

April 30, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

The Apostles' Creed: The End of Evil
He shall come again to Judge the Living and the dead

Psalm 10:1-2, 12-18

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We have two more sermons to go in our series in which we are looking at basic, orthodox, Christian faith through the lens of one of the oldest and most widely used summaries known as “*The Apostles’ Creed*.”

The last phrase of the Creed speaks about “Life Everlasting,” and so, next Sunday I want us to think about heaven: everlasting life with God. But this Sunday, today, I want us to consider the line in the creed which affirms the belief that Jesus will come again as a judge:

“He shall come to judge the quick (the living) and the dead.”

Now, this is a huge topic, and the first part of it, (Jesus’ coming again)

I’ll only deal with briefly this morning – by saying that I have no clue WHEN Jesus will come again! And, perhaps more importantly I don’t really care!

In fact, it seems to me that the amount of ink, time and energy, spent on this subject by some followers of Christ trying to determine what’s going on in the world so they can get the final timetable, is not only a complete waste of time but a profound slap-in-the-face to Jesus himself.

That is, Jesus’ simplest and clearest word on the subject is in Matthew 24, where he says

³⁶*But about that day and hour no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*

And then he adds

⁴²*Keep awake therefore,
for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

In other words, even though there are lots of passages on the second coming in the New Testament, lots of passages about Jesus’ return, and the timing of his return, most of them are wide open to different interpretations because they are highly symbolic (think, for example of the Book of Revelation).

BUT in Matthew 24, Jesus says something about his return that’s absolutely straightforward and not symbolic at all. As if to say,

“For goodness sake, don’t waste your time trying to figure it out! If even I don’t know, then you’ll never know. Only one thing is necessary JUST BE READY!”

- Like a parent returning to a child
- Like a visit from the boss in a business
- Like a teacher returning to a classroom
- Like a coach with a team

implies Jesus – “*I’m coming and it shouldn’t really matter when I’m coming because what you know is this: you’re accountable to me – whether I’m visible or not, I’m a judge! THE Judge – of the living and the dead.*”

For years when I was younger, the doctrine of judgment was one that I wrestled with a lot, with the fear that somehow God-the-judge would make a mistake and would willy-nilly condemn people unfairly to an eternity without him: *What about those who have never heard about Christ? What about those who’ve seen Christians at their worst and have decided that Christ is not the way?*

In fact, there was a particular time at university, a period of two to three weeks of enormous turmoil and doubt and pain – that I can still feel – when I almost threw faith out the window because the idea of judgment made no sense: *what kind of a God would do such a thing?*

But as time has gone by my mind and faith have changed completely, and though it can still be troubling, for me, it’s not optional to believe not only in Christ as the Savior of all, but in Christ as the Judge of all. And this, for at least four closely-related reasons that I want to share.

1. Christ is a Judge because he knows that accountability can lead to great things, and “no accountability” can lead to devastation.

When we are held to account by someone, we tend to up our game and do our best, and vice versa.

About two years ago, Gary Haugen, founder of *International Justice Ministries* testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a hearing entitled, “Ending Modern Slavery: What is the Best Way Forward?”

[<http://news.ijm.org/live-ijms-gary-haugen-testifying-on-slavery-before-senate-foreign-relations-committee>]

He said this:

Slavery – human trafficking – is as brutal and vast as ever.

- *12 million people are enslaved in human trafficking for profit around the world, much of it, but not all, related to the sex trade.*

“Slavery is more vast than ever.”

And then he added this – that

“Slavery is more stoppable than ever. And it exists on a vast scale for only one reason: impunity. Impunity is the simple fact that across the world, people can get away with the awful things they do; and there’s no one there to stop them: either no law, or rule of law, or no one willing or able to enforce the law. When impunity ends the vast majority of slavery goes away. Slavery is a crime of opportunity, and will decrease when the risk gets too high.”

In other words, when you know there’s a judge who holds you to account, awful things stop, and we bring the best out of people, and for people. And we decrease the worst.

This may not seem like the most positive or best motivation in the world, but it is how it is for every parent and coach and teacher and boss who speaks of “consequences”!

So, in the first place, Christ the Judge (like a good parent, or teacher or coach or boss) wants to do this for us: to bring the best out of us!

2. And wants to do so, in the second place because, as a judge, Christ values us and counts us precious.

In a paradoxical way it's precisely in holding us accountable, in bringing us to a moment of judgment, that God gives huge value to our lives: treating us as not as mere animals or puppets on a string, but as human beings, made in the image of God.

In sports, for example, anyone can play a game at some level. I like to play golf; but I don't play very well. So I do it alone! Or with close friends who will not judge! And I would never think of going public, or entering a competition or a league. But when you go public (whether it's a school team, the NBA, or the Olympics) you are actually choosing to come under judgment; you are choosing to be measured and judged by others, you are willing to be held accountable with every move and whistle. And we do this – we go public, before others when we come to believe that what we do matters! Matters to us, and matters for others.

So, Judgment, in the second place, is God's way of saying that "every-one of us is on the team." God selects not just *the best of the best*, but all of us. Each of us has a life that matters – a game to play, with a purpose, with moral choices that matter and count for something. And that includes you and me.

So, Christ is a Judge who takes our lives and our actions and our choices seriously.

3. And, then, in the third place: Christ is a Judge because he's passionate about resolving what is unfair and downright wrong here on earth.

Says the prophet Amos (5:24: quoted by MLK Jr. in his "dream" speech):

*"Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

This is God's passion. It is not a passion to condemn! But a passion for justice: for what is right and fair.

Of course it's true that there are things that make God Mad! Furious! Angry! And rightly so. BUT this anger is not dominant in the character of God

Says St. John (3:17):

God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world

This is not God's passion – to condemn!

And Peter (2 Peter 3:9) adds:

"God doesn't want any to perish but for all to come to repentance"

God's passion is for us, and for what's right and fair.

We see this in Jesus' story we call the wheat and the tares (or weeds; Matthew 13:24-30): Jesus knows that some people have a view of judgment that is macho: "*Go get the bad guys and deal with them!*"

But in the story, Jesus effectively says,

“Slow down: if you move too quickly then you’ll get it wrong. Just wait. God’s timing, and God’s justice will end up being just right – in the end.”

And in our deepest selves, isn’t that actually what we all want? Justice and fairness for all?

Or, to put it another way: what would be truly intolerable to all of us would, in fact, be to have a God who provides – no judgment and justice at all! No day when all the injustices and all the senselessness of the world would find their resolution.

This is what the Psalmist is crying out for in Psalm 10.

He’s on the underside of society and from down below, there’s often no justice to be found. So there’s this human cry for someone, for God (!) to DO SOMETHING! And so he cries out

Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, “***You will not call us to account***

But you (God) do see!

Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands;

The helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan.

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;

You will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,

– so that those from earth *may strike terror no more.*

Think of the brutal persecution of all kinds of people by ISIS, with no recourse or justice in sight!

Or think of the countless incidents of injustice throughout history, conducted simply on the basis of race: lynchings and shootings with no justice in sight. Or think of those who are just not as physically strong as others: the countless women and children abused repeatedly behind closed doors, by husbands or relatives, or friends of the family, for whom there’s no escape; no one who would believe them if they told the truth.

- Over 6 million children abused in our nation each year
- 1 in 4 women in their lifetime abused by their partner; across all economic levels. Most of who are stuck where they are!

All of these and much more – cry out for justice!

In fact, God has placed this cry somewhere in each of our hearts and consciences (there’s something in each of us, isn’t there?) that cheers when the good guys win and the bad guys to lose!

We see it in book after book; and movie after movie – not just for adults, but especially for children and youth. From the *Incredibles* to *Harry Potter* to the *Hunger Games*, when evil finally loses out, and good wins we want to give a collective YES! A collective cheer!!

So we need not worry! Christ’s Judgment is not about the day when God gets it wrong – when an instant replay might cause God to go “Oops! I made a mistake!” But quite the opposite. Christ’s Judgment is about the day when the God who loves us so much that he is willing to die for us in Jesus Christ gets it right. And on that day we will all go “*Ah! At last, it all makes sense. That’s fair! That’s Right! At last*”

So, Christ the Judge is

- (3) God's pledge to resolve the unresolved injustices of life
- (2) God's action to give meaning and value to our lives
- (1) God's motivation (not the only one) - to be our best

4. **And then fourth: Christ as Judge** – the knowledge of God's ultimate justice and resolution – *provides the power that enables us to forgive: in fact, to forgive the unforgiveable.*

James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church NYC, hit the nail on the head when he said that:

Some offenses can never adequately be atoned for (this side of death). "Even if I stand up all night repeating, *"I hate them, I hate them, I hate them!"* Yet, at some point

(unless our own lives are to be dragged down in the mire too)

there has to be the movement beyond the fixation that by holding a particular bitterness or injustice in my mind, in some way, I am going to improve the situation, or fix the situation, or show adequate atonement for the situation.

[2007 PBS documentary, The Power of Forgiveness]

In other words unless you are going to be eaten up by a particular injustice or unfairness there are times when you'll have to LET IT GO and leave the atonement, the ultimate resolution, the justice or injustice of it all, to the hands of God.

- Christian Forgiveness is not about letting injustice win
- Christian Forgiveness is not about not pursuing human justice

BUT

- Christian Forgiveness is the faith to trust God to resolve and sort out what we cannot
- It's the belief that that God will have the final word – so we don't have to

So this is what Christians have always believed: that Christ's Coming to Judge is vital. It is vital:

1. To enable us to forgive the unforgiveable w/out abandoning justice
2. To resolve the countless injustices of life
3. To give to our lives great value and meaning
4. To motivate our choices and actions

But one more thing needs to be said, or question asked:

***How do we know that we'll end up on the right side of the Judge – fair and just as he may be?
AND – Is there a way to be sure?***

To which the Scriptures give a resounding answer expressed never more clearly than in the third chapter of John's Gospel (3:16-18)

¹⁶"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him (trusts him) may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Looking back to those awful moments when wrestling with those questions on judgment was painful and difficult for me, much remains unresolved: I still have no clue what God will do with those who have never heard about the name of Jesus, for example.

But I can live with that! *Because, what I AM sure of this:*

(1) That IF the Judge is the one who died for us THEN his judgment for everyone – the living and the dead – will be mingled with grace and mercy, it will be absolutely “right and fair,” and nobody will end up on the wrong side by accident! (Paul gives us a hint of this in Romans 2)

And what I’m sure of as well, is this:

(2) That for those of us – all of us here – who have heard, God’s free offer, God’s free pass is ours for the taking when we believe in him – when we entrust our lives into his hands to be our Savior, our Shepherd and our Lord.

Behold I stand at the door of your heart, and knock, says Jesus

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door

I will come in, and eat with them and they with me

Friends: Invite the coming judge into your life now! And discover that his grace and mercy will never let you down!

- Our Value
- Our Best
- Our passion for what’s right and fair
- Our power to forgive
- and our eternal salvation

are all wrapped up in our belief that Jesus “**will come again to judge the living and the dead.**”

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