

Who Are The Righteous? Matthew 25:31-46

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

Sheep to the right, goats to the left. Those on the right are blessed by the Father, inheriting the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Those on the left are cursed, cast into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels. The very last sentence of our text has Jesus declaring, “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The righteous go into eternal life, that sounds nice. But who are the righteous? Let’s face that is what each of us wants to know. I do not want to be one of those sent away to eternal punishment, and I am sure that you do not want to be either. In fact, I think the idea of eternal punishment is one that terrifies most people. The righteous however go to eternal life, definitely far more appealing.

So, who are the righteous? That is an interesting question, for most people think that they have an answer to that question by how they *interpret* this text. I say *interpret this text* because the text needs no interpretation to be very clear.

Many claim upon a first glance, that the righteous are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, and visit those in sick and in prison. In fact, I have heard and read my share of sermons where the preacher is encouraging people to do these things. They claim that those who do such things are those who will earn eternal life, and those who do not do those things will not. So, they encourage people to go out and do this, in order that if even now they are goats, they can then become sheep before the last day.

Sheep do not change into goats!

And, we do not gain eternal life by what we do. As we heard in the Epistle lesson for Reformation Sunday two weeks ago, we know that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Rom. 3:28) It is also true, as we learn in the letter to the Hebrews, that “without faith it is impossible to please Him (God).” (Heb. 11:6)

Looking at our text, what is the difference between sheep and goats? Who are the righteous? At first glance, it *appears* that the sheep had earned a place in eternal life, that they were sheep because they had done all these things. But if you simply read the text closely, it is apparent that they did not even realize they had done those things. Our text reads: On that day they will respond saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

On the other hand, if you look at those on the left, they thought they had done all these things. They pointed at their works, as if what they had done had earned them a place in eternal life. They believed they had done all that was necessary – they pointed out that they had always done these

thing, “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?”

Either way, it has nothing to do what either group had or had not done. Listen to the King’s words to the sheep on His right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, *inherit* the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Let’s face it, when it comes to what we have done, no one has earned, nor can they earn, eternal life. How have we treated our neighbor the last few weeks leading up to this election? I am not going to point at sides, but even friends treated friends poorly and called one another names when it was discovered who they might vote for.

When we look at the things we do, we discover that we do not love God with all our hearts, minds, and strength. We certainly do not trust Him above all things – I heard people on both sides of the presidential election bemoan the fact that if their opposing candidate is elected the world would end.

We certainly do not love our neighbor as ourselves, caring for them in their need. Nor do we treat all our neighbors as we’d like to be treated.

Who are the righteous? To the sheep Jesus says, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ From the foundation of the world God knew who the righteous would be. They had not yet been born, much less done anything good for their neighbor at the time God laid the foundation of the world.

But the thinking that people earn eternal life is the interpretation people expect to find in the Scriptures, it is what people expect Christianity is about. It was no different in Jesus day, they believed that it was all about what they do – how they live their lives – that God will reward them. It is why Jesus had confronted the people before, “your search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life.” In other words, many are those who think that the Scriptures are the handbook to living rightly, and instruction manual on how to earn heaven. But Jesus continues, “but these are they which testify about me.” (John 5:39)

So, as that last day draws near, as the return of Christ looks imminent, in what will you put your faith? Will you put it in your works? Will you trust that you’ve loved God enough? Will you trust that you loved your neighbor enough? Will you trust that you’ve loved your spouse, your children, your family and friends enough? Will you trust that you’ve loved your enemies, just as Christ has said that you should? Will you take confidence that you fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, or visited the sick and imprisoned?

And do not think these are things you do not need to be doing, you do! The command of Christ is that you are to be doing all these things for your neighbor, so let us do good while we yet have time.

And that is exactly what happens in you. You see, for by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, faith is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one

may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

You hungered for righteousness, so Christ feeds you – the very flesh that was pierced upon the cross is holy food for your mouth.

In your thirst, Christ comes to give you to drink of His own blood – the very blood that was poured out for the forgiveness of sins is poured into your mouth to forgive and make you holy. It was Christ who sought you out. Though a stranger, He made you His own, and brought you into His house, washed you and clothed you in the waters of baptism with His own righteousness.

He visits you even though the sickness of your sin pervades you, even though you are in a prison of guilt by your own making, your sinfulness darker than the deepest prison cell – and He speaks to your words of comfort, words forgiveness and life, words coming from the towering work of salvation He accomplished when His innocence was crucified.

Yes, you could look to your own works, trust them, rely upon them, point to them. There is never enough! In your works, you would always have doubts.

Who are the righteous? The righteous are those who trust Christ. They live in Christ and Christ lives in them. And, as Christ lives in them, His good works are theirs. They do not go out *intending* to do them, but they do them just the same, for Christ does them in and through those who are in Christ.

So dear friends, do not look at your works, but look to Christ who has clothed you. Come to Him who feeds you and gives you to drink. Listen to the one who speaks to you in the prison of your own making. There is your confidence that you are righteous, for He has made you so. Amen.