

The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Trinity
17 November, Anno Domini 2019
St. Matthew 25:31-46
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In Article IV of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, we confess “it is God’s will, order, and command that believers should walk in good works. Truly good works are not those that everyone does himself from a good intention, or which are done according to human traditions, but those that God Himself has prescribed and commanded in His Word.”

Good works are necessary. This is the clear and plain teaching of Holy Scripture. The Ten Commandments are binding upon us and we are not free to dismiss them or minimize them or teach others to do likewise. And God indeed takes note of our good works. Look at how the Lord commends the sheep for the mercy they bestowed upon the very least of society, God’s dear children. Likewise, notice the sharp sentence of eternal judgment which our Lord passes on those rogue Christians who sought to love and serve God in their own way while withholding true Christian love from those in need and ignoring the works commanded by God.

Now, we must be clear. The sheep weren’t saved by their good works. Rather, their good works were the natural fruit of their right faith in the forgiveness of Christ. Because of their confession of their own unrighteousness and unworthiness and their trust in the mercy of God, they were drawn to bestow even the tiniest reflection of that grace upon others in need of the same. Good works absolutely don’t save you but that doesn’t make them unnecessary. It is a delusion to think that you can continue to adopt the practices and ways of thinking as the unbelieving world and still claim true faith. The Holy Law of God clearly teaches that the ways and works of the world are evil and deplorable in His sight. They are death to those who engage in them. Adam was not given a pass when he joined Eve in disobeying the Lord’s command. He and all of humanity were cast under the shadow of death. It was no laughing matter when King David followed his covetous and lustful thoughts. He stood under the strict judgment of God until the Lord graciously sent Nathan and brought David to repent and turn from his sin.

You, the Baptized, have been called out and away from the world, freed from its self-righteous and self-indulgent works, from its foolishness which it believes is so wise. God Himself has taught you through the apostles and the prophets what is

true and right and good. He wrote down with His own finger the Ten Commandments. More than that, He has rescued you from the eternal judgment which your disobedience had merited. You now shine in the resplendent robes of Christ's righteousness, pure as He is pure. You are free from the Law's just accusation against your sin because Christ accepted that accusation as His own, becoming your sin and suffering God's wrath and rejection on the cross. You are no longer beholden to the demonic tyrant who enslaved you to the desires of your flesh. Your Lord, Jesus Christ, who conquered death and will return on the clouds of heaven, rules over you in grace and mercy, calls you brother and sister, shares in your sorrows and your sufferings, and serves you daily with His good gifts and care.

But you haven't been saved from death so that you may return to wallow in it. You haven't been shown the truth so that you can only dabble in it as long as it is comfortable and doesn't get in the way of your plans. You have been redeemed so that you can walk in the way that is good, the way that is filled with God's blessing and promises which He sets forth in His commandments. All too often our flesh would have us use our new-found freedom, as children are wont to do, to do whatever is easy, whatever is fun, whatever it is I want. We are tempted to try to slap the title "Christian" on whatever we were otherwise doing and imagine that our Lord will simply be okay with that.

We get uncomfortable when we hear Jesus talk about works or we hear the apostle Peter say things like "what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God..." Too quickly do we want to turn away because our flesh doesn't like to be called to account. We cry "Hey! Hey! FAITH!" Yes, faith is the source of our salvation but are you bearing the fruits which God has given that are in keeping with repentance? Are you daily drowning that Old Adam in the promises of Christ and fighting against the desires of your flesh, seeking to walk according the faith you confess? Or are you using Christ's forgiveness as an excuse to disobey the commandments of God? Are you making provision for the flesh to gratify its desires and using your freedom in Christ as a cover for further unrighteousness?

Repent. The apostle asks the question because he himself is very aware of the struggle that we are engaged in every day against the flesh. He is urging and stirring us all up to battle - to fight against our idle, doubting, and rebellious flesh every hour of every day because your flesh will not rest. The Holy Spirit is stirring us up out of our slumber because the day is surely drawing near. Temptation to sin is all around us. Every one of us is hampered and hindered by weak flesh, by a

world that despises the Lord we confess, and by a devil that is the master of a thousand temptations. You have been given a living faith, one that is constantly moved by the magnitude of your salvation, by the willing sacrifice of Jesus Christ to raise you up out of death into eternal life. You have been called into a life of stewardship, knowing that every breath, every word, every hour, every ability, every penny is a gift from your heavenly Father who has bestowed upon you the riches of His kingdom. You are not your own. You and all you have belong to Christ. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit given to you that you might, as your Lord, use it in the service of others, not simply however you see fit. St. Paul exhorts us by the Holy Spirit to present our bodies a living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

Having been called out of the darkness and blindness of somehow earning your salvation, inventing works that you imagine will be pleasing to God, you now know that the highest and truest worship of God is to hear and believe His Word and to receive in faith the life and forgiveness He promises in the Holy Sacraments. And having thus been filled to overflowing with His mercy, having been loved by God, we are then called to the joyful task of seeking out other poor beggars like ourselves who need God's mercy. We are called especially to care for and show mercy to those who are of the household of faith.

God has told you how to walk in faith - hear and receive His mercy; give thanks and call upon Him in every need; set aside the Lord's Day to gather with your brothers and sisters in Christ around the Word of God and the Holy Communion; cheerfully and generously bring your firstfruits in thankfulness and faith; share the mercy and love of Christ with your neighbor and help him in every way to enjoy and keep the daily bread that has been bestowed upon him; forgive those who sin against you as you yourself have been forgiven by God. These works, though despised by the world, are truly good in God's sight because they proceed from faith, they are born of the joy of the absolution and the certain hope of everlasting life.

Children of God, the hour of our Lord's return is drawing near. Every day we are to live in the eager expectation and hope that today will be that day. May God the Holy Spirit stir each of us up to a true and living faith that tirelessly receives the mercy of Christ and equally tirelessly shares that mercy with our neighbor.

In the Name of +Jesus.