

Matthew 16:27

The Christian faith is believed in the heart, but it is not lived there. What we believe as Christians translates into action. A good tree produces good fruit. If it does not produce good fruit, it is not a good tree. And so we hear Jesus say in Matthew 16: *“For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay each person according to what he has done.”* This is in Scripture? These words are from the mouth of Jesus? Yes. Listen also to His apostle in 2 Corinthians 5: *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*

This is not contrary to what we have been taught all our lives--that we are saved not on the basis of our good works, but by grace through faith in Christ. In the one case, we are looking at the tree; in the other, we are looking at the fruits.

You do not say that an apple tree is an apple tree because of the apples it produces. Rather, you say it produces apples because it is an apple tree. You are Christians not because you do good works. You are Christians because you believe in Christ Jesus within your heart. But because you, thus, are a good tree, the fruits of faith will appear on your branches. You are saved not because of those fruits of good works, but because of your faith. But how dare anyone claim to have faith if those fruits are lacking in his life.

I told the Bible Class last week about a man I know who has no real desire for Jesus and His church. And this man is currently living sinfully with his girlfriend. So he is producing bad fruit on his tree. I have not told him that it is wrong for him to live with his girlfriend. Why should I? Why should I try to make his fruit good when his tree is bad? Producing good fruit does not make a tree good. A man who stops sinful behaviors does not, thereby, become a Christian. Fruits do not produce faith; faith produces fruits. It is only the good tree, the man who is joined by faith to Christ who can, as a result, produce true good works--those fruits that flow from faith.

What my friend needs is not to stop living in sin with his girlfriend, but to start hearing the Word of God in church. Through the Law and the Gospel, God can make him into a good tree, having faith in his heart. And because he then has faith as a good tree, he will want to stop his sinful living and will begin to bear good fruit in his life.

Now if you check the fruit on my branches, you will spot some fruits that should not be there. You and I are not perfect trees. The Old Adam in us puts out fruit that is ugly, distasteful, and which needs to be removed from our branches. And so we return to our baptism daily through repentance. Good trees do not want bad fruit on their branches. And so we confess our sins and ask God to remove those sins from our life. And through His word of forgiveness; through the faithful eating and drinking of His Sacrament, God does just that. He cuts away those ugly fruits and strengthens the good fruit on our branches.

Jesus says in our text that He *“will repay each person according to what he has done.”* This is explained further by His parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25. The sheep will be repaid with the reward of eternal blessedness. The goats will be repaid by being thrown into the eternal fire. Jesus will point to the good fruits the sheep have done because of their faith. But the sheep are not aware of them. They do not see their own good works.

This is the way good trees grow. Beautiful, red apples are not hidden away by the tree so that the tree can gaze upon them. The apples are produced out on the branches away from the tree, but visible to anyone who walks by.

As Christians, you do not do good works for yourself. Apples are not eaten by the tree. They are eaten and enjoyed by others. You do not benefit from your good works, but others do. You cannot gain heaven for yourself by your good works, but your good works done from faith can help others on their way to heaven. As

sheep, we do not even notice our good works. The nice, red apples we produce as Christians hang out on our branches away from our own eyes, but they are visible to others, and are a blessing to them.

Anyone who thinks the good works he does will help him in getting repaid at the Judgment with a place in heaven is forgetting a very basic truth--you and I do not do good works; Jesus does them through us. *"I am the Vine,"* He says, *"you are the branches...apart from Me you can do nothing...(but) whoever abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit."*

So this explains why you are faithful to your spouse, why you honor your father and mother, why you give your offerings to the Lord, why you serve the Lord with your life. This explains why you come to church with listening ears and a hungry heart. Jesus lives within you. He is in you, and you abide in Him. And He is producing in you, and through you, these and other fruits of faith in your life.

Jesus knows something about trees. He was nailed to one. And so that ugly cross became the good tree because the fruit it bore was forgiveness, life, and salvation for you. He did not die for Himself; He died for you. Even the fruits His tree produced were not for Him, but for others.

And those fruits are before you today because they are for you. Here in the Sacrament is the fruit of Jesus' cross. Nothing you eat tastes as sweet as the meal your Lord here gives you. Here is your Savior in bread and wine coming to abide in you, and you in Him. You are here eating and drinking the Lord of Life Himself in a Sacramental manner. Here you taste God's forgiveness for you. Here you do the exact opposite of what Eve did in the Garden of Eden. You take and eat not sin and death, but pardon for sin and eternal life.

Friend, you need have no fear of the Day of Reckoning--the great Day of Judgment. All your sins are forgiven. Jesus made certain of that. His death for you sealed it. Your sins were buried in His grave, but He rose from death so that you have a living Savior.

Do not fear that your good deeds will be lacking on Judgment Day. Do not even concern yourself with trying to produce fruit so that God will approve of you. That is what the goats, the bad trees, concern themselves with--not with Christ and His Word, but with their fruit and God's approval of them because of their fruit.

But God already approves of you for the sake of Jesus. Apple trees do not worry and fret and concern themselves with trying to produce good apples. The apples come because they are apple trees.

You are good trees, not because you are busy producing fruit...you are good trees because you are in Christ and He is in you. His words are in you. His Sacrament is what you desire. The fruit will appear on your branches, but you won't even see it. All you see is the tree of the cross where your Lord died for you. All you see is the baptismal font where Jesus made you His sheep. All you see is bread and wine on the altar, but here in bread and wine is Jesus for you.

These holy things, not your fruits, are your concern. Concern yourself with God's Word. Busy yourself with hearing it, reading it, studying it, receiving it. You do this...you abide in Christ doing this and, friend, the fruits will come. Amen.