

“WHEN THE SON OF MAN COMES IN HIS GLORY, AND ALL THE ANGELS WITH HIM, THEN HE WILL SIT ON HIS GLORIOUS THRONE. BEFORE HIM WILL BE GATHERED ALL THE NATIONS, AND HE WILL SEPARATE PEOPLE ONE FROM ANOTHER AS A SHEPHERD SEPARATES THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS. AND HE WILL PLACE THE SHEEP OF HIS RIGHT, BUT THE GOATS ON THE LEFT (vv. 31-33).

If you want to make an apple pie, you need apples. If you need apples, you go to the apple tree because apple trees produce apples.

Profound, I know, but I share this with you in light of Jesus’ words in our Gospel on this Last Sunday of the Church year.

We confess, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead,” and our lesson is the day when Jesus comes again in all of His glory. The dead will be raised. The same bodies that have died, will be raised to life again and body and soul reunited. And all will be gathered together for the final judgement, and Jesus Himself will be the judge.

It seems simple enough: At the final judgement, the righteous are delivered to heaven and the unrighteous are condemned eternally. There is one strange note to our ears, however, that unsettles and troubles us -- It seems that the righteous get into heaven for helping the underprivileged.

King Jesus says,

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’”(vv 34-36).

The unrighteous, it seems, are condemned for their failure to do the same. Again, hear the words of the King,

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me’” (vv. 41-43).

The question before us this morning is this: Do you inherit the Kingdom of God because of what you have done? To put it even more clearly: Are we saved by our good works?

You are a sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock. And, it’s not about you – what you have done or not done. You can give thanks, rejoice, and sing, “I am Jesus’ little lamb, ever glad at heart I am,” because what happened to Nicodemus happened to you (LSB 740:1). Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). And you believe. You believe Jesus is the Son of God who suffered, and died and rose for you, not by your own reason or strength, but because of the Holy Spirit who called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps you in the true faith (cf. Explanation of 3rd Article).

This is the Christian faith. We are saved by faith, and faith alone, in Jesus. The Bible clearly teaches this,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ep 2:8.9, NIV).

And again, the Bible says,

“We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified” (Ga 2:16).

We are not saved by good works. Good works do not, in any way, contribute to our salvation; our good works do not earn God's grace; our good works do not make us more pleasing to God. We cannot make God love us more; nor, can we make God love us any less than He already does.

We are saved by faith alone. In our lesson before us today, our King Jesus is teaching us that good works are a fruit of our faith. They are evidence, proof, that we are alive by faith in Christ. St. James says it this way, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (2:17)." In the Christian life, it is FAITH, THEN DEEDS.

I'm going to say something yet more profound. Ready? Here it goes: Apple trees produce apples. Just as apple trees produce apples, so in Christ, we produce the fruits of faith. By doing the works of Christ, we show that we are one with Him by faith, we live in Him and He lives in us.

The goats, those separated from the sheep and placed on the King's left, cannot do anything before God that considers a good work, because they remain dead in sin. The goats, those on his left, had no faith. And the Bible teaches us, "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (He 11:6). This is why He says to them, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41).

The GOOD NEWS for you, Dear Little Lamb is that you will never hear those words from the King. Yes, you were cursed, destined for the eternal fire of hell prepared for the devil and his angels, but note the mercy of the Judge – He suffers the sentence of misery and death in your place.

He who is seated on that glorious throne is the One who was hungry and tempted in the wilderness, but remained faithful for you. He was thirsty in His dying anguish nailed to the cross. He was a stranger, rejected in his

own hometown, by His own brothers and sisters; He had no place to lay His head. He was naked, as the soldiers stripped Him bare. He was sick, for He bore your sickness and infirmity to the cross. He was imprisoned, by the brutal Roman soldiers who scourged and mocked Him; and finally in death, by Joseph's tomb.

Your King did that for you, for your forgiveness, for your salvation.

And He gives you that forgives and new life to you in Holy Baptism. In that blessed washing of renewal, God the Holy Spirit works faith in you, so that you become one with Christ in death and in life. You live in Christ, and He lives in you, which means He does His work through you. As He loved, we love. As He had mercy and compassion on us, we have mercy on our neighbors.

The King tells us, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (v. 40). We care for our fellow sheep, those who find themselves hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or in prison, especially for their faith in Jesus. We come to them with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, love. God doesn't need our good works, but our fellow sheep do, so God serves your neighbor through you.

An apple tree gives no thought to producing apples at all; it just does it. So, you, living in Christ, as one of His sheep, produce fruits, simply because of who you are in Christ Jesus.

You have faith and that faith will save you. And, that faith is active in works, works of love, works of mercy, works like feeding, welcoming, visiting, clothing your neighbor.

So, whether you are feeding the hungry, working a job and providing for your family, loving your spouse and your children, or simply being a friend to your neighbor, the King will say to you on the Last Day, "Come,

you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” because all that you have done is through faith in Jesus Christ.