

The Second Last Sunday of the Church Year
Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus warns us today about the final judgment so that we might do the works of God while it is day.

I hope you notice that the separation of sheep and goats, or believers and unbelievers, respectively, happens before Jesus makes any pronouncements. They are separated based on one thing: belief in Jesus. As Jesus says when He is talking with Nicodemus:

“Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (John 3:16)

Belief in Jesus is the only difference between the sheep and goats when it comes to salvation. Belief is not a work; not really. Jesus says later in John that “this is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” In that sense, belief is a work. But Jesus is really talking about the fruits of that belief. If you wear Minnesota Vikings jerseys and are decked out in purple, I would have a hard time believing you’re a Green Bay Packer’s fan. Likewise, if you live a life of vice and the unending pursuit of pleasure, never darkening the door of the church, I have a hard time believing you’re a Christian. This is not to say that Christians are perfect. You and I know better. But it is to say that the Christian strives to live as a Christian. This means they faithfully go to church to hear His word and receive His gifts offering back praise and thanksgiving. This means they strive to serve their neighbor with the love of Christ.

They do this because they believe. That is, they have been convinced by the Holy Spirit through the means of the Word of God that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God who is coming back to judge both the living and the dead. In this sense, belief is not a work.

The Christian believes and then acts on that belief. This is what God says in our favorite verses here at Grace:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not 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, that we should walk in them.”
(Ephesians 2:8-10)

Here I am equating belief and salvation. This means that you wouldn't believe without it being a gift of God. The question is not why some believe, and some don't believe, but why do any believe at all? Our original sin blinds us to who God is and what He has done and continues to do for us. But God gives us the gift of faith and the Holy Spirit in our Baptism so that we do believe in Him. This is why we get so offended when some Christians profess that Baptism is their work. Faith, or belief, is solely the gift of God. And He delivers this amazing gift in our Baptism. That's why it's so comforting for us to daily remember our Baptism. Satan, the world, and even our old flesh fights against our belief. Yet, we know that God acted on us in our Baptism and have confidence that no matter how small or little our belief is, God's action is mightier than ours and will do what He wants, which is our salvation.

And because we believe, we do good works. This is how the Augsburg Confession talks about Good Works:

¹ Our teachers are falsely accused of forbidding good works. ² Their published writings on the Ten Commandments, and other similar writings, bear witness that they have usefully taught about all estates and duties of life. They have taught well what is pleasing to God in every station and vocation in life. ³ Before now, preachers taught very little about these things. They encouraged only childish and needless works, such as particular holy days, particular fasts, brotherhoods, pilgrimages, services in honor of the saints, the use of rosaries, monasticism, and such things.

We were accused of forbidding good works because we rightly place the emphasis on salvation, or belief, on faith alone through grace alone for the sake of Christ alone. When you make this the chief thing, everything else falls into place, including good works. Good works follow faith. These good works are informed by the Ten Commandments which is God's good and gracious will for our lives. The will of God is communicated through the Ten Commandments and worked out in our various stations and spheres in life.

The concept of stations in life is not a popular thing these days. It is true that no one is better than you because all men, women, and children have been created by God and are redeemed by Jesus' work in His life and on the cross. But in this life, there are people over you and under you. God has created stations so that justice and peace might prevail in our day to day lives. Since men are sinners, we see injustice and strife in our day to day lives, but this is not God's design. Hard-hearted, stiff-necked, rebellious people who thumb their nose at God and His good order will be punished eternally. They will not get away with any injustice or strife they have caused.

There are also spheres in life or you may have heard of them as the three estates. God created the family, the church, and the economy which includes commerce and government for us to operate in. These are pre-fall establishments that govern our daily lives. You might say that Adam was the first husband, pastor, and governor. He has these positions so that he and Eve might "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over [all living things]." (Gen 1:28) These spheres still exist so that we might do the same.

Stations and spheres are why the "Table of Duties" in the small catechism is set up the way it is. It lists Scriptures that cover our duties in every station and sphere in life. The "Table of Duties" is probably the most neglected portion of the Small Catechism by both pastor and parent alike and that is a shame.

It shows how the Ten Commandments are carried out in our day to day lives. It also capture something that Luther rediscovered about good works. Good works are normal day to day things and not huge list of so-called extraordinary works the medieval church had created.

So, what separates works done by Christians and non-Christians? After all, many caring and responsible non-Christians love their spouse for a lifetime and raise their kids decently and in order and are generally good neighbors. The Ten Commandments, after all, are written on our hearts. And even when they are obscured by our original sin, most people have a general sense of what they are. But only those works done in faith are pleasing to God in heaven. As Hebrews says,

“Without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Hebrews 11:6a)

Only works done in faith are pleasing to God. And these works look really ordinary. It’s a dad working his tail off to provide for his family. It’s a mom working her fingers to the bone caring for husband, home, and kids. It’s feeding and showing hospitality to even the smallest of the children of God. It’s visiting the sick and those in jail. It’s caring for those who cannot care for themselves. Just like Jesus says in our Gospel reading today.

Did you notice how the believer’s are seemingly unaware of these good works? They reply, “when did we do these things, Lord?” They were just living their lives in the light of a living trust in Jesus, their Lord. They don’t do good works to earn anything from God, but they do them because of all that God has done for them in rescuing them from sin, death, and the devil. And God uses that for the good of the world and your neighbor. This is what Jesus means when he says that you are to be salt and light for the world. (Matthew 5) You go out and confess Christ with your lips and show the love of Christ to your neighbor, especially those of the household of faith. And Jesus says they will know you because of your love for one another. (John 13:35)

And this is also one of the ways Jesus comes to people.

He sends pastors out to proclaim His Word and administer His Sacraments for the forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith. He gives children parents so that they are raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord. He establishes government so that justice and peace may prevail. The church has led the way in a lot of this. The reason we have hospitals, soup kitchens, and adoption agencies is because of Christians.

And when you are sick in the hospital, He visits you when your pastor or other Christians come to you.

When you visit someone who is sick or hurting, you act as Christ to them. When you do good works for your neighbor, you act as Christ to them. And Jesus will praise you for the good works that you do in faith. For funerals I attempt to convey the life of Christ in the deceased Christian. This is not always easy because there is so much I don't know, even if I knew that beloved disciple of Christ well. But when Christ returns, we will all see the life of Christ in each other. We will see how we acted as Christ to others and how others acted as Christ to us.

The final judgment is not something scary for the Christian. It is coming. It is sure and certain. But you are judged already. You are a sheep who is covered in the blood of the Good Shepherd. You will be separated to the right of Jesus as His beloved Sheep. And you will hear the amazing words of Jesus:

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34)

In Jesus' name. Amen.