

Christ the King Sunday Yr A, 20/11/2011  
Matt 25:31-46  
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"Who wants to be a goat?"

A Christian woman wanted a parrot that could talk. She looked in several shops before finding one. The owner told her, however, that the parrot had been previously owned by a bartender and though he could say anything, he also on occasion used profanity. She told him she would buy him anyway and teach him to say good things. Everything went well for about a month. He learned to say "Praise the Lord" and a number of other Christian words and phrases. One day she forgot to feed him and when she came into the house she heard him cursing. She grabbed him up and said, "I told you not to talk that way. I'll teach you never to do it again." So she put him in the deep freeze and shut the door. A few minutes later she took him out and asked, "Have you learned your lesson?" The bird shivered and replied, "Yes, ma'am." She asked, "Are you going to talk that way anymore?" The parrot replied, "No ma'am."

About seven months went by and not a bit of bad language. Apparently the bird was cured of his rascally habits. Then one day she forgot to feed him, water him, or change his cage. When she returned home that day he was carrying on worse than ever. She grabbed him and put him back in the freezer but forgot him for some time. He was almost frozen to death when she thought of him. She put him in his cage to thaw out. Finally he began to move and talk a little and she asked him again, "Did you learn your lesson?" "Yes, ma'am," he retorted. Then he sat there quietly for a few more minutes shivering and said, "Can I ask you a question?" She answered, "Yes." The parrot

said, “I thought I knew all the bad words there were, but just what did that turkey in there say?”<sup>1</sup>

The story—even though humorous—got me thinking about today’s gospel. I think the story emphasises the difficulty of getting rid of the so called “rascally habits” of the parrot. In our gospel, on this last Sunday of the church year, we are given a picture of Christ as King and Judge; gathering people from all the nations before his judgement throne at the end of time. He then proceeds to separate the people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Apparently in the Middle East shepherds do place sheep and goats together into one flock during the day. However, at the end of the day, they separate goats from the sheep, since apparently goats cannot stand the cold of the night as well as the sheep so they need to go inside. Another reason for separating the two is that some goats need to be milked. So the parable of Christ separating people like a shepherd is true to real life shepherding in the Middle East.

Yet, there is something as a Lutheran reading of this separation of the people from each other that doesn’t sit well with me and rather nags me. We Lutherans believe, along with the apostle Paul, that we are at one and the same time saint and sinner. Our saint-sinner nature cannot be separated—that is who we are. Consequently, in this life there is always going to be a struggle inside of us between our saintliness and sinfulness. In other words, the two cannot be separated. So, my question is: Are we not both at the same time sheep and goats? Just as the parrot could not separate its habit of using bad language from speaking good language—perhaps we too can be called goats because can you not think of times in your life when you have failed in the six criteria that Jesus lays out in this parable? I know that I can think of such times. Moreover, I do not feel proud of it either. I deeply regret those times and wished that somehow the clock could be turned back and I could act like those who did: feed the hungry,

give drink to the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. However, turning the clock back is not possible.

Another point of the story that coincides with today's gospel is that just as the parrot could not escape judgement and punishment for its foul language—so too we, according to the parable, cannot escape judgement and punishment for the goat side of our existence. There is a judgement day; a time of reckoning; a being held accountable for the life that we have lived. We cannot escape that. The parable also tells us that the consequences of being a goat are tragic and to be dreaded and avoided at all costs! Who wants to be a goat?! Who wants to be accursed? Not I! Who wants to go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels? Not I! Who wants to go into eternal punishment? Not I!

So, then, what is this parable about? If we've blown it miserably and failed in all six criteria that Christ our King and Judge bases his judgement on—then is there any hope for you and I? The answer to that question, I believe, is a resounding "YES!" There is good news in this parable. It is not a case of doing good works to get our eternal "brownie points" in heaven. We are not saved by good works. Nor, as Luther once said, do good works make a person good. Nope, sorry, it doesn't work that way (pun intended). Rather, the key to interpreting this parable, in my humble opinion, is found in Christ our King and Judge who speaks the following words in verse 34: '*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*' Did you hear that?! The emphasis is on what God has done for us, NOT what we do for God when it comes to our final, eternal destiny. Our inheritance into the kingdom is God's work, NOT our work; GOD'S GIFT, NOT our work.

Only AFTER verse 34 do we have our response to what God has done for us by giving us his inheritance. God acted first, we are told in

verse 34 God had done that by preparing our inheritance into the kingdom from the foundation of the world. In other words, even before we were born. In what follows in verses 35 and 36, where Christ speaks of the six criteria; the criteria are a response on our part to what God in Christ has done for us. We shall want to do these things not because they are our “brownie points” into heaven. No. Rather, we shall want to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned because we are free in Christ to do these good works in response to his love for us; NOT to earn our own salvation by good works. This point is quite clear in the parable when we learn of the response of the righteous—they are surprised that they had even done such things for Christ. They did not calculate them as a means for salvation. Rather, the righteous did them freely, in response to Christ’s love and grace from the foundation of the world.

If we really do love our parents or our spouse or our children; then we deeply desire and want to do things for them to please them. How much more then if we truly love God shall we deeply desire and want to do things for him to please him. Christ tells us this happens whenever we do it to the least members of his family, we do it to him. Surprisingly, like the sheep in the parable, often what we do may not seem important or make much difference. Yet, the most important things are often the ordinary things—like visiting a lonely widow or widower; serving a meal at a homeless shelter; or visiting a teenaged drug addict in prison. In such people Jesus is present. May Christ our King and Judge grant us his grace and love to respond by freely wanting and desiring to share his love and grace with one another. Amen.

1 James S. Hewett, Editor, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988), p. 310.