

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Trinity, November 16, 2008

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HYMNS: 605, 373:1, 604, 610, 298: 1 & 6.

LESSONS: Daniel 7:9-10, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Mark 13: 21-33.

TEXT: Matthew 25: 31-46.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

When Jesus speaks of the end of the world and judgment day that is yet to come – at any moment – in Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, he has also just been talking about a historical event that has come and gone. Less than 40 years after Jesus walked the earth, the city of Jerusalem, which crucified him, was utterly destroyed by the Romans, as recorded in secular history. In these chapters, Jesus was also prophesying about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and he almost intermingles that picture of horrible destruction with the final destruction to occur when he comes to judge the living and the dead. He had promised, after all, in Matthew 16:27 *“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.”* For the believer, that is a promise, for the unbeliever, it is a threat. Today let's look at

THE MOMENT OF JUDGMENT

- 1. The sheep will be separated from the goats when they are gathered before Jesus.**
- 2. The sheep – the believers – will receive the eternal inheritance of the heavenly Father.**
- 3. The goats – the unbelievers – will be cursed forever in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.**

God always knows what we are doing and what we are thinking. Jesus knows. We can hide our wickedness from others but not from God. We can keep our sinful thoughts and words and deeds hidden from our fellow humans, but not from God. To paraphrase an American leader, “You can fool some of the people some of the time, and even all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool God even for a moment!”

God knows what is in our hearts, perhaps better than we ourselves realize. We can even convince ourselves that we are good people – so much better than others – but we can't convince God of that. Scripture is abundantly clear about God knowing what is in our hearts, as we read in Psalm 44:20-21 *“If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?”* And in Jeremiah 17:9-10 *“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.””*

God knows. Jesus, the very Son of God knows. And he will come suddenly, like a thief in the night, to judge the living and the dead. And so, when Christ comes in judgment, as we confess in the Apostolic Creed he WILL DO, He will judge and separate all people according to whether or not they have faith.

In the third article of the creeds, we confess that there is a Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. What makes one a member of that invisible communion, or gathering, is faith in Jesus Christ. I cannot

see faith. You cannot see faith. We can see only fruits of faith. But God – and his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ – can see that faith, and that will be the basis on which he separates believers from unbelievers.

FAITH, not WORKS, saves us eternally, although some have wondered about this picture from Matthew. A superficial reading of this, without knowing how it is that anyone is saved, might lead one to think that it is because of their good deeds that the believers, called “sheep” here, are given their inheritance. You have heard, and you have learned, and maybe even memorized that ***“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** Ephesians 2:8-10

Believe that Jesus paid the price for all your sins and eternal life is yours. Listen to the “gospel in a nutshell”, John 3:16, and especially the next verses: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”*** John 3:16-18

Jesus came to give eternal life, not to condemn. And our text today says ***“Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’”*** But wait. Jesus speaks of “inheritance”. What do you do to deserve an “inheritance”? This kingdom of glory, eternal salvation, is regarded as an inheritance. It isn't something we earn. An inheritance is the opposite of wages. Do we get any inheritance from our parents because we did something to earn it? The very principle of inheriting something denies that idea. Oh, yes, you may have done something nice that lead to an ancestor giving you some prized possession. But the general idea of an inheritance is something that you have because someone decided to give it to you, or because you are the child. And how is it that you are a child of God? God himself tells us in Galatians 3:26 ***“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”***

An inheritance of eternal life is not because of good deeds or works. It is a gift. It is a gift to those in whom the Holy Ghost has worked faith by the word of God. And even though we are not saved by works, we just heard ***“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** The works or deeds of a Christian are fruits of faith. They are motivated by their love of Him who loved them first. When Jesus tells them to come and receive their inheritance, he lists their fruits of faith: ***“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”*** ***“Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’”***

The question: when did we do this or that? shows that they have not counted their works or good deeds. They were not performed to gain honor from men. But they are recorded by God – whose book is complete to the minutest detail. Every generous act will follow these believers into eternity, and as one writer said “gleam like diamonds in the crown which shall adorn them forever”. Jesus considers all deeds done in faith and love as done for him personally. ***“The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”***

This is a fulfillment of Saint Paul's words in Ephesians 1:3: ***“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”***

After announcing and giving the inheritance to those on his right, he turns his wrath to the goats on the left – the unbelievers: Depart. Only they have really previously departed from Him. As prodigal sons and daughters they have lived and celebrated the deeds of the flesh on earth – having no time for Jesus and his father. They will be removed beyond the great gulf spoken of in the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus. They are forever excluded from God’s presence. ***“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’*** Jesus does not say “cursed of my father”, as he said of the believers: ***you who are blessed by my Father.*** Their curse, which includes all of God’s wrath and punishment, has been called down from heaven by themselves upon themselves. They are responsible for their own judgment of eternal damnation. Now they can follow in eternity the one whom they were so anxious and willing to follow in this life. Jesus says: ***‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’***

We don’t have to look far to see such who revel in wickedness, which will, Jesus assures us, call down the anger and eternal punishment of God for rejecting the only way to eternal life – Jesus Christ. But let’s look for a moment at the destruction caused by a hurricane such as Katrina in New Orleans. Now let me say first of all that surely there are those in New Orleans whose property has been damaged and destroyed who are not among those so boldly celebrating debauchery – a word even used in the newspapers – in the city and looking forward to the wickedness of the New Orleans Mardi Gras next spring. But even news stories present the recovery of the city and the places in it which are dedicated to wickedness, and there seem to be many who are only all too anxious to recover a way of life which is totally contrary to the will of God.

In naming the reason for the judgment of damnation on all unbelievers, their evil deeds are not mentioned – they could be listed in abundance, and scripture warns us elsewhere, as in First Corinthians 6:9 ***“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived:”*** and then follows one of those lists of sins that God’s children are to avoid.

Jesus mentions a lack of truly God-pleasing works – and we define good works in a broad sense as EVERYTHING that a believing child of God does in the fear, love, and trust of God. Even a lack of these things is enough to reveal their lack of faith and love for God and their fellow men. They even try to blame Jesus when they will ask ***‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’*** They think and claim that it couldn’t possibly be their fault. They didn’t see Jesus. God had not done enough for them.

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

That moment of judgment will be a moment of joy and happiness for all believers, but a moment of dread for all who rejected Jesus and did not believe that he paid the price for their sins.

We dare not pat ourselves on the back for our God-pleasing lives, but must realize that within our hearts and words and actions are the very things which can separate us from God. Every one of us has that sinful flesh and must penitently turn to God each day to ask forgiveness of the sins of our thoughts, and of our hurtful words and of our thoughtless and sinful deeds.

We pray that we and all of Jesus’ little lambs may truly remain his sheep until he comes in judgment to give us eternal life. Amen.