

Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. ²⁰Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Why We Should Welcome Judgment

Last week, as I was in the airport in Port Au Prince waiting for the check-in counter to open, a young man passed by and asked me if I was a missionary or a pastor (very few white tourists visit Port Au Prince). I told him I was a pastor, and he asked me if I pray to God for forgiveness. I told him I did, and he immediately corrected me by saying that if we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ we are sanctified by his blood and no longer require God’s forgiveness for sins. he

impressed me by pulling out his smart phone with its Bible app and provided a half dozen scripture references, most from the book of Hebrews, in order to support his case. I was embarrassed as a pastor for not being able to immediately provide “counter” scripture to dispute him not because I was not as adept at using my Bible app but because I was just not that good at locating scripture verses to support my case – the best I could think of was the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father “forgive us our trespasses...”

If you know me, you know that I’m not particularly fond of theological arguments like this. For one thing, I know that the Bible can be (and has been) used to justify nearly any position you’d like to make; it’s not a single book by a single author with a single message. But the main reason that I don’t like getting wrapped up in such discussions is that I believe strongly that Christians spend far too much time and energy “splitting hairs.” To me, the main message is that God loves us immensely and that he wants us to do a better job of loving others. There’s nothing to dispute in that, and if we believe that, other things fall into place; of course God forgives us when we repent, and he leads us if we ask him to. So the less time we spend arguing with one another about how sanctification occurs, the more time we have to do the things God wants us to do.

Today we’re focusing our attention on the issue of judgment, and Christians get into a tizzy with regards to this issue.

And judgment is something we need to welcome in the present. Think about it; the reason we dread “judgment day” is because we doubt our own case. We’re not so sure how we will stand on that unknown day in the future. That’s why so many people spend so much time emphasizing the theology of salvation, and Christianity offers us a menu of options with regard to salvation. All would agree, I think, that we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but from there things break down. Some will swear that it’s simply a matter of confessing that “Jesus is Lord” with our lips and believing in our hearts. Some will say that our actions must bear witness to our faith. Some will say that all believers enter paradise when their life here ends; some say that a distinction is made between those who still held onto their sin and those who were truly sanctified. In our Old Testament lesson God, speaking through the prophet Amos, says that the Jew is mistaken if he thinks that festivals and music and sacrifices are what put us on God’s good side; it’s justice and righteousness that God expects from his people.

And the Apostle Paul explains that we are “justified” through Jesus Christ. What does that mean? It means that our faith in him as our Savior and Lord makes us righteous, not by some magical loophole, but because we submit ourselves freely and completely to Christ’s authority. We repent, which is our acknowledgement that we have failed and we ain’t getting better, that no amount of good that we do in our lives is going to outweigh the bad. Then we appeal to God’s grace – again, because we know that we can’t pass the test relying on our own abilities. And so in faith we place our trust in God’s love and it’s there that we find our peace, and it’s there that we must remain.

And you see, once we're there, in the realm of God's love and grace, we have no fear of judgment. The reason we don't fear judgment is not because we understand how the process works; the reason we don't fear judgment is because we have opened ourselves up to perpetual judgment; it's called sanctification. Everyone knows that our lives don't suddenly become perfect when we repent and accept Christ into our hearts. But we open ourselves up to the process, and the process works only if we open ourselves to God's judgment, which means we become aware of the places where sin still holds sway in our lives, and we surrender it to Christ as we become aware of it; Christ frees us from sin.

The problem occurs when we look for shortcuts, when we say, "I don't want to give up this sin." "I don't want to forgive that person." "I don't want to love that person." "I don't want to take care of the needs of others." And here is where our Gospel Lesson needs to shake us up a little bit. There is judgment for those who don't submit themselves to Christ's authority, and you can't say that you submit to him if you insist on holding onto your sin. God is loving; God is patient. And I believe God's desire is that every person dwell with him eternally. But refusal to submit means you now fall under judgment, and so you exhibit a fear of judgment which translates into an obsession with a theology of judgment.

But if we rest secure in Christ, we can welcome God's judgment because we not only know that his judgment is perfect but we want to be perfected, and we trust that we will be perfected. Observe our Gospel lesson, about the sheep and the goats. Too often we understand the goats; they are the ones who paid lip service to Jesus, saying they loved him but not following through by doing anything for "the least of these." But note the mindset of the sheep, who serve "the least of these" in the same way that they serve everyone else. They serve Christ completely, and so they have no fear of judgment. No concern whatsoever.

As long as we look for shortcuts, for ways to avoid serving "the least of these," we should stand in fear of judgment. But as long as we are true to our word in making Jesus Christ our Lord, we can welcome judgment, because we respond to that judgment, and it makes us better and better at serving God.

And eventually we reach that point where we are the people God wants us to be; the imperfections are burned away and we shine beautifully in God's eyes.

Whatever happens after death, we live with hope in life eternal and in the assurance that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39).