

LAST JUDGMENT
Matthew 25:31-46
The Trial of Faith

I've been thinking about death a lot this week. I've had to come to grips with the fact that my life is nearing its end. I've turned thirty—thirty! That's old. According to Bob Dylan, I can no longer trust myself. I can't even imagine what I'd do if I turned forty, God forbid, fifty. I'd probably just roll up in a ball and wait to die.

I'm joking, sort of. Ok, no, I'm really joking. There's plenty of life after thirty, at least for some people. But for many there is not. Not a year of this life is guaranteed. Walk through a cemetery and read the dates if you don't believe me, and so it is important that we think about death, that we come to grips with it.

We're all going to stand before our Maker someday. We're all going to give an account, to face one of two possibilities, eternal salvation or eternal damnation, with no in between. It may be the furthest thing from your mind, but it's closer than you think. So are we ready? Are you ready?

“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” That is what Jesus will say to those not ready. Are you ready? These words should be all you need to know you'd better be. There is no curve on this test. This is pass or fail. Do you make the grade?

What we have before us in the Holy Gospel today is a trial, the trial of faith. One might suppose it is a trial of works. Jesus does talk about works, after all. But we are not called to scan the text. We are called to study it, to dive into it, to analyze every jot and tittle. This is a trial of faith, and it is unlike any trial you've ever seen. We must remember the order.

The verdict comes first. We're sheep or we aren't. It all depends on the verdict. What does God declare us to be? And to know what we are, sheep or goats, we must know the basis of the verdict. Thankfully, Scripture gives it repeatedly. St. Paul writes, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”* (Ephesians 2:8,9). Jesus says in Mark 16:16, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”* And in John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

The word “justify” means to declare someone not guilty. Whenever the Bible speaks of justification, it paints the picture of a trial, and a trial is what we have before us today. St. Paul writes in Romans 5:9, with an eye toward the trial before us, *“Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.”*

There will be plenty of nice people in hell, fine citizens and good neighbors, but they will be lost nonetheless, because the evidence does not precede the verdict, it follows it. Christ’s death was not a sham. His cross is not a stepping stone. Christ’s crucifixion is everything. He did not say from the cross, “I’ve got it started.” No, He cried, *“It is finished.”* Christ’s death, Christ’s cross is the beginning and end of your salvation, not to mention everything in between, and to make it anything less is to reject it, to blaspheme it, to call it less than enough. To base salvation on our feeble works or anything else less than Christ is to make salvation too easy, and, even more, to make it uncertain.

“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Every last wretched one of us deserves to hear this from our Maker and Judge, none other than Christ Himself. We’ve earned it. We’ve worked hard at it. As we confess in God’s service, we’ve won these words from Christ not only by what we’ve done, but by what we’ve left undone, not only by what we’ve done on purpose, but even by what we’ve done without knowing, by what we couldn’t confess even if we wanted. David begs in Psalm 19, *“Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults”* (12). We’re damned on the evidence. We’ve sinned, and one sin is grounds for damnation. *“The wages of sin,”* not of sins, *“is death,”* St. Paul says (Romans 6:23). Our only salvation can be the verdict. But what will the verdict be.

Thankfully, our Maker and Judge is also our Savior. When the jailer at Philippi asked Sts. Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, they answered, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”* (16:31). And even that, even faith, which believes and receives salvation, is a gift from our good and gracious God.

Jesus says to those who would expect earn salvation by their works, who would anticipate the Savior’s praise for their merits, *“Does [the Master] thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we*

have only done what was our duty” (Luke 17:9,10). If we want to stand before God with our works, we must also stand before Him with our sins, because the standard for keeping the law is clear. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”* (Matthew 5:48). St. James warns in his Epistle, *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it”* (James 2:10).

Jesus wants no one lost. Notice that He tells the unbelieving to depart *“into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* Hell was not created for people. Heaven was. Hell was created for the devil and his demons. Jesus wants *“all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”* St. Paul tells Timothy and all of us as much in his first epistle to his spiritual son. Jesus wants you to be saved, and in Him, by grace and through faith, you are. He has taken hold of you as you drowned. He hasn’t told you to swim to this or that place or say this prayer or touch this bone or relic to be saved. No, He’s grabbed you and pulled you through the waters to new life, letting only your sin drown. His death is your life. His life is your salvation. You are His sheep. Stay out of the goat pen.

And what will sheep do? St. Paul tells us in that same passage from Ephesians: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:8-10). And St. James, who preaches salvation by faith, which means he also urges the saved to good works, writes, *“Faith without works is dead.”* To paraphrase Luther, *“We are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone.”*

If you want to be saved, for the love of God don’t look at your works! No, look at the love of God, at Christ. In Him, you are saved. In Him, you are the sheep. But don’t think that looking at Him won’t have any effect. If you are saved, you will produce good works, not for salvation, but because salvation is yours, not for heaven, but because heaven is yours, not for grace, but because grace is yours.

You saw justification in action today. Let me assure you, Augustana could not have walked, crawled, or rolled to the font had she wanted. She could not have asked for salvation. But saved she now is. *“Baptism now saves you,”* Peter says (1 Peter 3:21), and Baptism has saved her, because St. Paul

promises in Romans 6, “*all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.*” And Christ has died for you. And you have been baptized. And that is justification. And that is the verdict. Receive it through the faith God gives to you, and He will produce the evidence, not merely for you, but through you, not in spite of you, but in cooperation with you, pulling your regenerated and renewed will along. Just step out of His way. It’s as simple as that—simple, but not cheap or too easy—Christ’s precious Body and Blood, given into death and dispensed from the altar, could never by a believer be called that. Amen.