

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.

Every time this text comes up, you hear me tell you that in the part of the text that many focus on, Jesus differentiates how His messengers are received by believers compared to unbelievers. To the sheep, He says, "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." The sheep are confused, because they don't know when they did this. To the goats, on the other hand, Jesus says, "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." The goats are also confused, because they didn't see Jesus in order to do any of these things.

Jesus tells both the goats and the sheep essentially the same thing. "If you've done it or not done it to the least of these My brothers, you've done it or not done it to Me." And this is where I tell you that the "least of these My brothers," refers to His apostles. I refer you to Matthew 10 where Jesus sends out His disciples to preach that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He prepares them for their mission by telling them not to take much in the way of provisions, for they will be taken care of by those who receive their message, which is His message. In fact, 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. (cf. Matthew 10:5-42)

"He who receives you receives Me." "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

But there is a simpler way of explaining this. To whom does Jesus refer when He says, "My brothers," or "My brethren?" Well, in one place, when Jesus had returned home and was told that His mother and brothers were looking for him, "...He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers. For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.'" (Matthew 12:49-50) In another place, after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to women who had gone to His tomb to anoint His body and told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me." (Matthew 28:10)

In the first case, the brothers are disciples in the very general sense: those who follow Jesus and learn from Him. If this is applied to today's text, it would beg the question: who are the sheep? It would be out of sorts for both the sheep and the brothers to be the same group of people. And if that were somehow the case, then Jesus indicates in this parable that there is no need for you to show the same kinds of courtesies to the unbelievers as you do to disciples, or as the sheep do to you, because then it's not to Him that you're showing these courtesies.

In the second case, the brethren are disciples in a very narrow sense. Jesus speaks specifically of His 12 disciples, whom He would see in Galilee after His resurrection and later send out as His apostles. Their ministry is continued to this day by the pastors He calls into parishes, for their task is the same, though these are not eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection; this is why the Church is referred to as apostolic. Nevertheless, if this understanding of brethren is applied to today's text, it makes more sense, especially in light of what happens in Matthew 10, how the apostles carried out their ministry following Pentecost, and how congregations are to regard their pastors today. "He who receives you receives Me," Jesus said.

When the apostles were sent, some people received them, others did not. Many heard their message and believed on the Lord Jesus. The Word of God which they proclaimed had its way with them. Still, others did not receive the apostles' message, and some even treated them shamefully. All of them, spare John, died a martyr's death, and John was exiled for his efforts. "He who receives you receives Me." "[I]nasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

The same thing happens today, though in many places without as much gore...so far. Pastors are called to congregations where they see to the task of proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. They call sinners to repentance by way of the Law of God and soothe troubled consciences with the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. Just like the apostles before them, some people receive their message and receive the One who sent them, others do not. In some places, these pastors are run out of their congregations, and in some cases practically left for dead like the man who fell among the robbers in the Parable of the "Good" Samaritan. "He who receives you receives Me." "[I]nasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

Woe to those people! In today's text, Jesus refers to them as goats. The reality of their punishment is harsh. "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels..." Or, as Jesus says in Matthew 10, "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!" (Matthew 10:14-15)

However, those who received Christ's sent ones, whether they were the apostles or are the pastors of today, will hear their Lord call out to them as to the sheep in today's text. "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." You, as a sheep, may wonder when you did all of these things; if you have done it to the messenger God sends to you, you have done it to the Son of God, for it is His message that they proclaim.

This works so long as the called minister of the Word remains a minister of the Word. That is to say, so long as the message he proclaims is the one given to him by the Savior, he remains one of the least of the brethren of Jesus. He is to be received and cared for by the faithful as if Christ Himself were standing in their midst, and that is why as he proclaims the forgiveness of your sins, he does so in the stead and by the command of his Lord, Jesus Christ.

So, while this parable may serve as an exhortation to you, it also serves as a reminder to the ones whom Jesus calls and sends. And inasmuch as it may serve in both of those capacities, may it also comfort you that you receive Jesus through His sent ones only by faith, even as they continue to proclaim the message of salvation by grace also by faith. In both cases, it is God-given faith, worked by the Word of God.

Let me also make something perfectly clear. It is not the activity of the sheep that saves them. They are not saved by taking in, feeding, visiting, and caring for Jesus' sent ones. The sheep do these things—without keeping score, mind you—because they are sheep. It's what the sheep do, as I said before, by faith. In other words, it comes naturally to the New Man, and without even realizing that they have done anything good at all. These good works are a demonstration of the faith that they have been given.

Likewise, it isn't the inactivity (or wrong activity) of the goats that earns them condemnation. What they do not do is a result of the sinful heart, whether they realize it or not. They reject the grace of God and do whatever they can to counteract it. As it is with the sheep, so the goats demonstrate their faithlessness by what they do not do.

Therefore, here is the judgment to be made on the last day: the sheep—the believers—are given entrance into the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world; the goats—the unbelievers—are cast into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels, a sentence much worse than what befell Sodom and Gomorrah.

The point of all of this is simply this: the parable in today's Gospel teaches exactly what the rest of Scripture teaches, that people are saved by grace through faith. It is only unbelief that condemns. "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) Salvation by works is rejected, even in this text where someone may try to insert it by teaching that the sheep are saved because they helped a helpless person, whether that be any non-particular neighbor or specifically the neighbor that is the servant of the Word. Likewise, condemnation by works is also rejected.

It goes simply like this: Jesus sends His disciples or apostles—His pastors—they preach the Word, many receive the Word and believe it—they are given faith by this proclaimed Word—and on account of this they are saved: "The just shall live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4) Only because they have received the Word proclaimed to them do they receive the messenger sent to them, and care for him as if for Christ Himself. And this, without keeping score, without having a mind to the fact that they are doing as much to Christ as they do it to His messenger.

Feeding, giving drink, welcoming the stranger, clothing, visiting the infirm and imprisoned sent one of Christ is done out of thanksgiving for having received forgiveness, life, and salvation, not as a condition for it. These are done out of a sense of wanting the proclamation of Christ crucified to continue, in their midst as much as to all nations. In essence, having heard the word of sins forgiven, the God-given response is, "Stay a while, have something to eat and drink, let us care for you, and tell us again of the forgiveness of our sins. We want to hear more."

Therefore, I will tell you more. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Christ is coming, coming soon. "Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them." (Revelation 12:12a) Rejoice as well, you saints on earth, for He comes quickly to judge the earth. (cf. *E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come, st. 3*) He comes to pronounce the judgment made at the cross, where He died for the sins of the world, where He died for your sins, dear saints here in this place. Therefore, this is the judgment pronounced of you: you are not guilty, you are forgiven for all of your sins. "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.