

Matthew 25:31-46
“I Can and I Will”
Rev. Bob Balwanz
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As I begin, I need to take first things first. I have a concern with the gospel reading. It may be misunderstood and mislead us in our Christian walk and work. We all come to Jesus seeking salvation. We would prefer to be counted among the sheep. At first glance, the scripture seems to provide a simple means to be a sheep...do the right things. King Jesus gives a few examples; feed the hungry, visit the lonely, clothe the naked. Of course, we could add additional good works to the list. Whatever is on the list just do it and you are in...in the sheepfold.

But here is my rub. I am a Presbyterian Christian who believes we are saved not by our works but by our faith and trust in Jesus. And this passage seems to tippy toe along the edge of works righteousness. So...one may ask...preacher...Which is it? Are we saved by faith or by our works? How do I make my way into the sheepfold?

Since the Protestant Reformation the question has been hotly debated. It seems that we have managed to do a fine job of separating the two ideas. You are saved by: A. faith in the Lord or B. by the good works that we do. We Presbyterians know the correct answer is A. By our own witness, we also know what a fine job we have done distinguishing and separating the two ideas.

But maybe the two ideas are not as separate as we might wish them to be. Faith begets good works. Good works witness to an abiding faith. Perhaps the correct answer to our salvation question is answer C...all the above! My best scriptural witness is from the letter of James Chapter 2:14ff

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say that you have faith but do not have works? Can your faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked 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. But someone will say, “you have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

I am reminded of this conjunction of ideas as I remember the old hymn, “Trust and Obey.” The title captures both sides of our salvation question. And notice this, these ideas are joined by AND...not OR. The passage may, at first, sound like a works righteousness. But that would only be a partial answer to salvation’s question. But I still want to be saved. How am I to become a sheep?

The best way I can imagine to address this question is to share a story that first raised the question for me. I was serving as a student intern in 1978 at the Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church smack dab in the middle of the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The church pastor and my mentor was John Stanley. I learned a lot from him. My story is one of those lessons.

My morning begins in my Church Office where I was having a very bad-disgusting- make one mistake after another- day. I suspect we have all had days like that because they have so many names -bad hair day-woke up on the wrong side of the bed day. My favorite description is- everything I need or even touch winds up on the floor. That was how my morning was going. I was frustrated, discouraged, angry at myself, and angry with the world.

Our morning routine at the office was standard. Just before noon, John Stanley would come to my office, and we would sort out our afternoon adventures. He shows up and asks how my morning was going. I suspect he had a fair idea without the need to ask. I respond that I would find it difficult to answer his question with polite language. He acknowledges my distress. Then he says, "Here is what I would like you to do this afternoon. We have 4 church members in the hospital at the University of Virginia Medical Center over in Charlottesville. Go visit them. Share your grace with them. I have found that when I need an attitude adjustment it helps to bring grace into someone else's life." I sigh and say, "OK boss."

After lunch, I drive up and over the Blue Ridge Mountains to Charlottesville. Then I began my trek through the rat maze of hallways most people call UVA Med Center. I visit with all the folks. They were good visits. The folks were glad to see me, and graciously thankful for my prayers in their behalf. I did not do too much except express the concern of their Church for their well-being.

On the way home I did notice a change in my outlook. After lunch, I had gone up the Blue Ridge frustrated, discouraged, and angry. But on the way back down the big hill towards home I experience grace, contentment...and even a sense of satisfaction. What a change!

I wonder why. I had not done much. I visited the folks, expressed the concern of their Church, had a prayer, and went on. "Hey Bob," I say to myself. "You did not save any souls this afternoon."

Then it hits me like a brick on the head. I was struck so hard; I pull off the road...about mile marker 100 westbound on I 64. (Some things you just remember) I realize there was one soul that went up the hill in bad humor. Yet now as that soul heads down the hill, he is a changed person. Yes, this would be me. I go up the hill as a goat. But on the way back home, this once upon a time goat joins the sheepfold.

That night as I drift off to my sleep, I wonder," Would God create human life in such a way that the depth of meaning and purpose and the grandest of satisfaction comes to the soul as you step out in faith and offer grace to another in need?" Is the chief purpose of human life to give it away? That really is an act of faith, but is that what God intends? Are we meant to witness to our faith by sharing our grace with another?

I fall asleep pondering the question and not really knowing for sure how to answer. It is well beyond my paygrade to fully understand the will and wisdom of God. As I awaken the next morning, several words from Jesus rumble through my mind... like: "whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." I do not fully understand this, but I believe I may be onto something. I am bit encouraged.

I share my experience with John Stanley that morning. He did not come right out and say, “I told you so.” But he did say my experience was consistent with all that he had experienced in his life and ministry. If you are feeling down and out, step out in faith and invest all the grace that you can muster in behalf of another in need!

I decide to try it out. I was going to undertake a grand experiment. This is my hypothesis. You are having a down day, go make the day better for someone else. It will warm your own heart. I intend to gather data over the course of my ministry to see if it works. I imagine I will have lots of chances to examine my hypothesis.

I recognize my problem. You can never prove your hypothesis by the accumulation of empirical data. No matter how much data you acquire, you are always subject to the one example that does not work, hence disproving your hypothesis. I recognize the difficulty. None the less, I decide to take it on. Does it work. I will see.

I made that deal with myself in 1978. I want to know if John Stanley was right or wrong. Well, here I am in November of 2024...oh my... that’s 46 years of life and ministry. I have yet to find the disproving example. You would think by now I would give up looking. No! But I am beginning to reckon that when all is said and done, the sheepfold, eternal salvation, waits for those who have given their lives to make a better day for someone else.

Then, as I prepare this message for you, I’m struck again just like that time back at mile marker 100 in 1978. All these years, I have not been experiencing the glories of eternal life in the heavenly mansions. I am experiencing that blessed life here and now. WOW! We have the assurance of eternal glory. That’s good. “When we all get to heaven what a day of rejoicing there will be!” But there is more.

Now I hear Jesus say, “The Kingdom of God has even now drawn near.” Near here... near you and I. That which is near allows us to catch a glimpse – a taste- a sense of that eternal even now. We are called to be sheep not just in the sweet by and by. But now. We get a little taste of glory even now. That’s the offer that is on the table. So, I wonder, why oh why, would anyone ever pass it up. I will offer two reasons.

Reason #1 Human beings are selfish. That is the way we are. We know to look out for #1 first. And we know what that means.

But I realize I am speaking for and to a group of Christians that do a right fair job reigning in that selfish nature and replacing it with generosity. Thank the Lord for you. This is not your problem

But then there is problem #2. We are surrounded – immersed in the ocean of human need. It is so easy to become so overwhelmed by it all that it fades from our sight. We fail to take note. It is like driving down Stadium Blvd. and not noticing at every street corner the gathering of homeless. After a while they become part of the landscape and invisible to us.

But we want to notice. I want to care. But I can’t stop at the first street corner, empty my wallet to those in need, and then hope to find an ATM before I reach the next street corner. What to do?

Here is my solution. Good folks in our town are doing their best to minister to those in need in your behalf. Let's see: Salvation Army, Love INC, Loaves and Fishes, Missouri Food Bank, City of Refuge, Voluntary Action Center. You and I both know that the list is extensive. Why you even have a Brotherhood Fund at Trinity Presbyterian Church. We have lots of options to give of ourselves to make the day brighter for those in need. And as we do, we draw closer to that sheepfold as we experience the blessing in life God intends.

That's how I got the title for this sermon, "I Can and I Will." Amen