

## Getting Ready for the Judgment Day

Matthew 25:31-46

The idea of a Judgment Day is not one of the more appealing or attractive aspects of our faith. It's a frightening concept. I always feel a kind of shudder when I hear the term. The notion of a Day of Judgment conjures up images of a giant courtroom. God, the ultimate judge of all things and all persons, sits on a throne. One by one persons appear in the judgment hall to receive reward or punishment. The pronouncement God makes is final. God has the last word. There is no appeal, because there is no higher court.

Sobering and disconcerting thought, isn't it? We don't want to think about it. Yet, you find that the ideas of judgment, God as Judge, and a day of judgment running throughout the Bible. The idea of divine judgment occurs from Genesis to Revelation.

When I study the Biblical passages and think deeply about the concept of judgment, I find that I move from fear to hope. It's not that I think I would fare well before that kind of judgment. I would not, for, as the Psalmist said, "my sins are ever before me" (51:3). And it's not that I want to see other persons punished for their misdeeds. I pray that every person will be included in God's redemptive activity.

I have two reasons for finding the idea of judgment hopeful. One is that I want to believe that we live in a moral universe. I want to believe that truth will triumph over falsehood, that right will defeat wrong, and that good will win out over evil. I dare to believe that someday all evil will be destroyed and that life can be an experience of love and communion and peace. If those hopes and beliefs are to be realized, there must be a judgment and a Judgment Day. It will take judgment to bring about justice and reconciliation.

My other reason for finding judgment a hopeful concept is that if God is the judge, we can be assured that judgment will be loving, merciful, understanding, and redemptive. It will be based on love, not law. It will result in healing, not punishment; restoration, not rejection; and union, not separation.

Jesus readily accepted the notion of God's judgment and of a Day of Judgment. That is clear in his teachings. But, as he did in virtually every area, Jesus recast the idea. He saw judgment not as something occurring in the distant future, but as an everyday reality. The Day of Judgment, Jesus would say, is today. The separation of the righteous and the unrighteous is taking place now. The rewards and punishments are being meted out in the present moment.

Jesus got attention with a picture of a common activity. Palestinian shepherds allowed their sheep and goats to graze together during the day. At night they separated the sheep from the goats. Goats were taken into caves or pens for the night; sheep were left in the open. In Jewish thought sheep symbolized righteousness and the right side of a banquet table was the side of honor; so the sheep on the right represented the righteous and the goats housed on the left the unrighteous.

With this figure Jesus gave two profound lessons about righteousness, unrighteousness, and judgment. The lessons cut across time periods, religious and ethnic lines, and racial and national divides. His message here is universal and timeless. His lessons are striking.

First, this approach to judgment depicts the righteous as those who respond to human need. Priority is given to ethics. Nothing is said here about belief or theology. Nothing is mentioned about confessing belief in Jesus. Nothing is said about forgiveness of sins or salvation by grace. The righteous are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, house the homeless, clothe the naked, minister to the sick, and visit the imprisoned. The unrighteous are those who fail to respond to human need.

Now that's a jolt! It doesn't seem to have made the impact on God's people that it should have. We are deeply concerned about what people believe and how they behave. We work diligently to do things just right in church. We spend bundles to make our houses of worship beautiful and comfortable. And here, in this dramatic parable, delivered according to Matthew just before Jesus' death, nothing at all is said about those things!

We like to think of good deeds as something we can add to faith when we have time or opportunity, something that gives "extra credit" with God. Jesus takes the other position. Serving humanity is more important than our other religious pursuits.

There is a dimension of this truth that you and I need to keep before us in today's world. We are reading and thinking a lot today about the many religious approaches even within our own country and how we relate to other faiths and persons of other faiths. Jesus would say that this is the common bond. If any approach to God reaches out to human need in love, it has validity whether it be Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or whatever. At this point we are all one.

The Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn told this story about judging religions. A woman asked the Teacher, "Which is the true religion?" The Teacher replied, "Once there was a magic ring that gave its bearer the gifts of grace, kindness, and generosity. When the owner of the ring was on his deathbed, each of his three sons came separately and asked him for the ring. The old man promised the ring to each of them.

"He then sent for the best jeweler in the land and paid him to make two rings identical to the original. The jeweler did so, and before he died, the father gave each son a ring without telling him about the other two. Inevitably, the three sons discovered that each one had a ring, and they appeared before the local judge to ask his help in deciding who had the magic ring. The judge examined the rings and found them to be all alike. He then said, 'Why must anyone decide

now? We shall know who has the magic ring when we observe the direction your life takes.' Each of the three brothers acted as if he had the magic ring by being kind, honest, and thoughtful."

"Now," the Teacher concluded, "religions are like the three brothers in the story. When they strive for justice and love, they are true and valid. When they stop serving people, we know that they are not of God." (Retold by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If God Is Love*, pp. 139-140.)

Jesus taught and demonstrated that the essential characteristic of God is love and compassion. If that is our basic understanding of God, it follows that love and compassion are the standards on which God's judgment is carried out. Ever practical in his message, Jesus simply listed some of the ways that love and ethical concern can be demonstrated. Not an easy lesson to absorb, but deeply important!

The second lesson is equally as powerful. We refer to this truth often, but I fear that we either do not fully accept it or we simply let it slide from our minds. It is this: The person in need, the person to whom we minister, is no less than Christ himself. Mind-numbing, isn't it? Jesus has identified with those in need. When you read the gospel accounts, you find that Jesus consistently sought out persons in need. The disciples were often taken with the sights in a certain area or became involved in the gossip. Jesus was always found with persons with problems and needs.

This idea has all kind of ramifications. If you want to find Jesus in the world, where would you go? You want to speak with Jesus? Find a person you can serve. Of course, Jesus has not limited himself to the needy. His spirit is within every one of us. You are Jesus to me. I am Jesus to you. Isn't that amazing?

And also disturbing! It means that that person who hurt you is Jesus. It means that the person you find to be completely obnoxious is Jesus. It means that you find Jesus where you would never expect him. Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked him for alms. Martin had no money. He noticed that the beggar was shivering with cold and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier's cloak, worn and frayed as it was, and cut it in half and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream. In the dream he saw heavenly places and angels and Jesus in the midst of them. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Where did you get it?" Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

What I see in this story is that we are being judged. Judgment Day is now. Jesus was a realist who lived in the present. He rarely spoke of the future. His concern was the kingdom of God in the present. So we are judging and being judged day by day.

And the judgment is based on how we respond to human need and how we treat each other. It's so stunningly simple and so difficult! It is much easier to be judged on beliefs and even on behavior. What Jesus lays before us is the challenge that our judgment is determined by the way we treat the people we meet and the needs we encounter.

J. William Harris

23 November 2008