

## Matthew 25:31-46

After hearing the words of Jesus in our text, you and I may be more inclined to put some change in those red kettles when we shop at Wal-Mart for Christmas. We have been taught, and correctly so, that faith in Christ saves us, not our works. For this is the clear teaching of Scripture. But here in Matthew 25 the works of the sheep are put forth by Jesus as the identifying mark of those who have faith.

It may well be that some who drop their coins in those kettles, do so for the wrong reason. Just as we who drop our envelope in the offering plate, or show kindness to our neighbor, are tempted to believe that our works of charity can't hurt when Jesus comes to separate the sheep from the goats.

But how much does it take for us to be confident? How many coins must we put in to sleep well at night? How much kindness must we show our neighbor in order to feel secure about our place in eternity? This is the great difference between the sheep and the goats. The sheep never have confidence in their works of love. The goats do. The sheep sleep well at night, completely confident of their place in eternity, because the sheep know that Jesus did what it takes, not them. The goats do not have this confidence in Jesus.

Our text bears this out. Jesus tells the sheep, "*Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...for I was hungry and you fed Me, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me...*" But to everything Jesus says they did for Him, the sheep answer, "We did? When? We were not even aware of it!"

When a thief is let off the hook by a judge, the last thing the thief wants to do is to question the judge's verdict. "Keep your mouth shut!" his lawyer will tell him, "Let's get out of here before he changes his mind!" But the sheep do not heed this advice. They talk back to the Judge. "*When did we see you sick or in prison, and visit you?*" they ask Jesus. In heaven's courtroom, Jesus will tell the sheep, "*Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you...*" but the sheep respond with the words, "Are You sure, Jesus? We don't recall feeding You, or visiting You, or giving You clothing to wear. Are You sure we did these things? Because even though You say, 'Come into Your kingdom,' we know that we don't deserve to."

The goats are just the opposite. "*Depart from Me,*" Jesus will tell the goats, "*into the eternal fire...for I was hungry and you did not feed Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.*" And the goats will say, "Are You sure? We do recall doing all these things to You. Are You sure we must depart into the eternal fire? We think we deserve a place in heaven."

The sheep and the goats are not just sheep and goats in the final Judgment; they are sheep and goats now. The way of the sheep in the end, is their way today. And the way of the goats in the end, is their way today. Sheep are not declared to be sheep only after Jesus reviews their way of life after all is said and done. You are Jesus' sheep right now. "*My sheep hear My voice,*" He says, "*And they follow Me.*"

The two go together. Hearing the voice of Jesus results in the sheep becoming His followers. Why do you do the works of faith in your life? Because you hear the voice of Jesus. Your faith is the direct result of Jesus' voice coming to you...with water in your baptism, with bread and wine in the Sacrament, and into your ears as His words are heard. And your works--the very works Jesus will commend you for in the Judgment--flow from the voice of Jesus at work within you.

But despite the works they do, the sheep are very much aware that they are sinful and undeserving. The goats are not. "Are You sure, Jesus?" the sheep will say, "We don't recall doing all these things for You. We surely do not, therefore, deserve a place in heaven on account of our works." This response by the sheep in the Judgment is how the sheep live today. Not proud. Not arrogant. You who are Jesus' sheep do not boast of your works of love. You do not set yourself up on a higher level than others because of your faith. Rather, you confess with all who are Jesus' sheep, "I am a poor, miserable sinner. I do not deserve a place in heaven, but on account of my sin, I deserve a place in the eternal fire."

Sheep do not live their lives counting all the good things they do for God. Sheep are more aware of their failings than their accomplishments. Sheep are more aware of their sinfulness than their righteous deeds. Sheep are always ready to confess their sin rather than point out their good qualities.

This is not the way of the goats. The goats defend themselves in the final Judgment, and so they defend themselves today. They minimize their sins, thinking, "Others are worse than me." They point out the speck in their brother's eye but ignore the log in their own eye. They would rather stand with head held high than kneel before God in humility. They seek God's favor in what they do, and so they have little or no need for Christ and His word of forgiveness.

Jesus knows His sheep, but the goats He does not know. Jesus' words of life are for all sinners--sheep and goats alike. And His sheep are the ones who hear His words and live them.

You do not need to concern yourself, friend, with wondering whether you are a sheep or a goat. Remember your baptism into Christ. He makes you His sheep with His voice, His Word. You are where you need to be--hearing the voice of your Shepherd right here in His house of mercy. You are not a sheep because of how you live. You are a sheep because, "*My sheep hear My voice.*" Your life, your conduct, your giving and charity will flow from Jesus' voice within you.

Friend, Jesus gave this story in Matthew 25 to you not to frighten you, but to comfort you. You have no need to fear the final Judgment. God loves His sheep. He loves you. Jesus died for all--sheep and goats. He died for you on the cross. And you, His sheep, believe this in a heart of faith. Jesus forgives you. All your sin He forgives. All of your unworthiness He forgives.

Those who are sheep live in this forgiveness of Jesus. They do not live in their own works; they live in Christ. The sheep are not sure about their works for Jesus, but they are sure of Jesus' works for them. This is why you have no confidence in yourself and in what you do for God. You have faith. And faith does not look at what it's doing. It looks at what Jesus has done on the cross.

No wonder you, as Jesus' sheep, will tell Him in the final Judgment, "When did we give You food and drink? When did we welcome You and visit You and clothe You?" As sheep, your faith does not see that you do all these things for Jesus. Your faith sees Jesus doing all these things for you. Jesus gives you food and drink in His Sacrament. Jesus clothes you with His holiness in your baptism. Jesus welcomes you with nail-pierced hands. Jesus visits you in the prison-house of your sins, and He forgives you.

As a sheep, you look to the works of Jesus, and you listen to His voice. When your Shepherd says, "Come to Me and drink," you come. When He says, "Come to My Table and eat," you come. You come because you are Jesus' sheep. "*My sheep hear My voice, and they follow Me.*" This same Jesus who invites you today with the words, "Come to Me," will say to you on the Last Day, "*Come, you who are blessed by My Father...Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you.*" Amen.