

Christ the King 2020

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Ezekiel 34:11–20, Psalm 95, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, Matthew 25:31-46

Judgment Day.

The words may bring to mind a variety of classic images of the humans standing before the throne of Christ. Some are slipping down into the fire below and some are ascending into glory.

It could bring to mind a variety of films from robots crushing humanity to angels on a killing spree. Years ago, I saw a bumper sticker that said, “Jesus is coming...look busy.”

In his book, *Before Church and State*, Andrew Willard Jones, offers a picture of judgment from actual cases in 13th century medieval villages. Rather than applying abstract principles of law, the judges and lords made decisions on the basis of maintaining communal peace. He suggests a sacramental world where there is a spiritual dimension to all judgments. Here is one example of a village conflict,

“The peasants of a certain village went every spring to a nearby wood to cut down the dead trees for firewood. One year the local knight stopped them on the way and took their laden carts. They protested, saying, “We have always taken firewood from this forest.” Indeed, responded the knight, “but you have always taken only one cartload; this year you have two.” Parliament held an inquest and ruled that in the previous forty years sometimes the peasants had loaded one cart sometimes two. The knight was wrong and violated the peace through his actions and he was to pay amends. But, what is really important is that now the peasants have a “right” to that dead wood in the forest, two cart loads. Before the conflict, it was just something they did within the peace.”¹

This was not decided on the basis of an abstract principle of human rights but on the way of life in a specific village. The judgment was meant to restore the harmony within this community. This gives us a different picture of rights and justice that has to do with harmony in relations. It brings to mind a biblical picture of judgment as the restoration of shalom.

Over the last couple months, we’ve heard a variety of parables about judgment. We’ve heard a couple judgment stories related to a coming wedding: a king who seeks to invite the community to his wedding feast and a group of virgins waiting for the bridegroom deep into the night. We heard the story of a king settling accounts with his servants. He forgives one servant a particularly large debt. The servant does not forgive someone who owes him a debt and soon the king alters his initial judgment and throws the unforgiving servant into prison. We’ve heard several vineyard stories including an owner hiring laborers at different points in the day but paying them all the same agreed upon price. Or the tenants who refused to pay the landowner his due and end up beating and killing his servants and even his son. In each of these stories, a judgment is passed.

Jesus gives His listeners a range of images about a coming judgment that is connected to the coming of the kingdom. Even as the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the judgment is at hand. The heart of each person is being revealed as Jesus speaks.

¹ Jones, Andrew Willard. *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (p. 191). Emmaus Academic. Kindle Edition.

In today's final judgment passage from Matthew, the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne. The nations are gathered, and a judgment is rendered. He separates the people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. His judgment is based upon whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited those who were sick or in prison. Jesus identifies himself with each of these poor and needy ones. He says, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Those who cared for one of the least of the brothers are welcomed into kingdom. Those who did not are cast into the fire.

There are several challenges with this image of judgment. First, who is being judged? Are Christians? Are the pagan nations? Are all people? Secondly, who specifically are the least of these: Jews? Christians? All humans in need? Thirdly, is this image of judgment suggesting that it is not our faith but our works that save us in the end?

To help us untangle these questions, I want to think about the placement of this story in the Gospel. After this last image of judgment, the Gospel of Matthew shifts to the story of the betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus. In the story of the cross, Jesus will be arrested and will literally identify with those in prison. He will be stripped and identify with the naked. He will be rejected instead of welcomed and even his own disciples will treat him as a stranger. He will even switch places with Barabbas, a notorious criminal.

In each of these images, Jesus is descending into the place of utter rejection, utter poverty, utter humiliation, utter desolation. The cross event reveals God's judgment and God's love, but it also reveals humanity. As we look at Israel, we see the human response to God. As the people Israel turn against Jesus, we see the judgment of God upon humanity. The drama of the sheep and goats has played out before our eyes. At judgment, there is none righteous, no not one. All have fallen short of the glory of God. This notion of judgment does not eliminate the idea of Jesus coming again in glory, but it helps us to understand how the judgment of God is revealed in past, present, and future.

In today's judgment of the cross, it is not Barabbas who is crucified. It is not the disciples who are executed. It is not the Pharisees who are cast into outer darkness. It is Jesus. He pours His life out completely on behalf of a world that has betrayed and killed Him. If this image is not clear to us, the Gospel of Luke makes it very clear. From the cross, Jesus says, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Judgment and mercy are bound together in the cross.

A way has been made for us. We should be cast out into outer darkness, but instead we are restored; the enemies of God come home through the redeeming grace of God.

With the reality of the cross in mind, we return to the previous questions: Who is being judged? Who are the least of these? Do our works save us in the end?

First, who is being judged? All humanity. We realize that we are all under judgment. Speaker 1: It's not a matter of determining whether we are sheep or goats. We are goats. We have been judged and yet we have been redeemed.

Do our works save us or our faith? We realize that it is Jesus who saves us and not we ourselves. In the end, our faith is trusting in Jesus, but our faith is not a work. Sometimes we act like it's a work. There's no work of our own that can redeem us. It's the work of Christ. We realize Jesus is the one who saves us.

This leaves us with the final question, and that is the least of these. Who are the least of my brothers?

Now this last image of judgment draws from ancient image in Israel, that the nations will be judged for the way they treat God's chosen. We read in Genesis 12:3, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The church adopted some form of this understanding and has often read the least of these as the people of God who have forsaken all to follow Christ. Then in the early 1800s there was a major shift in biblical interpretation, and it was suggested in this parable the least of my brethren referred to all people in need. In the modern day, this reading leads to a universalism outside of Christ that has more to do with works than Christ.

In light of the cross event, we might simply read the whole question differently. One we realize that we are the ones under judgment and Jesus acts on our behalf to redeem us, we might also begin to see that we are the least of these. We are the needy, the dispossessed, the naked, the imprisoned, the hungry, the thirsty, the unwelcome. We are the ones who are far off, but in Christ we have been brought near. He has welcomed us. Clothed us. Fed us. Healed us. We are the ones who are desperately in need, and the only one who could meet the need is Christ.

Christ has identified with our position as outcasts, as the unloved, as the unwelcome, as the judged. Christ enters into our poverty and raises us up into his life. We now enter into His life.

In Galatians 2:20, Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

The saints of God follow Christ into His poured out life. We learn the pattern of identification with the other believers in the communion of faith. In Philippians 2:3 we read about life in the community of faith. "In humility count others more significant than yourselves." We learn the way of honoring one another, serving one another, not considering our own gifts more highly than we ought. We learn to pour out our lives on behalf of one another.

Our understanding ministry is changed. The notion of feeding the hungry, of bringing drink to the thirsty, visiting those in prison, visiting the sick, welcoming a stranger is an overflow of the life and love of Christ. Otherwise, I might understand all those great, wonderful acts in light of some kind of personal superiority. Sadly service to the needy can often be condescension instead of lifting up the needy to the life of Christ.

When I see people in need, I realize afresh how God has met me and my needs. He has met me in Christ and he's also met me through the community of faith, so I follow the pattern of pouring out my life on behalf of the needy. This becomes a way of life. Every time we eat a meal, we thank God for the food but simultaneously we remember those who don't have food, which always keeps in our remembrance those in need. Now, the images of clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick and those in prison, these aren't universal principles. These are personal encounters with living people and it works its way out personally in each of our lives in the way God has made us, in our own particularity, the way our gifts work.

Our lives will be poured out in very different ways. Christ will call us to make very different sacrifices just as he turns to Peter and tells him he's going to be taken where he doesn't want to go. Peter looks at John and says, "What about him?" Jesus says, "It's none of your concern. You

go where I lead you." That's the nature of us pouring out our lives. My life is poured out in a way that is different. Each of our lives are poured out in a way that's different, but each of us are following the call of the spirit to walk in the way of king Jesus as we lay down our lives for others.