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Throughout the history of organized religion, there has been a question about which came first, the chicken or the egg. There doesn't seem to be a right answer. It is just a mystery, and there's no reasoning with people who think differently than you, is there?

Well, for the church, the question is what must we do to receive God's favor? And the chicken and the egg in this scenario are faith and good works. Are we heirs of salvation because of our faith or because of our works? And, importantly, can we be outside of God's grace if we lack either faith or works?

I grew up in a family that had people on both sides of this fence. Chicken folks and egg folks. Faith folks and works folks. On one side, were taught that our salvation, our standing with God, all boiled down to one moment in time – if you confessed that Jesus Christ was Lord, one time in your life, then you were “born again” and you would go to heaven no matter what else happened in your life. Like the thief on the cross next to Jesus who had lived a (supposedly) terrible life of crime, he had faith in Jesus at one particular moment, and Jesus promised him his sins were forgiven and that he would get to be in paradise that day. Faith and faith alone was all it took. *Sola fide*.

Sola fide is a Latin term that became the foundational principle of the Reformation in the 1500s. You see, in the middle ages, when the church and the state co-existed, obedience and compliance became essential – to be in good standing with

God and the church, one had to practice penance, recite certain prayers to offset sins, give tithes, buy indulgences, and attend regularly. These acts of worship were how you earned your way to salvation.

Martin Luther made quite a fuss about this when he spoke out about a need for reformation of the church. He argued for “sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia” (only scripture, only faith, only grace). Your “works” had nothing to do with salvation. Luther railed against the theology that suggested that our actions, particularly actions commanded by the church, had anything to do with how God viewed us.

And he loved Ephesians 2 that says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

And yes, God’s love for us is unconditional, covenantal, and doesn’t waver despite our wavering. We stumble, we fall, we succumb to an addiction or a temptation, but God remains faithful to us. As a younger person, this concept of not having to earn God’s love was a source of great confidence for me.

But other members of my family had been taught that faith alone was not enough. Their warnings that a person who believed in Jesus could lose their salvation – that God could be so frustrated with sinful humans who didn’t live right – scared me deeply. And passages like Matthew 7, in which Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” gave me heart burn.

How could God turn away people from heaven who called Jesus “Lord?” What was the truth? Are there things we must do or avoid doing to be in God’s favor even after we’ve said we believe in Jesus?

I was a mess. How do you earn God’s favor? Is it faith or is it works? The chicken or the egg?

And then I came across this scripture text in Matthew chapter 25. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, just a couple of days before his arrest and crucifixion, about what will happen on the “day of judgment.” Who will be blessed and who will not be. And it’s fascinating. And it’s terrifying. And it’s surprising. Listen to this.

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. [Can you picture that image in your mind’s eye?] ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will

answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

This is the challenging word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Jesus is not speaking in a mysterious parable that we can dismiss as coded language. This is pretty straightforward. Humanity – all of humanity – the Jewish people and the Roman people and by implication all of us, will be brought before the throne and separated based on this criteria.

And interestingly, there is *no* mention of organized religion in this scripture at all. No baptism, no communion, no sacrifice at the temple, not even a prayer that proclaims Jesus Christ is Lord in his listing of what really matters. It turns out, according to this, that upon the final judgment day, it's not about church attendance, or how much you put in the offering plate, or what church programs you're associated with. It seems to have nothing to do with organized religion at all!

Instead, it seems, in this passage, that the only thing that matters to Jesus is how we treat the most vulnerable among us. Not how we treat our friends. Not our relatives. It's about how we treat the outcasts - the powerless in society. In our modern culture, that's not just the hungry and thirsty, and sick and imprisoned, those still exist, but also the unhoused, the undocumented, the transgender, the other-abled - all those in society without voice or power or support.

How did you treat the least of these brothers and sisters of Jesus?

And I'll be honest, I thought God was going to judge us on more than just that. I thought there might be some mention of having to be sprinkled with water, or immersed in water, or you have to have eaten the bread and drank the Kool-Aid. I mean grape juice. I thought we'd have to sit through long sermons in hard-backed pews from time to time, and not have tattoos, and follow purity rules because that's what I had been taught by organized religion!

And I know I am not the only one a little surprised by this scripture. I see your faces out there. One of the most striking details in Matthew 25 is the surprise of the sheep and the goats. Neither ones realized how important care for the vulnerable was to the Son of Man in this scene.

"Lord, when did we see you hungry?" "Lord, when did we see you thirsty?" "Lord, when did we see you in prison?"

The sheep weren't performing acts of charity to earn points. They weren't calculating their credits of righteousness.

And the goats, on the other hand, are equally surprised—but for the opposite reason. They never imagined that their neglect mattered. They never imagined that faith without embodied love for people who were so needy was hollow.

But James chapter two says it well, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is [without a coat] and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

(And I will tell you, that Martin Luther, the one we mentioned earlier, who fought for salvation without a list of works attached, ripped the book of James out of his own Bible and tried to get it removed from other Bibles because of this passage that suggests works are essential and non-negotiable and that faith alone is not what matters.)

Now, I know that’s uncomfortable to hear. There are thousands of years of theology that tell us to repent and be baptized and worship the Lord and that through *those* actions we shall be called the children of God. Every week we confess sin and are assured that God still loves and adores us just as we are. We don’t ask you to list how you’ve helped the vulnerable or turn in any documentation of volunteerism. And, of course, there are scripture passages that say that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, that faith is all we need. Thanks be to God.

And perhaps this flies in the face of your theological upbringing. I get it. It is wildly different than how I grew up.

But what I've come to understand is that the chicken or the egg question itself is flawed. It's not one or the other. It's both and.

Faith is not just words spoken aloud. Faith is a lifestyle that reshapes how we see the world.

Faith is not about believing the right doctrines. Faith is about worshipping God the Creator who loves us more than we can fathom. Faith is about following Jesus the Self-Sacrificing Savior who hung out with the outcasts, Faith is about trusting Holy Spirit, the one who both comforts us and provokes us to action.

But faith is not a private conviction we practice on Sunday. Faith is a public way of life that is lived out 24/7! Look at the banners behind me! If you are spirit-filled, you're supposed to be bearing evidence of that spirit! You're supposed to be oozing love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control – and not just to your friends and family! You're supposed to be living between Sundays like the sheep in Matthew 25, seeing the image of God in the people the world has despised. And caring for them as if they were Jesus himself without expecting that those acts are what earn our way into heaven.

Ephesians 2 tells us salvation is a gift from that cannot be earned or taken away. Matthew 25 tells us that our care for the vulnerable is the evidence of that gift.

But Matthew 25 is not meant to terrify us into thinking we'll never *do* enough. It is meant to awaken us to our purpose. Our purpose is to be the body of Christ on earth, caring for those who need Jesus the most because we are all made in the image of God.

. . . But that begs the question then - why are we here in this place on Sunday mornings? Why do we make such a big deal about the rituals and the sacraments and the traditions? If we're not going to be judged on how active a Christian we were within our church, then what's the point of being here? Why don't we just go help others on Sundays?

Well, I don't know about you, but it's easy to get caught up in my own little bubble and have a routine that keeps me comfortably within the home and businesses I am familiar with. I don't take risks or seek out the vulnerable on my own accord. But I have found that I am more likely to support those in need when I am in community with like-minded people. I am more encouraged to try some new act of kindness when someone I know has invited me to be a part of something they are passionate about. It is easier for me to help a child who can't afford a new pair of shoes when the church puts on a shoe drive. Or provide a coat to those without one when we have a coat and gloves drive in November. Or show up to a Habitat for Humanity site when I know other people from church will be there that day. Or to provide food for the unhoused through the WARM Shelter because the church organized it.

When we worship together on Sunday, we can read scripture and discern the will of God for our lives. We can study the life of Jesus and seek to follow it, and *that should* drive us toward the vulnerable.

But church is not supposed to be a requirement in your life that you attend because you think that's what God expects of you. It turns out, church membership is not what makes us sheep any more than a gym membership makes us athletic.

We've got to put some action into our faith. A little sweat around our prayers. A little dirt under our fingernails. A little sacrifice of time and resources alongside our confession that Jesus is Lord.

Rally Day is about kicking off a new program year at church. There are going to be conversations that happen after the benediction about programs and committees that you could take part in. We hope every single one of you will find something that this church does outside of Sunday morning worship to be involved in. There are so many opportunities. We are more capable of living into Matthew 25 if we're all motivating and encouraging and inspiring one another. Together, we'll talk the talk and we'll walk the walk. We'll prove that it's not the chicken or the egg, it's the chicken and the egg. Faith and works. Simultaneously. Inseparably. Loving God with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves as if they were Jesus himself.

. . . You know, I think that's what Jesus meant all along. Amen