

11.24.2019 Sunday Next Before Advent (Matthew 25:31-46)

I remember hearing a story about a man who fell asleep one night and began to dream that he was building a ladder from earth to heaven. The construction of this ladder was based on his own good works. Every time he fed the hungry, gave a cool drink to the thirsty, or visited the sick another rung would appear and he would climb one step closer to heaven. In his dream time passed quickly, and as the years rolled by the ladder went up into the clouds and the man thought that when he died he would step off his ladder at the gate of heaven, but one day as he climbed another rung higher on his ladder of good works, he heard a voice roll out from Paradise, which said, *“He who climbs up by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.”* At the sound of the voice, every rung on his ladder broke, and as the man fell to the earth he awoke from his dream no longer believing that the stairway to heaven is built by the good deeds of good people, but rather by grace through faith in the One who *“loved us, and gave Himself for us”* (Ephesians 5:2).

So many things in this life must be earned. Students earn degrees. Employees earn paychecks. Athletes earn championships. When you think about it, many of the things we value most in this life must be earned. Our reputation, the trust of our friends, and the respect of those we love is not given, these things are earned. We share this common experience by which we've learned that hard work pays dividends, and we've experienced the sense of fulfillment that's found in climbing a ladder one rung at a time - achieving a goal that once seemed beyond our reach. From the earliest years of my life, I was taught that honest, hard-working, people of integrity live by this pattern in which they work hard to earn their reward, and while I whole-heartedly believe in the value of our own hard work, as I read the New Testament lesson appointed for this Sunday I was reminded of the danger in applying this type of thinking to the eternal reward that God has prepared for us.

In our Second Lesson this morning, our Lord provides us with a vivid image of the Last Day. He tells us that on that day, *“before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left”* (Matthew 25:32-33). At the beginning of this description of Judgment Day, one of the first things we recognize is the

reality of the judgment to come. We state this fact every week when we profess in the Creeds that our Lord will “come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead,” but as we say those words how often do we stop and acknowledge the fact that there is a judgment to come, a final day of reckoning for the living and the dead, a time when we will each stand in the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself. In His presence there will be no shades of grey, no pretending to be something we are not, no middle ground. There will be those on His right and those on His left. Those who are with Him and those who are not.

To those who are with Him, to the sheep on His right hand, the King says, “*Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me*” (Matthew 25:34-36). It’s important for us to read these words carefully. We are people who’ve been taught to work hard to earn our reward, and therefore, it’s much easier for us to view Jesus’ words as evidence that we are saved by our own good works. When we hear our Lord speak about all the good works of those on His right hand and the lack of good works from those on His left, we may feel inclined to conclude that Salvation is just one more thing we must earn, but I assure you, that is not the truth.

The only-begotten Son of God nailed to the Cross stands as a testimony of “*the breadth, and length, and depth, and height*” (Ephesians 3:18) of a love we do not deserve, and could never earn. Our Lord speaks of good works, but the knowledge that we are “*justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 3:24) moves us to prayerfully and carefully consider this passage to the end that we may hear and receive the truth God intends to communicate through these words. When we do so, the first thing we notice is the very specific language in our Lord’s invitation to those on His right hand. He says to them, “*Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*” (25:34). Our Lord’s invitation to those on His right hand is an invitation to receive an inheritance. He said, “*inherit the kingdom...*” As you know, a person doesn’t work for or earn an inheritance. An inheritance is received

because someone placed you in their will. Those on His right hand inherit the kingdom by the grace of God, because “*God wills the Salvation of all through the knowledge of truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4).

It’s also important for us to recognize that this kingdom inheritance was, as the Scripture declares, “*prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*” The words of our Lord once again describe an infinite love we could never merit by our own good works. When we contemplate a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world, our thoughts may turn to the first words we read in book of Genesis: “*In the beginning, God...*” (Genesis 1), or in the Gospel according to St. John: “*In the beginning was the Word...*” (John 1). These familiar verses bring to mind images of our Triune God before time began, and when we make a connection between these words and those we read today, we realize that in the beginning, the Father, through the greatness of His wisdom and power, prepared this kingdom for us. From the beginning, the Son, through the abundance of His sacrificial love, purchased this kingdom for us. Since the beginning, the Spirit, through the Divine power of Almighty God, has been preparing us, for this kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

Through a careful reading of this passage, we also discover that a kingdom prepared for those on the right hand of God stands in sharp contrast to what is written concerning those on His left. As our Lord separated the sheep from the goats, He said to those on His left hand, “*Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41). Everlasting fire, eternal condemnation, the hell of separation from our Father was not prepared for people, it was prepared for the devil and his angels. What God prepared for people, He sent His Son, our Savior, to offer to all mankind. His offer is life and rest in the kingdom *prepared for you from the foundation of the world*, yet our Lord’s words indicate that some will turn their back on His gracious offer, and as we discussed earlier, on the Last Day there will be no middle ground - only those on His right hand and those on His left. On the Last Day you will either have a relationship with your Creator, or you will be told, “*I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*” (Matthew 7:23).

Our relationship with Christ is the key to understanding the place and the

necessity of good works in the Christian life and on the Day of Judgment. While the good deeds of good people will never merit Salvation, this passage clearly communicates a message we find throughout Scripture, the truth that, to use the words of St. Paul, “*we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works*” (Ephesians 2:10). In Paul’s words we see that our relationship with Christ is the key, for he tells us that it is only *in Christ Jesus* that we are able to do good works. I’m sure the majority of people in our culture would disagree with that statement, but Jesus said, “*Apart from Me, you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). Our culture would disagree, but I ask you, isn’t it reasonable to think that the only way to do good is to be in union with the One who is goodness itself? Isn’t it reasonable to understand that the only way to love is to be in union with God, who is love? Isn’t it reasonable to believe that the only way to be saved from the punishment we all deserve is by grace through faith in the only One who was sent to for our Salvation?

Every Sunday we stand together and proclaim the truth that our Lord will come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead. Judgment Day is coming, but don’t let your heart be troubled and don’t put your faith in your own good works. Instead, look to the Cross of Christ, reflect on the perfect image of God’s infinite love for you, and believe, to the end that you may hear these words roll out from Paradise: “*Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*”