

The Prospect of Judgment

About twenty years ago I was on my way to a writers' conference, when I came across an old friend I hadn't seen for a few years on a Dallas airport layover. He had several books and pamphlets about the



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second coming of Christ and launched into an excited description of the signs he was seeing that the time was near. What did I think? Did I know the identity of the Antichrist? It was a "rain on his parade" moment when I explained the New Testament was not about a timetable but about us living out the love and grace of God in this lost world.

Matthew is the most Jewish flavored of the four gospels, so it should come as no surprise that Jesus is presented as God's promised Messiah who cares about people on the fringes of society, people in need – the Jesus who died as a common criminal on a Roman cross. The synoptic gospels have Jesus referring to himself as "Son of Man," a common Hebrew expression that means "human being" or "mortal." For the Jews that designation referred back to Daniel 7:13-14, where "one like a human being" would appear with the clouds in the air, who will possess "dominion, glory, and kingship." Matthew makes full use of this image in a vision of Jesus on the throne of judgment, separating the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:32-34).

For many, this powerful scene is the ironclad promise that we have heaven to look forward to – and, isn't it sad so many "others" will not make the cut? How is that for a neat little picture? I have actually had people express to me that they had not done a very good job of living as God's children, but that is OK; so long as you had accepted Jesus in your heart, you would go to heaven. Think about that. I have been tempted to ask them about any necessary connection between daily living and faith in God.

At the time of Jesus' original teaching, the Jewish crowds understood there would be a day of reckoning, not unlike the familiar routine of shepherds separating the sheep from the goats at the end of each day. What must have surprised Jesus' audience was the clear distinctive and basis of division. This came straight from the history of Israel's spiritual journey in which God's people were to care for

the outcast, foreigner, poor, widows, and orphans (Deuteronomy 24:17-19). The common idea of that first century Jewish society was that God's chosen people, and in particular, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Levites, and scribes would be first in the admission line for God's kingdom. That notion continues in our thinking: if you believe the correct doctrine, are baptized, are a member of the right church, etc., your heavenly entrance ticket is stamped.

It would be interesting to watch the faces of that listening crowd when Jesus taught about dividing the sheep from the goats on Judgment Day. Who are the "blessed by my Father to inherit the kingdom"? Reality, as in behavior, informs the spiritual truth. Faith must be more than knowing the correct religious answers. Faith is how you live.

Jesus warns us that if we busy ourselves with judging others, we should remember God will judge us (Matt. 7:1-5). Judgment is a significant element in Christian theology, but we are wise when we focus judgment on ourselves instead of others. Matthew understands clearly that ultimate judgment is based on acceptance or rejection of Jesus as our salvation, but there is also a judgment focused on our obedience to or living out biblical teachings.

This unit of study has shown the development of Israel's ideas about life after death. The earliest concept of death was the end of individual life or identity, followed by the shadowy existence of Sheol in the book of Job and a hint there is more. Then came a gradual connection between how God's people live in this world and hope for a better life in the next. If you have raised children, you know learning is a process. Finally, against a backdrop of injustice and inequalities in this world, Israel came to the realization that the eternal all-knowing God must have more in store for his faithful people than a shadowy ill-defined existence beyond the grave. Reading Daniel introduces the singular hope that God will send a "redeemer" or Messiah (Daniel 7:13-14).

By the time of the New Testament, the Jews were anticipating the coming of God's Messiah who would judge all the nations, divide people into two groups (sheep and goats) and judge all the nations (v. 32). What is to be the criteria for this

judgment? It is Christian living, i.e., behavior and relationships based on love and morality.

Is this a conflict with grace, the unmerited favor of God? Certainly not! Faith that is invisible or without connection to compassion and integrity is a sham. As the Apostle James forcefully writes: "Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:17). Jesus stated it plainly as well: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Isn't it interesting that Jesus' description of those who are the sheep, those who will be welcomed into heaven, are surprised that they have actually made a real difference in the lives of people who were hungry, sick, a stranger, or in prison (24:44-45)!

When we talk about our good deeds or efforts at Christ-like living, we must be certain to avoid any feelings of worthiness or spiritual superiority. Christ-like living is based on our willingness to see people as Jesus sees people, putting aside all concepts of superiority, and remembering God's love and forgiveness is a gift to all who will receive it. Judgment is clearly a part of Christian theology, but we must be wise enough to focus our judgment on ourselves more than on others.

We who describe ourselves as "God's sheep" should remember there is some "goat" in us all. Our calling is not to become superior to others but to be loving, like our Savior. That involves a lifetime of learning and growing. Personally, I frequently read the book of James because he grounds me, as when he writes: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

To get out of bed in the morning is to confront a world corrupted by selfishness, inequality, hatred, poverty, immorality, sickness, hunger, violence, and prejudice. The list seems endless, and all this in a world we call civilized and advanced. This is why Jesus came into our world, died on a cross, and took his life up again, so we can have hope. Judgment will come – but our calling is not to long for God's punishment on evil people, but to share the love and grace of God before that final day of reckoning.

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