

Second-Last Sunday in the Church Year, A²D 2010

Matthew 25:31-46

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 The Day is surely drawing near. The weeks at the end of the Church Year call for a watchfulness, a readiness, for the Day of Christ's return. When He returns, He will come as Judge and as King. As King, He will take His place on His glorious throne. He is King even now, but His powerful reign is hidden in the cross. Then His power and glory will be fully displayed. As Judge, He will separate the elect from the damned, those who belong to Him from those who do not, the sheep from the goats. The final trumpet then shall sound and all the earth be shaken, and all who rest beneath the ground shall from their sleep awaken. But all who live will in that hour, by God's almighty, boundless power, be changed at His commanding. And before Him will be gathered all the nations, every person still alive or raised from the grave back to life will stand before the Judge.

2 Ask any average American who believes there is a place called heaven how people get to such a place, and he will tell you that they get there because of their good works. Naturally, such a person also believes his good works are sufficient for God to grant him entrance into paradise. Even among regular church-goers, people who consider themselves Christians, the prevailing sentiment is that good people go to heaven. Wherever this thinking comes from, it does not come from sacred Scripture.

Good people may indeed earn God's favor, but this American spirituality too loosely defines "good people." Instead, God defines goodness in terms of the Commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. If your supposed good works toward your neighbor are really self-interested, they're not good works. If you break even one commandment, even once, even only in your thoughts, you have not met the standard set for you: "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

3 The Day is surely drawing near, nearer now than before, nearer now than when you awoke this morning, nearer now than when this sermon began, nearer that it has ever been before. The books are opened then to all, a record truly telling what each has done, both great and small, when he on earth was dwelling, and every heart be clearly seen, and all be known as they have been in thoughts and words and actions. Then woe to those who scorned the Lord and sought but carnal pleasures, who here despised His precious Word and loved their earthly treasures! With shame and trembling they shall stand and at the judge's stern command to Satan be delivered.

4 Yes, you will be judged on works. But this false notion that all you need to do is get your good deeds to outweigh your wickedness and you'll be fine is as eternally dangerous as it is wrong. But this way of thinking is perilously pervasive. When someone dies, what are your first thoughts? You wonder, was he a good person? Rubbish. If he were a good person, he wouldn't have died. The wages of sin is death. Only sinners die. Even among Christians this way of thinking, thinking like sinners prefer to think, thinking like the unbelieving world, is pervasive. But you are not left to your own thoughts. In order to guard against this way of thinking, in order not to think that you might have the ability to make yourself

worthy of the free gift of eternal life, God gives you His Word. Everything else passes away. The Word of the Lord endures forever. So your whole life long God is catechizing you, teaching you in the classroom of repentance and forgiveness not to esteem yourself worthy but to trust in Christ completely. Unlike other types of instruction, where the goal is knowledge, the goal of catechesis is faith in Jesus, to turn you from confidence in yourself to filial trust in Jesus for forgiveness and mercy. Your whole life you are a catechumen, taught by God from font to funeral, toward faith in Jesus.

5 Make no mistake, the sheep and goats are judged based on works. After separating the sheep from the goats, Christ the Judge commends or condemns each based on their works. To the sheep, He says, "Come you who are blessed by 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 welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." And the sheep respond "Us? When?" They know of no such works that the Judge should esteem so highly. "Whatever you did to the least of these my brethren," Jesus answers, "you did to me." Then to the goats, He will declare, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal 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 welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." The goats had believed themselves to be good people, good enough to earn eternal dwelling with God, based on their list of good works.

6 In the end, everyone gets what he's trusting in. The sheep had no list of works they trusted in. They knew their good works were incomplete and altogether outweighed by their sins. So trusting completely in Christ and His merit, they receive credit for all His righteousness and for none of their sins. The goats trust in their works, in themselves. And when the Judge returns, all they have are those works. If you want to be judged on your works, the Judge will give you what you want, but you will be found altogether lacking.

7 Before He will come as the Righteous Judge, Jesus came to be judged. The problem with thinking you might make yourself good enough to earn God's grace is not merely that it grossly underestimates the magnitude of your sin, but that it underestimates the precious gift God gives you in Jesus. Your savior paid the debt you owe, and for your sin was smitten. Within the Book of Life, for His sake, your name has now been written. You need not doubt, for you are free, and Satan cannot threaten; there is no condemnation. Goats cannot make themselves sheep. But they can be reborn as sheep. All of us who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and paid for them with His suffering and death. Jesus doesn't call you to be more sheep-like. He makes you a sheep. He makes you a saint by taking your place as a sinner. He gives you His place, the place of the only sinless Sheep ever. Good works are the result of salvation, not the cause of salvation. Those saved are set free from having to earn God's favor with their works. And so they may freely do the good works God has prepared in advance for them to do, confidently knowing that they will not be judged on their own imperfect works but on Christ's perfect, complete work. They are free from having to serve God with their works in order to serve their neighbor with their works.

8 If you are in Christ, your works toward your neighbor are perfect and complete because His work is perfect and complete. Don't look at your works or esteem them. Look to Jesus and trust in His work. This sets you free from having to compose a list of your own works. The list is already complete. Even though you don't know of your good works, Jesus does. As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to Him. The question is not whether you'll be judged based on works, but rather on whose works will you be judged. Goats are judged on their own works and damned; sheep are judged on the work of the Lamb of God and declared righteous. The Lord who will come as the Righteous Judge offers you all His righteous works in exchange for all your sin.

9 The Day is surely drawing near. Take heart. The Day of your deliverance, your vindication, the Day when your good works will finally be revealed to you, is drawing near. It is so near that you can almost touch it, almost taste it. Indeed, you can. The Day when Christ returns to gather His elect breaks into this day at the Lord's Altar. There, the blood shed to forgive your sins is given to you to drink for forgiveness. Christ who will come as Judge tomorrow comes today in His Body and Blood to prepare you for that day, to get you used to His presence by meeting you at the Altar, to preserve you in His grace until that day. Come, beloved, you blessed by the Father, inherit the kingdom by eating the Body and drinking the Blood of the King, the heir. The Day is surely drawing near. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer