

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

How do people react to the thought of judgment? For most people, I think, it's a bit uncomfortable. If you should attempt even a gentle admonition to an unbelieving friend, you would likely be met with a "[j]udge not, that you be not judged" (Matt. 7:1). That's one of those Bible passages that such sinners utilize so well to ward off their well-meaning Christian friends. They may not know where to find it in the Bible, but they know it, and they know it works well against the pious Christian who doesn't want to go against Jesus own words.

But you know well that that's a twisting of Jesus' words. He's not there "forbidding *all judgments*" regarding others, and certainly not "with regard to our [Christian] brothers and sisters." Rather, He is warning about "a hypocritical kind of judging"; judging "with an arrogant spirit," "blind to [one's] own faults and failings" (Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1–11:1*, p. 369). The point is: we don't generally like judgment from others.

Our youth undergo judgment at school all the time, being judged by their teachers for their progress in various subject matters. They generally don't like that kind of judgment either, though it's usually pretty gentle. One can still pass while making significant errors. The standard is not all that rigorous. It's certainly not the Divine standard.

It's not worry free to be involved in our court system, either. At our circuit winkels, the pastors are reading and discussing Dr. John Kleinig's book on the body, "*Wonderfully Made*." Dr. Kleinig is a Lutheran theologian from Australia who often lectures here at CTS. Dr. Kleinig writes in his book: "Innocent people welcome judgment. They welcome it because they have a clear conscience; they know that they will be vindicated by any just judge. They have nothing to fear from any right court of law" (p. 114). If only that were true in our courts. But as good as our legal system is, it makes plenty of mistakes, and our prisons are littered with people who are innocent of the crimes for which they were convicted. Try as we might to minimize these kinds of injustices, they happen. No, simply being innocent is not enough to welcome judgment by our courts.

So, what about the judgment by Jesus? It looms ahead of all of us. Jesus in our Gospel tells us about this coming judgment, which we are awaiting, as we confess each week: "And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end" (Nicene Creed).

How shall we think on this judgment? With the same kind of anxiety and trepidation as earthly judgments? Jesus says, "that depends."

Surely, the standard of Jesus' judgment is high. He told His disciples earlier in His ministry, "*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,*

*you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:20). That’s a high standard, but it’s higher yet. After giving a litany of things to do and not do, Jesus concludes it, saying: *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matt. 5:48). That’s the Divine standard by which we are judged — perfection.

By that standard, you might rightly ask: “Who would look forward to the judgment?” For before God we are not innocent. We’re law breakers; we’re guilty; and we live under a death sentence. Kleinig writes, “Even if we pretend that this is not so, the day of death will surely come for us, that fearful day when God the Judge confronts us in his final judgment of us ... By rights we should expect nothing but condemnation to eternal death from him then ...” (p. 115), that is, if we’re depending on our own righteousness.

May it never be! For then, what was Jesus about? Was He just an example for us of how we can achieve a righteousness like He did? Is that why He came? And if that’s so, what of His death? And His resurrection? What was that about? If we could achieve a righteousness by our own striving, be judged innocent by God, and attain to eternal life all on our own, why did Jesus have to suffer and die and rise again?

The answer, you know, is that we can’t do it on our own. That’s the answer Jesus gave to the disciples’ question after His encounter with the rich young man. *“Who then can be saved?”* they asked after the man went away dejected — he wasn’t perfect; he coveted; he wouldn’t give away all he had and follow Jesus. Jesus answered the disciples: *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”* (Matt. 19:25-26). Yes, salvation is a work of God, of God’s own Son, Jesus. That’s what Jesus’ perfect life was about — we call that His active obedience; it’s what His perfect suffering and death was about — we call that His passive obedience.

And this obedience of the Son is granted to us by grace, making us righteous — *“with God all things are possible”* — granting us life, as St. Paul says: *“The one who is righteous by faith shall live”* (Rom. 1:17). Indeed, this gift of righteousness, we receive by faith, as Jesus says, *“everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life”* (Matt. 19:29). Obedience, righteousness, life, love ... they all come to us as a gift by following Jesus in faith, as sheep that hear the shepherd’s voice and follow him (John 10:27-28).

Which brings us to the final judgment in our Gospel. When Jesus comes again in glory, returning as He departed ... on the clouds, flanked by angels, He will sit on His throne of judgment. The angels will have sounded the trumpets; the dead will have been raised; and all nations, the living and the dead, will be gathered to King Jesus for the final judgment.

Jesus knows His own sheep. They're those who had listened to His voice in faith. And so, the Good Shepherd is able to separate the people into two groups — sheep and goats ... believers and unbelievers ... those who trusted in Jesus as their righteousness and those who trusted in their own imperfect, incomplete obedience.

The believers are called blessed. What was theirs by faith in the promise becomes theirs concretely for eternity. The sins, which cling so closely to us now (Heb. 12:1) and which the devil uses to accuse us day and night (Rev. 12:10), are forgotten by Him who tells us: *“I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more”* (Jer. 31:34). There is no record of sin kept by the Lord (Ps. 130:3), who had triumphed over them by His cross (Col. 2:14). So that when the books are opened — those which record *“what they had done”* (Rev. 20:12), the believers are judged according to their deeds, it was all good: giving food and drink, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. And these were done not to gain heaven — *“when did we see You ...”* they say to Jesus. These simple things — done according to your station in life: “father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker” (Small Catechism, Confession, Which are these?) — were done in response to the grace already bestowed in Christ Jesus.

The unbelievers, on the other hand, are called cursed, and so they are for eternity, punished in *“the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* They refused the grace of God, and in the judgment, their sins clung to them still — their ledger was still full, their debt unpaid. Because of their lack of faith, they had no pleasing good works, as Scripture says, *“without faith it is impossible to please”* God (Heb. 11:6). When their works were read, it was all bad, the love they refused to bestow: no food, no drink, no welcome, no clothes, no visiting. The Great Judge holds them responsible, and they hear the damning words.

It's no wonder that the thought of judgment brings with it a feeling of dread for the unbelieving goats. But may it not be for us, the sheep of the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for us when He came in humility, but who will come again in glory. Rather, may we wait for this second coming eagerly, and ready ourselves to welcome Christ and His judgment when that day finally does come, for, on that day, we will be judged righteous and our works good. We will be called blessed, and we will receive our promised inheritance of everlasting life. Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.