

Part of what we do every Sunday morning is recite a creed. We say it is a way of talking about what we believe as Christians and as a way of showing what it means to be a Christian. This morning we recited the Apostles' Creed, and of course, in this congregation we go back and forth between the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Those two creeds are pretty similar to each other. Similar wording, similar ideas, so that, at least speaking for myself, I sometimes find myself, if I'm not paying attention, starting with one and ending with the other. Because they are easily confused, because they are so similar. But Christians, there's another creed which we recite only once a year on Trinity Sunday, the creed we call the Athanasian Creed. And you'll never get that one confused for the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed. It's just so different. We say things like, "The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three gods, but one God." It's very clear what it's trying to do.

But the Athanasian Creed sometimes is confusing for a different reason. Especially towards the end of that creed, when it says very clearly that those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire. That might confuse us. I've even had people ask me about that. Why does that Creed say that? Aren't we saved by faith? Aren't we saved by believing in Jesus? Why would it say that we are judged on the basis of our works? Those two things seem to conflict with each other. How do we make sense of this?

Christians, I'm here to tell you today that that Creed, the Athanasian Creed, is correct in what it says. We are, in fact, judged on the basis of our works. And the proof of that is here in Matthew chapter 25, which we have as our Gospel reading for today. But it's also important to remember in all of this that we are also saved by faith and not our works. Both of those are true at the same time. And this passage we have before us today is going to show us how, that we are both saved by faith and judged by our works.

So let's look at this passage. Jesus here in Matthew chapter 25 is talking about the end of all things, when he will come again to judge the living and the dead. And he says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne." Now, of course, we hear the Son of Man language coming from Daniel, which we also read this morning, Daniel chapter 7. The Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days and receiving a kingdom and dominion and glory. Jesus is the Son of Man. He calls himself on many occasions. And Jesus receives the kingdom from the Father. And part of receiving the kingdom, Christians, is receiving the judgment that also belongs to him. When God judges the world, it will be Jesus who sits at the bench. It will be Jesus who judges everyone, the living and the dead. What a dreadful day that's going to be, Christians! To stand before God himself and to have everything made absolutely clear. There will be no more secrets. There will be no more hidden things. There will be no more wrong. There will be no more anything contrary to the will of God. God will pour out his wrath on that day, and it will come to an end. And so, yes, that day is a fearful one, a day on which Jesus comes to judge all people, whoever has lived and whoever is still living at that time, to stand before him and to judge them according to what they have done.

But Jesus tells us in Matthew chapter 25 that when he gathers up everyone around him, all the nations gathered before his throne of judgment, it will be as if it was a great mixed herd of sheep and goats. The sheep being those, of course, who believe in God, and the goats being those who

do not believe. And Jesus says that he will separate the sheep and the goats on that day as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats in his herd.

Now, why would he use this picture? That doesn't seem to make much sense to us. The last time we looked at a goat in this part of the world, it looks nothing like a sheep. When we see goats and sheep in our part of the world and in our time, they're very different from each other. The way they look, the way that they're built, the way that their faces look, even their horns are different. How do you mistake a sheep for a goat? Why did they have to be separated from each other? In some parts of the world, especially in the Middle East and especially in Jesus's time, the sheep breeds and the goat breeds actually looked very similar to each other. The same size generally, the same build, the same face, pretty much. They also had wool and the goats had hair that kind of looked like wool. And they were even generally the same color as each other, browns and grays and tans. So if you didn't know what you were looking at when you looked at this herd in the Middle East, you might confuse a sheep for a goat. And only if you really knew what you were looking at would you be able to tell the difference between the two.

And that's the whole point here, Christians. The whole point is that we can't tell the difference between a sheep and the goat in this life. We cannot tell who has faith and who does not have faith. I can't just look at somebody and say, "Well, they obviously look like a Christian. They obviously look like somebody who believes in God." And I can't look at someone else and say, "Well, they're obviously not a Christian. They're obviously some kind of goat." No, we can't do that. Faith is something within. Faith is something of the heart. Faith cannot be seen by the eyes of men. Only God knows the heart. And that is why it takes God to separate the sheep from the goats on the last day, because he knows who truly has faith and who does not.

But after he's separated the sheep and the goats in this way, he then sets the sheep onto his right hand, the right hand being his hand of power, the right hand being his hand of salvation, the right hand being his favored hand. They are the ones who are blessed by God. In fact, Jesus says to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Now, pay close attention to that. Jesus does not say to them, "You've done all of these good things. I guess that means you've earned your way into heaven." That's not what he says. He says to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the creation of the world. All of these things have happened to you because you believed in me." It is faith that brings them into the kingdom. It is that faith given by God that makes them blessed in his sight.

But we can't see faith. We can't tell who has faith and who doesn't. And so Jesus has to point to something else for our sake to show us who has faith and who doesn't. And the thing that he points to, Christians, is our works. Because it is our works, the fruit of faith, which prove that we either believe in God or we do not believe in God. The fruit must come forth from faith. The two have to be together, so that when Jesus points to what they have done, it proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that they are in fact believers in him. This is why he says, "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." Whenever they did the righteous thing, whenever the fruits of faith came forth, they were doing all of these things for Jesus himself. They didn't even realize that they were

doing it. They say, "Lord, when were you around and doing all these things and then we saw you and took care of you? We don't remember that happening." But Jesus says, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." When we live as the Christians that God has called us to be, when we show forth the fruits of faith in our lives, then we are doing these things also for Jesus. Especially when we take care one another as Christians. We are, Christians, living out what it means to be Christians by the love and the concern and the care we have for one another.

And the opposite is also true for the goats, on the other hand, those who are set on his left hand, on his unfavorable hand, on the hand of judgment. He says to them, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. You have no faith. You do not believe in me. You are those who are walking in darkness." And he will prove it by their own actions. He says, "I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger, you did not welcome me. Naked and you did not clothe me. Sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Your own actions prove that you had no faith." There were no fruits, and so where there are no fruits, there is no faith. Of course, they ask, "When did we see you do any of these things and not minister to you?" "When you did not do it to one of the least of these, you also did not do it to me. You stand condemned by your own actions. You have proven the truth of your heart by the things that you have done or not done." Because that is ultimately the point here, Christians. Faith shows itself in good works, and a lack of faith shows itself in evil works. The two always go together. And so if we want to know the truth of our hearts, we can look towards the fruits which come forth from it. All of these things prove beyond all doubt that we are either sheep or goats in the judgment of God.

Now, you might also turn to a passage like James as a way of really emphasizing this point. James, chapter 2, where he says, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." And that's exactly the point that Jesus is making. Faith and our works go together. You can't have one without the other. And Jesus, if we have a living faith, will point to our works, the things that we have done and judge us by them to our everlasting glory. Because they show that we belong to him. And if we don't have those works, then they show that we do not belong to him to our everlasting shame.

So what's the point of all of this? Just to know who's a sheep or goat? What is Jesus trying to tell us as Christians? Simply this, same thing he's been telling us all throughout chapter 25 and all throughout chapter 24. Watch! Pay attention. The day of the Lord is coming, and it is coming quickly. You do not know the day or the hour when he will come. And so how will we spend that time in waiting, waiting for him to come? Will we spend it in the things which do not profit? Will we spend it in the things which are ultimately part of darkness, so that it will be to our everlasting shame when he catches us completely off guard? Or will we spend these things doing what God has created us to do? The good works which he has prepared for us from before the foundation of the world? We show forth that we are Christians by the things which we do towards one another. To care for one another, to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to

clothe the naked, to visit those who are sick and in prison. When we do all of these things, Christians, we show that we belong to him, because he has done them first for us.

So let us do then what is right, Christians. Let us do the works which God has prepared for us from before the foundation of the world, as we wait for him to return on that great and terrible day. And when we do that, we will be ready for him, and he will call us to himself, because he has saved us by faith forever.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.