

Me Or God? Ezekiel 34:11-16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I was at a fund-raiser this last fall, and someone noticed my clerical collar, and asked me, “Can you help settle an argument for us here, what things must we do to live a good Christian life?”

I replied, “Believe in Jesus Christ.”

They replied, “We all believe in Jesus, Pastor. But what we want to know, is how do we *live* a good Christian life?”

I told you, “Believe in Jesus Christ.”

“Yes, pastor, but how do we live a good Christian life?”

“What do you mean, I don’t understand your question?”

Our friend responds, “We already believe in Jesus. What we want to know is, what must we do, so that we can be sure to go to heaven? What must we do to live a good Christian life?”

It is so sad how many who claim to be Christian are stuck in just such false belief, that God will grant us heaven based upon what *we* contribute to our salvation – as if there is anything that we can do. And then there are those who think that their faith is their own work – God does His part, and it is our part to make a decision for Jesus, or as if we somehow can choose to believe in Him.

If such beliefs in our own works of righteousness, or work of believing is followed, it shall surely lead instead, to eternal destruction.

Some people believe that their attending worship is their service to God, their attendance is a good work *earning God’s grace*. Such people believe that their worship gives worth to God, that their worship is gaining them points with God. God doesn’t need anything from you to give Him worth. In fact, too often, our worship is an offense to God. We daydream during the sermon – or get upset about something the pastor says at the beginning and tune out the rest. Sometimes, instead of paying attention to the prayer of the church, we are having our own prayer, Please Lord, let this be the last petition and this long boring prayer can be done.” And, instead of pondering the gift of forgiveness given with Christ’s body and blood, you notice Helga Herplescheimer go up for communion – and you miss the rest of the blessings God bestows during the rest of the service because your mind is scheming how you can get out of the building without talking to her.

I could have told our friends, that the way to lead a good Christian life is to follow the commandments – to keep them in thought, word, and deed. I could have suggested things they could do to show their love for God, and their love for their neighbor. And you know what, those are indeed things we should be doing – in fact God commands us to be doing such things.

If we want to trust in our works though, God’s command is for us to be perfect.

Thankfully, our salvation is not purchased by our deeds – and our faith is not by our choice or work. Yes, we are to do good deeds, and if we are not doing them, we are sinning. But when we begin to trust in our works, it can become problematic in a couple ways.

If I had told our friends at the fund-raiser that their works help gain heaven, and informed them that God requires perfection, they might have come to realize how tough it is, impossible really. Then they might have become depressed, and depressed, they might even abandon the faith.

Or, in an attempt to justify themselves before God by their works, they could have compared themselves to others. Compared to the right people, they might have thought they were doing a pretty good job, believing that they were indeed rising up the ladder to heaven.

There is no salvation by our works. Yes, we are indeed supposed to keep God's commandments. We are to love God! We are to desire to hear His Word; know our need to have Him feed us with Word and Sacrament, which is why we attend services in His house regularly; use His name in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving; and avoid using His name when we are not speaking to Him.

And yes, we should love our neighbor, even the ones who have hurt us or abused us. We are to care for our neighbors who cannot care for themselves. We are, in all things, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The very sad truth is that we fail at every turn – either to love God, or love our neighbor. We are like sheep who love to wander. We love to wander away from God, from His Word, and from His will. Although, we like to think that we do not.

And there is no way that we would search out God and come to faith in Him. We are born spiritually, blind, deaf, dumb, and dead in trespasses and sins. Dead men do not make any decisions, they do not search for anything. According to our sinful flesh, we really do not want to have anything to do with God – at least not on His terms, according to His will and commands.

That is why I love today's readings for Misericordias Domine. By the way, that is simply a Latin term that means "the merciful heart of the Lord." And it is so true, God's heart is so merciful to us, and that is evident in all our Scripture lessons today.

In our Gospel, Jesus reminds us that He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. He lays down His life unto death upon the cross and purchases forgiveness for our sinfulness and all our sinful failures to do as He desires. And He purchases our forgiveness with His own precious blood shed for you and me – the sheep that love to wander.

In our Epistle, we are reminded of the fact that Jesus bore our sins in His body on the tree of the cross, and that by His wounds we are healed – forgiven. Living in that forgiveness, we now live a life of love in His righteousness.

But our Old Testament lesson is truly amazing.

It is amazing how the merciful heart of our Lord is so vibrantly exposed, and brilliantly expressed in our *Old Testament* text from Ezekiel.

There are fifteen times in these 6 verses in which God tells the people what **He will do** for His people. He also says that He will destroy the fat and the strong, which is how God declares that He will destroy those who rely upon themselves, who feel they are good enough on their own, and who prey upon others.

In the meantime, 15 times He states what **He** will do for His people. He tells how He will be the one doing everything. Were you listening? Hear them again:

I myself will search for my sheep,

I will seek them out,

As a shepherd seeks out his flock, so ***will I*** seek out my sheep,

I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered,

I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries,

I will bring them into their own land.

I will feed them on the mountains of Israel,

I will feed them with good pasture,

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,

I myself will make them lie down,

I will seek the lost,
I will bring back the strayed,
I will bind up the injured,
I will strengthen the weak,
I will feed them in justice.

Today is also often called Good Shepherd Sunday, and you can hear why. We are the sheep who love to wander in the wilderness of the world, and wallow in the decadence of sin. But thanks be to our God, for we the sheep would never choose Him as our Shepherd. Thankfully, He chooses us as His sheep. He sought us out because we were running from Him. So, He gathers us in His arms and brings us to Himself in the waters of baptism. He has brought us from numerous places to be His people – from Embarrass, Algoma, Detroit, Connecticut, California, from foreign lands, and places.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus connects Himself with this text. In our text, He is the one foretold to do all these things. And so, Jesus does them. He lays down His life for His sheep on the cross and victoriously rose on the third day.

It is Jesus who comes to us in Word and Sacrament. He has brought us to His house, His land, His mountain, His pasture – to this very place – where may makes us lie down, to bind up the wounds of our sinfulness with His Word, to strengthen us to live in His grace, and to feed us unto life everlasting with His precious body and blood.

“I will do it,” declares the Lord, and He does. Our text is an Old Testament prophecy proclaiming the work of God’s Son, the Good Shepherd. It declares to us the merciful heart of God who does not leave us to our own devices, but comes to us and saves us. Thanks be to God, for He has done, and is doing it all – for us – in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.