

“Unexpected Blessings!”—Matthew 25:34-40

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is “Unexpected Blessings!”, is Matthew 25:34-40. These are the words of Jesus: *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. 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.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?” 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.’* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

Unexpected blessings—those favorable experiences which come into our lives and “catch us by surprise.” They may come in the form of unsolicited recognition for a kind deed; purchasing a needed item and discovering at the checkout that the price is 50% less; being greeted at

the door by a family member whom you thought would not be able to join you for the holidays; receiving a much needed anonymous monetary gift during a distressing time; and numerous other actions which surprise us and benefit us greatly.

In the picture of the sheep and goats which Jesus spoke about the final judgment on the Last Day, the focus is on the “unexpected”—unexpected blessings of heaven for believers and unexpected torment in hell for unbelievers. For the Christian receiving eternal life “unexpectedly” may seem rather strange. Doesn’t a believer in Jesus Christ expect to receive eternal life in heaven? Isn’t that the sure and certain hope of a Christian?

There are many people who are secure in their refusal to recognize their sin and their need for the work of Jesus who atoned for their sin. There are many people who confess the name of Jesus while depending upon other things to get to heaven. There are others who simply know nothing about heaven, hell, God’s Word, Jesus Christ as so forth. These will be in for an unexpected surprise on the Last Day which will not be positive. At the same time, our text reveals that those who trust in Christ alone for salvation will be surprised as well—even a bit confused.

In Jesus’ description of Judgment Day in our text He compared separating the believers from the unbelievers to a shepherd who

separates the sheep from the goats in his flock. Those who trust in the atonement of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sin (i.e. the sheep) are placed on His right and those to do not trust in His atonement (i.e. the goats) are placed on His left.

The picture teaches us that **all people** are accountable before Jesus on the Last Day when He declares us “innocent” or “guilty” in the sight of God. It also teaches that His declaration is not based only on our verbal confession of faith but also has something to do with our actions. 2 Corinthians 5:10 puts it this way: *We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* Maybe connecting your works to the declaration by God on Judgment Day makes you feel rather uneasy. This is because you know your works have not met up to the demands of God’s perfection and the declaration of “guilty” feels inevitable.

It seems that Jesus was stressing the same idea in His illustration before us. God’s declaration of “innocent” is bound up in the words of *the King* in verse 34 of our text who will say to the believers in Jesus: *Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.* They get to go away . . . *into eternal life!* (cf. Matthew 25:46) The declaration of “guilty” is bound up in

words of *the King* who will say to those who refuse to believe in Jesus: *Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.* (cf. Matthew 25:41) *They will go away into eternal punishment.* (cf. Matthew 25:46)

Notice that to which Jesus directs the believers in verses 35-36 as they receive their eternal blessings: *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.* He points out their good works directed toward their neighbor, stating that when they served them . . . they were actually serving Jesus? He connects such works of service to being saved, receiving eternal life? Just this connection would make the hair on the neck of any faithful Lutheran stand on edge!

A person's eternal salvation is based on faith in Jesus Christ alone. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* How does grace and faith fit into this picture as Jesus described the believers' works in the context of their eternal destiny? Ephesians 2:10 goes on to say that we are God's *workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* Good works are a fruit of faith

which is based upon God's grace in Jesus Christ.

This Judgment Day declaration of Jesus is based primarily upon your relationship to Him. Notice the believers are told to *inherit the kingdom prepared for them*. An inheritance is not something that is earned or even deserved. An inheritance is given on the basis of a **gracious** relationship with someone upon his or her death. For believers this inheritance is based upon a faith relationship with Jesus Christ prepared for them by His death. You have inherited the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life in the Person & Work of Jesus.

Such a faith relationship will **naturally** be reflected in how you live your life, **so much so that you will be surprised when such works are revealed to you**. We see this in the response of the believers in verses 37-39 of our text: *Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?* The works flowed through them by the Holy Spirit's power so naturally that they weren't even aware they were offering the service. Since they were simply acting true to their identity in Christ they were surprised.

The adverse was also true as seen in the response of the unbelievers, which was exactly the same: "We haven't got a clue what

You're talking about Jesus. When did we see you in these conditions and not help You?" They too were surprised because they also acted true to their identity apart from faith in Christ. Their lack of faith naturally produced a lack of action which was pleasing in God's sight.

Notice also that the declaration in the judgment is given after the separation of the faithful and the unfaithful has taken place. Thus, *the King* was simply telling each group how their faith or their lack of faith did or did not display itself in their actions.

In Jesus' teaching during His Sermon on the Mount He pointed out the surprises which will take place for those who speak in His name yet refuse to obey God's Word and Will. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus said: *Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father Who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness!"* Even those who have the appearance of a "proper" ministry for the Lord, accomplishing many great things in His Name, will be surprised on the Last Day if they do not trust in the atoning work of Jesus for the forgiveness of their own sins.

Salvation is always based upon faith in Jesus alone—trust in His

atonement work for sinners such as you and me.

Many of us may be familiar with this famous phrase: “Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!” You **will** experience the unexpected **blessing** of eternal life as you serve Christ each day by serving your neighbor. When you do serve others Jesus says in Matthew 6:3 → *Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*. Pointing out your acts of obedience is a self-serving action where results are defined by you instead of by God’s Holy Spirit. It’s simply being who you are in Christ in your daily vocations of life and leaving the results to the LORD. You act not to be saved but because you are saved through faith in the Person & Work of Jesus.

Actually, you have already received His unexpected, undeserved, eternal blessings in Jesus Christ! As you focus on what He continues to give you through Word and Sacrament—not on how you get it—you will bask in the unexpected blessings of His forgiveness of sins daily. As you focus on repentance—not reward—while walking in obedience to Him, unexpected blessings will abound for others in the name of Christ. As you focus on your sin paid for—not “pay-backs” to God for what He’s done—the Holy Spirit will bring forth His fruit so other may also experience the **unexpected blessing** of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ alone! Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus
for the unexpected blessing of life everlasting. Amen.

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