

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 26 – November 19, 2023
Matthew 25:31-46 – The Book of Life
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

The awesome day of the Lord. A day no man can withstand. What terror mixed with joy, when the thrones are set in place, when the Ancient of Days takes his seat. A thousand thousands serving him, ten thousand times ten thousand before him. The dead are raised, the court sits in judgment, and the books are opened. Then the Son of Man approaches the throne, to take up his kingdom. This is our great hope, the day of our salvation, when the Son of Man comes in glory.

But what about these books that are opened? What do they contain? These are the books of the whole law of God, all his righteous demands. Justice and punishment for sin. Demands to which no man can measure up. The eternal consequence of hell.

In the New Testament, Revelation 20 also mentions these same books. “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened... And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.”

But in Revelation 20, when the books are opened, another book also appears. “Then another book was opened, which is the book of life.”

The book of life. Not a book of demands and condemnation. A book of salvation. The list of the names of the elect, those set apart by the Father from before the foundation of the world to inherit his kingdom forever. The same book of life that Jesus mentioned, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” The same book of Daniel 12, “At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.” The same book of Psalm 139, “My frame was not hidden from you, O Lord, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

Is your name found in that book of life? How can you know for sure? And does it depend on what you have done, as Revelation 20 seems to say? “The dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” How can you ever do enough?

What about the parable of the sheep and the goats? Does that teach justification by works too? For when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, and he sits on his glorious throne, he will separate the sheep from the goats on the basis of their works. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” These lovely words of the King to those on his right are based on what they did. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”

And the goats are condemned on the same basis. By the good works they failed to do. “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For 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.” Judged by their sins of omission, what they should have done but omitted.

So what becomes of our Lutheran doctrine? Is salvation really by grace through faith? Are good works necessary after all? Has all our preaching been in vain?

No. Pay closer attention to the lovely words of the King. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom.” It's not by works. It's because you are blessed by his Father. The Father has chosen to bless you, not because of anything you did. God chose you before the foundation of the world. He appointed good works for you to do, and wrote them in his book before he even formed you in your mother's womb.

Your name will never be blotted out. Not because of what you did or failed to do, but because of what Christ has done for you. He died for you. He washed you clean. Your sins are atoned for, they cannot be held against you. And he rose triumphantly, in order to go to the Father, to approach the throne and sit in the heavenly courts as your advocate. To speak on your behalf, “This one is mine, I died for him, write my name in his place.”

So on that day, when the books are opened, your name shall be found in the book of life, because your

name is found in Jesus, and his name is in the book.

The parable of the sheep and the goats fits in with all this. Yes, on judgment day, our Lord will separate the sheep and the goats on the basis of whether they served the least of these, his brothers. How they cared for their fellow disciples and Christians. But good deeds are not what saves them. It's like in any courtroom. The heavenly verdict must be based on publicly available evidence. So the visible works of the sheep are the public evidence of their invisible faith. Their deeds bear witness to their faith, as evidence and proof.

This is why the sheep are so surprised. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" The sheep weren't even aware they did anything good. They simply lived as Christians, and their good works proved it. They never tried to earn heaven, they simply lived out their faith. They did good works because that's what Christians do. And Jesus counted that faith to them as righteousness.

So the sheep were shocked. How could such small and simple works deserve such an eternal reward, eternal life? Of course they can't.

Works do not save, they only prove that saving faith is alive. Ephesians 2. "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."

God prepared good works beforehand, that we should walk in them. He prepared good works for his sheep, to demonstrate their faith. And he gave them the Holy Spirit, so they would do these works. All the glory belongs to God.

As for the goats on the left, those who did not minister to their brothers, they imagined they did plenty of good works, but they were fooling themselves. They failed to act in love, and that was proof of dead faith. So these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

God knows the hearts of all men. He searches all hearts for evidence of faith. He knows those who are living complacently. He knows those who neglect the good works he has prepared. He seeks those who live in repentance. So if you have no concern over sin, repent! Repent, for the day of the Lord is coming like a thief. If it catches you in such a state, you may hear the Lord saying, "Depart, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

What a terrifying thought. So how can you make sure that your name is found in the book of life? Thanks be to God, it doesn't depend on you. You are blessed of the Father. You bear the name of Christ through baptism, and his name is surely written in your place. You can be sure because he has given you the sacraments to prove it. When God baptized you and put his blessing on you, this visible sign proved your name was in the book. When he absolves your sin now through the pastor, these audible words prove that your name is not blotted out for your sins. And when Christ gives you his body and blood, this food proves that you are forgiven. Such great proofs mean you never need to doubt. You are among the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven.

Even if you are afraid that your life looks more like a goat than a sheep, even if you do not see yourself serving and caring for the brothers of Christ as you ought, at least you are repenting, and you want to do better. And perhaps you are simply unaware. Like the sheep were unaware. Sheep cannot see how their works bear witness to their faith. God sees, that's what matters. He knows all hearts. He knows that you seek forgiveness, so your name will not be blotted out. Because he loved you and knew you from the foundation of the world.

But what if you're worried about someone else, someone you love who is living in unrepentance? What can you do? Keep praying. Know that the Lord is patient, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. Jesus loves the whole world, and he died for all. Not one of those that the Father has given him will be lost.

So as we face the last day, keep praying. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly and sit on your throne. Open the books! Open the book of life, and bring all those whose names are written under your name into your kingdom. Do not blot us out for our many transgressions, for you have written our names in your book by your own blood. Grant us faith. Kindle our hearts to good works that bear witness to faith. And perform your good work in us, so we may be counted righteous by all you have done. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.