

“Not What we Expected to Hear”

John 5:16-30

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We treated this same text the last time and discussed the very important and impressive disclosure in these verses of the equality of the Son with the Father and, at the same time, his distinctness, his separateness from the Father. In other words, John 5:16-30 is a Trinitarian text – a text that provides materials with which to help construct the Bible’s doctrine of one living and true God who exists eternally in three separate persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is also a Christological text – a text that provides materials with which to help construct the Bible’s doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ as both the eternal Son of God, or God the Son, and a true man. But, there is something more in this rich and important paragraph that I did not feel comfortable leaving unmentioned and unexamined.

I am speaking of the doctrine of divine judgment that we have here and the scene of the last judgment that our Savior himself paints for us, especially in vv. 28-29. If there is a doctrine that has fallen out of sight in Christian preaching and thinking today, it is the doctrine of the last judgment. But it looms large in the Bible! We pointed out last week, as part of our consideration of what these verses teach about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ, his Son, that the Father has entrusted the judgment of mankind to his Son. That is one part of the larger unity of action between the Father and the Son which is taught here. We read in v. 19: “whatever the Father does the Son also does.” The Jews of course knew that God was the Judge of all the earth and that mankind, every human being, would someday have to stand before him to hear God pronounce judgment on his life. The books of the Bible we today call the OT made that clear. What is startling in these verses, of course, is that Christ claims that that divine work, always ascribed to God, to Yahweh, in the OT, is actually his work, entrusted to him by the Father. So we read in v. 22. And, that there be no mistaking the implications of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the Judge of all the earth, v. 23 spells them out explicitly: the Son is to receive the honor due to God. The reverence men owe to the Supreme Judge of all men, they owe to Jesus Christ just as they owe it to God the Father. The honor and glory due to God is due to Jesus Christ who is God and does the works that only God can do. The same point is made again in v. 27 and then, once more, in v. 30.

But, in these remarks the Lord not only disclose that he is the Judge of all mankind, he says something about his judgment, about the basis of it, about the standard by which he will separate the righteous from the wicked on the last day.

This is something that human beings must know. Is there anything more important for any human being to know than this? By what standard will God judge my life? What will he demand of me then if I am to be given entrance into heaven? What will take me to hell? Tell me if you can, anything more important to know than that? Accept that there is a last judgment and that at that judgment there will be a separation made between the righteous and the wicked – and Holy Scripture, our own consciences, and the history of the world teaches us that there will be such a judgment and such a separation – and surely the great question of life, the absolutely vital piece

of information, the one thing necessary for human beings to know, is upon what basis that separation will be made and how will Christ judge human beings?

And he tells us here: “those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”

Now, to be sure, that comes as no surprise to most men and women. That is how they think of the measure of human life. The good people will be approved; the bad people condemned. That is what they do in their own minds all the time: they constantly approve those they think to be good and doing good and, in the same way, they constantly condemn in their thoughts and words those they take to be bad and to be doing bad. The problem with their understanding of this judgment is that they vastly overstate the goodness of human beings and they seriously underestimate their badness. They imagine that many men and women, including themselves, are more good than bad, and that should be sufficient.

It has not occurred to them to say, as the Bible always and everywhere teaches us to say:

“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” (*Psalms* 130:3)

“But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” *Malachi* 3:2

They imagine that the sort of righteousness that characterized the scribes and the Pharisees – what men take to be a moral life and a pious or religious life – should be more than enough in the judgment. But, Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

They have not faced the obvious and crucial fact that the Lord Jesus over and over again warned us against trusting in our own righteousness at the judgment of God. Human beings are profoundly sinful, always and in every way, breaking the commandments of God. They are not “good” and they do not do “good” except to a trivial degree in comparison with the standards against which they will be judged on the last day. They do not love God with all their hearts and they do not love their neighbors as themselves. And in a thousand ways they not only have a far higher view of themselves than God does, they have a far higher view of themselves than anyone else does. They are, as Samuel Rutherford quaintly put it, only men buried in graves with a few flowers growing on top. [*Quaint Sermons*, 291-295 cited in J. Coffey, *Politics, Religion, and the British Revolutions: the Mind of Samuel Rutherford*, 83-84]

It is only someone who judges himself by standards of his own making who can read John 5:29 without fear. And as Paul puts it with masterful understatement in 2 Corinthians 10:12, “he who judges himself by himself is not wise!”

But, as unsurprising as v. 29 is to unbelievers, who have no real understanding of the depth and width of human sin and moral failure, so it is surprising, even unsettling, for Christians to hear the Lord say what he says there about the last judgment.

Christians know that they are sinners – profoundly, thoroughly, inexcusably sinners. They know that they could never stand in God’s judgment if left to themselves. They know that if their lives are judged against God’s law, they must be condemned, they have no hope of acquittal, of reward, of entrance into eternal life. It was precisely this knowledge that they came to have about themselves that made them Christians in the first place. It was precisely to obtain the forgiveness of their innumerable sins and to obtain a righteousness that would avail in the judgment of God that they turned to Jesus Christ and trusted themselves to him. He who knew no sin had become sin for them so that they might become the righteousness of God in him. The wages of their sin, they had recognized, was death; but, they had come joyfully to know that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And, then, as new Christians, they cut their teeth on Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone. It is not by works that one gets to be right with God, but by faith in Jesus Christ and his life and death for us.

So, they wonder, why in the world would Jesus Christ say what he says here? Why does he say, “those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned”? Is that not exactly what the Pharisees taught? Is that not the very doctrine that Paul condemned as a false gospel? Is that not salvation by works instead of salvation by faith? Where is Christ the Savior in a statement like that?

If this were the only text like this in the Lord’s teaching and in the teaching of the rest of the Bible, we might perhaps safely ignore it. But, virtually every time the Bible talks about the last judgment, it says something like what the Lord Jesus says in v. 29.

In the Lord’s famous picture of the judgment given in Matthew 25:34-46 once again he separates the sheep from the goats by the weighing of their respective behavior. And he says in another place (Matthew 13:27): “...the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” Paul, the champion of justification by faith, nevertheless, writes on a number of occasions about the judgment and says just what Jesus said. Here he is in Romans 2:13ff.: “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ... This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ...” And right at the end of the Bible we hear it again: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”

Nor, is it simply a substantial number of texts like those that depict the judgment day as a weighing of our deeds while in this world. There are also a large number of texts that read in ways many evangelical Christians are not prepared for. For example, there are texts in which God declares in one form or another that his people are those who *obey* him. We would expect that he would have said his people were those who *trust in him*, and the Bible says that often enough, to be sure, but over and over again we read of obedience as the mark of the child of God, the Christian.

Texts in the OT like Deuteronomy 6:25: “...if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.” Texts in the NT like 1 John

3:7: “Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.”

Then, another example. There are many texts that speak of the *reward* of the righteous. We think, there can be no reward for righteous living, for what have we – including our good works – that we have not received from the Lord, and surely our good works, insofar as they are ours are too imperfect to be deserving of reward. But, that is not the way the Bible speaks. Time after time, we read that “the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does...” (*Ephesians* 6:8).

Even more striking are texts that speak of the “worthiness” of men and women who obey the Lord and serve him faithfully. “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, *for they are worthy*. He who overcomes will be like them, dressed in white.” (Revelation 3:4-5) We are used to singing, “And from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess: the wonders of redeeming love and my own worthlessness.” And here is the Lord Jesus saying to the church in Sardis that those among them who are worthy will walk with him in white. This is the NT equivalent to David’s, “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have lived a blameless life!” (*Psalms* 26:1). We are so uncomfortable with statements of that kind. But they are found everywhere in the Bible. *What are we to do with this?*

Well, let there be no doubt whatsoever that we are saved by grace alone and justified by faith alone and not by works. The Bible teaches that in terms so emphatic and so unmistakable that it would be high treason for a Christian to believe anything else. We are *not* worthy of heaven if, by worthy one thinks that we have deserved eternal life or that we could have obtained it from a holy judge by the record of our own lives. Far, far from it! The Bible and the Lord Jesus himself teach us to think of ourselves, if we are Christians, as sinners saved by grace and grace alone.

Were we to face the last judgment left to our own devices, nothing is more certain than that everyone of us would find how fearful a thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God and to be “crushed between the millstones of omnipotence.” [Bonar, *Life*, 511]

No, we have no hope apart from the death of Jesus Christ for us and for our sins and his resurrection from the dead. And, very interestingly, we have that witness born in the very text we are considering this morning. In v. 24 we heard the Lord Jesus himself say: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” Already he is righteous before God; already he is seated in the heavenly places with Christ; already he is a citizen of heaven. *He has crossed over*.

And the Bible makes that clear even in its presentation of the last judgment. Listen to this summary from Herman Bavinck the great Dutch theologian of a century ago.

“The Scripture indeed says that all men without exception, thus also believers, must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. But it attests, at the same time, that those who believe are not condemned and will not come into judgment, because they already have eternal life (*John* 3:18; 5:24); that the believing dead are already with Christ in heaven and are clothed with long, white robes (*2 Cor.* 5:8; *Phil.* 1:23; *Rev.* 6:11; 7:9,14); and that

Christ [will come again] to be glorified among his saints and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (*2 Thess.* 1:10). This appears also from *1 Cor.* 6:2,4 where Paul expressly says that the saints will judge the world and the angels. [*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, iv, 781-782]

Let no one ever take our crown in the proclamation of God's free grace, of his salvation as a gift of his love and as the achievement of his almighty power. Let no one exceed us in the joyful and emphatic declaration that our salvation from start to finish is the plan, the purpose, the accomplishment, and the gift to us of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And, yet, at the same time, we are taught also to believe that the salvation God gives is one; it is a unity. The salvation that God has decided to give us, that Christ has purchased for us, and that the Holy Spirit works in us is not only deliverance from our sin, our guilt, the dominion of the Devil, and the prospect of divine wrath, it is also the transformation of our lives that we might live to God's glory. As Paul put it, God chose us and Christ saved us *to make us holy and to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, to be made like him*. God's grace not only carries us up out of death and hell, it carries us all the way up to life and heaven and to a kind of living that is appropriate for heaven and the presence of God.

Our old theologians used to say that you can distinguish justification (the forgiveness of sins) from sanctification (the purification of our lives) *but you cannot separate them*. They always go together. Anyone whose sins are forgiven will live a godly life because God only forgives the sins of those whose lives he intends to transform. That is why the Bible teaches us that we cannot claim to be forgiven if we are not, at the same time, living a righteous life. In this world, of course, our righteousness is deeply imperfect to be sure, but still, that is the way the Bible always speaks. "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:10)

We want to qualify that statement. We want to hurry on somehow to take the bite and the sting out of that statement made by the same apostle who wrote the Gospel we are reading these Sunday mornings. We do not like to hear such definitive pronouncements about the absolute necessity of obedience if we are to stand in the judgment of God. But such statements are *everywhere* in the Bible. We meet them at every turn. God's people will be righteous people, obedient people. They will serve the Lord. People who do not and will not are not God's people no matter how vigorously they protest their loyalty to him. Which is why those who do good will rise to live and those who do evil will rise to be condemned.

Our task this morning, yours and mine, brothers and sisters, is not to qualify the Lord's statement here in vv. 28-29, not to set beside it in our minds all the things we are more ready to hear about Christ's perfect righteousness being given to us and our salvation being the effect of his works not ours. Our task is to embrace this text, believe it, take it to heart, examine ourselves by it, and commit ourselves to a life of doing what is right and good – come wind, come weather – so that we may stand in the judgment day of God!

I have a great deal of sympathy with the doubts and fears that rise in many hearts and particularly in some hearts from this high estimation of Christian character that meets us in statements such as this one. They look into their hearts and despair of any good that might be found on the judgment day by the One who searches the heart. They look at their behavior and find too much to blame and too little to commend to feel that they could survive a judgment that distinguishes between those who do good and those who do evil.

But, if some are forced by such passages as these to struggle all their lives with their doubts, there are many others who would be infinitely better off if somehow such a passage as this would din a doubt into their minds and hearts. They are altogether too careless, too indifferent to obedience to God's law, too unmindful of his judgment. They take their salvation altogether too much for granted. And, at the last, it is much better if you must go up to the judgment day burdened by doubts, only to be acquitted by a gracious and merciful God who takes your very little for a very lot, than to go gaily and confidently to that day and then to hear the Judge of all the earth say to you, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

But there is not only worry to be found in this picture of the judgment. Surely there is inspiration and summons and the makings of a zealous life. Surely that is what the Lord is after in us today. A new consecration of ourselves to an obedient life of Christian service, a life of seeking hard after all that pleases Him. And we know -- we all know -- what would please Him.

Craig DesJardins gave me a book the other day and pointed me to a particular passage in it – a parable on very much this same theme we have before us in *John 5:28-29*.

There are travelers on a journey and they are met by the King's messenger. She gives them burlap sacks and instructions to fill them with stones from the riverbeds they'll cross at night. Then she leaves them with the cryptic words, "In the morning you will be both glad and sad."

But, in the morning, they're unable to open their bags and see what's inside. In fact, throughout the journey they're only able to open the bags at night when and if they choose to add more stones. Nick is reluctant to follow these apparently senseless instructions. Isn't the added weight of these worthless rocks just an unnecessary burden for a weary traveler? Later, as they finally near the City, they're met again by the messenger and told to present their gifts to the King. "Gifts?" the travelers ask.

"Yes. The stones you picked up in the riverbeds." My heart pounded. I put down my worn sack, just over half-full. I pulled out a stone. It glimmered in the sunlight. "It's gold!" I said. I reached back into the sack. "Silver! A ruby. Look – two diamonds. An emerald! And this one... I've never seen anything like it!" Vaguely aware of the others shouting, I looked up to see them rifling through their bags, holding up precious stones in the rosy sunlight. I reach further into my bag and found what I'd thought were some light stones. I pulled them out and stared at them. "They're not stones at all," I said. "They're just crumpled balls of straw." I turned the bag upside down. One last gem fell out, a small one. The rest was straw and stubble.

The contents from Nick's sack are then placed on a grate above a raging bonfire. The fire immediately consumed the straw, while it burned off impurities from the gold and silver and

gems. They glowed with an otherworldly beauty, and I stared at them breathlessly, held captive by their radiance.

Nick then sees the stones from his companions' sacks. From one he sees "dozens of precious gems, perhaps twenty diamonds and chunks of gold and silver." Another companion, whom Nick has thought of as dull-witted, had filled and carried two sacks in his journey. "Here he was," Nick discovers, "with three times as many precious stones as I."

An angel's voice whispers to Nick: "Choice and consequences. What is done in one world has profound effects on the next." Then they observe the angel beginning to forge their fire-refined stones into crowns. "You will cast these at the King's feet," the travelers are told. "And sometimes you will wear them. The King and all the citizens [of the City] will be forever reminded of your faithful service. You will remember the meaning of every stone, and so will he. Elyon's book says, 'A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the King and honored his name.' All your works are recorded here – every cup of cold water given in his name."

Nick stares at his gemstones and sees animated images within each of them. Pictures that portray each of his prayers and other good deeds – some long forgotten – done in service to the King. Finally he understands those cryptic words of the King's messenger.

The long night was over, and morning was here at last. I looked at the stones I'd picked up, knowing they were my tribute to the King. Seeing them, I'd never felt so glad. Then I thought about all the stones within my reach, all those I could have picked up but didn't. I'd never felt so sad." [R. Alcorn, *In Light of Eternity*, 108-111]. You see the point of that story, that allegory, don't you? Every where you look, stones to be picked up and put in your bag!

"One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done." [*Psalm* 62:11-12] "The mouth of the Lord has spoken!"