

July 15, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Living Between Two Judgments

John 12:44 – 50

The goal of Christ's ministry, the goal of His life was to glorify the Father. The summing up of His three and a half years of ministry is in verse 37 where Jesus prays, '**Father, glorify Your name**'. And if this is what summed up His life – that all He did and said pointed to the glory of God – can we say that our own lives should aim at anything less? In fact, we could say that the whole meaning of human existence is summed up in three statements: **God is glorious – He must be given glory – and it's only by giving Him glory that we experience glory ourselves.** The greatest goal of human living, is living for the glory of God.

And we saw last week that God gets glory when His attributes are displayed. When God's mercy is understood, God gets glory. When we know His love, realize His grace, understand His mercy we give Him glory. When His truth, His righteousness, His love and wisdom and grace are displayed through us we give Him glory. And the greatest manifestation of the attributes of God in history took place on the cross – all His love, all His mercy, all His righteousness and justice and forgiveness was poured out there. And when we see Him on the cross and we accept Christ's death on our behalf, God is glorified in us. We must see the glory of God and love and treasure that glory.

Because if we don't, we're saying that we love the glory of men more than the glory of God. We might say that God is important – but He's not first. He's valuable, but not priceless. When you've seen the glory of God, you have seen that God is the most important thing in your life. To be a Christian means that you have seen that God is the most important thing in your life – He's why you do what you do, why you live the way you live. He is why the only thing that made sense to write on William Borden's tombstone were the words, '**Apart from faith in Christ there is no explanation for such a life.**' The Christian is one who says, 'Does God's glory, His will, His way, motivate my every moment – does it drive the way I work, the way I relate to everyone?' 'Is God the center of my thinking, is He the defining force behind the way in which I use my possessions – the way in which I use my money?' 'Is He at the center in the way I think about life and my world view and politics? Is He the center of everything?

Because if that is not the case – we are living in unbelief. **The root of unbelief is loving the glory of men rather than the glory of God.** And if He is not the center – if the glory of God is not your ambition, you are simply living to please yourself – to seek your own glory. And the reason this is so incredibly important is not just the fact that you've wasted your life on yourself; it's not just that you've missed the central purpose for your very existence; and it's not just that you've thrown away a glorious future; it is because there is a day of reckoning coming in which the outcome is dependent on whether you've lived for yourself or for God.

This last section of Jesus' public ministry teaches us at least four things here, and I'll give them to you up front – so if you fall asleep during the sermon at least you'll have some reference points to go on. Here they are: I think that this passage teaches us at least four things – There must be a judgment day – We can't have a judgment day – In Christ we've already had a judgment day – and finally our lives as Christians are lived between two judgment days. Now I'm sure some of those points are immediately understandable, and some are rather unclear so let's get into it.

First of all – **There must be a judgment day.** There must be a final reckoning – there has to be. The Bible affirms it, the human heart fears it, and almost everybody is trying to either ignore it or explain it away. When I was younger I learned the Apostle's Creed which summarizes the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. One of the summaries has to do with judgment and it affirms that Christ will return in judgment: *He will come to judge the living and the dead.* But in the old King James Bible language it went: *He will come again to judge the quick and the dead.* And I had this thought that everyone's trying to get away from this judgment but God is even going to get the quick ones.

I know this is not the most popular topic, especially in today's atmosphere of non-judgment and tolerance. I just saw an advertisement for a new Planet Fitness gym that offers along with tanning beds and cardio machines and fitness programs, a "Judgment Free Zone". If members feel that they are being judged in the gym they can set off a loud alarm that flashes and is intended to reprimand the offender. And in keeping with the "judgment-free zone," they have no dumbbells that weigh more than 75 pounds. Judgment free. That's how we want to live. We think that without life without judgment is somehow utopia. But we can't live without judgment – there must be a judgment day.

Look at what Jesus says here: *"If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day."* John 12:47-48 What He's saying is that when He came, He did not come as a judge. His coming was for salvation – not judgment. But He goes on to say that there will be a judgment – there will be a final judgment. There is a judge and judgment day is coming. But Jesus links this judgment with one of His best known metaphors – light. Right before He says this He proclaims: *"I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness."* John 12:46

What is He saying here? The image of light is so inviting, so judgment-free – but the image of a judge, of judgment is so intimidating, so dark. A judge always is sitting up above you – never down at a desk, but elevated above everything. If you ever go into a courtroom, the guy that is literally above everyone is the judge – there's no one higher than him. And so Jesus puts these two images together – light and judgment – and what He's really saying is that **without judgment, we are doomed to live in total darkness**. If you believe in Him, you won't be in the dark. Without Him all is darkness – without judgment, there is no light at the end of the tunnel – there is just the tunnel.

In our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines. There are plenty of bestsellers that proclaim things like 'Your Best Life Now' and 'Becoming a Better You' and 'Chicken Soup for the Soul'. But I've yet to see the bestseller that is titled, 'Judgment Day for the Soul.' But if this passage is about anything, it is about the coming judgment. And there are two popular myths about judgment that people want to believe today. The first is that **there is no judgment** and the second is that **judgment leads to violence** in our society. The problem with the first is that deep down, no one really believes the myth that there is no judgment; and no one really lives like the second myth is true.

In trying to avoid the specter of judgment day, people simply try to believe it isn't there at all. Arthur Miller wrote a play called *After the Fall*, and in that play, the main character, Quentin, says something that captures the essence of how some people try to deal with judgment: *For many years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you're young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover; then, a good father; finally, how wise, or powerful or [whatever.] But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved. . . on an upward path toward some elevation, where. . . God knows that. . . I would be justified, or even condemned. A verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day. . . and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself, this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. . . Which, of course, is another way of saying despair.* Quentin in ***After the Fall*** by Arthur Miller

Essentially Quentin realizes that if the bench is empty, if there is no final judgment – the only option is despair or darkness. We must have a judgment day if there is to be any meaning at all in the universe. We must have a judgment day if there is to be any light at the end of the tunnel. The odd thing is, is that people tell themselves that, like how you live doesn't really matter, but they really live as though life mattered anyway. They do what Quentin did – they argue with themselves and others. When he talks about the pointless litigation of existence, he's talking about how we argue with ourselves and with each other, even though we say the bench is empty, there is no judge. We say that, but we don't really believe it.

For example, we say 'It's better to be generous than selfish' – 'It's wrong to steal or kill or lie' – 'It's wrong to oppress people' – 'It's better to keep your word than to break your promise' – we are constantly making judgments as to right and wrong – we're constantly telling one another what the right course and wrong course of action is – we are litigating with ourselves and each other – we're saying 'It matters how you live'. But Quentin, who is really Arthur Miller, says, "I looked up one day and there was no one on the bench". The bench was empty, there was no judge. But what does that really mean? If the bench is empty, then there is no way you can say 'This is how you ought to live'. 'This is what is moral'. 'This is right and this is wrong'.

If there is no judgment day, then we can live any way we want – nothing matters. How can there be any basis for saying this is better than that, or this right and that is wrong if there is nobody on the bench. And Quentin was at once liberated by the thought that there was no one on the bench, but at the same time he was thrown into utter despair, total darkness because the absence of a judge and a judgment meant that his life was meaningless. It can't have any meaning if there's no one on the bench. There must be a judgment day.

But people that are opposed to the idea that there is a God who will one day judge the living and the dead, also write it off by embracing a second myth – which is the idea that a judge, **a judgment day, leads to violence in our society** and if we only got rid of the idea of judgment – make the world a judgment-free zone – then we wouldn't have any violence in the world. But once again, they are not living in the real world. It isn't the absence of a judgment day that inhibits violence – it's the **fact** that there is a judgment day that **prevents** more violence.

Miroslav Volf, Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale, is a Croatian whose country experienced worst sort of violence in the 90's during a civil war. Atrocities were committed by both Serbs and Croats, and yet Volf's contention in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace* is that the prevention of violence **requires** the existence of a judgment day. Here is what he writes: *My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance...My thesis will be unpopular with man in the West...But imagine speaking to people (as I have) whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit...Your point to them—we should not retaliate? **Why not?** I say—the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God...Violence thrives today, secretly nourished by the belief that God refuses to take the sword...It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land—soaked in the blood of the innocent, the idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind...if God were NOT angry at injustice and deception and did NOT make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship. **Miroslav Volf in Exclusion and Embrace***

Volf claims that only the “quiet of a suburb” leads people to believe in a God who refuses to judge. Because – for most of us – the injustice we have received is minor. We in the West have been saved, for the most part, from the kinds of brutality we read about in that war. From our place of wealth and security, we dismiss the rest of the world's intolerance and need for retribution. So we don't need a God of vengeance. Volf insists that disbelief in a God of vengeance will lead to more violence, not less. If we live in a land “*scorched and soaked in the blood of the innocent,*” and if we doubt God will bring ultimate justice, then we will be forced to take up the sword ourselves. Because injustice needs an answer, and if God isn't going to give it we must. So, if there is no God of justice, what hope is there for the world? So we must have a judgment day.

The problem though, with that is that we must have a judgment day, but **we can't have a judgment day** – we can't survive a judgment day. If there **isn't** a judgment, there is no hope – if there **is** a judgment there is still no hope – because we wouldn't make it through. And if you never understand this you'll never have a life transformed by the gospel. This is the gospel – there is a judgment day – and you'll never survive it. We can't bear a judgment day. And Jesus brings this out in the way He talks about judgment day. It isn't said outright but we can see it in the text. Two things about this judgment – this **judgment is focused on the heart**, and this judgment is **based on what we know**. Judgment, final judgment is focused on the heart and based on what we know. The reason we can't have a judgment day is that **our hearts and our knowledge will condemn us**.

First of all **judgment is focused on the heart**. In verse 44 Jesus, responding to the lack of belief by those who loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God, cries out: *And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me."* John 12:44-45 Who were these guys? Strangely enough these were religious leaders – these were people who said they knew God. Religious people are those who are quite good on the outside – they go to church, they obey the Ten Commandments, they pray, they say all the right things – but something is wrong with their hearts – speaking of their hearts the writer says, 'They loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God'. The fact that they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God meant that there was something wrong with their hearts.

And the fact that they didn't believe in Jesus meant that they really didn't love the Father. They aren't judged on the basis of what they had done – apparently they had done everything right. Their problem wasn't behavior – their problem was their heart. There was something wrong with their heart. 1 Samuel 16 gives the guiding principle of God's judgment. As Samuel went looking for a king in Jesse's home, he looked Eliab, the firstborn, and said to himself, '*Surely this is the Lord's anointed*'.

But God right away spoke to him and said – '**Man looks at the outward appearance – but the Lord looks at the heart**'. The focus of God's judgment is the heart – because it is from the heart that behavior springs. It isn't so much, 'What have you done? But **why** have you done what you've done?' Remember the story of the two sons in Luke 15? One son ran away and one stayed home and did everything right. But who was lost in the end? It wasn't the one who stayed home and did everything right – it wasn't the one who obeyed all the father's rules. It was never based on behavior. In the end the one that was lost was the one whose heart was farthest from the father's heart. God looks at the heart. What's in your heart?

But we also see that **judgment is based on what we know**. *"If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day."* John 12:47-48 Jesus is not saying that He won't be there, He's not going to just mail it in – what He's doing is using another metaphor. He is the Word of God and He is saying what you've done with Him will be the deciding factor in the end. The word you heard is what will be the evaluation criteria. In other words, on the last day, what will happen is that you will be confronted with the truth that you've known – and your judgment will be based on what you've done with that word. On that day, what people will hear is '**You knew Me, but you didn't do Me**'.

The question on that day will be, '**What did you know, and what did you do with what you knew?**' God is not counting up all the good behavior and weighing it against the bad behavior and seeing which one wins out. He is asking what did you do with what you knew? He doesn't judge lack of knowledge – He judges according to the knowledge you have. Some people are heaping up the truth Sunday after Sunday but it never impacts their living, they never do anything with it. Every time they come, every time more truth is being heard and on the last day that word is going to rise up and say, 'What did you do with me?' So if you want to be less responsible, you shouldn't listen to so much truth. This may cut our attendance in half but this is sobering. This is staggering. There is no hope there. **If there isn't a judgment there's no hope – and if there is a judgment there's no hope.**

So where's the hope? Well this is the good part. We must have a judgment day – at the same time we can't have a judgment day – but the good news is that **in Christ we've already had our judgment day**. Look at this passage again. Jesus doesn't outright tell us this but rather hints at it here. First of all in verse 44 it says '*Jesus cried out...*' And we've heard this before in John chapter 1 where it says that John cried out '*Behold the Lamb of God*'. And in chapter 7 where Jesus cried out '*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink*'. The word is **krazo** and it literally means to shriek like a raven. This word is full of passion and intensity. It is not simply a loud voice, but one with great emotion. In Greek it means both tears and shouting. It is a loud cry, full of passion and intensity.

And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. John 12:44 Jesus is passionately pleading for them to believe in Him. He is warning about the coming judgment – He is saying – 'There must be a judgment, and you can't stand in the judgment – it is only by believing in Me that you'll survive the judgment. I'm the representative of the Father and if you reject Me you reject the Father – I'm the only way through the judgment'. He's crying – He's calling out. It is the same kind of intensity we hear from C.H. Spurgeon: "*Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that.... The saving of souls, if a man has once gained love to perishing sinners and his blessed Master, will be... an all-absorbing passion to him. It will so carry him away, that he will almost forget himself in the saving of others..... If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for."*

Our job is not to judge, but rather to preach the message that there is a judgment coming, and you can't stand in that judgment. But in Christ that judgment is already past. Jesus tells them that everyone who believes in Him will not remain in darkness – they'll be in the light. *"I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.* John 12:46 Judgment is over for them. Paul makes this clear in Romans chapter 8: *There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Romans 8:1 No condemnation. No judgment. **That is the only real judgment-free zone**. The judgment is only for those who reject Him – for those who reject the word. *He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.* John 12:48 But if you believe in Jesus, your judgment is in the past – it's history. There is no anticipation and terror of coming judgment. He was smitten in our place – He took our judgment – He's the judge who came down off the bench and took our punishment.

And what that means is that for the believer, **he now lives in between two judgments.** His judgment is already past – and he is living in that space between his judgment and the judgment of all those who ultimately, finally, will not believe. So what does that mean? How is it helpful to know that we are living between two judgments? It means that the Christian can really **live in freedom.** Knowing that our judgment is passed, knowing that our Father loved us so much that He sent His Son to die for us liberates our souls from the guilt of sin and the punishment we so richly deserve. It frees us up to be honest about our sin, knowing the full penalty has been paid. We don't have to hide anymore, or pretend anymore. We're not perfect – just forgiven and the blood of Jesus continually cleanses us.

What's more, is that if you know that Christ absolutely loves you, and absolutely forgives you, you can be honest with me about my flaws, and I can be honest with you about yours. How else can you be completely honest about your sin and completely assured of forgiveness unless you believe in the One who came down off that bench and took your sin and judged it at the cross? How else can you call sin, sin, in your life or anyone else's unless you live between two judgments? The Christian is someone who says, 'My judgment's behind me. Which means I deserved to be punished, so I don't feel superior to anybody. But I know there will be a judgment so I can call sin, sin. I can oppose immorality and injustice and unethical behavior, but not out of any vindictiveness or need to feel superior – because we all share the same fate unless we embrace the grace. How can you ever forgive anyone, unless you know that you don't have the right to judge others, **because there is a judge and He is not you?**

Knowing that you are a wretch, saved by grace, living in the light and not under judgment – only the realization that you are living between two judgment days – can you call sinners to repent – without being judgmental and harsh and legalistic. And it will motivate you to wrap your arms around their knees and not allow them to perish unwarned and unprayed for. The realization that you have passed from death to life, from guilty to innocent, because Jesus took your place will fill you with a gratitude and grace that cannot help but call others into this grace.

The Heidelberg Confession puts it like this in question 52: **What comfort is it to you that Christ shall come to judge the living and the dead?** That in all my afflictions and persecutions, with uplifted head I may wait for the Judge from heaven who has already offered Himself to the judgment of God for me, and has taken away from me all curse.

Our gracious God and Father,

Not a day of our lives have passed that has not proved us guilty in Your sight –in our words, in our actions, in our thoughts – prayers uttered from a prayerless heart, praise with a praiseless sound, our best behavior like filthy rags. O gracious Savior, grant us Your to hear Your voice assuring us that You came down off the bench to take our place, that by Your stripes we are healed, that You were bruised for our iniquities, that You were made sin for us that we might be righteous in You and that all our sins were forgiven and buried in the ocean of Your concealing blood. Though our sins seem to rise to heaven, Your merits soar above them all. When our unrighteousness weighs us down to hell, Your righteousness exalts us to the throne. Help us to live in the glorious freedom of judgment passed, looking for and loving Your appearing when You come again to judge the living and the dead. And let that overflow in in joy, delighting in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.