

Judgment Day

Matthew 12:33-37

Our focus this afternoon is judgment day, the judgment day of God. I begin with the certainty of,

Heb. 9:27 “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.”

The question I would put before us is this, how does that judgment square with the declaration of God's unconditional love for us? Specifically, according to verse 36 of our text today, how is the accountability we bear before God consistent with the declaration of the promise of the gospel, especially in terms of our justification. More plainly, if you are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, then what do these words mean...?

v.36 “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. 37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

To answer that question, it's not enough just to give you a lecture of justification, emphasizing that these words cannot mean that you are justified by your good works. It is not enough for me merely to tell you about God's grace if I leave the meaning of these words unexplained. Because there there are, in the Bible. So what do these words mean? They are Jesus' own words, “for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” So what does that mean?

Jesus gives us his own answer, in the immediate context, beginning with verse 33. In that verse, there is,

I. A GENERAL PRINCIPLE OF JUDGMENT ILLUSTRATED.

The illustration is easy to understand. It is so clear and obvious, and that's the point.

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“A tree is known by its fruit.” Is there anyone who doesn't understand that? If you have an apple tree, you get apples. And if, like me, you don't know what kind of tree it is when you see it, you can wait until you can see the fruit. I can't begin to tell you the how to identify an apple tree or a pear tree, or even a pine tree. But I can tell the difference between an apple and a pine cone. And that's how I identify the tree.

A. There is a necessary connection between a tree and its fruit.

To explain that illustration, the tree represents people, of course. And the good tree, bearing good fruit, represents the good person, the Christian. So there is a necessary connection between a Christian and the fruit of his faith that is made evident and plain in the ordinary course of his life.

We've seen that already in this gospel.

Mat. 7:15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

James makes the very same point, with reference to the tongue.

James 3:11 “Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter

from the same opening? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.”

James' point is clear, too.

James 3:7 “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.”

It's a contradiction, a mouth that brings forth blessing and cursing. That's the point. A tree is known by its fruit. And, in this context of judgment day, the obvious reality of Jesus' words is that,

B. There is a moral identification of good and evil.

There is a good tree, with good fruit. And an evil tree, with evil fruit. That's moral distinction is the foundation of God's judgment. And those moral categories must be preserved, for that is how God has revealed himself. But without God, those absolute moral identities have no meaning, for God himself is good. God himself defines good. Without God, “good” can be nothing more than a relative, personal and autonomous judgment that I make myself; or that you make.

The moral quality of good requires a transcendent God who exists above you and me, beyond my own personal identity and beyond yours. It is these moral definitions of good and evil that form the basis of God's judgment, and all men created in the image of God have a natural sense of that revelation of God. Yet the sinner consistently suppresses that truth because of their own

unrighteousness. That's what Paul says so clearly in Romans 1. But the point remains, there is a moral identification of good and evil, and God's judgment is based upon just that.

Thus, God's judgment has,

II. A PERSONAL APPLICATION.

It is a negative judgment. A condemnation upon the Pharisees for their evident hypocrisy. First, verse 34, he calls them a “brood of vipers.” In case you missed it, that’s identifying them as evil. Evil as a snake, the original form of the personification of Satan himself in the garden of Eden.

Then Jesus makes no bones about their moral condition. “You are evil,” verse 34. Then the broad and general principle clearly stated,
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In other words, to state the obvious, obviously,

A. Men prove their moral identity by the fruit of their lives.

Men prove themselves to be good or evil. They demonstrate themselves to be good or evil. How? By the evidence of the fruit of their lives. And that will be the foundation of the final judgment, will it not?

John 5:28 “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

Thus the day of judgment.

2 Cor. 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

Or in Jesus' own words,

Mat. 16:27 "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works."

That judgment will be just, because it will be based upon the fruit of your life. A tree is known by its fruit. And that is not legalism. That is not works-righteousness, given the fullness of what the Bible teaches. Because you see, those whom God has saved by grace through faith, God has already prepared them to do good works. So the works become the evidence of the grace.

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

To put it in doctrinal or theological language, those whom God justifies, he sanctifies! Those who are saved by grace through faith, have evidence for their faith.

James 2:18 "But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works...24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

That last verse certainly interprets what goes before. What does it mean, in James' context, "that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone"? Simply what he himself explains, "faith without works is dead." If there are not works of faith, there is no faith, for the works are the necessary consequence of a true and lively faith. Not the ground upon which you are justified, but the

evidence of the faith by which you are justified.

And so our Confession of Faith states, "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love." So faith works!

And for those who have no faith, those who remain unbelievers, their judgment will be a just punishment for their evil works. But there is a more personal point to be made here. This is not just a general principle, but even more so,

B. Men reveal the condition of their heart by the fruit of their lives.

You will reveal the condition of your heart by the fruit of your own life. Whether good or evil. You reveal the nature of your own heart.

First, the wicked,

v.34 "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

So even when you speak what is evil, you must confess the sin of evil that remains within your heart. When you curse, when you gossip, when you speak in unrighteous anger or lose your temper, you reveal something about your heart.

Again, verse 35 makes sure you realize that this works both ways, but this is a very penetrating self-evaluation. This requires a very humble self-awareness. Too often we attribute the sins that come out of our mouth to something else. "That's not who I am," is the often used excuse, when sin becomes evident. We often outright deny this very verse, as if the sin of your life didn't

have its origin in the remaining sinfulness of your heart. And unbelievers, all the more so, often assuming themselves to be good at heart, they excuse their sinfulness in the most flagrant of ways.

But I don't want this to be merely something to apply to unbelievers. It is a warning to all of us to beware the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, a warning so well expressed in,

Mat. 15:17 "Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. 19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

So what is the condition of your own heart? That's the challenging question. In an ultimate sense, that is the question that will determine your eternal destiny, for if God has not changed your heart, if God has not given you a new heart, then you remain dead in your sin and dead in the hardness of your heart.

But again, even for believers, this warning is useful and challenging, for abiding sin remains with us. What Paul calls the flesh, that wages war with your soul. You are a new creation in Christ, but the old man still must be fully and finally put to death. So if you are a Christian, stimulate the good treasure of your heart and bring forth good. And when you fail, when you sin, when you do evil, confess your sin quickly and flee to Christ for his forgiveness.

Jesus, then, concludes this section with,

III. A DIRECT WARNING.

A warning of judgment. Judgment to the wicked, and a challenge to believers as well.

v.36-37

First, in that, let me declare,

A. The absolute certainty of God's final judgment.

As I began,

Heb. 9:27 "...it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment..."

As I read just a moment ago,

2 Cor. 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ..."

It is absolutely and unchangeably certain. There will be a day of judgment.

Mat. 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...41 "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Note then,

B. The righteous justice of God's final judgment.

Now, I use both the word righteous and the word justice in that

sentence, but in the Greek language, it is the same word. So I'm being repetitive, because too often we think of justice only in terms of punishments, even a vindictive retribution, exacting justice as if that means "getting even."

But justice is more than that. Justice is the vindication of righteousness, and it involves both the praise of the one doing good as well as the punishment of the one doing evil. The point is fairness. Justice means fairness, and we do use the word often way, in that seeking justice means gaining what is right.

Again, the point is that God's final judgment is just. Those who are condemned are condemned justly. And those who are vindicated, or as we read in verse 37, justified, are vindicated justly. There is evidence with way.

So the warning to those who do evil.
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Please let the impact of that verse sink into your mind. Those who reveal the evil of their heart by the evil words of their mouths will be judged, for their evil. They will be held accountable, and that is what is so often missing in our culture and experiences today, accountability. If you act badly, there is a just and righteous recompense that will come.

Yet even for Christians, even for those who understand and believe God's promise of "no condemnation" to those who are in Christ, this threatening and warning is useful and helpful, for even apart from the threat of hell to you personally, it teaches you that your evil words are deserving of hell. Your evil words, coming out of the evil that remains in your heart, would render you worthy of the judgment of hell.

So repent! And put to death that evil. Stop sinning with your words, and I should note how many of the frequently listed sins in Scripture have to do with your tongue: gossip, slander, evil speaking, quarreling, anger, bitterness, clamor, impure and obscene speech, cursing, and on and on.

v.36

Then,

v.37

"Justified" here means vindicated. Shown forth as righteous. The emphasis is not the judicial decree we usually associate with the word, the justification which is by grace through faith. Here, as with James, the emphasis is upon the evidence of true faith that makes itself known in the practical matters of daily living. And those good works, in this case, those good words, will vindicate you on the day of judgment. They will give evidence of your salvation. "For by your words you will be justified."

Likewise, again, to the contrary, the wicked. "By your words you will be condemned." In either case, God is just. And God is righteous.

So there will be no one going to heaven in the absence of good works. There will be no one carried off to heaven kicking and screaming, as if God's election and work of salvation produces no effective results in their lives. Likewise, there will no one good, in word and deed, who is sent to hell by the capricious and unjust will of God, unable to get to heaven despite all their good works. No, they are condemned for their sin, and condemned justly.

All of this should affect the way you live your life! At least, the Apostle Peter thinks so.

2 Peter 3:10 "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in

the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. 11 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? 13 Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

So, people of God, live in the light of eternity. Live in the presence of God now, knowing you will stand before his presence on the day of judgment; and, as you live now, “look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”