

A Harsh Judgment
Sermon for the 2nd to Last Sunday in the Church Year
Sermon Text: Matthew 25:31-46



“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.’ ⁴¹ Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, ⁴³ 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.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

There is hardly anyone who would dare to enter a slaughterhouse to see how the animals are killed there. It's not a pleasant idea. A worker at such a slaughterhouse once told me that the animals definitely realize at some point that they are going to be slaughtered. This can then lead them to panic which negatively influences the quality of the meat. In a special slaughterhouse, in which my acquaintance worked, they trained a goat to calm the other animals. The goat was trained to calmly and without fear go into the slaughterhouse and the others followed him because they sensed that he wasn't afraid. Then, at the last moment, the goat disappeared through a side exit to lead the next herd in. The worker called this specially trained goat the “Judas goat” because its sole purpose was to lead the other animals to slaughter.

In the Bible text for today, Jesus compares the Day of Judgment with a slaughterhouse because the goats mentioned on the left are those that are being prepared for slaughter. Similarly to those animals in the previous example, the goats on the left don't know that they are being led to their destruction. Out of ignorance, they take the wrong path and therefore suffer their fate. Those who are doomed to destruction all claim, one after the other, that they knew nothing about their fate. First of all, I note that people don't fall into ruin out of any ill will, but simply because they didn't know it. In a way, they followed their “Judas goats” and didn't realize that their “goats” would lead them to destruction. The deciding question is this: what didn't they know? And how can I stop something similar from happening to me? What the goats on the left in this example from Jesus didn't know was that they had to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Satan successfully spread the falsehood that there would be no divine judgment. He suggested that God won't judge us, but we will judge ourselves. With the motto, “The most important thing is that I somehow get along with my fellow man,” pretty much everything is judged as “good” or “bad.” We are often blind to our own mistakes and forgive ourselves for our sins, which then no longer burden us. But that is a mistake. We don't judge our own lives; on the contrary, it is God who will judge. We don't question good and evil, but God will question us about such things.

It may be that we can run away from this God for our entire lives. Similarly to the Prodigal Son, we can greatly distance ourselves from God and for a time, it appears we can manage well without Him. Without God, life seems to be pretty good. Yet sooner or later, the time will come when God confronts us and makes it clear to us what it means when we confess every Sunday: “...and will come to judge the living and the dead.” This is shocking. As believing Christians, we can't imagine sitting in the defendant's chair. We only really know this kind of thing from movies, where the bad guys usually end up in the defendant chair because of clear evidence, while we see ourselves as good guys who don't belong there. The parable that Jesus presents to us comes about because we all, without exception, must stand before the judgment seat. Yes, even we who consider ourselves pious. We must

make an accounting of our human lives. We will be held accountable for what we did or did not do. Sooner or later, we will be confronted with the hidden aspects of our hearts. We will realize that we can't absolve ourselves; only God is authorized to do so. This reality is something that we can put off, but nothing better can happen to us than that we realize today what it means that Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. Jesus would like nothing more than that we find ourselves again on His right side! He desires nothing more than for us to be saved from eternal damnation to eternal life. That's why He encourages us today not only to take a look at the end of time, but also to take a look into our own hearts. While Jesus holds the parable of the Final Judgment before our eyes, He wants to awaken us from our ignorance. Similarly to King David who had to hear from the Prophet Nathan: "You are that man!" So should we also hear where we have failed and damaged love. God's final judgment is at the end of all time. But the moment I accept His Word as my personal judgment and then flee into the arms of Jesus to seek forgiveness, the judgement is already behind me. For this reason, nothing better can happen for a person than to realize this: "This means you! You've brought guilt upon yourself!" Jesus wants to save us from the surprise of judgement.

And that's why He makes it clear to us that such a judgment is unavoidable. Jesus doesn't leave us in the dark about what this divine judgment is all about. He gives us clear signs. He places the responsibility for our neighbors at our feet. The examples that Jesus uses are very practical so that everyone can start with something: "You didn't feed Me or give Me something to drink or clothe Me nor did you visit Me" – these are all concrete examples that are familiar to everyone. The surprise is that God Himself is injured when we don't do such things! The Day of Judgment is a surprise because both the people on the left and the people on the right don't know who they're dealing with when they meet normal people in their daily lives. A wife is not just a wife but also Christ. My child is not just my child but also Christ. My business associates and coworkers aren't just business associates and coworkers but also Christ. Even the man or woman who seek comfort in a bottle of beer outside the door is Christ. Jesus shows us how important love for our neighbor is because the final judgment will be decided with this. It isn't just the opportunity to help the poor or to donate money to organizations like "Bread for the World" – everyone somehow knows this. The question is if our eyes are opened to all the little "Christs" which He has placed as our responsibility directly at our front door. Can we recognize Jesus in these people and treat them accordingly? Each one of us can ask where there is need and where others are burdened. I am sure we will find that need is never far away, sometimes it's even in our own families. We are blind if we believe that the needs of others don't concern us. The need which is right outside the door or is in our immediate neighborhood, is much more important than we think – it is even decisive. It decides between life and death. Many peoples' question of "where is God?" can be answered very simply: God is found in our neighbor who needs our help! There is no question at all whether this person deserves our help. Jesus identifies Himself with this person and we don't need to know any more than that.

The judgment that Jesus passes on those that don't do all this is harsh. Despite all our theological and humanitarian efforts, we can't reduce this harshness: "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!" Jesus makes it absolutely clear that not all people will automatically be saved but that there is an alarming possibility that we unknowingly, like the goats, could come to ruin. Jesus doesn't downplay this horrible possibility. When I hear the words of Jesus, I notice, even now, that I haven't stood on the right side at one time or another. These words of Jesus alarm me. The Father assigned this judgment to Jesus. In no event will I be exonerated for lack of evidence. The body of evidence speaks against me! The Judge Himself, Jesus, can be my only hope. Here I see something amazing: Jesus doesn't simply stay sitting on the judgment seat. He came precisely because He knew how bad things were for us. Directly after these words, Jesus took the path to Golgotha and died an excruciating death there. There was just one reason for this death: my sins and guilt. When I must stand before Jesus' judgment seat, I will refer to the Judge who died on the cross for my sins. I will put my hope in Him. But I won't start doing it there in the courtroom, I may already seek this Priest and Judge, Jesus. It is He who would love nothing more than to say these words: "Come, you who are blessed by My Father!" On what grounds does Jesus call these people blessed? The judgment lies solely in the words of our Lord Jesus: "Come, you who are blessed by My Father!" When He says this, everything is clear and distinct. Amen.