

# Knowing the Shepherd who Knows YOU

Matthew 25:31-46

The election is still a year away, but our country is already in the Presidential race, isn't it? There are lots of candidates running, and it will be crazy next year seeing how it all plays out.

Here in America, the President is a big deal. We would never go for a king. We had a bad experience with a monarch back in the days of the Revolutionary War, with King George III, and we are never going back.

Our aversion to monarchs makes it hard for us to understand what it means for us that Jesus is our King. We tend to get images in our mind of King Charles in England and all the nonsense with Prince Harry and Megan Markle. That is definitely NOT at all the kind of King Jesus is! Jesus is not some political leader who is just going to give us a different style of government. Jesus tells us He will come in His glory. He will have authority over all nations of peoples of all times. And yet He will be like a Shepherd too. Jesus was announcing the coming of an ***entirely different way*** of being in relationship with each other and with God. It's not the ruler that changes, but the realm in which we live. All this makes it hard to us to understand what Jesus is saying to us today. And today we are looking at a parable which is very challenging.

This 'Parable of the sheep and the goats' is the last of three parables which end Jesus' public teaching. It tells us about the end of time when Jesus will return to the earth. It sends a clear message that there are those who will enter into eternal life with God, and those who will not. However, there are still a couple of surprises in the parable that we can miss if we're not paying close enough attention to what Jesus is saying to us.

**Are you a sheep (saved) BECAUSE you are good?**

What worries me about this parable is that Jesus seems to be saying that on the Last Day, when He comes to judge us

and all people, He is going to be more interested in our works than He is in our faith.

Whether I go to heaven or hell all seems to come down to how well I've fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned. And when I look at my own life, I realize that these works are not high on my weekly list of things to do.

But now, You might say, "**Aren't we saved by grace alone, "...*apart from works of the law*"?** Isn't grace all about what God does (especially what He has done in Jesus' death and resurrection), while works are all about what we do?"

This is where we might get confused about what Jesus is saying to us on such an important topic as this! So let's be really crystal clear so that we have no confusion.

### **You don't do good works to GET saved.**

Giving food to the poor, and walking little old ladies across the street are, indeed, good things to do and God wants you to do compassionate, loving things. But they count for nothing when it comes to earning your way into heaven. You can't do anything to deserve heaven. Salvation is by grace. Period.

You don't do good works to GET saved. Jesus is not judging people to be sheep because they did 'sheepy' things. It's exactly the opposite - the works of the sheep prove that they were true sheep.

A sheep doesn't say, "bah" and eat grass to *become* a sheep. A sheep says "bah" because it really IS a sheep and can't help it. In the same way, if you slept in your garage and drank motor oil, that won't make you become a car. Or if a wolf dresses up in sheep skins, eats grass, and says, "bah," it doesn't become a sheep. It's still a wolf. So, you can't get yourself to heaven by doing things that look like the things that people going to heaven do.

### **Are you a sheep (saved) BECAUSE you are good?**

God is clear that you are not saved BECAUSE you are so good. Instead, you are saved by God, by His love, by His gifts. Paul writes:

***For by grace you have been saved through faith. ...<sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are His (God's) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*** Ephesians 2:8–10

In other words, God saves you -- gives you forgiveness -- by grace, because Jesus won it and offers it to you. AND God gives you the ability to do good works. God the Holy Spirit lives in you moving you to actually think and act holy -- like the holy status that Jesus gives you. So, works are just as much God's gift to us as faith is. Grace and works are not opposed to each other but are two sides of the same coin.

Isn't that great news? If it were up to us to do enough good things to deserve heaven, we'd be up a creek without a paddle. We'd be stuck. See, the truth is no one is good enough, or capable enough, to do anything to earn our way closer to God. The Bible says, ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."*** Romans 3:23-24

Both evil and good people are equally in need of God's mercy: from Hitler to Mother Theresa, from the drug dealer on the street corner making money while kids are dying from that junk, to the Pope himself. Good works make no difference. We are ALL sinful. NONE of us can earn our way. When it comes to getting into heaven, living a good life counts for nothing. We are all so sinful that none of us could ever be good enough. All of us must rely on God's grace. All of us must trust only in what Jesus has done for us.

To make sure we get the point that these sheep did not earn heaven by doing sheepy works, Jesus tells heaven is an inheritance. Jesus says, ***"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ..."*** Matthew 25:34

An inheritance is not wages for services rendered. An inheritance is not something you spend your whole life working for. It's the thing somebody else spent their life working for, then they died, and you receive it all.

The inheritance God's sheep receive is not theirs because they worked for it, but because Jesus Christ

sacrificed Himself in your place. He took your sin on Him and died for it them.

An inheritance is given within a family. You are born into the family of God. It happened in your Baptism. Jesus is your brother who spent His life working for your inheritance, and then He died, and you get heaven as a gift.

**Good works SHOW you are saved (a sheep).**

A week ago, I saw one of my older brothers. It is amazing to see how much he talks like my dad. My brother's facial expressions and the way he moves his hands are spot on for my dad. Families pass on these family traits. You don't have to learn them, you just have them. Maybe when you were young, you heard your mother say something and you swore you would *never* say that. But now that you're older you hear those same words flowing from your mouth.

In the story, the sheep do good works because they are part of the family. They are sheep. The good things they do just flow naturally out of them. The sheep were surprized at Christ's judgment. They had no idea that what they had done were works done for the Lord. **"When did we do that? When did we see You hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison, and help You?"** They didn't see Christ when they did these things—they were simply doing what came naturally to them. And that's how Christ's sheep are. That's how true faith in Jesus is. When you know and experience Jesus' love for you, then loving others comes naturally, without being told, without thinking about it.

That's the sheepy part of Jesus' story, but there is another part. The parable goes on to tell of the goats. The goats hear a very different verdict, ***"I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."***

Notice something strange about Jesus' judgement here? The goats are not judged by their *BAD* works. Instead, Jesus draws their attention to their complete lack of works. **The goats do NO good works.** The goats lived according to

their goatish natures. They are selfish, self-focussed. Goats don't know Jesus, His love, His forgiveness, His grace. The only those works that count on the Last Day are done in and through Jesus. So, without knowing Jesus, the goat had nothing. Their faithless lives resulted in a whole bunch of nothing.

This may be where we start to get a little uncomfortable. We are Lutherans. We are quick to rely on our Lutheran mantra, "Saved by grace through faith, without the works of the law," We often use it wrongly as an excuse for idleness and sinful self-interest. We live in a land of abundance and riches. Yet there are still many around us who go hungry, thirsty, naked, unwelcomed and unvisited. There are LOTS of people who need you to show the love and compassion of Jesus into their lives. So, let me ask you: **What do your works – or absence of works – show about you?**

I have heard of a party game where every person in the room has a sign taped to their backs, reading either "monarch", "guest of king/queen," "servant", or "beggar".

The object of the game is to try to guess what sign is on your own back by how people treat you. So, if your sign says "monarch", then most of the guests are going to flatter you and offer you treats. If, however, yours says "beggar", you're going to be treated like rubbish.

Here's my question to you: Would the people you spend time with at home, on the golf course, at work, in the neighbourhood – would everyone say that you treated them as if they had a secret sign on their back, a sign that read "Christ the King"? Jesus said, **"As you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to Me."** If we asked your grumpy neighbour, or your over-bearing boss, or your good-for-nothing relative about how you treat them, would they say that you treat them as if they were Jesus Himself. Is your faith just words without works? Or do your works show your true faith?

John, the closest disciple to Jesus, wrote this in the Bible for us: ***"If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"*** <sup>1 John 3:17</sup> This truth should make you search your

heart! What verdict will you hear on the Last Day? Will you hear Jesus' blessed assurance, "Come", or will you find yourself standing among the goats, complaining that "If I had just known it was You, Lord, I would have done something—honest!"?

In the ancient church there was the tradition of the 'seven deadly sins'. You've probably heard of them: pride, anger, lust, envy, gluttony, greed, and sloth. Now if I were to ask you which of these sins you think is the biggest problem in our world today, you might say, "Lust or greed or maybe envy or pride". You might even say, "Gluttony. But I doubt if any of you would say, "Sloth". After all, we are so busy these days. We are so hurried, overworked, and stressed-out. Sloth is the least of our problems ... or is it?

Sloth is not laziness; it is the deadly sin of lack of care. Presbyterian minister, Fred Craddock, defines sloth as, **Sloth is "...the ability to look at a starving child...with a swollen stomach and say, 'Well, it's not my kid.' ...Or to see an old man sitting alone among the pigeons in the park and say, 'Well...that's not my dad.' It is the capacity of the human spirit to look out upon the world and everything God made and say, 'I don't care!'"**

This apathy, this total disregard of hungry and hurting people is NOT to be in the family of God. This is NOT one of the family traits. As children of God you are to show the character, the nature of God to others by the way you live. Did God say "I don't care!" when He saw you lost in your sin and destined for hell? No. He gave us His most costly gift – the life of His own Son – to save you.

Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves. THAT'S the family trait. Starting at your baptism THAT'S what God the Holy Spirit is working in you. That love for God and love for others is to be growing all the time throughout your life. You are called to do good works.

Today, if you examine your life and you are troubled by your lack of good works, if you are afraid of what judgement

Jesus will say to you on the Last Day because you don't think you ever gave a cup of cold water to a thirsty person, or visited someone in prison, then don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Instead, like a true sheep, turn back to Jesus for forgiveness. All of our lives come up short on the good works scale. So turn to Christ. Ask His forgiveness. Ask that God help you to live as He desires. And God is faithful and just and will forgive you of all your sins!

**Good works are GIFTS (blessings).**

There's a story about a man who was out of work and desperate for a job. He finally saw a help wanted sign on the door of a bank and went in to apply. Not having any banking experience he was shocked when they offered him the position of comptroller of the bank. "I can't do the job, I don't know what it even is!" he exclaimed to the interviewer. But the man behind the desk said, "We will train you, don't worry." Desperate for work he accepted the position and arrived to work the very next day, excited to finally be gainfully employed again.

They brought him into a very messy office with a desk, lots of files stacked all over the place, and strange stamping sorts of machines on the counters, none of which he knew how to use. As the branch president walked out the door, he said the man, "Oh, by the way, the regulators will be here in two days to look at the books."

Suddenly it dawned the man what this was all about. He was the fall guy, the one they would blame when the regulators realized that things were not right. Staring at the mountains of files and strange machines and thick binders all around him, he put his head in his hands in despair. But suddenly a young woman poked her head in the door and asked, "Do you need some help?" "Yes," said the man. "I am totally lost." She smiled at him and got right to work. Together they began to tackle the files and put the machines where they belonged. The binders were all sorted and put in the right places and the computers were synchronized. For two very long days they worked and got the comptroller's office back in shape.

After the second day, the night before the regulators were arriving, he went home. The office looked much better, but he really had no idea if all their work was in vain or not. After all, he had no idea what it was supposed to be like. It was a sleepless night as he pondered what would happen. If the bank failed the regulator's inspection, he wondered if he would be put in jail? Would he be fined? What would happen in the morning? With a lot of fear and anxiety he walked into his office and took his place behind that now clean desk and surveyed all the work they had done. But, would it be enough?

The knock came at 9:30. A receptionist said the bank regulator was here. "Show them in," he said. His heart was in his throat. But imagine his surprise when the person who walked through the door was the very same young woman who had helped him for the past two days. And imagine his relief when he realized that the work she would be judging would be her own and not really his.

God lives in you, working in you to do good works. ***"For we are His (God's) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."*** Ephesians 2:10

These are God's GIFT to you! You get to live in the joy of a clean conscience now. You get to live in the joy of loving other people. There's nothing better! This is the BEST life! And this is God's gift to you.

And in the end, even though the works Jesus judges on the Last Day are what He, Himself has done in you and for you, still, He rewards you. Isn't that crazy? It's wonderfully crazy!

***"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'"*** Matthew 25:34

He gives us His works to win our forgiveness and make us holy, then He works IN us to do good works, then He *rewards* us with heaven. I mean, WHO WOULD DO THAT?! Only God.

And that's the point. Only your God. He is so gracious. And He invites you to turn to Him. To know Him. To be His sheep.

Because you are in the family of God, His beloved son or daughter, made His by the water of Baptism, a sheep of the Good Shepherd, then, live as a sheep. Live your faith. Now is the time to live as God has made you to be. Now is the time to give yourself to God in faith, and give yourself to serve your neighbor in love. You are a sheep of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. So live sheeplike. And look forward with confidence to the everlasting sheepfold waiting in heaven. In the name of Jesus.

AMEN.