

At Our Death – No Fear of Judgment

From the Lenten sermon series: Christian Hope in Life and Death

Text: John 5: 24-25

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I want to begin this evening a series of brief messages on the theme “Christian Hope in Life and in Death.” And in so doing, I want to probe some of the biblical teaching around the point of our death and the nature of that experience that we will pass through at the moment of death. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that great positive announcement of what God has done in Christ for the salvation of the world. The Gospel, in its radical announcement in the New Testament, is an announcement of an accomplished reality which is announced by the Apostle in order that people might simply open up their lives to it.

Oftentimes in the history of the Church, down through the centuries, salvation has been made something that has been offered as a possibility, sort of dangled in front of a person, almost used, on occasion, as a kind of manipulative motivator in order to get people to toe a certain line or to mouth a certain confession, but salvation as a reality has often been held out as something to be grasped and appropriated. But a line has been drawn, a line around the redeemed with a very clear demarcation between those who are in and those who are out, and therefore, the idea of a final judgment or a continuing judgment, even in the midst of history, has been used often in the Church to create fear and, at its worst, even terror. Religious people have often been people who have been controlled by that fear of the end, and religion has been as much a binder of the human spirit as it has been a liberator of the human spirit. Indeed, I would not be surprised if we could actually examine the annals of history and had a profile on every human person that has ever passed through this way, if we might not find that religion has been a burden to be borne rather than that which lifted the soul and brought a person into the freedom of the grace of God. And the idea of judgment has been one of the great tools that have been used in the religious community to control, and fear has been a negative motivation that has often been used in the church.

It has been my own personal pilgrimage that we have moved from a response of fear to a response of love and joy in the presence of grace. And, as I have done that personally, I have found my own spiritual life enriched and I have found my ministry enriched. You don't find a lot of fire and brimstone preached around here, and you do not have often held before you in vivid fashion the leaping flames of Hell, and I suspect that you probably won't as long as I'm around, because I am, more and more, overwhelmed by the radical nature of God's act in Jesus Christ by which He has brought about redemption of the world, and I see that as an accomplished fact which has wider and broader implications than those that seem to be evidenced within the narrow circle of the Church. I believe that God's salvation of the world has been accomplished through Jesus Christ, but I think that in our traditional understanding of salvation in the Church, we have been far too narrow as to the scope, the breadth and the depth of that saving act in Jesus Christ.

Now, it has often been the case that people who have moved away from that fearful portrait of judgment and that threat of Hell have moved in a reactionary way to the denial of the reality of judgment and the seriousness of human experience and the testing nature of human life. I want to avoid that kind of reaction in my own pilgrimage and so, as I have been probing these things personally in my own life, I have begun to share them with you in preaching. A year ago in December we talked about Heaven and Hell and Judgment and Purgatory, and that was only the beginning, but I have continued to study the theme and reflect upon it, and so during these Wednesday evenings in Lent, I want to seek to share with you from the Word of God some conviction to which I have come which I hope will be helpful to you.

I am convinced that there are many questions in the hearts and minds of God's people about these themes and, in the Church in general; often not very much is said about it. We have been a little bit embarrassed about the subject of Hell, a little embarrassed about the subject of Judgment, we have oftentimes, in becoming rather uncertain of some of the biblical images, backed away from it and just left it alone, and yet I find that we really still have within our hearts – educated, sophisticated, suave people of the last quarter of the 20th century – we still wonder what lies before us, what is human destiny? What kind of an appointment do we have with God? What has God done in Jesus Christ, and what will be the implications of that for the whole world, for the whole human race, and for me?

Well, with that as kind of a broad-stroke introduction, let me say that tonight I simply want to say to you that at our death there need be no fear of judgment. But the first thing I want to say is that there will be judgment, and that is clear throughout the scriptures. In the 5th chapter of John's Gospel, which is really a very difficult passage, – I read part of it this evening – in the 24th verse we have these words,

In very truth, anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in him who has sent me, has hold of eternal life, and does not come up for judgment, but has already passed from death into life.

Now, that statement would seem to say that judgment is a thing of the past, for the one who has come to believe in Jesus Christ, there is no condemnation.

One has passed from death to life. That's a very common theme in John's Gospel, and it makes a very important point, which we ought to take to our hearts and minds and that is this: that, in coming to God through Jesus Christ, we have moved beyond the fear of judgment, we have moved beyond condemnation. Paul said it another way - in the 8th chapter of Romans,

There is now therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

In John's Gospel the theme of eternal life is dealt with to great extent, and it means the present possession of a qualitative dimension of life which is the gift of God's grace. Eternal life has often been popularly spoken of as something that begins after our death, as though we live now, die and then come into the possession of eternal life. That is not biblical teaching. John's Gospel is very clear - Jesus' words here are explicit. The one who believes, who puts his trust in him who sent me, has (present tense) hold of eternal life, and does not come up for judgment, but has already passed from death to life. There is a state of spiritual death; coming to God through Jesus Christ brings one into a state of spiritual life. To come to life through Jesus Christ is to move beyond the threat or the fear of condemnation.

But then you take the passage we read from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the 5th chapter, and in that chapter Paul speaks about judgment, and he speaks about judgment to those at Corinth who had committed their lives to Jesus Christ. He says "We must all have our lives laid open before the tribunal of Christ where each must receive what is due him for his conduct in the body, good or bad." Now, how do you put Jesus' word from John 5:24 together with Paul's words in Cor. 5:10? Jesus said he is passed from death to life and had moved beyond judgment. Paul says our lives must be laid open before the tribunal of Christ where each must receive what is due him, according to his conduct.

Both are true, obviously. In the one case, Jesus speaks about coming into that condition or that state spoken of as eternal life, which is a qualitative change of life, an existence in relationship, in conscious relationship with God through Jesus Christ. For such a person, there is no fear of judgment. Yet, Paul speaks about the judgment of Christian people and, in this case, he says our lives will be laid bare before the tribunal of Christ. So, we have now a testing, an examination that God's people will go through in the moment of their death. On the one hand, Jesus speaks about no fear of condemnation. But, on the other hand, Paul speaks about that testing or sifting that we will go through at our death. And both are true.

The subject this evening is, “At Our Death, No Fear of Judgment.” No fear of judgment in terms of being turned away or turned out, or condemned. But judgment, to be sure. Judgment that we need not fear, in fact, judgment that we ought to seek. For when we reflect on our lives, don't we really know that we are people responsible and accountable, and don't we really want to know the truth about ourselves before the face of God? What is it to belong to God through Jesus Christ and experience his grace, if it is not to free us up to want to have our lives just that open in His presence? At the moment of our death, no fear of judgment, but judgment, to be sure, in the sense of a testing and a sifting of the character of our lives. And, indeed, that not only should not strike fear into our hearts, that should give us great consolation. For, not only in our own lives, but as we survey the whole course of human history with all of its horror and its tragedy and its suffering and its evil - isn't it a necessary and desirable thing that somehow or other wrongs will be righted, and justice will be done? Don't we really want to be transparent before the face of Jesus Christ, and is that not what the biblical theme, the New Testament theme of judgment is all about? There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ. That's behind us. But there is that laying open of our lives before the tribunal of Christ.

Now that makes my living every day a very serious matter. Not that it strikes terror in my life, but what it does do is cause me to seek to be a person of integrity, of honesty, of honor, and to the extent that I know that I fail, and to the extent that I know that I'm caught up in life itself where things are not black and white, but various shades of gray, where I not only deliberately do that which is wrong, but sometimes get caught up in the web of that which is wrong, do we not really in the depths of our being long for that day when we will know as we are known, and our lives will be laid open? That is not a cause for fear, but an encouraging cause of hope, for we believe in the God Who takes us seriously and Who takes human history seriously, and Who has a redeeming purpose in the midst of our history, and Who has a destiny designed for us wherein His kingdom will fully come, a kingdom of righteousness and joy and peace.

And so, our lives will be laid bare before the tribunal of Christ, and the conduct of every day is a part of the ingredient of that which will be revealed. At our death, judgment without fear, because the judge is Jesus, our Saviour.

Now, you know you've heard me say that God is not through with us at our death, and I'll be coming to that on subsequent Wednesday nights. That moment of death must be a fascinating moment when, in a moment, we will understand both the wonder of grace and the record of who we have become. No cause for fear, but a fascinating appointment before the judge of all the earth, who is none other than Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. He who loved us and gave himself for us and has prepared for us that place in eternal fellowship with God through that which he has accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

At our death, judgment without fear, for the judge is our Saviour, who in a moment will give us bread and wine, his very life flowing into our lives.

What wondrous love is this, indeed!