

Sheep and Goats

This morning's Gospel lesson paints a graphic picture of the End Times when the Son of Man will come again in His glory to judge both the living and the dead. In that time, we hear how He will gather all nations to himself. Every person will be made to stand before Him and give a defense for how they have lived their lives and spent their time here on earth. Based on that testimony, Christ will separate us as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will show no partiality, no favoritism; He will accept no excuses or apologies. Every person will be laid bare, exposed by God's penetrating light. All secrets will be unlocked and those things once hidden will be revealed. He will judge according to His strict standards of righteousness. Does that scare you? It should. Can you imagine the embarrassment and shame we would feel right now if our private thoughts were all of a sudden projected onto a screen for everyone to see? The fear of something like that is almost unbearable. And yet we confess that such a day is coming! A day of reckoning and retribution. He has prolonged this Day of Judgement out of His infinite mercy, but it is coming just the same. Each passing moment serves only to increase the tension and make His coming all the more eminent.

Who can stand this mighty Judgment? Let us look at the text more closely for clarity and comfort. What separates the sheep from the goats? Certainly not purity for none of us is pure. Certainly not worthiness for none of us is worthy. Certainly not works for all our works are but filthy rags before God. In fact, in regards to sheep and goats, both are equally guilty and fall short of the glory of God. As far as it goes, sheep and goats are identical in every respect except one. The only meaningful difference between the sheep and the goats is a matter of Law and Gospel. You see, the goats reject Christ. They reject His sacrifice of forgiveness. They reject His helping hand of mercy. They reject His offer of friendship and companionship. They desire instead to live on their own, to do it without help. They don't believe in God, but they do believe in themselves. Our God, being a loving God, accepts their demands

for freedom. He never forces anyone into His Kingdom. But the rules of the eternal Game don't change just because someone refuses to abide by them. God's exact standards remain in force even if someone refuses the help. Apart from Christ and His Gospel there is only God's perfect and unbending Law. Hear me when I say, it is possible to earn God's eternal Kingdom apart from Christ. It's quite simple, actually. All it takes is perfection. Simply keep God's Law perfectly in every aspect and God's heavenly rewards are yours. In their freedom, the goats choose this harder path. They choose Law over Grace. And so in that final hour, Christ will pronounce His verdict: "I tell you the truth, whatever you *did not* do for one of the least of these you *did not* do for Me." This is how it ends for them. A lifetime of good works, a life time of good intentions, a lifetime of being a good person and it all it comes down to the one thing left undone. But this is the price of perfection. The goats demand to be judged by their works, and so they are. Christ honors their autonomy and judges them accordingly. He places them in the balance, but unfortunately they are found wanting.

The sheep, on the other hand, accept their limitations, confess their unworthiness and understand their many shortcomings. They are no better than the goats. They know that. In fact, in many instances they are far worse. For the sheep have seen themselves in the mirror of God's Law and their reflection is not a pretty sight to behold. The contours of sin have cut deep wrinkles across their face, leathered their skin, darkened their hearts, polluted their minds. This sobering reflection has removed all delusions of being self-made. Even in their moments of goodness, they can still sense their wickedness- a hint of pride, a dash of superiority, a pinch of arrogance. And so they forsake themselves, deny themselves; they take the lifeline, beg for mercy, and live by grace. The sheep stand before God not as worthy opponents, but as humble servants. And Christ speaks to them in an altogether different way: "I tell you the truth whatever you *did* for one of the least of these, you *did* for Me." This is the joy of living under Grace. The stress of perfection has been removed. The sheep are not judged according to the strict rigors

of the Law, but by the Gospel. Notice the change. Christ omits one of the words. He does not say, “Whatever you *did not* do”, but rather “Whatever you *did* do for one of the least of these, you did for me.” The Gospel judgement changes the sentence from a negative to a positive. The sheep are not judged by the strict negation of Law. Instead, they live by grace. They live under Christ. All the pressure has been removed. All the anxiety has been relieved. The Gospel judgement is no judgement at all. At least not for the sheep. For that horrible judgement took place on the cross. Thereupon the cross, Christ accepted the strict judgement of the Law. In His perfection, He accepted the world’s imperfections. He heard His Father cast judgement upon Him: “whatever you did not do for the least of these...” Christ accepted His lot, received His judgement. He heard His Father’s verdict and it literally killed Him. But from His lifeless body burst forth true life and salvation and freedom.

Christ has set the sheep free. For freedom in Christ is the only true freedom available in this life. When the goats reject God in favor of their own independent freedom what they really receive is bondage. Bound to the Law they must live under the Law. And the Law is relentless. It never lets up. It hangs about their neck as an albatross. They live in self-made dungeons that lock from the inside. And those who live by the Law die by the Law. But for those who live by grace, by every word of Christ, they are set free from bondage. Free to live under the Law of Liberty and enjoy the bounty of God’s peace. And so it is good to be sheep, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for what is God’s is now ours, now and forever. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Mills