighbor or unjustly take his life; help and support him in every physical need.
- Don't lead a sexually impure life in what you say and do; husband and wife love and honor each other.
- Don't take your neighbor's income or possessions; help him to improve and protect them.
- Don't lie about your neighbor or hurt his reputation; defend and speak well of him.
- Don't scheme to get or entice anything that belongs to your neighbor; be of service to him in keeping it and urge them to stay.

These things the Law demands that you do.

Furthermore, the Law also tells you that you do not do keep the Law. In fact, your will is so bound to sin, that you do precisely the opposite of what you are to do and not do. So, the Law demands that you deserve to die for breaking the Law.

By all accounts, according to the Law, you are a goat. And as a goat, you are destined to spend eternity in that place prepared for the devil and his angels.

That's where the Gospel comes in, though. The Gospel declares to you that Jesus Christ did everything that the Law requires of you. All that the Law demands of you—that you should not do and should do—Jesus has done and continues to do. In fact, Jesus clothes you, as you wear robes that are made white in His blood—the robes of Christ's righteousness given to you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Jesus even feeds you, as He gives you His very body and blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. Additionally, Jesus visits you in His Word, even as He has promised to be with you to the very end of the age. And all of this, dear hearers, He does for you.

Furthermore, the Gospel also tells you that the death that the Law demands for your sins, Jesus has suffered and died for you. The blood which washes your robes white was shed for you by Jesus, most especially from the cross. The body and blood which you eat and drink was given and shed for you by Jesus from the cross. Jesus has died your death that you may live.

Jesus has done it all for you. By all accounts, by the working of the Gospel on and in you, you are a sheep. By the work that Jesus has done, you are made a sheep. And by the work that the Holy Spirit continues to do, you remain a sheep.

So, that's the comfort of the Sheep and the Goats. The sheep are ushered into eternity to live in the glorious presence of the Son of Man. What the sheep did is only secondary, a result of having been made sheep. All of this is solely by God's grace: that the sheep are made sheep, that the sheep spend eternity in the glorious presence of the Son of Man, and that the sheep do all of the things that they do.

And this is true of you, dear Baptized. You are sheep, because Jesus has made you His sheep; He is your Good Shepherd. And because He is your Good Shepherd, you are forgiven for all of your sins. Therefore, you will hear the Son of Man say to you on the Day of Judgment, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

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