

SAVED BY GRACE BUT JUDGED BY WORKS!

Today's Text: Matt. 25: 31-46

Extracts:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. *All the nations will be gathered before Him* and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats; and He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then *the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."* Then the righteous will answer Him [when they did such things] and the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, *inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me*" [Matt. 25: 31-37, 40]

Claude Surena is a 59-year-old pediatrician who lives in a two-storey hillside home near Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti.¹ On Tuesday, 12 January 2010, an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude struck the Haitian capital, leaving over 150,000 persons dead and millions of others displaced. Dr Surena's house was undamaged. So, he turned it into a triage centre (a place where patients are prioritized for treatment based on the seriousness of their injuries). In his own words, "It is a blessing from God my house is safe. We at least have been able to do something for everyone."

Rescue missions led by the United States, the United Nations and major charitable organizations have been pouring into Haiti to help. The major media networks have had extensive coverage of the disaster and Hollywood stars have raised funds. But if you were to tune to the main religious media channels, you hardly felt that sense of urgency and concern, even though several religious organizations were on the ground in Haiti. In fact, it was on one of such "born again" media that an insensitive statement was reportedly made that God was punishing the Haitians because of the pact that they had made with Satan to win independence from France! In this week's study, Jesus tells us how He will judge all nations when He returns. It will be by their works, such as Surena and others are doing in Haiti. Yet, we know that we are saved by grace, not by works. How do we reconcile these two positions? Let us find out from this week's interesting study.

¹ Based on "Haitian doctor takes 100 patients into his home," *The Associated Press*, Sun., Jan. 17, 2010; : http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34907124/ns/world_news-haiti_earthquake/

1. Background Separating the Sheep from the Goats!

In this week's study, Jesus gives us a glimpse of how He will judge the nations of the world when He returns as King [**Matt. 25: 31**]. The prophet Daniel was shown this revelation when he wrote [**Dan. 7: 13-14, 27**]:

I was watching in the night visions and behold one like the Son of Man, coming in the clouds of heaven. He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages, should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom, the one which shall not be destroyed. Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him.

There is a big debate among theologians when the said judgment would actually take place. Some argue that it would be soon after the rapture, after the righteous have been removed from the earth to join Christ in the air [**1 Cor. 15: 51-52; 1 Thes. 4: 15**]. Others propound that it would be after the great tribulation [**Rev. 20: 4-6**]. No matter what you believe, what is important is that we shall one day all appear before the judgment seat of Christ [**2 Cor. 5: 10**]. Therefore, it is necessary for you to know what to expect and the need to prepare for the inevitable.

Jesus told His disciples that when He comes in His glory with His holy angels, He will sit on the throne of His glory. Then, He will gather "all the nations" before Him and He will "separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats." Jesus will set the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left [**Matt. 25: 31-33**], indicating those that He will commend or condemn respectively. We know from the Scriptures that sheep and goats are both clean animals [**Lev. 11: 2-3**]. So, what is it that will separate the sheep from the goats? The following discussion should make it clearer:

a) *The sheep represent the righteous*

Jesus, as King and Judge, will say to those people on His right (the sheep) [**Matt. 25: 34-36**]:

Come, you blessed of My Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.

The righteous will wonder when they did all those things for the King and He will reply, “Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these *My brethren*, you did it to Me” [vv. 37-40].

b) *The goats represent the wicked*

In like manner, Jesus will turn to the goats on His left and say to them, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” [v. 41]. Their judgment is based on the fact that such people had similar opportunities, like the righteous, to feed the hungry, house the homeless or visit the sick and imprisoned but they did not. They will ask similar questions, like the righteous, when they had the privilege to do such things for Christ and He will draw their attention to His brethren that they had ignored or neglected or afflicted [vv. 41-45]. In conclusion, Jesus told His listeners, “These will go away into everlasting punishment, *but the righteous into eternal life*” [v. 46].

The word of God says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” [Eph. 2: 8]. Righteousness is by faith. For example, Abraham “believed on the Lord and He accounted it to him for righteousness” [Gen. 15: 6]. So, why then is it that at the Judgment, good-doers will be equated with the righteous? We need to dig more deeply into the matter!

2. Righteousness and good works

The key to understanding the link between salvation through grace and good works can be found in the words of Jesus to both the sheep and the goats, “inasmuch as you did it to the least of these *My brethren*, you did it to Me” [Matt. 25: 40, 45]. Who are the brethren of Christ? Recall the story of His mother and brothers coming to look for Him on one occasion. He looked around in a circle at the multitudes surrounding Him and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For *whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother*” [Mk 3: 31-35]. Jesus did not come to earth to do His own will but that of His Father that sent Him and “This is the will of Him who sent Me, *that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day*” [Jn 6: 38-40]. This Son of God has revealed to us that the great commandment of God is summarized in loving God with the heart, soul and mind, and our neighbours as ourselves [Matt. 22: 36-40]. That is why the just lives by his/her faith [Hab. 2: 4; Rom. 1: 17].

There is thus a close relationship between grace and works, as Paul puts it, “For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them [Eph. 2: 9]. In other words, we cannot be saved by works but we have been saved for good deeds! If people are

known by their fruits [**Matt. 7:20**], then their motives for good deeds will give us a clue as to whether they can be classified as goats or sheep as follows:

a) *The Goats*

If you look at the various governments, and international and religious agencies and individuals that are helping with relief work in Haiti, they are all there for different purposes. For example:

- Some countries are there to protect their hegemony or to score political points to overcome unfavourable ratings back home. Thus, the United States is more active there than China even when the latter can do much more, given the buoyancy of its economy. Hugo Chavez, the President of Venezuela, would have loved to use the opportunity to expand his political influence in Latin America but he has been stunted by the presence of his political foil, the United States!
- The United Nations and the Red Cross will see the disaster as an opportunity to raise more funds for their worldwide humanitarian work. In fact, scammers are also doing overtime on the Internet to use the occasion to defraud innocent donors!
- The media are certainly there for audience ratings back home; just the same way they treated the death of Michael Jackson in 2009.
- Individual donors may be interested in the tax benefits they will derive from giving to charity. You can be sure most people are collecting and preserving receipts for the next tax season!

There is no doubt that a majority of those helping are doing so with genuine motives and the fear and love of God in their hearts. However, a good number of them may even be atheists (who believe there is no God) or unbelievers (who do not accept Jesus as the Son of God). The Scriptures call atheists fools because they have said in their hearts, “There is no God.” Such people “are corrupt (and) have done abominable works” [**Ps. 14: 1**]. The word of God is quite clear that “there shall by no means enter [the New Jerusalem] anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” [**Rev. 21: 27**].

God looks at the heart, not outward appearance [**1 Sam. 16:7**]. Therefore, the goats in today’s story are those who believe that good deeds can take them to heaven. They have not given their lives to Christ, the only gateway to the Father [**Jn 14: 6**]. Being ignorant of God’s righteousness while seeking to establish theirs, such people have not submitted to the righteousness of God “for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” [**Rom. 10: 3-4**]. The story of Cornelius, the

Roman military officer, a centurion in the Italian Regiment, underlines this point.

He was said to be “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, *who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.*” Even though his charitable deeds and worship had “come up for a memorial before God,” he was still required by God (who had sent an angel to appear to him) to send for Peter the apostle. Peter came and preached the risen Christ to Cornelius and his household. The Holy Spirit descended on them as they listened and they received water baptism [**Acts 10: 1-6, 33-48**]. I believe that giving his life to Christ moved Cornelius from being a goat to becoming a sheep!

b) *The Sheep*

The sheep know that there is no amount of self-effort that can lead them to salvation. It is only by grace that comes from faith in Christ Jesus, for as it is written, “as many as received Him, to them He gave the *right* to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” [**Jn 1: 12**]. By that privilege, *true believers* become heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ [**Rom. 8: 17**].

So, what does being saved (born-again) imply? Does it mean that you can just snatch it and run away like a dog with a fat bone? God is looking for labourers in His vineyard, to bring the Good News to all the world [**Matt. 9: 37-38; 28: 19-20**]. As a born-again, you become the “light of the world,” which so shines before men “that they may see *your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*” [**Matt. 5: 14-16**]. Such good works are done differently as follows [**Matt. 6: 1-4**]:

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men.... But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

You can then appreciate why the righteous that will stand before Jesus on Judgment Day will be surprised that what they had done secretly had been openly acknowledged by the King. Conversely, the goats will be surprised that all their loud but hypocritical charitable deeds had not been noticed by the Judge. God wants you to work for Him because you appreciate the great gift of grace of salvation purchased for you with the precious blood of Jesus.

3. Conclusion: Make works the fruit of your salvation by grace!

The early Christians clearly demonstrated the desirable relationship between grace and good deeds in the following verses [Acts 4: 32-34]:

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked, for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold and laid them at the apostles' feet, and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

As you prepare for your judgment on that day, it is a good idea to audit your good deeds, using the following check points:

- What is your motive for them? Do you do them in secret or as reality TV shows?
- How do you receive those who come to you for food or drink? They may be hungry for food or the word of God. They may be thirsty for a drink or knowledge and wise counsel. They may not be asking for silver or gold but simply listening ears or helping hands.
- Do you reach out to others, especially those who are too shy or too proud to ask you for assistance? Some people are sick, suffering from STDs (sexually transmitted demons!) that hospitals cannot cure. What are you doing with the power that Christ has given you as a believer [Mk 16: 16-18]? What of those who are imprisoned by alcohol and drug addictions, domestic violence, sexual harassment, religious persecution, etc? What hope are you providing within your ability? You will answer to Christ on that day on such matters.

Yes, you are saved by grace. But you will be judged by works.