

SHEEP, GOATS, AND GOD
Matthew 25:31-46

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He showed up in the church office years ago. He boldly went up to the receptionist and asked if he could borrow a computer because he needed to type a letter. We didn't know him from Adam, so we tried to explain that if he would just write his letter down on a piece of paper, we would have someone type it for him. "This should be interesting," the office staff thought. "What is this guy going to write?"

This is the typed copy.

Of the "ten lepers" the Bible says only one returned to give thanks. I have said that if I should pass through Amarillo again I would take time to thank them for a particular act of kindness rendered to me some 40 years ago.

I was in the military and at Amarillo only 3 months but a friend brought me to 1st Baptist where every Sunday after church the congregation would feed us. The preacher preached in earnest, but I don't remember what he said. The food was excellent and plentiful but I don't remember what we ate. What I do remember was that I couldn't figure out why these people treated me so well – the people at First Baptist Church. Generally speaking the people don't much care for soldiers around a military base. I left Texas in wonderment at you folks. "Why would you care about me?"

I was an awful boy and became a worse man. In 14 years, I managed to ruin my life. In desperation I went to visit a little Baptist church and the people were just like the folks in Amarillo at 1st Baptist. While trying to figure out why the people were like that, they won me to themselves. The result being that I continued to go till one day the light shone through and I got saved.

I have been preaching now some 22 years and holding preachers school for Appalachian ministers.

I tell them be like 1st Baptist, Amarillo. I know what it was I saw in them. It was Jesus.

If you are the same church, I'll see you in heaven.

Thanks for showing me what Jesus would do when He met the likes of me.

Wow. What we thought would be silly gibberish was really a heart-warming, heart-felt thanks. To this church. There are some of you who are still here who participated in caring for the servicemen.

But he remembered. He couldn't get past it. He couldn't figure out why you loved him. And when he left First Baptist, after his stint here (perhaps those here at the church who worked with him, thinking they had accomplished nothing), God sent him off to see that love again in another – this time little – Baptist church. It didn't matter, did it? Big or little, he felt the same love in God's house.

For you see, there was no reason for us to love him that way. But we did. I love what he said about the little Baptist church. It wasn't Jesus he saw first. It was their love. He says – remember what he said – “...they won me to themselves.” As a result, he kept attending. Then the light shone through and he was saved.

It's signed “Preacher Paul, 2922 Mutton Hollow Road, Kodak, Tennessee 37764.”

We are saved by grace – saved by our faith in Christ Jesus and not by our works. It was His faithfulness on the cross that brought us into the Kingdom of God, not anything we did. But I can't get past what I read in scripture – passages like Matthew 25:31-46, passages in the New Testament that over and over again make it very clear – and I cannot fail to make clear what Jesus and the apostles taught so frequently – that we are saved by faith, but we are judged as God's people by our deeds, by our works, by what we do.

Over and over again in scripture we have the judgment scene. The scene is a division based on works. You have to be careful when you read the New Testament not to read it through so many presuppositions, so many “I've-already-made-up-my-mind lenses” that you can't see what's really written there. You read the New Testament and you're going to read about a judgment of works, of deeds. Over and over again, these are the words from the mouth of our Lord Jesus and the apostles He taught.

What Jesus says is what James says. It's what Paul says. It's what Peter says. We just cannot get past it. We are judged by our deeds. D-E-E-D-S. Our works. Put another way, the children of God are to be busy producing works that reveal who they really are in Christ Jesus. A faith that does not work cannot be a faith that saves. God's people work.

God's people are full of acts of kindness, good deeds that serve God, His church, and the Kingdom. There is not one of you here in this congregation who is saved to be shelved. Every one of you has gifts. You are to participate in the ministry and the functions of your body of faith, your local church. First and foremost, before you serve any other entity you need to serve your local church, the body of Christ. First and foremost. Service through your stewardship – your giving, your tithing. Service through the myriad of ministries and missions at First Baptist Church. They are countless.

Serving. Plugging in with God's people in God's house to produce His ministries to change lives. You cannot get past it.

What does the Bible say about works?.

I. First of all, I want to say that God remembers our works.

Nehemiah 13:14 says “Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.” Remember my active duty in your place of worship, he is saying clearly.

Hebrews 6 says the same thing. Whether it’s the Old Testament prophet or the unknown author of the New Testament book, in Hebrews 6:9 we read, “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.”

God remembers our works. He remembers our service for His house and for His church. The author of Hebrews says God is just. He will remember your work and the love that you have shown in His name as you’re ministering to the people of God. Don’t be sluggish about this, the author of Hebrews continues to say in chapter 6.

Look it up. Read it for yourself. God remembers our works.

Here in our passage in Matthew, our main text, we have the judgment of the nations, the dividing of the sheep and the goats. There is a division among those who are sheep and those who are goats. He says to those who are to inherit His Kingdom: “I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.”

And the righteous – notice, they are just as confused as the wicked – “Lord, when were you thirsty and I gave you something to drink? When were you hungry and we fed you? When were you a stranger and we invited you in? Or naked and we clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison and come to you?” And He’ll say, “Inasmuch as you do it to the least of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you’ve done it to Me.”

Then to the left He says, “I want you to go to the eternal fire. I made it for the devil and his angels, but you’re going to go there. I was hungry and you didn’t give me anything to eat. I was thirsty, and you left my throat parched. I was a stranger, and you didn’t take me in. I was naked; you didn’t put any clothes on my back. I was sick and in prison, and you shunned me.”

And they’re going to say, “Lord, we didn’t see you hungry or thirsty or sick or in prison or naked.” And He’s going to say, “Yes, when you saw the least of these that way, you saw me that way. Now go to eternal punishment.” But to the righteous, “Go to eternal life.”

You can almost see the scene as someone comes to the Kingdom of God, to the throne. Picture yourself there. I picture myself there. The King says to me, “Batson, did you bring your datebook?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Well, I want you to look up March 6, 1973.”

“Yes, that’s great Lord. That’s when I was elected president of the 5th grade class of Wade Hampton Elementary. Wow. You remember that, Lord?”

“No. That never even crossed my mind,” the King replies. “It was on that day you shared your lunch with a boy who said he forgot his, but you noticed he’d been forgetting it a lot lately. Kinda looked like a hungry lion looking at a downed antelope as he watched the other children gobble down their lunches. That’s what I remember you did on that day. Now turn forward there. It’s 1980 – December 24.”

“December 24, 1980. Lord, what did I get for Christmas that year, Lord? I can’t remember.”

“That’s not important,” says the King. “It was on that day, after your family’s party, that you quietly slipped out, as a junior in high school, and played Santa Claus for the Kuswani children – a single mom from Lebanon who had found Jesus and was struggling with two boys who were unruly, like little boys are without a dad, and two daughters – one older, trying to play mom to the rest of her siblings while Mrs. Kuswani was at work. You gave Ead a bowling set, with plastic pins and a plastic ball, but he thought it was a Brunswick. You gave Joad a yo-yo and dart gun. You gave each of the sisters a doll. Batson, you’ve studied a lot of religion since then. I didn’t think you were ever going to graduate. But you never came as close as you did on that day to understanding what I said: that pure and undefiled religion (James 1:27) in the sight of God is to visit orphans – they were that – and widows – she was that – in their distress. Now, how about February 2, 1992?”

“Yes, Lord,” as I thumb ahead through my calendar. “I thought you’d take note of that. I defended the unity of the authorship of the prophet of the book of Isaiah. Dr. Bellenger’s class. I tried to set them all straight that you only had one prophet who wrote that whole book. I made an A on that paper in that Baylor Ph.D. seminar. I thought you’d be proud of me for that. Hmm...you didn’t really even take notice of that, King? Oh yeah...I forgot about that...yes, the lady had a flat tire and she was scared and I stopped and helped her change it. And that’s what really mattered that day? Not my seminar paper on the unity of the authorship of Isaiah.”

You’ve got the picture. You can substitute your life as well as mine. Yes, when we come to that last judgment, I’m afraid the text says there are going to be all kinds of surprises. There are going to be folks who are absolutely certain they were sheep. They are ready to saunter over to the King’s right side. He’ll stop them and they’ll say, “Of course, we qualify. We preached in your name. We’ve done miracles in your name. We climbed to the top of the ecclesiastical ladder.” And the King will say, “You’re goats in sheep’s clothing. I never knew you.”

Then there will be people who have been broken in their sinfulness, ashamed of the things in their lives, who will wonder if they even have a chance to get into the Kingdom. They’ll conclude that the only possibility is for them to rely on the grace and favor of the kindness of God.

You think God has saved you to shelve you? No, He's saved you to be His disciple, His learner, His follower who is dispensing grace everywhere you go. Even if it is only a cup of cold water in His name, it counts. You think God has given you the gift to teach so you can sit here and just listen and be entertained by me? No. He wants you not only to listen, but He wants you to talk and teach. You think He's given you a special love for children to sit here in worship and admire children? No. He's given you a special love for children that you can teach them in Sunday School about Him and His ways.

We need to wake up to works.

II. Not only does God remember them, but they are the evidence of our faith.

We see it here in Matthew 25. We see it in James 2: "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, 'You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'" "

Yes, secondly, works are evidence of faith.

III. The third thing I want to say – and you need to hear it – you're going to be judged by your works.

Look at 1 Corinthians 3:10 ff.

According to the grace of God which was given to me (Paul writes), as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (That's our salvation.) Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss;- – (but notice he doesn't lose his salvation) – he himself, shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (says Paul), that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

It doesn't get any clearer than that.

In John 15, Jesus speaks of the vine and the branches. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit."

Romans 2: “Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds.”

You can’t miss it. Doesn’t Jesus Himself say in Matthew 16, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man (speaking of Himself) is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds.”

I just can’t get past it.

IV. Our deeds cause people to glorify God.

Matthew 5:16

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

1 Peter 2:12

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

The world ought to see all the wonderful things that the people of God are doing in such a way that they say, “You know, they must really have something.” Like Pastor Paul who wrote and said, “I couldn’t figure out why you loved me here at First Baptist Church.” Pastor Paul said he was drawn to the people at the small Baptist church he went to. It was only after being drawn to them that he was drawn to Jesus. And only after people are drawn to you will they be drawn to your Lord. And they’re drawn to you by your works, by your deeds.

V. In 1 Timothy, we learn finally that those who minister to us – that is me – it’s my job to exhort you, like I am doing today, to do good works.

In 1 Timothy 6:17 ff., Paul tells the young minister, “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but upon God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.”

You think God has blessed you and blessed your business so you can own yet a third or fourth home, or have a new car every year? You think He is really blessing you for those self-serving things? Or do you think He might be blessing you so that you can be a blessing to others, working for His Kingdom through His church? You tell the rich, says Paul to Timothy, that they need to be rich in good deeds.

Paul writes to Titus, as he instructs him, to “remind them...to be ready for every good deed.” In the same chapter he says, “This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.” And in verse 14 of Titus 3, “Let our people also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, that they may not be unfruitful.”

Congregation, I can't get over the call in scripture that our judgment will be based upon our deeds. I can't get over in scripture that God notices the little things we do for the insignificant ones of this world. I can't get over in scripture the pressing duty of the minister to call you to be engaged in good deeds.

Every pastor has his ministry or his message summed up in just a few words. When my ministry – whenever that may be – is finished here at First, Amarillo, it is my prayer that you will say, “Why, he's the one who told us to get busy, to have a faith that uses our hands and our pocketbooks, our mouths and our feet. He's the one who called us to walk what we talk.”

Those words of Preacher Paul ring in my ears. “I've been preaching now for some 22 years and holding preachers school for Appalachian ministers.” What does he tell them? “I tell them to be like the people in the Amarillo church. I know what it was I saw in those people. It was Jesus.”