

Message: "Faith vs. Works," Christ the King Sunday, 11-23-08

In order that we might gain an understanding of a King that would divide sheep and goats, let me, first, outline this kingdom and the attributes of the King. Without accepting Christ's rule over our lives, this passage of Scripture would seem nothing more than a cute story. Second, I'll like to explore how the kingdom of God is built, delving into the works-righteousness debate. Lastly, I desire to apply these insights to my life and faith before God.

Ann Spangler asks, "Have you ever thought about the challenges of being a king - of presiding over a large group of people with different temperaments, desires, needs, values, and interests?" If you've ever been a parent, a teacher, a boss, a building contractor, or even a pastor, you know how difficult it can sometimes be to get people to act in a responsible manner - like trying to get ducks to fly backwards, dogs to stop barking, or even, in extreme cases, to herd cats. Ann goes on to say that, one way to get people to behave is to force them.

The tendency to try and control people is not common only in Islamic and Communist regimes, but is often experienced in free societies like our own. For example, in America filmmakers and news media distort the truth to sway public opinion, or political parties use lies or half-truths to influence elections.

God's kingdom is presided over by the most powerful ruler in the Universe. Yet God operates on entirely different principles. The integrity of the kingdom depends not on any external force, but on the internal, indestructible power of Christ's love.

Our King begins by inviting, never compelling, us to join his kingdom. When we do, Jesus reverses the outside-in formula whereby we are forced to conform, and, instead, begins to transform us internally by the power of the Spirit. It is the

indwelling presence and power of the Spirit that enables us to be more Christ-like.

As one early Christian writer put it, God "was determined to save us by persuasion, not by compulsion - for there is no compulsion found with God. His mission was no pursuit or hounding of us, it was an invitation." In this way, step by step, Christ builds the only kind of kingdom that will last - the only kind worth living in forever.

As a side-bar, I want to acknowledge that I follow the same pattern in my ministry. I rarely chase anyone, or attempt to coerce. My experience is that this tactic bears little fruit. Many people respond to God's call through the invitation of a trusted friend or family member, once in a while, a pastor. It is God who calls, and I'm here to help those who respond to God's call of "draw near..."

Let's put one age-old question to rest: who's Smarter, sheep or goats?

Sheep and goats behave quite differently. People often say that goats are "smart" because they are very curious and inquisitive. They are more independent than sheep, who are usually aloof to people. People often say that sheep are "stupid" because of their strong "flock mentality." A sheep will become very agitated if it is separated from the rest of the flock. However, it is this flocking behavior that provides their best defense against predators. Neither species is smart or stupid. They are just characterized by different types of behavior that enhances their survival in the wild.

That being said, Jesus explained the parable in a little different way. In [Luke 8:9-10](#) we find: "His disciples asked Him (Jesus) what this parable meant. He said "the knowledge of the secrets

of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables so that "seeing they may not see; though hearing they may not understand."

This quotation from [Isaiah 6:9-10](#) does not express a desire that some would not understand, but simply states the sad truth that those who are not willing to receive Jesus' message will find the truth hidden from them. Jesus spoke in parables because of the spiritual dullness of the people and He compares His preaching in parables to the ministry of Isaiah, which, while it gained some disciples, was also to expose the hard-hearted resistance of the many to God's warning and appeal. God does not want anyone to perish (*see [1 Timothy 2:3-4](#) and [2 Peter 3:9](#)).

After a casual reading of the sixteen verses that make up the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, it seems that these verses suggest that salvation is the result of good works. The group of persons compared to the sheep were the ones that acted in charity in giving to the needy food, drink, clothing, who exhibited hospitality, and who visited the sick and those in prison. The goats seem to have done nothing in regard to these things. This resulted in salvation for the sheep and damnation for the goats. The casual reading seems to make it very clear and concise that salvation comes from good works. However, this is clearly not the meaning of the Parable of the Sheep and Goats.

The core message of this Parable is that good works will result from our relationship to the Shepherd, to Christ. Followers of Christ will produce good works, will treat others with kindness, will deal with others as if they were Christ. Those who reject Christ live in the opposite manner. While "goats" can indeed do acts of kindness and charity, their hearts are not truly in them for the right purpose - to honor and worship God, they are usually out for themselves.

The practical question for me is: Just where, exactly, do I stand in relation to the Shepherd? Am I a Sheep or a Goat, saved or lost? Until I come to the place in my life where I find myself among the sheep, until I am saved by faith, through the grace and mercy of God, I will never find true and lasting peace with God. God made us for Himself, and our hearts will be restless until we find our rest in Him. This parable further begs the question, what *is* the condition of my heart? Do I understand and believe wholeheartedly that, *Jesus paid a debt he did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay.* I make my decision to dwell with the sheep under the care of the Shepherd, by the grace of God, with the love of Jesus. Until I achieve this relationship of justification, nothing else in this Christian life makes sense.

When I understand my relationship with God I may ask, who do we feed, clothe, etc.? Now most of us will cross the street for a good person (Jesus adds that some will even die for a good man), but what of our enemies? In Romans 12, we are informed that there are no limits to charity "If your enemy is hungry, feed them; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink..." We will be judged not only on how we treat those we'd like to help, but also those we have no desire to assist. Matthew concludes that it is in our humility that this all makes sense. Our faith motivates our actions. These actions are a natural part of walking the Way of Christ.

As we look toward Advent (that's next Sunday) we might acknowledge that although we honor the birth of the Christ child, we have opportunity, once again, to prepare our hearts for Christ's second coming, when every knee will bend and every tongue confess that Jesus is, indeed, King of Kings, and, Lord of Lords!

This preparation informs my faith, as it is necessary for me to realize, once again, just how broken the world is, and how broken

I am, without Him. After all, when we help others, aren't we really helping ourselves?! And when we give with a grateful heart, are not we blessed 10 times over?

Jesus asks us, "What are you worried about? Do you need clothes or food or a roof over your head? *I own the cattle on a thousand hills.* Are you worried about your marriage, your career, your children? *I am compassionate toward all I have made.* Are you anxious today because you don't have today what you need for tomorrow? *I open my hand to satisfy the desires of every living thing.* Are you sick or sorrowful? *For you who revere my name, the son of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.* Are you lonely or fearful? *I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* These are the promises of our great and faithful King. Pray for the grace to seek first his kingdom, and all those things will be added to you as well.

Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!

References:

The Quest Study Bible (NIV)

The Devotional Bible (NCV)

Parallel Study Bible (NKJV, NCV, Message)

Praying the Names of Jesus, by Ann Spangler

Article: Separating the sheep from the goats, by [Jean Lightner](#)

Worship Planning Helps for Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday (November 23, 2008)

Worship Connection (for 11/23/08)