

## **“The Commendation of the Sheep and the Condemnation of the Goats”**

SERMON TEXT: Matt. 25:31-46

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*Dearly beloved of God, our sermon text is from St. Matthew’s text. Let us pray...*

*O Jesus Christ, righteous judge of heaven and earth, through faith in You, You have made us new. Graciously keep us faithful to You until the day of which no man knows the hour comes upon us. In accord with Your Word, O Lord, You, like a shepherd, will separate Your sheep from the goats found in Your fold. O Most Blessed Father, You have sent to us Your Son to save us from the wrath to come so that we might be numbered among the blessed, those whose inheritance is secured through Your reign in their hearts. By your indwelling Spirit, through Your Word and Holy Sacraments, align our hearts in faith toward You so that our actions do not contradict our confession, but conform to it. In love, O Lord, encourage us by Your Word to lovingly encourage one another in those works which come forth as we, Your sheep, are turned to hear Your voice and heed Your call. Amen.*

Dear brethren in Christ Jesus, tonight we come to that parable which has traditionally been appointed as the text for the Last Sunday of the Church Year, that is, that time in the Church’s calendar which looks forward to the Last Day— the day when our Lord returns to judge this world as it gives way to the world to come! From the ashes of last Wednesday’s start to the forty days of our Lenten contemplation of our sin and its consequence, so as to prepare us for the greater contemplation of our Saviour’s cross, this

text sets before us that day which ushers in the promise of the new heavens and new earth at the passing of the old. It marks the day when all accounts will be settled as all men give account for every thought, word, and deed. So, we had best mark well the words of our Lord Jesus Christ concerning that day from which none can escape— for even though we do not know the hour of its coming, we nevertheless know that its coming is certain. While the Lord may have left us in the dark about the timing of that day's coming, His Word has nevertheless shed light upon that day's content: He comes in judgement. Indeed, God's Christ, the only begotten Son of God, will return in power and glory to judge the very world which God so loved that He gave Him to it to save. Jesus Christ came into the world as the light of the world. He came to grant life to those who would trust in Him, believing in His name. He came to make a difference among men by making men different. God did not send His Son into the world to see how many He could find to fit into heaven; rather, He came into the world to make many fit for heaven. Yet, even though the very light of life came into this world, the world's condemnation will still surely come as many more men continue to embrace darkness, thereby deserving their doom in death. Yes, on that great and terrible day, the Day of the Lord, God's wrath will be visited upon those who stand condemned at the time of Christ's visit. Only those whose lives have been hidden in Christ, through Baptism, by faith, will be spared God's wrath. Only those born anew in Christ, those having died to sin, will inherit the new world which comes with the passing of the old order. This is the testimony of Holy Scripture. This is what we bear witness to before the world. This is what our text tells us: sheep go to heaven; goats go to hell.

Yes, according to our Lord Jesus Christ, upon His return He will separate the people gathered before Him, those drawn from all nations, into two distinctly different groups with very different destinies. Like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats at night, in preparing them to find their rest, Jesus will cut through humanity's masses, dividing their number in twain, with those constituting the so-called sheep of His fold at His right hand and those akin to goats at His left. Sheep go to heaven; goats go to hell. The sheep are commended; the goats are condemned. Sheep go to heaven to be with the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. The goats go to hell to inherit the punishment prepared for their cloven-hoofed cohort, the Devil. Sheep go to heaven; goats go to hell. Yet, as clear as this teaching may appear, there are many who are blind to its meaning. Many have misinterpreted Jesus' words as advocating a kind of works-based righteousness. Of course, this cannot be the case as it is contrary to the crux of the Christian confession—namely, that we are made right in God's sight not by our own works of merit, but entirely by the work of Christ upon the cross, wherein He took upon Himself our guilt and gives to us His righteousness! Our right relationship with God is based solely upon His work on our behalf, the benefits becoming ours through trusting only in His promise to us. In *this* there is a world of difference. Yet, if that is indeed the case— if that's how we are reconciled to God— then how do we reconcile Jesus' words in this passage with this particular truth? Why does Jesus condition His commendation of the sheep by speaking of their works of compassion? Why does Jesus then consign the goats to condemnation after confronting them with their lack of such compassionate works? In order to answer such questions so as to understand how this is complimentary

to the core components of our Christian confession, we must return to the very context in which Jesus' teaching is found. Only then can we make heads or tails of the truth that sheep go to heaven while goats go to hell.

Our text is taken from a larger context in which Jesus' disciples serve as His audience. His disciples approached Him privately after He pronounced the coming judgement which would engulf Jerusalem and befall its temple. They asked Him to tell them more about that particular day of judgment as well as the Last Day, the close of the age. In responding to the latter, Jesus taught them through the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Ten Talents that there would be those whose profession of faith in Him would be betrayed in the light of their actions. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, or bridesmaids, all ten desired to be a part of the bridal procession at the coming of the bridegroom. In the Parable of the Ten Talents, all of those entrusted with their master's funds were his servants. Such is also the case in this parabolic passage. The goats are numbered among the sheep in the same way that the foolish virgins were with the wise and the wicked servant stood among those who were faithful. All of these harken back to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, wherein He clearly taught: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" Therefore, these parables speak of those who name the name of Christ, differentiating between those whose confession rings true and those

whose confession is hollow. This must be kept in mind as we return to our text. Now, while goats and sheep may indeed share many superficial similarities, their difference is profound. In our text, Jesus highlights the matter by expounding upon what those identified as sheep or goats did or didn't do to the "least of these my brothers." So, the next question we need to ask is, "Who are Jesus' brethren?" The answer to this question is important because whatever is done or left undone in regard to these is done or left undone in regard to Christ Himself. The answer to this question is also found in St. Matthew's Gospel, wherein Jesus says, while pointing to His disciples, "Here are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." The spiritual bond between our Heavenly Father and all who believe was esteemed by our Lord to be far greater than any earthly ties. Indeed, the very Son of God became a man so that men could be counted as sons and inherit the kingdom prepared for them from before the foundation of the world. So, it is safe to surmise that Christ's brethren are our fellow Christians. Hence, what we ought to do unto one another is in keeping with Christ's command that we love one another. This love is the key to unlocking the contextual framework needed to understand the difference between the commendation of the sheep and the condemnation of the goats.

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." This love would mark Jesus' disciples as being different. About this love, St. John, the Beloved Disciple, wrote the following: "We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates

his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” This love marks the sheep. This love separates the sheep from the goats. This love is the source of sheep’s works of compassion. Having been the recipients of the love of God— the very love that moved heaven and earth itself as God sent His Son from heaven to earth for the sake of our salvation— those counted as sheep cared for and visited the least of their fellows who formed His flock in the times of their need. In so doing, their work in love was received as if it was done unto the Lord Himself. Yet, we must not mistakenly believe that such work served as the *cause* of their salvation, for by no means is this meant. Rather, their works were the *effect* of their salvation. Good works are the outworking of God’s work within the Christian and they are only acceptable to God because of the relationship that exists, through faith, between the saved and their Saviour, the sheep and their Shepherd. The sheep are those who’ve heard the Good Shepherd’s voice. In repentance, they’ve entered His fold, His forgiven flock. Their sins will not be brought before them on the day of judgement because their sins have been forgiven and forgotten in Christ. They will know no condemnation. They will only find themselves commended to the joys of His kingdom.

As for the goats, their lot in the afterlife is far different as they indeed have to give an account for both their works and their lack of works in this life. Those who faithlessly take upon themselves the name of Christ while dancing to the tune of Pan’s pipes, coming to church just to drink some wine, will share the same fate as those in the world who

reckon that as soon as you're born you start dying, so you might as well have a good time. Yes, sheep go to heaven; goats go to hell. There are no good works which can cover the sins we've all committed. Indeed, their works, no matter how outwardly good they may seem, cannot save because, as it is written, "without faith it is impossible to please God," and, "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." So, the works left undone by those deemed to be among the goats, those sins of omission, are only symptomatic of the far more significant problem: their lack of faith. Had they heeded His call to repentance and called out to Him in faith, in accord with his Word, they would have received His forgiveness and remained His own in having been forgiven. He would have completed His good works through them. Yet, those who reject or ignore the Lord *will* reject and ignore those who belong to the Lord. Therefore, the love that serves as a sign of salvation is not seen among them as their love of self ultimately transcends any love toward God and neighbour. There is a world of difference between those who've been called out of the world and those who are still bound by it. Hence, goats go to hell.

On that great and terrible day, the Last Day, in which the Lord will return to judge the nations, God's Christ will first cleanse His temple, His house, as He separates His own from those He knew not. The sheep will be commended for the works which flow forth from their faith, in love toward God and His own, and the goats will be condemned for their lack of faithful works of love toward God or His own. Jesus has given us fair warning of what awaits those who'll be found wanting on that day. His desire, however, is that none should perish in that place prepared for Satan and those who follow in His folly. By grace, through faith, He calls us all. By His Word He creates that faith which

fosters the love we have for Him and now share with one another. Therefore, on our day-by-day journey through the days of Lent, let us contemplate the coming of the Last Day through the lens of His word of promise, especially as we work towards the commemoration of Calvary's cross: "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them... I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness... I will tend them in a good pasture... I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.'" This is the Word of the Lord. This Word from the Lord makes all the difference because, by its fulfilment in Christ, it makes us different. The Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us has spoken to us. His sheep hear His voice. They return to it and are gathered around it. On the Last Day, they will hear Him say, "Come, you who are blessed by My Father..." for, as He has promised, sheep go to heaven. Amen.

*May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.*