

## “Exceedingly Great and Precious Promises”

The Collect says that the Almighty and ever-living God has given “exceedingly great and precious promises” to those who believe. Do you find them in our text? Probably not. You’re made uncomfortable by this text and don’t come away with any promises let alone “exceedingly great and precious” ones. Look again.

Jesus promises there is a Judgement Day. This text isn’t a parable. It’s reality. When Jesus comes in glory, all the angels will be with Him, and He’ll be seated on His throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him. He will separate all people one from another. Now comes the only comparison: “*as* a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” The reality is this is what King Jesus does. Three times the text refers to Jesus as “the King.” Jesus here promises that He will distinguish on the Last Day between His sheep and the goats, between the blessed and the cursed among all the nations. No more of this, “We’re all sinners.” Meaning there is no difference between you who confess your sins, want to be free of them, and don’t defend them and those who admit what they do, wish to keep on doing it and defend doing so. No more of this, “All Dogs Go to Heaven.” Nope, some are going to eternal, fiery punishment. No more of this ‘salvation by death’, i.e. everyone who dies automatically goes to heaven. Nope, some keep on dying forever.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent is *Judica* from the first word in the Latin Introit: “Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation” (Ps. 43:1). Modern translation of Ps. 43 have “Vindicate me.” That’s what Jesus promises His sheep: vindication. You who’ve hoped against hope in the Creator God they say doesn’t exist; You who’ve believed in the face of mockery that Christ Jesus died to forgive your sins; You who’ve trusted that God is love despite tragedy, disaster, and death are going to be vindicated on the Last Day. Now isn’t that an “exceedingly great and precious promise”?

Jesus promises you there is a heaven, and it’s a kingdom. Who doesn’t love stories of Camelot, King Arthur, or Richard the Lionhearted? Only the Kingdom of Heaven is unlike any you dare hope for or can imagine. Listen to how Paul describes it: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). And Jesus promises that it’s prepared for His sheep from the foundation of world, so before you were born, before you did one good work, before you believed, hoped, or loved anything it was prepared for you. King Jesus promises on the Last Day, after He has separated sheep from goats, He’ll say, “Come, you who are blessed by My Father, take your inheritance.” Really only the Greek verb “inherit” is there. King Jesus promises He will say, “You must inherit the kingdom that has been forever prepared for you.” Same word Jesus uses in the upper room: “I am going there to *prepare* a place for you. And I go and *prepare* a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me” (John 14:2-3).

Okay, I can see how the promise of an eternal kingdom is exceedingly great and precious, but King Jesus also promises there’s a hell. How’s that great or precious? One, King Jesus says hell is “from *Me*” emphasizing hell is being separated from Him. There is no god of the underworld apart from Jesus. The Devil doesn’t send people to hell. Neither do Sin or Death: Your King Jesus, does. In video games, animated shows, and some movies, the ruler of hell is depicted as monstrous, huge, unstoppable. Nope, he has no part come Judgment Day except to be thrown in the same Lake of Fire that the Beast and False Prophet go into (Rev. 20:10).

And do note for whom hell is prepared? Jesus promises it was prepared for the Devil and his angels, not for the goats, not for the damned. It wasn’t prepared for people at all. That’s where they end up, but that is not King Jesus’ eternal plan for them. So why this promise of eternal hell? It’s a promise of a once and for all end to evil. Without their eternal end in hell, there would be, could be no end to the fight. There would be an unending series of battles. In Scripture Jesus’ sheep lose almost every battle, but the promise of the sheep going to eternal life and the goats to eternal death means we win the war.

The final promise of this text comes from my mouth but it’s King Jesus’ Words. I promise you He wants you to know today where you’re going forever. Jesus is not a worse parent than us sinners. No loving parent wants to keep their kids on tenterhooks about their future. No loving parent deliberately keeps them in doubt. Right now in this time of uncertainty about disease, vaccines, government, and finances, I promise you He doesn’t want you to be uncertain about your final destination. He doesn’t want you unsure about what you will open your eyes to there after you close them the last time here.

Well, are you a sheep or are you a goat? You get all wrapped up on feeding, drinking, clothing, and visiting. Don’t trip over the word “for”.

“For I was hungry and” you did or didn’t feed me isn’t, “You come to heaven or you go to hell *because* you did or didn’t do that.” The Greek word *gar* can be causal but it can also be evidential. The works of both are evidence of being a sheep or goat not the cause of what they are (Buls, *Notes Gospel Texts*, A, 89). A wet sidewalk is evidence that it has rained; a wet sidewalk doesn’t cause it to rain. And note it’s goats who think they’ve aced the doing. It’s sheep who say when did we ever do these? But what’s the reality? The Word of Jesus prevails. He says His sheep did them though they say they didn’t. He says the goats didn’t though they said they did. Furthermore, sheep are not only called *the* blessed but *the* righteous. What makes a person righteous? God’s Word declares them that. It declares that all of Jesus’ good works are theirs and all their sins belong to Jesus who paid for them. The goats want no part of that judgment. They think they did just fine feeding, watering, clothing, and visiting others.

Hearing this as mainly about caring for the poor and needy leads away from the Christian point. Caring for the poor and needy is not a uniquely Christian point. The Rabbis of Jesus' day, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Muslims today, and even atheists make the same point. The distinctively Christian point is that the sheep are sure they're goats and the goats are sure they're sheep (*Formula for Parish Practice*, 90-94). King Jesus promises on Judgment Day, before He mentions works at all, He'll separate all the nations "as a shepherd separates sheep from goats." Go to [rurallivingtoday.com](http://rurallivingtoday.com). It says, "We explain the difference between sheep and goats in appearance, temperament, herds, foraging, diseases, smell, and much more." What looks hopelessly jumbled to us, with most people believing there are no goats, with it being difficult to tell those in Christ from those outside by what they do, Jesus says it's as easy for Him as it is for a shepherd distinguishing between sheep and goats.

Okay, King Jesus can do this, promises He will, but you still haven't told me am I sheep or a goat? Do you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? Then Jesus says you're a sheep. Do you follow the Good Shepherd? Jesus says His sheep do and they won't follow a stranger. Whoa, slow down. There are a cacophony of voices in my ears. Many claiming they are the voice of the Good Shepherd. And there are many saying, "Follow me". That's true. So, do you think with all eternity resting on this point; with eternal punishment or eternal life resting on this question; do you really think Jesus leaves it up in the air, wants you up in the air? I'm back to the point about Jesus at least as being as good a parent as you. We don't purposely leave our kids up in the air about what's for dinner an hour a way, and yet we think perhaps Jesus doesn't want us to be sure if we're hearing His voice and following Him for eternity?

First, don't look to what you're doing or not doing. Isaiah 64:6 saying all our righteous deeds, all our good needs are filthy rags means we can't point to what we do for the certainty of where we're heading. We sing as much in *Jesus Lover of My Soul*. "I am all unrighteousness,/ False and full of sin I am;" This is a tough line. It's left out of the nondenominational *Hymns for the Family of God* (222). The entire hymn is left out of the LCMS' latest hymnal. But it's by no means our only hymn that has this tough truth. In *Just as I am* we sing of "Fighting's and fears within, without," of being "poor, wretched, blind". And in *Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness* we sing, "Lord, I believe were sinners more/ Than sands upon the ocean shore". King Jesus not us points to our works as proof not of what makes us sheep but proof that we are. To us, however, they're just filthy rags.

We follow His Word both Law and Gospel. What He says is sin. No matter if all the world says otherwise, we say it's sin because Jesus does. What He says is the way something is, no matter if the majority of people disagree, no matter if commonsense disagrees, we say, "Thy Word is truth." We don't defend our sins; we don't want our sins; we don't consider repentance to be saying, "I'm sorry that's just the way I am." No, that's what goats say; those outside of Jesus go by their own words, thoughts, judgments. Those in Jesus go with what He says both in Law and Gospel.

He says in Baptism, "You're mine", and puts to death my sinful nature and gives birth to a new man created in Him righteous and holy. The Law says we're sinners and we confess that we are. Jesus says in Absolution, "I have bought and paid for your sins. They belong to Me, and I send them away from you as far as East is from West." And we go by what Jesus says not what we feel or others say. He says, "My Body and Blood and all the forgiveness, all the life, all the salvation they won for you on the cross are present here today in My Supper. Eat, drink, live." Baptism, Absolution, and Communion promise to take you where King Jesus reigns forever because they bring Him to you today. How great is that? How precious is that? Amen.

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