

Matthew 25:31-46

“Your Judgment Day”

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Proper 29 A)

November 26, 2023

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said: ***“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 from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on His left”*** (Matthew 25:31-33).

How often do you think about the glorious return of Christ? How often do you think of the Final Judgment?

Jesus speaks of wars and rumors of wars. He speaks that many will fall away from the Christian faith only to betray one another and to hate one another. He speaks of an increase in natural disasters.

With the war between Israel and Hamas, and the war between Russia and Ukraine, one may think, are we close to Christ’s return? With an ever increase in Christians falling away from the one true faith, are we close to Christ’s return? With the news media and politicians lecturing us about the climate, is this a sign of Christ’s return?

Instead of pondering these questions, what does Jesus say? ***“Concerning that day and hour no one knows”*** (Matthew 24:36). So, life will be considered normal. Christ says that it will be like the days of Noah, since the general population was unaware until the flood came and swept them away. Christ says over and over again: ***“Be ready.”***

But even with the call for us to “be ready,” the natural question is “when?” Now, we don’t know the day and the hour of Christ’s return. So, if someone tells you that he knows when, he is lying. So, you must dismiss him. And, if you forget about this, then some false prophet will make a fool of himself by claiming he knows what he cannot know and he might make a fool of you as well.

But Jesus does give us a question from today’s Gospel lesson that we can answer. At least this is one that the Lord tells us the answer. When will all this get decided? When does the judgment happen? When does the Lord make up His mind about who goes where? The big answer to when is this Final Judgment is: right now.

After warning us through the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Tenants, this morning, everything comes to its climax. So, on this Last Sunday of the Church Year, Jesus again is warning His church – *you and me* – to be ready for the Final Judgment. As I said last week, on the one hand, we pray for Christ’s return, and on the other hand, we pray for His delay. Just the other day, I was waiting in line at Kwik Trip, and I thought: “*How many of these people around me will be numbered with the goats?*” It is a scary thought!

We have this conflict, because the Day of Judgment, which is magnificent, is also scary. It’s scary, since we have family and friends who are lapsed Christians. It’s scary, since we have family and friends who are being fed lies by false prophets wearing albs and stoles saying good is evil and evil is good. It’s scary, since we have family and friends who have never once stepped inside a Bible-believing church. It’s scary, because we all see so many people heading for judgment. It’s scary, because we see how urgent it is to tell everyone that their salvation has been won in Christ alone and that He is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

Again, “***When the Son of Man comes in His glory, ... He will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats***” (Matthew 25:31a, 32b).

So, on that great and magnificent day, Jesus will divide all mankind into two groups: sheep and goats. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus likens this to the customary practice of the shepherds in Israel. You see, during the daytime, the shepherd would let his sheep and goats graze together in the same pasture, but at night, the shepherd would separate the sheep and the goats. As it is with a shepherd, this separation is easy, since a shepherd can easily tell the difference between a sheep and a goat. So, on the Last Day, this will be a simple matter for Jesus. “***He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left***” (Matthew 25:33).

The sheep are those who God made righteous through Holy Baptism, so they live as sheep. They gladly hear and learn God’s Word. They share the good news of salvation. They care for God’s creation. They take care for those around them.

The goats are those who ignored the call of God. They chose to do other things instead of gladly hearing and learning God’s Word. They chose to reject God’s grace. They chose to ignore the cry of their fellow creatures. They chose eternal death. So, in return, God gives them what they chose. They chose to share in the same fate as Satan and his demons – eternal punishment apart from God in hell.

Now, what to make of “right” and “left”? Well, “right” signifies complete approval by the One who has all power and authority. By contrast, “left” means rejection, or sinister.

During the French Revolution, the French National Assembly was divided as “right” and “left.” In fact, our Congress has adopted this framework. But do you know the origins on this seating arrangement? You see, those who supported the Church sat on the “right” and those who supported the revolution sat on the “left.” It may be unknown to them, but the French Assembly and even our Congress is attempting to divide in a similar way as that of Christ on the Last Day.

But then we come to a problem. I thought true believers were not judged. Remember Christ saying, ***“Whoever believes is not condemned”*** (John 3:18a)? What about: ***“Whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”*** (John 5:24)?

But then we come to: ***“For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God”*** (Romans 14:10) and ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil”*** (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Hmm. What is going on here? On one hand, those who trust in Jesus are not judged and on the other hand, everyone is judged. How do we resolve this?

Well, let’s look in what manner Jesus speaks of the sheep and the goats. To the sheep, Jesus does not mention a single sin of theirs. He only speaks in glowing praise. But to the goats, Jesus makes a specific mention of their sins, which have brought them into everlasting condemnation.

To the sheep, the Last Judgment is a witness of exactly what they by faith expected. At the sight of Jesus, the sheep are filled with great joy, since Jesus is their Brother and Friend. To the sheep, He calls them ***“blessed by My Father”*** (Matthew 25:34).

To the goats, the Last Judgment is a witness of exactly how they lived apart from faith. For them, at the sight of Jesus, the goats are filled with fear, since Jesus who they denied, is actually real and present before them. To them, Jesus says, ***“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”*** (Matthew 25:41).

The goats may have known Jesus, but they chose to deny their faith before man. Remember, even Satan and his demons believe in Jesus. So, by denying their faith and living no different than an unbeliever, Jesus casts these goats into hell.

I mentioned earlier about the big answer to when is the Final Judgment. I said that this Final Judgment is right now. But what about that separation of the sheep and the goats? Well, right now everyone's fate is being decided. As for the Last Day, that is when everyone's fate will be publicly announced, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is vindicated as the truth before all people: the sheep and the goats. So, for the sheep, the same Jesus you believe and trust in today and throughout your life is the One in whose righteousness you shall stand on Judgment Day.

But what about right now? Each Sunday, we publicly confess that Christ will ***“come to judge the living and the dead.”*** We confess that this day is not a day that we – *as sheep* – dread, for we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We have the forgiveness of sins that covers all our sin. For us sheep, Judgment Day marks the public and eternal announcement of God's judgment in Christ: *“Your sins are forgiven, so you are righteous for Jesus' sake!”*

Each Sunday, we too, confess that ***“the wages of sin is death”*** (Romans 6:23) and ***“cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them”*** (Galatians 3:10b). According to God's Law, the sinner deserves God's ***“present and eternal punishment.”*** This is the judgment of the Law.

But this judgment, which we all deserved, fell upon Christ in His death on the cross. Because He took our sin into His flesh, God the Father punished His Son. Christ bore the suffering and death that we deserved. ***“He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed”*** (Psalm 53:5).

The judgment of the Gospel is that the death of Jesus and the shedding of His blood covers the sin of the world (1 John 1:7). The judgment of the Gospel is that the sinner is declared righteous for the sake of Jesus who has paid the price for his sin. And this word of forgiveness is received by faith. The righteousness of Christ clothes the baptized believer. It covers his sin with forgiveness, so that on Judgment Day, the Christian stands before God righteous and holy for Jesus' sake as His sheep.

You are His sheep! In Holy Baptism, He claimed you as His own as He gave you His name! As His sheep, we believe the judgment of the absolution which declares you forgiven!

So, today, you are judged. Through Christ's death and bodily resurrection, you who believe in Him are now declared innocent. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: ***"In fact Christ has been raised from the dead"*** (1 Corinthians 15:20a). When Jesus said, ***"It is finished"*** (John 19:30), He declared that His death paid the price for all sin, and our salvation was accomplished. When He rose from the dead, He proclaimed the forgiveness of sins to His disciples when He said, ***"Peace be with you!"*** (John 20:19, 21). Then He sent them out to proclaim the judgment of the Law and Gospel on His behalf, in order that sinners might be brought to repentance and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

So, our Judgement Day is today when a sinner is either "bound" or "loosed" from his sins through the preaching of the Law and Gospel in sermons, in catechesis, and in confession and absolution. This takes place daily in the life of the Christian as he is brought again and again to repentance and faith in Christ. This is the life of the Christian. We hear the preaching of the Law that exposes our sins, which flow from a mistrust of God. God's Law cuts us to the heart (Acts 2:37) as we feel the judgment of the Law that Jesus felt on the cross. But then you hear the preaching of the Gospel, which declares your sins forgiven for Jesus' sake. The word of the Gospel covers your sins, creates faith in Christ, comforts the heart, and gives the penitent and forgiven sinner the joy of salvation and the sure and certain hope of eternal life.

So, when you hear, ***"I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"*** you are hearing the judgment of God. It is as if you are hearing, ***"Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"*** (Matthew 25:34). Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

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

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +