

I. Intro

A. There are questions students ask about a class before they sign up: Is it hard? Is there a lot of reading? Does the professor take attendance? Are the lectures boring? And... is there a final exam? And if there is, is it hard? Is it comprehensive? Is it open book? Do many people fail?

1. These are not unimportant questions. As much as teachers may want students to learn for the joy of learning - or because it's good to know - there is value in understanding what we're going to be assessed on. Indeed, this is one of life's biggest questions. It is one of the big seven: Who or what matters most (who is God)? Who am I? Where did I come from? What went wrong? What is expected of me? What happens when I die? Where do I go for the answers to these questions?

2. Today's topic combines "what is expected of me?" and "what happens when I die?" We are going to look at our final final. This sermon is on judgement.

B. This series is based on:

1. The idea that there is a God – a personal, holy, just, loving, all-powerful Creator.

2. And He has a plan. History is going somewhere. It's not aimless or cyclical. It's marching towards a climactic ending, which includes the unfolding of the Kingdom of God. He is going to defeat evil, recover and restore all things and celebrate and coronate Jesus.

3. And this series is based on the idea that we live after we die - that what we see is not all there is. Eternity follows.

a) In the first message, we noted that the life and teaching of Jesus only makes sense when we shine our headlights beyond this world. Which led to the refrain: life is short. Eternity is not. And opportunity is now. Our chance to shape what follows ends when we die.

b) In the second week, we turned to Psalm 90:12 – Moses's request that God **teach us to number our days** (to be aware of our mortality) **so that we may gain a heart of wisdom** (so we would live wisely). After all, eternity changes everything.

c) Last week the Campus Pastors spoke on the resurrection – not Christ's only. His is key. It marks the defeat of death. It is history's pivot point. It is also a foreshadowing of what is to come.

C. Today's topic is judgment: the assessment we face when we stand before God to offer an account of our life.

1. The answer to the question - is there a final? - is, yes. We do undergo an audit. The answer to the second question - what's it on? – is, well, everything.

D. Let me note that our focus today is specifically on the judgment to be faced at the end of the age by Christ-followers.

1. As you are about to see, there are lots of passages about judgement – the judgement of the nations,¹ God’s judgment of the whole world. His active judgment. His passive judgment. Quite a bit of ink is dedicated to the idea of judgment. Our focus today is on the judgment of Christ followers.

a) What we see is that, at the time of our death our body goes to the ground and our soul moves on. Remember, this separation is not the goal. It is not ideal. We are not hermit crabs who occupy a shell. We are a shell. We don’t have a body. We are a body. But there is a period – an intermediate state - where our body and soul are separated. During this time we are either with Christ or apart from him. (There is plenty we do not know. Luke 16 seems to be a helpful passage here).

b) Then, at the end of the age, there is a resurrection and we receive a new body.

c) And then, we face judgment.

(1) Romans 14 speaks of the Judgment seat of Christ (sometimes referred to as the Bema seat²), which is where Christ’s followers are judged for how they lived.

(2) Revelation 20 speaks of the judgment of unbelievers - the Great White Throne Judgment – where those who stand apart from God are also judged for their life. For their works.

2. Neither of these determine whether we are going to heaven or hell. That sort appears to have already been made at the time of our death. But there appear to be levels at each.

3. Today we are focused on the judgement Christians face.

II. So, take a deep breath. There is a lot to reflect on here.

A. I thought about exploring how contentious the idea of judgement is.

B. I thought about noting how common it is – how we find some form of it in every major religion.³

C. I thought about complaining about how difficult it is to speak on – both because there is so much confusion out there.⁴ But mostly because people need to hear such different things. Some claim my job is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Not really. But, there is sometimes some directional truth there.

1. Some of you have limped in here, desperate for hope, desperate for some assurance of God’s love and care. Desperate to hear that things will get better. You need to be able to lay down your burdens and rest in him, secure from the noise and lies and threats. You need to hear that He is for you. Some of you desperately need to hear about God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness.⁵

2. While some of you need to wake up to the fact that you are going to stand before God to offer an account of your life.

III. What we are going to do is look at I Cor. 3, and then I am going to answer six common questions about judgement.

A. As I said, there are lots of passages we could turn to. A lot of ink was spilled on this topic.

1. Hebrews 9:27 states that: **people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.**

2. Matthew 12:36 says: **But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken**

3. Romans 2:5: **Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done."**

4. 2 Cor. 5:10 reads: **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.**

5. In the middle of Mt. 25, Jesus tells the parable of the talents – where a master entrusts three servants with three different levels of assets, goes on a trip and then returns and assesses their work.⁶

6. Later in Matthew 25 – in one of the most unnerving passages in the Bible – Jesus tells a parable about separating the sheep and the goats. We will be looking there next week when we explore the topic of hell.

a) By the way, it's not lost on me that the campus pastors shaped this series. And somehow, they got to preach on the resurrection, and I ended up with death, judgement and hell.

b) As you will see next week, Matthew 25 is unnerving both because some of those who Jesus sets aside thought they were in the club. But also because the judgment does not focus on sins of commission (bad things we do) but on sins of omission (good things we fail to do).

IV. We are looking at I Cor. 3:10.

A. Corinth was a significant Greek city. It was located on a major trade route, which made it a center of culture and wealth. Paul planted a church there – and the influence and affluence of the city made it rough sledding for the Christians there. The letters to the Corinthians make it clear that they were frequently tripped up by the city's, culture, prosperity and rampant immorality. He has been addressing what they were doing wrong. He talks about how to do things right. His first illustration is agricultural – I planted. Apollos watered and God gave the growth." He now shifts to an architectural metaphor.

B. V10: By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. Paul was a church planter. His MO was to blow into town, go to the center of activity and start talking. He was one of those activators that could get something started. He'd spend a bit of time there (not long) and then turn it over to others to grow, while he went off to do it again. So, he lays the foundation for a church.

C. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the head of the church and also its foundation. He is the cornerstone. The church is his idea. It rests 100 percent on his work. But everyone – i.e., you and me – everyone is supposed to be building it up. That is not just the job of those on those on paid staff. Indeed, the job of the staff is not to do the work, but to make it possible for you to do the work. You are not an audience but a congregation. This is training time. The actual work happens when we leave the building. Everyone is expected to serve. Everyone is equipped, commissioned and expected to serve.

D. Reading on. Here is where we get the judgement part. **If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw** – some of these items are worth more than the others. The gold, silver and costly stones represent good work that will last. The wood, hay and straw represents shoddy work that will not.

E. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day – he is referring to judgement day - **will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.**

V. So, I am guessing you have some questions. I am going to assume you understand the basics:

A. That God is the judge. In particular, Jesus.⁷

B. That the judgement will be fair. We don't have to worry about a crooked judge or about a verdict being based on bad or incomplete information. The judge is perfectly moral and all knowing. That is the problem. As I have said over and over, I do not want justice.

1. My devotional reading this week included Psalm 130:3: If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

2. I do not want justice. I want mercy and grace.

C. I am assuming you understand that we will be individually assessed. That it is not one big up or down vote for the family, or the church or the country.

D. I am assuming you understand that those born on 3rd base – those with every advantage. Those born with a loving family, who get a good education, who have monster gifts - get less credit for scoring a run than those born with two strikes against them. **“Those to whom much is given, much is expected.”**⁸

E. I'm assuming you know that I pre-emptively addressed some these questions this past week in the morning devotions.⁹

VI. But I am assuming you still have questions. Let me briefly speak to the six I think are most common.

A. One: What happened to “God is love?” I mean, why would a loving God judge anyone? I am going to say a bit about this in a moment, but I am saving most of my answer on this question for next week, when the topic is hell.

B. Two: What happened to judge not? I mean, I thought we weren’t supposed to judge. OK, well, no. In Matthew 7 – that is, in the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus famously says, “Do not judge or you too will be judged.” Many cite this in support of not judging. Of course, that is not what it means. It’s clear we are expected to make judgements – we are told to evaluate people and ideas so we do the right thing. The point here is to not be a hypocrite. It’s a call to be humble. We need to focus on the log in our own eye not worry about the speck in theirs. And, by the way, there is a big difference between God judging and us judging.

C. Three: I thought my sins were forgiven. Gone. Cast into the Sea.¹⁰ Removed as far from me as the East is from the West. I’m not excited to hear you think they’re going to be playing on a jumbotron for everyone to watch. OK...I have good news. **If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us.** When we reach out to Christ his blood pays our moral debt. Yes. Our sins are forgiven. And, no one said anything about a jumbotron. But... that does not mean our actions do not have consequences.¹¹ We are held accountable for our lives. Which leads to four.

D. Four: I thought my works didn’t matter. I thought that, **we are saved by grace through faith – not of ourselves. It is a gift of God. Not a result of works that no one can boast.** I was told that my works have no merit and that we will all be the same in heaven.

1. OK, well. Yes and no and no. Yes, you are right to understand that your good works do not earn your salvation. Nor do they even contribute to the work Jesus did on our behalf. Your salvation is secured by Jesus, full stop. But that doesn’t mean they do not matter or that they will not be rewarded.

a) Jesus and others talk about a fair bit about crowns – which I do not believe are actual crowns, but symbols of honor, reward, victory and responsibility. They represent the rewards that believers will receive from God for their faithfulness, sacrifice and perseverance as members of the advance party of the Kingdom of God.

b) And in other ways and other places Jesus, Peter, Paul, James and John all have things to say about rewards for the good we do and loss for the bad we do, or the good we do not do. If you are not seeing this it’s because you’re not looking.¹²

2. And in terms of all being the same in heaven.¹³ That’s Karl Marx’s promise, not God’s. Salvation is guaranteed. Rewards are not.¹⁴ We will not be the same in heaven.

3. Now, this raises lots of questions. I hear from some that you do not care about rewards in heaven, you only want to get there. I get that. Yes, but let me note that it sure seems like some of you care a lot about rewards, status and perks here on earth.¹⁵

4. In terms from others that this can't be right because if we are different in heaven there will be jealousy or regret. Look, I'm not sure we're given enough to understand all of this. But:

a) it makes sense to me that in a world without sin, we could be happy for others who receive more. Indeed, that we would want those who did more - who suffered more, who lived more sacrificially in order to care for others – to get more.

b) And It's worth noting that we do read that in heaven Jesus will wipe away every tear,¹⁶ suggesting that at least for a period, there will be some regret.

E. Question Five: Are you suggesting that I should be doing good now in order to have more rewards in heaven? That seems small and selfish.

1. Well, I want to acknowledge that we should be motivated to do good out of love for God -out of thankfulness for what he has done.

2. And I want to acknowledge that our motivation matters, even as I note that it is always tainted. I spent some time paralyzed early in my pastoral ministry. In my job, if you are paying attention, you quickly realize that you can do the right thing for the wrong motive, but you can't do the right thing only for the right motive, because as much as you try to work at this, pride and ego creep in. And I went through this period of time when I tried not to do the right thing if it wasn't for the right reason, and after a while I just had to confess – Lord, my heart is so conflicted. I am going to focus on doing the right thing and ask you to help me improve my motivation.

3. However, the thing I want to underline is that it's not me telling you to do good now in order have more rewards in heaven. Jesus is the one who says that. In addition to telling us we should be motivated by a desire to avoid God's wrath.¹⁷ In the Sermon on the Mount, he instructs us to store up treasure in heaven *and later* promises that no one gives up anything for him that they will not get it back 100 fold.

4. And Paul says much the same: in I Cor. 9, Paul says he is motivated to win the eternal prize and in 2 Cor 5, he tells us that because we will stand before God we should: **make it our goal to please him** – the Greek term is linked to ambition and aspiration - **for whether we are at home in the body or away from it.. we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.**¹⁸

F. Question Six: OK, so, suppose you are right. What can I do to improve my score? How do I prepare for this final?

1. Look, you know. Love God and serve others. Give. Pray. Help. Sit with God and let him do his work in you.

2. In Matthew 10, Jesus says we will be rewarded for every cup of cold water we give to those in need.
3. In Matthew 25 we see that judgement will be very much about what we did not do. Among the things that should jump off the page for you is that we displease God less for the bad things we do than for the helpful things we fail to do.
4. This week I was asked: “how much of my money do you think I am supposed to give away.” And I said: I’m not going to answer that question for you.
 - a) For starters, I don’t know.
 - b) Secondly, I’m hoping to get credit for Sheri’s generosity.
 - c) And thirdly, I am aware that the investment advice given by Jesus is scandalous to me
 - (1) He celebrates the poor widow giving the last that she has – where I would say: please, hold on to what you have and let me get connected with St. James.
 - (2) And when a person comes to me and says, I have made a lot of money and I am going to sell the company and sit back and relax. I generally admire that – and get it – but that is not what Jesus says to the man who needs to build bigger barns to hold his wealth.
5. So, I do not know. But I do know this: we are going to offer an account for how we live. And, life is short. Eternity is Not. And the opportunity to change our eternity is now.

G. OK, so back to question one: What happened to “God is love?”

1. As I said, I’m going to take up this question more fully in the context of hell. But let me note two things as we wrap up.
2. First, the Bible does portray God as being overwhelmingly compassionate and loving. There are passages – such as I John 4 – that declare as much. But even more than that, we see it throughout the book.
 - a) In 2 Samuel 24 – when David is to be judged for his sin of pride¹⁹ - he is given a choice of: three years of famine, three months of attacks by his enemies, or three days of disease. David chose the three days of disease, but not because it would be over sooner. It wasn’t the “rip the band-aid off quickly theory.” David explains his thinking by saying he’d much prefer to fall into the hands of God – whose compassion is great – than to fall into the hands of men.
 - b) In the Book of Jonah. When commanded by the Lord to go to the evil people of Nineveh, Jonah refuses and flees in the opposite direction. His reason is remarkable—he knows YHWH will show mercy
3. Secondly, he sent his son. As a totally righteous, holy God, he cannot just dismiss evil. Sin is a moral debt that must be paid. Wrongs have to be made right.
 - a) We do not call judges who let murders and rapist go free, compassionate, we call them corrupt.”

- b) But we do not want a God who only gives justice, because no one could withstand that judgement. We want a loving, merciful judge – and what we get is one who pays our penalty.
- c) Men and women, I really don't have much to offer but to say this story over and over again. A God who loves you sent his son as a provision for your sins. Take the offer.
- d) Become a Christ-follower. Trust Him.

VII. And to those of you who have, understand that we will stand before God to offer an account of our lives.

- A. Everything on the asset side of our ledger belongs to God. We are temporary stewards of his stuff. Invest your life in the Kingdom of God.
- B. And to engage in the Work of God – that is, the work we do and the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

VIII. So – I am going to pray. I believe a reflection on the idea of a final exam before a holy God should prompt us to move in one of two directions:

- A. The first to run towards his offer of salvation. To embrace his love. To ask Christ to be our Savior and Lord. We can help with that.
- B. The second – what seems to me to be the obvious message to those who are settled in their salvation – is to confess our sins of commission and omission and to ask God for eyes to see how we might be better stewards of our lives.

¹ Isaiah 17-23 talks about God judging the nations. (In Isaiah 24 we read about God's judgment over the whole world).

² *Bema* is the Greek term for a raised seat, which is where a judge sits.

³ This should not surprise us. In Romans 1 Paul makes it clear that God has revealed himself to us – and we have a sense of our accountability to him, or right and wrong.

⁴ This is also a hard topic to speak on because many people have not thought very clearly about it. Some want judgment for those who have wronged them without realizing that they have hurt others.

⁵ In a review of Dane Ortlund's book, *Gentle and Lowly*, we read: Christians know that God loves them, but can easily feel that he is perpetually disappointed and frustrated, maybe even close to giving up on them. As a result, they focus a lot—and rightly so—on what Jesus has done to appease God's wrath for sin. But how does Jesus Christ actually feel about his people amid all their sins and failures? This book draws us

to Matthew 11, where Jesus describes himself as “gentle and lowly in heart,” longing for his people to find rest in him.

⁶ Our life is a gift (everything on the asset side of the ledger belongs to God). We are stewards of his resources, expected to use them per his directives. And we will be judged for how we do.

⁷ 1) In John 5 we are told that the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. (John 5:22-27); 2) In his sermon at Athens – recorded in Acts 17 – Paul says that God has set a day when Jesus will judge the world with justice; 3) In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul writes that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, indicating that Jesus will judge; 4) In Matthew 25 Jesus speaks of His role as the judge who will decide people's eternal fate. He refers to himself as the Son of Man – whom Daniel says will judge everyone

⁸ Luke 12:48

⁹ This discussion is focused on our final judgment – i.e., God's active review of our life, which is different from the ongoing and/or the passive judgements we might face in this life. Active judgement is when God directly orchestrates the discipline. In passive judgment, God does not intervene, we just face the consequences of our bad actions. Most of the time we face the latter. God's laws are warnings to us that what looks like a good idea – or a short cut – is not. That lying make seem like a good idea. Or taking revenge. Or sleeping around. But these things come with a high price.

¹⁰ Micah 7:19

¹¹ Sins we have committed in secret will be brought forward. The theologian Louis Berkhof discusses what this might mean for Christians in the final judgment in his Systematic Theology. He writes: “. . . It is sometimes objected that the sins of believers, which are pardoned, certainly will not be published at that time; but Scripture leads us to expect that they will be, though they will, of course, be revealed as *pardoned* sins.” And the revelation of these pardoned sins will only magnify God's grace to us in Jesus and our own indebtedness.

¹² Melancthon, an associate of Luther's, made a distinction between works prior to salvation - which lack merit - and those after conversion, which he called meritorious. He wrote: We teach that good works are meritorious – not for the forgiveness of sins, grace, nor justification (for we obtain these only by faith) but for other physical and spiritual rewards in this life and in that which is to come, as Paul says (1 Corinthians 3:8), “Each shall receive his wages according to his labor.” Therefore there will be different rewards for different labours. . . . There will be distinctions in the glory of the saints. (Iosif Ton, “Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven” (Th.D. diss., Evangelische Theologische Facultiet, Haverlee/Leuven, Belgie, 1996), 477).

¹³ Some have understood the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), to refer to rewards. It is talking about salvation.

¹⁴ In his book, *Your Eternal Reward*, Irwin Lutzer argues that Rev. 19:7-8 – which reads: Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.) – suggest that the “fine linen” we have reflects the works we did. He also states (p. 66-68) that some scholars argue that there is a difference between “entering” the kingdom and “inheriting” it.

¹⁵ The Bible does not talk about degrees of punishment in hell. Dante does. There are arguments that part of what makes hell hell is that we lose our identity. I'm not going to say there will not be differences in hell. It seems like Hitler will be up against more debt.

¹⁶ Rev. 2:14

¹⁷ See Matthew 10:28.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards – the great Puritan writer and thinker - Resolved: To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of. Jim Elliff, *The Starving of the Church, Reformation and Revival: A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* (Volume 1, no. 3 (1992): 116.

¹⁹ I am indebted to Skye Jethani for this insight.