

“Come, you whom My Father blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world.” This sermon our Lord Jesus will preach to his church on the last day is what every Christian should look forward to. These words teach us that the Father has prepared for you his kingdom. It was prepared before the world was created. St. Paul teaches us in his epistle to the Ephesians that, before God made the world, he loved us and appointed us to be made his sons by Jesus Christ. In Christ, Paul says, God chose us to be holy and blameless before him. How did God choose us? How did God elect us? How did God appoint and predestine us? He did it all in Christ. The Father, who has loved the Son from eternity, chose us in his Son. It’s as we sing in the hymn:

Now I have found the firm foundation
Which holds mine anchor ever sure;
’Twas laid before the world’s creation
In Christ my Savior’s wounds secure;
Foundation which unmoved shall stay
When heav’n and earth will pass away.

If God has prepared for you his kingdom from before the foundations of the world, then this excludes all of your works. Nothing you ever did or thought or felt played any role in God’s gracious decision to give you faith and keep you in the faith. Only Christ, only what he earned by his perfect obedience, only the love he shares with the Father from eternity – only your Savior gets the credit. Right off the bat, Jesus will set the record straight about those who are blessed by his Father. They will inherit what God himself has already prepared for them, long before they were ever born.

When we look forward to the last day, this should remain our confidence. It should remain our comfort, our strength, and our lasting hope in what is laid ahead for us. If God has chosen you, then you can depend on him to see you through to the very end.

But Jesus then goes on with his sermon. You see, when God prepared for his saints eternal life, he also prepared for them a life here on earth. Again, in Ephesians, Paul says that we are saved only by God’s grace through faith apart from any works we have done. It is purely his gift. It doesn’t come from us at all, and there is nothing in ourselves in which we can boast or take credit. And then right after this, Paul says, “He has made us what we are, creating us in Christ Jesus to do good works, in which God long ago planned for us to live. (Eph 2:10)”

You see, if God has predestined you to eternal life, if God has appointed you and chosen you so that you would enter his kingdom of heaven and that you would be welcomed by the Son on the last day – if God has determined in Christ that you would be with him after you die – then certainly God has planned out your entire life here on earth as well. If he has prepared for you an inheritance in heaven, then certainly he has made preparations for your life on earth. If he has chosen you to have faith in Christ and hope in the world to come, then certainly he has also chosen you to have love toward God and your neighbor. He has planned out good works for you to walk in. He has determined that you would learn to honor your parents as you see them as his representatives. He has planned out how you would learn to repent and humble yourself when you have sinned, to forgive those who sinned against you, to fight against temptations, and to restore your fellow Christians when they have fallen short. God has planned out every good work for us to walk in so that these would serve as testimonies to what we believed and trusted in. He has planned out, in his own wisdom, how every cross and trial would drive us closer to his Word, killing the old, sinful nature within us, and conforming us to the image of his Son.

This means that your life here on earth is not in vain. It serves as a testimony – a witness – to the faith God determined to give you through the Word of his Son Jesus Christ. You can know this even now. You can know that when you do your duty, you are not merely serving earthly parents, earthly bosses, earthly authorities, but you are serving Jesus Christ himself. And this gives you confidence and strength not to give up or lose hope, no matter how difficult it may be to serve your neighbor.

Yes, the good works God has laid out for us are a testimony of our faith in the gospel. They are a testimony to how we received the preaching of his Word. Yet, as we live here on earth, we can only see this in part. We know that we are children of God. We know that God has called us to good works. We learn from his law what these good works are. But when we look at them, it's like when you try to look at yourself in the mirror after taking a hot shower. It's foggy and dim in this life. But on the last day, Jesus will reveal that these works you did were not in vain. He will prove that they truly were planned out by him. He will show, for all people, angels, and demons to see, that the faith he created in your heart was true and fruitful. Even his Christians will be surprised by this.

The Son of Man says to those on his right, "Come, you whom My Father blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world. I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you took me into your homes; naked, and you gave me something to wear; sick, and you looked after me; in prison, and you visited me." Those on his right will ask when they ever did any of these things. Of course, they knew they were serving Jesus. But they didn't know they did this much. Of course, they knew they were trusting in Jesus. They were gathering around his Word and Sacraments, taking refuge in his sin-forgiving and life-giving promise. But it isn't until this last day when the Lord the Judge unwraps what they did. And Jesus gives this explanation: "I tell you the truth, anything you did for one of the least of these my brothers, you did for me."

Who are these brothers of Jesus? Who are these who are called the least? They are members of his holy church. We should first of all consider the Apostles sent by Christ to preach his gospel. As the Apostle Paul said, "We have come to be the filth of the world and the scum of the earth. (1 Cor 4:13)" Jesus sent them out as sheep in the midst of wolves. They risked their lives and were treated terribly all the way to their death so that you and I would hear the gospel even to this day. As Jesus says before sending them out, "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me . . . Anyone who gives one these little ones just a cup of cold water because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

These works are testimonies of how they received the Word taught by his Apostles. They are a testimony to how we receive his Word from those who are called to proclaim it. When we hear about a pastor who "ruined" a congregation, do we immediately assume the worst about him, that he wasn't personable enough, that he moved too quickly? Shouldn't we first ask what he was teaching? I don't know how many times I have talked to someone who stopped attending church when he became an adult, and he would criticize his parents for "forcing" him to go to church. Should we assume that his parents were legalistic Pharisees who cared nothing about his soul? Shouldn't we instead ask about what his parents taught him about Jesus? When we hear about a Christian who is deemed "controversial" for speaking out, it's easy to assume that he was being uncouth, overbearing, or unloving. But what did he say? Was he speaking the truth? Do his words conform to God's Word?

Perhaps the pastor made some bad moves and showed some lack of judgment. Perhaps the parents were at times a bit out of touch or in over their heads. Perhaps your fellow Christian could have added a little more salt to his words. But God has not called us – he has not predestined us – to judge based on what the mob says. The works, which Jesus will reveal, are testimonies to how we received and treasured the Word of God, as it was taught, proclaimed, and confessed by the least of his brothers.

The works Jesus describes also seem like small works. They didn't end hunger or homelessness. They didn't stop cold weather, cure every sickness, or free those who were unjustly imprisoned. Only Christ can do this. Only his gospel can satisfy the soul, warm us with his righteousness, heal our sin-sick hearts, and free us from condemnation. The saints know this. So they simply received those who spoke God's Word. They received the Word. And Jesus reveals on the last day how their works testify to this.

Those who are on the left are those who didn't receive his Word. They weren't predestined. But we shouldn't therefore conclude that God determined beforehand that they would go to hell. No, Jesus clearly says whom hell was prepared for. It was prepared for the devil and his demons. God desires all people to be saved. Why some are saved and others lost is not something we can figure out. Those who are saved are saved only because of God's grace, not because of any decision they made or work they performed. Those who are condemned are condemned only because of their own unbelief. It is entirely their fault. It is a great mystery, which we leave to the secret mind of God. As Moses wrote, the secret things are for the Lord our God, but the revealed things are for us (Deut 29:29). So we rely on what God reveals. And on the last day, all things will be uncovered in full.

The reason people are condemned is because the light has come, but people loved the darkness rather than the light. Their works are proof of this. But Jesus doesn't focus on all the evil things they did. He points out what they didn't do. They didn't give him food and drink. They didn't welcome him, clothe him, or visit him. In other words, they paid no attention to his little brothers who were proclaiming his gospel. They ignored the words of the Apostles and Prophets, imagining that they knew better. They thought they knew how to bless themselves and make the world a better place. So they looked for approval from men rather than grace from God. They cared more about getting the godless world to like them than they did about sitting with those who look to Christ's Word as the one thing needful.

Everything written down in the Bible was written to warn us as well as teach, train, and comfort us. Death can happen at any time. Judgment is just around the corner. Don't treat this lightly. But you should not despair. You should not give up. You can have every confidence that God has chosen you in Christ. Why? Because you have God's promise. He promises that Christ's blood washes you clean. He promises that he will not let anyone snatch you out of his hands. And he has not called you to try and figure out whether this promise applies to you. No, he gives you the faith to rely on this promise. He chooses you through this promise. And with this promise, he has prepared your entire future. Your life is hidden in God with Christ. And when Christ who is your life appears, you will also appear with him in glory.

So don't grow weary in doing good. He has prepared these works for you. And with these works, he puts you in good company, whether they are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, or hated by all people. Your entire life is determined by God to receive his Word together with all his saints, no matter how small or insignificant the world sees them to be. He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will certainly with him provide for you and all his elect everything you need. He who calls you is faithful, and he will certainly do it. Amen.