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So You're Dead, Now What? - The Final Judgment
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Today we continue this sermon series called *So You're Dead, Now What?* We're looking at what happens to us after we die. So far we've talked about the differences between reincarnation and resurrection and that Christians are people who believe in resurrection, not reincarnation. Last week we looked at the Bible's teachings on hell...that some people might choose to reject God's grace, and if you do that, if you walk away from God, you have an existence that is the exact opposite of heaven. God doesn't send anybody to hell, people choose that, by decisions throughout our lives.

Next week we'll end this series of sermons by looking at heaven. What is heaven like? What will we do there? What kinds of experiences can we expect? We'll look at the scriptures and see what we can learn from them and infer from them and why does it matter.

Today we want to look at how we're judged at the end, what criteria are used to determine whether we go to heaven or go to hell. That's the judgment day. And all of this is important because what we think about the afterlife affects the way we live our lives in the present.

Now I'm not sure how many of us today have had the experience of actually standing before a judge or jury in the courtroom waiting for judgment. If you have, then you know it can be pretty intimidating. It is not the kind of experience you relish. At least it wasn't for me.

Aaron told you last week about his previous life as hell-boy, and I'm sure some of the things he did were chargeable offenses, but as far as I know he didn't appear in court for any of them. He was probably just better at not getting caught.

I was 18 years old and did some stupid things involving alcohol and eventually found my way in front of a judge. I remember well the feelings of guilt and shame and dread as my parents, other involved parties and their parents, were all waiting to go into the courtroom. This is not an experience I want to repeat. My mistakes, my poor judgment, my stupidity was on full, public display and a verdict was going to be rendered. I was embarrassed and ashamed and did not want to be there.

So when I drew the straw for "The Final Judgment", that feeling of dread just came over me..."great, the final judgement, standing before the judge...and this judge knows EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW about me. How can this end up being a good thing?"

And from your comments and questions in your emails, I think many of you are dreading this idea of judgment too. Many of you had similar questions. If I'm saved by grace and my sins are forgiven, then what is this judgment about? One of you asked, "Hey Mark, my question is that when we repent and ask for forgiveness of our sins, my understanding is that we are forgiven and GOD removes them as far as the east is from the west and remembers them no more. So at judgement time will he remember our sins again?" One person said that they picture stacks of file cabinets filled with stories and events and thoughts brought out as evidence. These are good questions, very valid questions that we will address today, but I think they also point to something we all kind of feel about this idea of final judgment...if it's OK with you, Lord, we'd rather not!"

There are other questions that go along with all of this, like who will be doing the judging and what will the criteria be and will this happen immediately after I die? These were all questions I received this week and we are going to look at them as well.

So let's take a look at what the Bible has to say about Judgment Day. Remember that Aaron mentioned over the past two weeks that the Bible does not lay out a black and white, literal understanding of this. Rather, the Biblical writers use images and word pictures to help us get some kind of grasp on something that is beyond our understanding. We should use the images and descriptions we receive to help us shape big concepts, knowing that they never intended us to get into too much detail.

So you're dead, now what happens? There are two biblical pictures; one is the idea of immediate resurrection and we see this in the conversation Jesus has with the criminal beside him on the cross. Jesus

says, “today, you will be with me in paradise”. So from this, many, probably the majority of Christians believe in immediate resurrection.

The other understanding comes from the passages in both the old and new testaments that describe a final judgment, this end of the earth complete judgment of all people. When you couple this image with Paul talking about those followers of Jesus who have died being resurrected when Jesus returns (1 Thessalonians 4) and you find many Christians who believe that the soul remains in a sleep kind of state until that day and all rise together.

I want to break this down for just a minute and give you my understanding of this. You don't have to agree with me, this is all in the realm of interpretation and informed opinion and I am not claiming to have the inerrant truth here. It's just the way I understand what the scriptures are trying to tell us about these mysteries.

For me, I believe we receive an immediate resurrection and go to our judgment then. 1 Thessalonians may have been the first book of the New Testament put on papyrus, and in this very early time, Paul believed that the return of Jesus was going to be immediate, in fact most people thought that none of the followers of Jesus would die before it happened. Well, people started dying and that raised a big question and Paul is trying to answer this question and bring comfort at the same time. So Paul uses imagery that joins those who have died with the living so that all of them participate together in the moment of glory when Jesus returns. Paul later backs off the idea that Jesus second coming is going to happen immediately and this also changes his understanding of what happens to people who die. Later in his life, Paul talks about wanting to go (to die) and be with the Lord, something that seems to be immediate. So I am of the opinion that when we die, we go to face Jesus then.

So what about these pictures of world-ending final judgment? This picture begins in the Old Testament with what is called “The Day of the Lord”. The Day of the Lord was not necessarily the end of time kind of judgment. It was a description of a time when God would intervene to re-establish justice and mercy. This idea became expanded into the belief that there will be a time when God does that permanently. And this idea was picked up in apocalyptic writings like Revelation. When the author of Revelation pictures the final judgment, it is a judgment against Satan and those who have chosen to stand with Satan. It is a judgment that removes evil from the world so that the work Jesus began could be completed...the kingdom of God arrives in it's fullness.

Even when books like Revelation are pronouncing judgment against evil, it provides words of comfort like this, “those whose names are written in the lamb's book of life do not fear the second death.” It may not sound all that comforting, but it is trying to say that if you are a follower of Jesus, then you have nothing to fear.

So I am of the opinion that when we die, we go immediately before Jesus for some kind of judgment, and that we don't go through judgment again at the end of time because that judgment is more about forever removing evil so that the Kingdom of God may come in its fullness.

So putting that aside, we still have some questions to look at: who gets judged and what is the criteria for judgment?

Let's start by looking at Romans 2, when Paul gives us some of his opinion on this matter.

¹³For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. Romans 2:13-16

The last sentence in this passage seems pretty clearly to include all people. Everyone will be judged. And this raises more questions. What about people of other faiths? In every faith there are people who are serious about following God as they understand God in their faith. There are Muslims who pray and practice their true faith daily and Jews who live out their faith with devotion and mercy. So what do we do with this?

And a related question is, “What do we do with the person who has lived on a remote island all their lives and never heard about Jesus at all? How will they be judged if they never had a chance to hear about Jesus?”

There are three main Christian responses to this question. One is a position called Universalism. Universalism says that God created all human beings, God loves all human beings, Jesus died for the sins of the whole world and that in the end God will work out the salvation of every single person so that all will be

saved and none will perish. I have to admit that I like the idea of that, it leaves out the free choice that we have to accept or reject God's grace. There is also an abundance of scripture in opposition to this position, so I'm not a Universalist.

The opposite view in the Christian faith is called exclusivism. Exclusivism is a view that says that unless someone received Jesus Christ as their personal savior they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, period. Even if you never heard the gospel, even if you were living a life of deep love and mercy and compassion toward others. The exclusivist belief would say that all those people are going to hell. This is a pretty hard and fast line.

The third option for us is called the evangelical inclusivist, and this is where I take my stand. This view acknowledges that God's mercy is probably broader than we imagine. And we can trust God to be just. And that because of this, God will look at people to see what they could have known and how they responded to his grace as it was available to them. In the passage we just read, Paul leaves room for God to be God and leaves open the possibility that non-Christians will have a different criteria and that God may provide a way of grace for them.

According to evangelical inclusivism, every person, Jew, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, will stand before Jesus on the last day and each one will recognize Jesus as the savior of the world. Jesus will look to see how they lived their lives. Now, they won't be saved by their works because the scriptures are clear that we are only saved by the grace of God through faith. So at that point Jesus could turn to his father and say, "Father, I would like to appropriate the saving work of the cross for this one. I give them the gift of my grace."

This view says yes, Jesus is the way the truth and the life. Yes, no one comes to the father except through him. Yes, there is no other name in heaven or on earth by which people may be saved. But in the end if they are saved it will be because Jesus looked at them, judged them according to what they could know of God's grace and appropriated his saving work on their behalf.

Many of the early church fathers held to this view. Many of the early church reformers held this view. John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Movement held to a view like this. C.S. Lewis, the evangelical writer of the 20th century held to this view. There are many other evangelicals who hold this view and many who do not. But as I've wrestled with this over the years, this is what I've come to believe. Others have wrestled with it and come to believe differently, and that's fine. What is important is that you wrestle with this too.

In the end I have to say that I don't know the mind of God exactly on this. I just don't know. What I do know is that God is just, and loving and I can count on that. If you're troubled by this idea, I'd just encourage you to have as much humility as possible before your pronounce judgment on other people. And it's also important for us to be able to say that we can trust God to do to do God's job...to do what is just and what is loving.

Some might say, "If that's the case then why would we share Christ with anyone? Why try to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ? Why send missionaries into other countries? Why would we try to win people to Christ?" The reason we try to win people to Christ and send missionaries around the world is because Jesus is the way the truth and the life. Because he offers the fullest life possible—the abundant life and that life can begin now! And because you want to introduce people to the one they will stand before on their day of judgment.

There is a passage of scripture that talks more specifically about the judgment of Christ-followers. So this is for you and for me... let's take a look at it...

II Cor 5:-10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

The "we" in this passage are the followers of Jesus...it's us. And when I read this passage, I feel that sense of dread of going before the judge all over again. And this is exactly where many of your questions are...in this moment. When we appear before Jesus, what is he looking for?

There is a tension in the Bible and in faith between the free gift of God's grace – that salvation is something we cannot earn – and the expectation that we will not waste that gift, that we will do something with it...put it into action, let it bear fruit. So when we are talking about the final judgment, I think we have to keep this tension in mind and that it will probably be on the second half of this tension...what have we done with the gift?

Many of the sayings and parables of Jesus that deal with judgment are about putting our faith in to action. What did Jesus look for when he walked among us? Did he look for people who believed in the right things? Was he looking for right belief about God? No, he was looking for right response to God

He was looking for both Faith and Work...belief and action. He said things like, "Be salt, be light. Seek first the kingdom of God; blessed are those who hear my words and do them." This is the criteria. John makes one of the most famous pronouncements of all scripture in his gospel when he says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life." Just a few verses later, John talks about how the good news of Jesus is also a judgment...

john 3:19-22

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

You know who the light of the world is, but are you living in that light of that truth? Or are you still living in the darkness? It's not just enough to believe in Jesus, it is about following him with our lives. Jesus once said, "you can tell a tree by its fruit". When Jesus looks at your life, what fruit will he see?

Matthew 25 contains 3 parables about judgment. If you use your study guide, you will read this chapter this week. The first of these parables, about 10 virgins and their lamps who are waiting on the bridegroom, is about being prepared. Jesus is telling us to be prepared for judgment day. In the second parable, the parable of the talents, Jesus is telling us that we have been given the gift of faith, and that this gift needs to be invested, lived out, so that it can produce more faith. And in the third parable, the one about sheep and goats, Jesus stands in judgment and separates the people out into two camps. And to one camp Jesus says, "well done, come on in. *For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*

And they say, "when, Lord, when did this happen." And Jesus says, "whenever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me."

And then he tells the others to depart, because they were too consumed with their own lives to have compassion for the needs of others.

Remember, what we believe about what happens when we die affects how we choose to live today.

So I've already confessed that my immediate reaction to the notion of judgment is dread, but it doesn't have to be that way! The author of Hebrews tells us to approach the throne of grace with confidence...this would suggest that if we live out our faith and follow Jesus on his mission that we don't have anything to dread. Here is how I picture it...and this is just me taking a wild stab in the dark. But for me it is consistent with who Jesus is and what he taught and lived. I think as I approach the throne of grace with confidence, Jesus will probably show me opportunities missed; times when I failed and I will grieve at the times I wasted his love, and I will be humbled...and that will become another moment of grace..another time when my shortcomings and sins are covered by the cross. Then Jesus will show me how his love bore fruit in my life in ways that I never dreamed and we will share in joy and celebration at the ways the love of God passed through my life into the lives of others.

What we think about the afterlife affects the way we choose to live today. My prayer is that you will live your life in such a way that you are able to approach that day with confidence, you will see it as a day of reward. That you will not be filled with dread or fear. And that because of the way you put your faith into action in this world, there will be countless others who will look toward a day of reward as well.