

22 November 2020
Last Sunday of the Church Year

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Blessed Are All Who Take Refuge in Him”
Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Two weeks ago we heard of the wise virgins and the foolish virgins, waiting for the Bridegroom to come.

Last week we heard of the joyful servants and the fearful servant, waiting for their master to return.

Today it is sheep and goats. The third and final teaching of Jesus about the Last Day. When the Good Shepherd comes and separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep *to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world*. The goats to go *into the eternal fire prepared not* for them, but *for the devil and his angels*. The God of life and salvation does not prepare or get ready to condemn anyone. That is not His way. That is not what He wants. It is not why Jesus went to the cross - He went to save all people! It is what *they* want - to not be with God. Or, at least, not *this* kind of God. And so they will not. Sadly. No joy for anyone in that.

It is sad, really, for us to even think about. Which is why today so many deny it and think: God wouldn't do that, and so come up with an alternative theology. But God's Word remains. There is only one way to take away the sin and guilt that separate us from God - and that is the death and resurrection of His Son. For your sin to be on Him and not on you. For your sin to be atoned for by His blood. Those who have that have everything. Those who have that have life eternally. Those who do not . . .

All depends on the Son. All depends on being in the Good Shepherd's flock.

But wait, Pastor! That's not what the words we heard today say! Jesus points to works, not faith. So, it would seem, we are saved by what we've done . . . or not done.

And perhaps it sounds that way. But it's not that way at all, which I hope to convince you.

But you already know that! You know that because it's what you've heard here all year in the readings and hymns and liturgy and sermons. It's what you've read in the Scriptures -

that we're not saved by works, but by the benefits of the cross received by us by grace through faith. And many of you could quote me Scripture that says that! . . . So it's interesting to me, how so many Christians, so steeped in this teaching all the other Sundays of the year, so confident in Christ, become terrified of the judgment at the end of the Church Year and think it's on us and what we do. That we're going to have to answer for each and every sinful thought, word, deed, and desire we've ever had! That the Good Shepherd suddenly turns into a horrible and strict judge.

He does not! But if what I just said describes you, I don't condemn you, just invite you to rejoice in the fact that you don't have to fear the Last Day. The one who is your Good Shepherd now, will be your Good Shepherd on that day as well. The Good Shepherd who watered you here in baptism, fed you here in His Supper, comforted you with His Word, forgave your sins, and watched over you and led you through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), *will not stop*.

So when He comes on that Last Day, as we heard, He's going to act like a shepherd! He's going to separate the sheep from the goats. Which is not hard for a shepherd. It's not like it's hard to tell. There's not a fine line between the two. It's obvious, especially for a shepherd. All you've got to do is separate them. And that takes place not because of what they've done, whether they've been "good" or not, but because of what they ARE - a sheep or a goat.

And Jesus could have stopped there! He could have stopped His teaching right then and there - full stop! - and not even said the rest, about all those things that were done or not done, and all would have been well. So . . . *why does Jesus do that?* Why does Jesus drag in this teaching and muddy the waters, so to speak?

Well, actually, it's for just the opposite reason - He brings those things up to clarify, not to muddy! And for two reasons.

First, to demonstrate the fairness or justice of His judgment. No objection can be raised by the goats that they were improperly put in the wrong group. No, there has been no mistake. By their lives they showed who they were. Not, perhaps, in ways that we notice. We often judge wrongly or are mistaken. But God knows and sees the heart. And notice: the goats *think* they have been good enough! And maybe they were very good goats! The best of goats, in fact! Praised by all the other goats! **But even the very best goat is not a sheep.** The best unbeliever is still an unbeliever, and so without the forgiveness of sins that comes only by grace through faith.

The second reason Jesus points to these things is for the benefit of His sheep - for you and I. For you and I who think we haven't been good enough. Who look at our lives and see mainly all the ways we fail and fall short and don't do those things we should do. And you're right. You're exactly right.

This is something that often happens with Christians, and especially new Christians. They're baptized, they're catechized, and they want to be good Christians and try really hard. Which is good. But inevitably, sooner or later, as they grow in the Word, they don't see improvement, they don't think they're getting better - in fact, they think they're getting worse! Because as they grow in God's Word, they learn to see things more and more clearly, and they see their sin more and more clearly, and so think they're getting worse. Most of the time they're not! They're just seeing more clearly the horrible reality of sin. But it seems that way to them.

Now that's good! *If* it pushes us to repent and to turn to Christ and His forgiveness. That's exactly what the Law is supposed to do. And then the Gospel and the joy of Christ's forgiveness can have its way with us and give us the confidence that our works could never give. And here, on the Last Day, Jesus' words seem to indicate the same thing going on. Sheep that know they haven't been good enough. So how comforting for us to know that to Jesus, **we are**. *Good enough*. Not because of what we have done, but because of what He has done - made us His sheep. His sheep where even the little things we've done are precious to Him. It's not becoming a pastor, it's not going to some wild and exotic country as a missionary, it's not doing things that draw the world's attention - it's these little things Jesus' mentions, things we've long forgotten and that seem like no big deal - they are a big deal to Him. A Christian mother taking care of her children. A Christian father providing for his family. Taking food to a family going through a rough patch. Visiting those alone or isolated. Caring for those in need. Those things don't wipe out your sin and earn you eternal life - Jesus did that! And so because He did, you can. You can take care of others. Because of who you ARE: a sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock.

Or maybe think of it like this: sometimes people are asked the hypothetical question, What would you do if you got a large inheritance, or won the lottery? What would you do with it? There are lots of different answers, but often there is the desire to help others - to fund a scholarship, give to charity, help friends and family.

Well for you, *it's not a hypothetical!* That is your reality. You HAVE an inheritance. You received it in your baptism. It's what the Gospel tells you about and delivers to you every Sunday. ***The inheritance prepared for you before the foundation of the world***, as Jesus said to you today. So you have riches beyond your understanding. Riches that will never run out. So now what? If you believe this, how will you live? What will you do? Will you live as if this world is all there is? Or will you live differently?

So in the Collect of the Day today, we prayed: *Enable us to wait for the day of [our Lord's] return with our eyes fixed on the kingdom prepared for Your own from the foundation of the world*. And so with eyes fixed not on ourselves or what we are able to do, but on the King and His kingdom - all that He has done for us, and all that He has for

us. For then we will see rightly. Satan is always trying to take our eyes off of that, get us to look at *anything* but that, and so cause us to rely on what we do and tremble and fear at the thought of the Last Day.

Instead, we will *fix our eyes on Jesus* (Hebrews 12:2). The Bridegroom coming for His Bride, the Church. The master who has joy for His servants. The Good Shepherd, who is both Good and our Shepherd, not just for now but for eternity. The Good Shepherd who always has **His eyes fixed on you**. The Good Shepherd who has once again *set His Table before us in the presence of our enemies* (Psalm 23:5) - in the midst of this sinful and turbulent and unbelieving world. So come now and fix your eyes on Him here, on His forgiveness given to you here, and *taste and see that the Lord is good* (Psalm 34:8). So that when He comes again, or even when you just think about that Day, you will not tremble and fear, but look forward to it with joy. As Jesus does. That Day can't come soon enough for Him either. To have you, and all His flock, finally together with Him. Forever. That's what He wants. That's why He came. That's why He died. That's why He's coming again. For you. That it really is true what the psalmist said: *Blessed* - now and forever! - *are all who take refuge in Him* (Psalm 34:8).

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.