

The Second-Last Sunday in the Church Year, A ✕ D 2009

Matthew 25:31-46 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ 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.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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

1 The last three weeks before Advent compose a season designed to call your attention to the coming Day of the Lord's return. That Day is surely drawing near. It is nearer today than it has ever been. This little season at the end of each Church Year is designed to remind you of how soon that Day is, to call you to remain in the fellowship of the saints, receiving the forgiveness of sins. In this short season, the Church prays the prayer of all the faithful: Come, Lord Jesus.

2 Hearing the Gospel reading for this week, some things are certain. Jesus will return. He will come in glory, surrounded by angels, to sit upon His throne and reign forever. He will come as King and as Judge. Fright shall banish idle mirth, and flames on flames shall ravage earth. The judgment will be as swift as it is severe. He will

separate people as a shepherd separates his sheep, placing the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. This also is certain: He will judge them based on works. The sheep will be eternally blessed; the goats eternally punished. He will give the sheep the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. And the goats will be sent to the eternal fire, which was prepared not for them but for the devil and his angels, but which the goats, by their works, preferred over what would have been prepared for them.

3 Both sheep and goats are surprised—not both by the verdict, but at least by the Judge’s account of their works. To the sheep, Jesus will declare, “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 will respond, “Huh? When did we do any of that?” To the goats, Jesus will say the opposite, “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.” Like the sheep, the goats are surprised. They had a much longer list of their own good works, which the Judge does not seem to give them credit for, “Huh? When did we fail to do those things?” “Truly, I say to you whatever you did to one of the least of these my brothers, you did to me.” You may not neglect to help someone in need—ever—and rely on your works. .

4 But where is the Judge's compassion? He doesn't even give the goats time to explain. They had works, but He doesn't even weigh these against the lack of good works and the wicked works he counts against them. And where is the judge's sense of political correctness? Doesn't He know any talk of eternal fire is passé? He needs to learn a little tolerance. Everyone who has faith—whether faith in Buddha, Allah, Dr. Phil, or the Triune God—is basically on the same path. What counts is not what you believe but how sincerely you believe it, right? God knows what's in the goats' hearts. Surely He'll give them the benefit of the doubt. After all, who can blame the goats for being goats? They were born that way. How can a goat be a sheep? How is this eternal verdict even fair? Repent. That's not the height of unfairness.

5 Sheep go to heaven; goats go to hell. The goats represent those people whom the Lord Jesus will cast into hell when He returns on that Last Day, the Day surely drawing near. It's not unfair for God to punish sin or sinners, even if they were born that way. Everyone is born sinful, rebellious against God, deserving to be cast into the eternal fire of hell. That's as fair as fair can get. What would be unfair is if a sheep were lumped in among the goats and got what the goats deserved.

6 Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Behold the only One ever born a sheep. Before He came to separate sheep from goats, saints from sinners, Jesus took His place as a sheep among goats, as the Holy One among sinful humanity. Before He will come as the Righteous Judge, Jesus came to be judged. Your savior paid the debt you owe, and for your sin was smitten. 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.

7 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.

8 What Jesus calls you to do for the least of these, His brothers, He has already done for you. Hungry? The Lord gives you His Body. Thirsty? Take; drink, the Blood of Jesus shed for you. A Gentile foreigner with no rightful claim to what Jesus came to deliver? There is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ. Naked? Wear the righteousness of Jesus. Sick? Those who are well have no need of a Physician, but only the sick. In the prison of sin? If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

9 The day of the Lord's return is the day Christians anticipate the most. It is a day for comfort, not fear, for consolation, not terror. Jesus comes to you today in His Body and Blood. These He gives you to forgive your sins. As certainly as He comes to you

for your benefit today, He will come for your eternal benefit on that Day. The Day is surely drawing near. Amen, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

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

Soli Deo Gloria
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