

JUDGMENT DEPENDENT ON WORKS?
Sermon for Trinity Sunday, 2019
Matthew 25:31-46

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 25:31-46: ³¹ **“When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them from one another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will have the sheep stand at His right but the goats at His left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those at His right, ‘Come, you whom My Father has blessed! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the time when the world was created! ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you took Me into your homes; ³⁶ naked, and you gave Me something to wear; sick, and you looked after Me; in prison, and you visited Me.’**

³⁷ **“Then the righteous ones will ask Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You a drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You into our homes, or naked and give You something to wear? ³⁹ When did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?’**

⁴⁰ **“Then the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you, anything you have done for one of My brothers here, even the least important of them, you have done for Me.’**

⁴¹ **“Then He will say to those at His left, ‘Go away from Me, you cursed ones, into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels! ⁴² For I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; thirsty, and you did not give Me a drink; ⁴³ a stranger, and you did not take Me into your homes; naked, and you did not give Me anything to wear; sick and in prison, and you did not look after Me.’**

⁴⁴ **“Then they also will ask, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not help You?’**

⁴⁵ **“Then He will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you, anything you have not done for one of these, even the least important of them, you have not done for Me.’**

⁴⁶ **“Then these will go away to everlasting punishment, but the righteous ones to everlasting life.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today is Trinity Sunday, and as such, this is the one day in the year when we confess the Athanasian Creed. Actually, we believe, teach, and confess this Creed every day of the year; it’s just that this is the one day in the year when we actually confess it out loud in church during the service. Since the Athanasian Creed is the creed that goes into the most depth and detail on the doctrine of the Trinity, it is most fitting then that we do this on Holy Trinity Sunday.

After giving an explanation of truths about the triune God, three equal persons in one God, the Creed goes on to clearly confess the divine and human natures of Christ and concludes by saying of Him, *“At His coming all men shall rise with their bodies and give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire.”* This mention of doing good to enter eternal life often bothers those who understand from Scriptures that we are saved by grace, not by works.¹ However, these words of the Creed simply echo Christ’s Judgment Day prophecies made in Scripture, as it does so in our text for today.

Judgment Day is coming, the day when we shall all be judged. The question to ask is, “Are we ready?”

Every person who has ever lived will be judged. Many people don’t want to hear this, but it is the truth. The Holy Scriptures in many places teach that there will be a *final judgment* when the Lord Jesus Christ will come again from heaven to do the judging and that everyone will be included.² Likewise, the Christian Creeds confess the reality of this coming judgment. We just said it a few moments ago in the Athanasian Creed: *“whence He will come to judge the living and the dead.”*

There is no question about it: Judgment Day is coming. We don’t know the exact time when it will happen, but it will come.

¹ Habakkuk 2:4; Luke 7:50; Romans 1:17; Ephesians 2:8; Galatians 2:16

² Psalm 50:4; Psalm 96:13; Matt. 12:36; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10

About this day, Christ Himself tells us: **“³¹ When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them from one another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”** To the goats, those on his left, the King will say, **“Go away from Me, you cursed ones, into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels!... go away to everlasting punishment.”** If anyone wishes to deny the existence of hell, then that person really is arguing with Jesus, because He taught it. The reality of hell is as well established in Scripture as the reality of heaven. If you want to deny the one, then you may as well deny them both. But that won't change what will happen - all people will be going either to the one or to the other.

While the goats **go away to everlasting punishment**, the sheep, the righteous ones on the King's right will enter into **everlasting life**, inheriting **“the kingdom prepared for (them) from the time when the world was created!”** This is the blessed reality of heaven for the children of God, being at home with the Lord forever. Being made members of God's family through Holy Baptism, our final destination is going to last for eternity. A shepherd can easily tell the difference between a sheep and a goat. So, on the Last Day, it will be a simple matter for Jesus to do the task of separating. Every single human being who ever has lived or ever will live is going to be present. No excuses. No exceptions. On Judgment Day, there will be this separation of the sheep from the goats.

This separation, this receiving of either everlasting life or everlasting punishment, will be on the basis of works. Now, before we recoil in horror, asking “Surely works have no bearing on our salvation, do they?” listen closely to Christ's words. He says, **“I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you took Me into your homes; ³⁶ naked, and you gave Me something to wear; sick, and you looked after Me; in prison, and you visited Me.”** On the other hand, **“I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; thirsty, and you did not give Me a drink; ⁴³ a stranger, and you did not take Me into your homes; naked, and you did not give Me anything to wear; sick and in prison, and you did not look after Me.”**

This coming of the Lord to judge the living and the dead according to works, is the consistent teaching of Scripture. For example, in John's Gospel, Jesus says, **“²⁸ Do not be astonished at this, because an hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and will come out. Those who have done good will come out to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil will come out to the resurrection of condemnation.”** St. Paul teaches likewise when he writes, **“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or bad,”** (2 Cor. 5:10). In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus says, **“See! I am coming soon, and My reward is with Me, to repay everyone according to what he has done,”** (22:12). So the church teaches and confesses this doctrine of judgment according to works. The Athanasian Creed is absolutely correct in stating, **“At His coming all men will rise with their bodies and give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will go into everlasting fire.”**

This may sound funny to our ears, but note this: Our works are not the basis on which we earn or merit salvation. No, the basis for salvation can only be the works of Christ, by which we are pronounced righteous and gain salvation purely by grace. However, our good works will be cited in the judgment, as evidence that we had a living faith in Christ. Good works done, proceeding from faith in Christ, will be cited as evidence when the righteous are rewarded. Good works not done in connection with Christ will be cited as evidence when those on the left are told to depart. So the separation of the sheep from the goats will be announced according to works.

Let us re-emphasise: It is faith alone in Christ that produces the good works that the righteous sheep do. Notice what the King says when he commends their good deeds, **“I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you took Me into your homes; ³⁶ naked, and you gave Me something to wear; sick, and you looked after Me; in prison, and you visited Me.... “Truly, I tell you, anything you have done for one of My brothers here, even the least important of them, you have done for Me.”** Everything is centred on the person of the King. If the work is done in connection with Christ, then it is regarded as a good work. If there is no connection with Christ, then there are no good works. We must be linked to Christ and His goodness - that divine, righteous goodness by which bad people are accounted as good - in order for there to be any good works to speak of. Faith in Christ is the key as to whether our works are judged to be good or not.

Without any doubt, it is faith alone, apart from works, that saves. Scripture says, **“For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law,”** (Rom. 3:28). Our works do not in the slightest degree merit our salvation. Rather, it is a free gift, pure grace. Only Jesus Christ and *His work* have earned our salvation. Jesus died on the cross to wipe the slate clean for us. His precious blood has washed away all our sins, and His resurrection shows that God

the Father has accepted His full payment on our behalf. Those sins are not brought forward when the books are opened.³ His righteousness is bestowed on us as a gift. His perfect holiness purifies our imperfect works, and they are then regarded as good works for His sake. Christ remembers only the good that we have done, not the bad. He sees in our poor little deeds of mercy, which we ourselves would never dare to plead, our “Yes” to Him.

So how do we understand this relationship of faith and works when it comes to the final judgment? Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone.⁴ It is always accompanied by works. Saving faith will produce good works. Works are the evidence, the proof, that a living faith was indeed present in the believer. Faith works. Like a good tree, it bears good fruit.

We dare not look to our works to be saved. Notice that the righteous, the sheep, are rather surprised when their good works are mentioned: **“Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not help You?”** They weren’t busy trying to score brownie points as they went through life. Instead, their good works are cited to show that they did indeed have a living faith that was connected to Christ. Faith in Christ will produce good works toward the neighbour.

The righteous do not look to their own works. They look to the finished work of Christ, who alone can produce works that are accounted as good before God. The key thing is to be connected to Christ, and that comes through the gospel, the good news of sins forgiven by the cleansing blood of Christ, shed on the cross. That’s the only way our bad record - all the bad things we did, all the good things we failed to do - that’s the only way our bad record can be erased and then replaced with works that are considered good for the sake of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the good news for today: God has forgiven us for the sake of Jesus! Jesus is our righteousness! Jesus is our life - our eternal life. Life that overcomes the grave, even as He rose from the dead on the third day. Life that will stand in the Day of Judgment. Here’s the good news: our Judge is also our Saviour!

All this is a free gift, dependent on the goodness of the Giver: **“Come, you whom My Father has blessed! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the time when the world was created!”** See, it is all God’s doing. He is the one who blesses us, who puts us in line for an inheritance, who has prepared His heavenly kingdom for us before we could do anything about it. So this text of ours today, which on the surface may seem like we have to pile up our works in order to merit salvation - this text is instead the most comforting passage of salvation by grace.

The day is surely drawing near. Judgment Day is coming, and we shall appear before the throne of the King to receive what is coming to us. By God’s grace, only our works done from faith in Christ will be mentioned, the evidence of a genuine and living faith. By God’s grace, we shall receive the reward of the righteous - eternal life in His kingdom. God in His grace has made us His sheep. Take heart and know that we shall receive the eternal kingdom God has prepared for us. Judgment Day is coming! Are we ready? By God’s grace, yes, we are. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR TRINITY SUNDAY

O most holy and blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we thank and praise You for revealing Yourself to us in Your Word as the only true and living God, Three Persons in One God, and for teaching us that You have created, redeemed, and sanctified us. Glory, worship, and praise be to You, O holy, almighty Lord!

O God the Father, have mercy on us, and gladden us with Your love. O God the Son, have mercy on us, and clothe us with Your merits. O God, the Holy Spirit, have mercy on us, and make us holy by Your continual presence. O blessed Holy Trinity, have mercy on us, and hear our prayers.

Shine in our hearts, dear Lord, and increase in us the knowledge of Your glory, which shines in the face of Christ; help us to know You, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. Uphold us in temptation, and fill us with holy thoughts and desires, that we may worship You with fervent prayer, and walk before You in holy obedience and devotion. Deliver us from evil, and comfort us in times of trouble. Protect our country and all its people; bless all in authority over us, and support all who seek to glorify You in their daily life and work. Defend Your Church from all who oppose it, and pour out Your Spirit on all flesh so that the very ends of the earth may acknowledge and worship You as their eternal, triune God and Lord.

Unite us all in the confession of Your holy name, and in the worship of Your glory, for You live and reign, God above all, for ever and ever. Amen.

³ Revelation 20:12

⁴ James 2:14-26

THE HOLY TRINITY

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

¹ Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? ² Wisdom takes her stand on the top of the high ground beside the road, where the paths cross, ³ beside the gates in front of the city. At the entrance to the gateway wisdom calls aloud: ⁴ “Men, I am calling to you and raising My voice to the descendants of Adam: ...

²² “The LORD had possessed Me at the beginning of His way, from of old, before any of His deeds. ²³ I have been poured forth from eternity, from the first, before the earliest times of the earth. ²⁴ I was given birth when there were no ocean-depths, when there were no springs that were made glorious by water. ²⁵ I was given birth before the mountains had been firmly set and before there were hills, ²⁶ before He had made the earth, the open fields or the first dust of the world. ²⁷ I was there when He set up the heavens. When He traced a horizon on the surface of the deep, ²⁸ when He made the clouds firm above, when the fountains of the deep became strong, ²⁹ when He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰ then I was beside Him as the Craftsman. I was also His delight every day, always rejoicing in His presence, ³¹ rejoicing in His inhabitable world and delighting in human beings.”

Acts 2:14a, 22-36

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ... ²² “Men of Israel, listen to these words! Jesus of Nazareth was a Man whom God commended to you, as you yourselves know, by miracles, wonders and miraculous signs, which God worked among you through Him. ²³ This Man was handed over to you by God’s set plan and foreknowledge, and you, with the hands of wicked men, nailed Him to a cross and put Him to death. ²⁴ Nevertheless, God raised Him and loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible for death to hold Him. ²⁵ For David says about Him: ‘I have continually been foreseeing the Lord before Me. For He is at My right hand, that I may not be shaken. ²⁶ For this reason My heart is glad, and My tongue rejoices; yes, even My body will rest in hope. ²⁷ For You will not abandon My soul to Hades or allow Your Holy One to see decay. ²⁸ You have made the paths of life known to Me. You will fill Me with joy through Your presence.’ ²⁹ Brethren, I can tell you frankly that our ancestor David died and was buried, and his grave is with us to this day. ³⁰ Therefore, because David was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him by an oath to cause one of his descendants to sit on his throne, ³¹ he saw what would come and said concerning the resurrection of the Christ that He was not abandoned to the grave and that His body

did not experience decay. ³² This One, Jesus, God has raised, and of that fact we are all witnesses.

³³ “Therefore, after He has been lifted up by God’s right hand and has received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, He has poured out this, which you both see and hear. ³⁴ For it was not David who went up to heaven, but he says himself: ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at My right hand, ³⁵ until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”’

³⁶ “Therefore, all the people of Israel should know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, Lord and Christ!”

John 8:48-59

⁴⁸ The Jews answered Him, “Are we not right when we say that You are a Samaritan and that You have a demon?”

⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon but am honouring My Father, and you are dishonouring Me. ⁵⁰ I am also not trying to glorify Myself. There is One who wants Me to have glory and He is the Judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I tell you, if anyone keeps My Word, he will certainly never see death.”

⁵² Then the Jews told Him, “Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets, but You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word, he will certainly never taste death.’ ⁵³ Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham was? He died, and the prophets died. Whom are You making Yourself?”

⁵⁴ Jesus said, “If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing. It is My Father who glorifies Me, He of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ ⁵⁵ Yet you do not know Him, but I know Him. If I say that I do not know Him, I shall be a liar like you. Rather, I do know Him and keep His Word. ⁵⁶ Abraham, your father, rejoiced to see My day, saw it and was glad.”

⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old and have You seen Abraham?”

⁵⁸ Jesus told them, “Truly, truly, I tell you, before Abraham came into being, I am.”

⁵⁹ Therefore, they took up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the Temple.