

Who Are the Least of These My Brothers?

Matthew 25:31-46

The Last Sunday of the Church Year, November 26, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

The Lord teaches what the Lord has always taught.

The Lord has always taught that He is the judge. John the Baptist, during his ministry, announced that the coming One would clear His threshing floor. His winnowing fork was in His hand. That is a fancy prophetic way of saying that Jesus is the judge. He decides who is gathered into His barn and who is burned with unquenchable fire.

The Lord announced to His apostles that He would come on the clouds of heaven together with the holy angels and pronounce judgment on the Last Day. The Lord announced to the chief priest at the Lord's trial that He would come with power and great glory and pronounce judgment. The Lord predicted His coming immediately prior to the parable that He told you today.

And so the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats teaches what the Lord has always taught. It teaches that He is the judge. He sits on the throne of His glory. He separates the righteous from the wicked.

And the separation of the righteous from the wicked is something that the Lord has always taught. John the Baptist, during His ministry, spoke of people who were baptized by the Holy Spirit and people who were baptized with fire. He spoke of those whom Jesus would gather into His barn and those whom Jesus would burn with unquenchable fire. Jesus Himself made a distinction between the righteous and the wicked when He told the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat. The weeds are the sons of the evil one. The wheat is the sons of the kingdom. He made a distinction between those who are gathered into the barn and those who are burned with unquenchable fire. In the Parable of the Net the Lord makes a distinction between the good fish and the bad fish. Both are caught in the net, but the good fish are sorted into containers and the bad fish are thrown away as it will be on the Last Day when the wicked are cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And so the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats does not say anything different. In His judgment the Lord acts like a shepherd. He separates the righteous from the wicked in the same manner that a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Those who are designated sheep are placed on His right hand. Those who are designated goats are placed at His left hand. The sheep are welcomed into the kingdom which had been prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The goats are banished into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. It does not matter that the fire was not prepared for those who are designated goats, but rather for the devil and his angels. Those who are designated goats are going to the eternal fire anyway.

And there is an eternal fire. There is an outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. There is a hell. And there is an eternal kingdom prepared for humanity from the foundation of the world. There is an everlasting life in the new heaven and the new earth. Some people call it heaven, but that introduces a confusion that need not exist. Simply put there is everlasting damnation and there is everlasting salvation. The Lord teaches what the Lord has always taught.

The problem is with why the sheep are sheep and why the goats are goats.

Does this Parable of the Sheep and the Goats bother anybody? Does it bother people that the reason why the righteous judge welcomes the sheep into the eternal kingdom is because He was hungry

and they fed Him? He was thirsty and they gave Him a drink. He was sick and they visited Him. He was naked and they clothed Him.

And it gets even worse with the goats. The goats are consigned to everlasting damnation because of what they failed to do. He was hungry and the goats did not feed Him. He was thirsty and the goats did not give Him something to drink. He was naked and the goats did not clothe Him. He was in prison and sick and the goats did not come to Him.

The distinction that this parable makes between the saved and the damned is works! Those who are designated sheep are designated so by the righteous judge because of what they did. Those who are designated goats are designated so by the righteous judge because of what they failed to do.

This does not sound like something that Jesus has taught from the beginning. It certainly does not sound like what the Lord taught through His apostles. Through His apostles the righteous judge has taught us that we are saved by grace through faith apart from works of Law. He has taught us that we are justified by faith and not by works of the Law for by works of the Law no one will be justified in His sight. Through His apostle the righteous judge has taught us that we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. He has taught us that He saved us not because of things that we had done in righteousness but because of His mercy. He saved us by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ, our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

What gives?

Does the Lord teach grace through His apostles and yet when dealing with Him personally He teaches works? Would the Lord engage in a contradiction like that one? Is this some kind of paradox that we are supposed to resolve? I had a Roman priest accuse me over the phone that we Lutherans had taken Matthew 25 out of the Bible while we claim to be sola scriptura. What he meant by that was that he accused us of ignoring the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats because no matter how you slice this parable it sounds like works to me.

Are we to say that the parable carries more weight than the epistles? After all in the Divine Service we stand for the Gospel reading and not for the epistle. Are the Gospels weighted more than the epistles?

No. Both the Gospels and the Epistles are written by apostles. So with the Gospels even though you are dealing with first person quotations from the Lord Himself which is why we stand during the Gospel readings, it is still an apostle who recorded those first person quotations. Thus when you read a Gospel you are dealing with an apostle. When you read an epistle you are dealing with an apostle. Which means that even though the epistles do not contain many first person direct quotations of our Lord they are nevertheless the viva vox, the living voice, of Jesus speaking to us.

So a person cannot get out of the problem of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats by privileging the Gospels above the epistles and certainly not the other way around.

Some people have pointed out that the sheep and the goats seem surprised in the parable. The sheep ask the righteous judge, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You or thirsty and give You a drink? When did we see You naked and clothe You? When did we see You in prison and come to You or sick and visit You?"

Equally the goats seem surprised. "Lord, when did we see You hungering or thirsting or naked or in prison or sick and did not minister to You?"

Some have said that the reason that the sheep were surprised is because they did not account their own good deeds to be good deeds. They did not think that they were doing anything righteous by

doing those things for their neighbors. They had faith in Jesus Christ and since good works always flow from faith they did good works, but since faith does not rely on good works for salvation, faith is surprised in the judgment when good works are attributed to it. Faith was not paying attention to its works. Faith was paying attention to its Lord.

I must admit that in the past I have preached this parable in just this way. But there is a problem with reading the parable this way. If the Lord really intended for us to be surprised on the Day of Judgment by our good deeds, then He would have done better by not telling us the parable at all. In fact I was in a county jail just recently and while I was waiting to be admitted to see an inmate I saw a plaque sitting next to the booth where you speak to the person who lets you in. The plaque was given by a prison ministry to the jail. On the plaque it stood written, "I was in prison and you came to Me." It was a quotation of this parable. That means that the Christians who participated in that ministry not only knew they were doing a good deed by going to the prison to minister the Word of God to the inmates, they did so precisely because they had read this parable.

If the Lord really wanted prison ministries or any other ministry that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, etc. to be surprised by their good deeds, then He should not have told the parable.

Now I have either accused the Lord of wrongdoing when He tells a parable in which case I might find myself at His left hand in the judgment or it was not the Lord's intention for us to be surprised by the righteous things that we had done when He told the parable. Now understand we will be surprised by some things that the righteous judge attributes to us for righteousness on that final day, but that is not the point of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

So how do we resolve this problem of the parable when it really sounds like the Lord is teaching us salvation by works?

The issue revolves around the meaning of the word "brothers." Our Lord only uses the word once in the entire parable, but everything hangs on that word. That may be why He uses the word only once: to call our attention to it.

When the sheep express their surprise because they did not realize that they were feeding, clothing, visiting, and caring for the righteous judge, the righteous judge responds by saying, "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it to Me."

It is commonly assumed that when the Lord says, "Least of these brothers of Mine," He means your neighbor. If the righteous judge is referring to our neighbor then you must conclude that in this parable He is teaching salvation by works. There is no way around it. You had better feed your hungry neighbor, give your thirsty neighbor something to drink, clothe your naked neighbor, and start a jail ministry here at Immanuel or we are all going to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and His angels.

I must admit that I have preached and interpreted the parable in this fashion and then found myself with the problem of how this is not works righteousness. But if you take your neighbor as the referent to the Lord's words, "least of these My brothers," then you have to embrace works righteousness. There is no way out of the problem.

But the Lord has taught, what the Lord has always taught. From the beginning of the Gospel including the preaching of John the Baptist, the Lord has taught what the Lord has always taught. He has told you who His brothers are. You do not need to "interpret" who His brothers are. You do not need to figure it out. He has told you who His brothers are.

The Lord had blood brothers, you know. Their names are James, Joseph, Simon, and Judah. Mark's Gospel records their names for us. Our Lord also has blood sisters, but the Gospels do not record

their names. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this incident where our Lord's mother and His brothers show up to a house where He is preaching. Some of the Gospels do not record why they showed up. Mark's Gospel records that His mother and brothers think that He is out of His mind. They are there to collect Him and take Him to the ancient equivalent of an insane asylum which probably meant taking Him home and secluding Him from public appearances.

When our Lord's mother and brothers show up, they cannot get to Him because of the crowd so they pass a message through the crowd to Jesus indicating that they are there and that they want to see Him. Then Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this, when the message gets to Jesus, Jesus tells the man who told Him the message, "Who are My brothers? And who is My mother?" Then our Lord points to His disciples and says, "Anyone who does the will of My Father is My brother and sister and mother." None of the Gospels record that our Lord ever bothered to go out and see His family. As far as He is concerned His disciples are family.

In Matthew's Gospel at the end our Lord gives His great commission as it is called. He tells His apostles to make disciples of all of the nations by baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and to teach them everything that He had commanded for them. Therefore a disciple is anyone who is baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and who is taught everything that Jesus has commanded. Anyone who is a disciple is also a brother of Jesus.

Therefore the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is getting at this: the Lord is saying to the sheep that whatever you did for the least of these My disciples, you did it for Me. It is not that the goats failed to feed the hungry. The goats may have fed thousands of hungry people. It is not that the goats failed to give drink to the thirsty. The goats may have given drinks to thousands of thirsty people. It is not as though the goats had failed to clothe the naked. The goats may have clothed thousands of naked people. The goats may have visited all kinds of people in prison or who were sick. But if the goats did not do these things for the disciples, they will be consigned to hell anyway. Their works will not save them no matter how many they did.

Now what is so special about the disciples of Jesus that showing them such favor saves you? The disciples of Jesus are the only people on earth who have the Gospel. They are the only people on earth who have the Word of God. They are the only people on earth among whom Jesus dwells because where even only two or three disciples are gathered in His Name there is He in the midst of them. They are the only people on earth who are the abode of the Holy Spirit. They hold the treasure of the Gospel of the free grace of Jesus Christ that He has saved us by His blood which He offered as the atoning sacrifice that takes away our sin.

To feed and give drink and clothe and visit the disciples of Jesus is to show favor to them over other peoples and the only reason that you would do that is because you believe in Jesus. And if you believe in Jesus, then you are saved, and it is not by works lest anyone should boast. To put it another way, in ancient context to do the things that the Lord describes in the judgment of the sheep and the goats is to throw your lot in with the disciples. If you have thrown your lot in with the disciples then you believe in the same Savior that they do.

So when our Lord says, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me," that is the exact same thing as the Lord saying, "Whoever receives a prophet because He is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward." Now note that closely. You do not receive the prophet's reward if you receive the prophet for some other reason other than the fact that he is a prophet. Receiving a prophet out of coercion or because it is socially acceptable or out of a sense of hospitality or politeness will not get you the prophet's reward. The only reception of a prophet that will get you the prophet's reward is if you are receiving the prophet precisely because the prophet is a prophet. And what do

prophet's bear? They bear the word of God. And what does the Word of God say? That Jesus has saved you by His death and resurrection by His grace and not by works.

Thus also the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is also consistent with the words of Jesus, "If anyone receives a righteous person because He is a righteous person, will receive a righteous person's reward. And anyone who gives even a cup of cold water to a little one because the little one is a disciple of Jesus will by no means lose His reward."

The Lord has taught what the Lord has always taught.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.