

The Bible and the Afterlife

The Last Judgment – A Biblical Study of Judgment Day

II Corinthians 5:10 and Matthew 22:11-14

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11 “But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. 12 ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. 13 Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14 “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Introduction

I. The Events of Judgment Day (II Corinthians 5:9-10)

- A. What? A verdict regarding one’s eternal state and future rewards/punishment
- B. Who? Who will act as our judge? (Romans 2:16, II Tim. 4:1)
- C. When? At death or at the Second Coming?

II. More Questions Thinking People Ask About the Last Judgment

- A. What criteria will Jesus use to judge us at the Last Day?
 - 1. Two ideas that Christians hold as essentials to the Gospel (Ephesians 2:8-9)
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- B. What about...
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Conclusion: What Will You Wear to Meet the King?

Study Guide

This week we'll study scriptures related to the Last Judgment. Within this biblical idea are two concepts: 1. Each of us, at our death, will give an account for our life – we will be judged and consigned to heaven or hell. 2. There will come a day when this earth will cease to exist as it is, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and there will be a Judgment Day upon which all will be judged. How these two relate to one another is the subject of debate. Some believe the second judgment would be for those alive at the time of Christ's Second Coming; others, that it will include the dead who were not Christians. In the Hebrew Bible this day of reckoning was called "the Day of the Lord" and this concept was sometimes used to describe a day when God would punish Israel, yet not the final judgment. At other times this phrase did point to the Last Judgment. Let's study a few of these passages this week...

Monday, April 30 – Read Joel 2:1-32 - Joel foretells the coming Day of the Lord as a day of judgment, a day when God's just wrath will be poured out upon those who have done evil and those who have turned their back on God's laws. But notice in this chapter the intent of these warnings – the intent was that the people would turn to God. Notice the judgment here seems to be one that comes from an army. What in this chapter points toward God's compassion? The Old Testament's final words are about the Day of the Lord. Read Malachi 4:1-6. Remember that Jesus called John the Baptist the "Elijah who was to come." What is God looking for from us according to today's readings? What will bring wrath or judgment upon us?

Tuesday, May 1 – For the rest of our readings this week we'll study the Gospel of Matthew, which has a major emphasis upon Judgment Day and the Kingdom of Heaven, as we will experience it in the future. The Beatitudes (Jesus' "blessed are..." statements) all point to those God will bless with life in the Kingdom of Heaven. Read Matthew 5:1-12 – what does Jesus teach us here about Judgment Day and the afterlife? Read these verses again, aloud, and reflect upon them. Finally, use them as the basis of your prayer time with God – asking God to help you be like these who will be satisfied in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Wednesday, May 2 – Let's take a look at the rest of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount today, and what he says in it about judgment, hell, heaven and how he will judge on judgment day. While the entire Sermon on the Mount points toward these themes, we've chosen verses that specifically mention one of these topics. You may want to make a list of what we should or should not do to enter heaven at the last judgment. Read Matthew 5:20, 5:21-24, 5:27-30, 6:9-15, 6:19-21, 7:1-5, 7:13-14, 7:15-20. Finally read and reflect upon the meaning of 7:21-23. Use today's passages to guide you in prayer.

Thursday, May 3 – Read Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:36-43. What is Jesus saying about life now, and about the Last Judgment? Read 13:47-50. Read 18:1-9. What does it mean to become like a child as it relates to faith? Read 19:27-30. What do you make of the teaching that the first shall be last and the last first?

Friday, May 4 – Read Matthew 24:36-44. What is the point of this passage concerning Judgment Day? Read the three parables of judgment in Matthew 25. What does each parable teach about Judgment Day? What is God looking for from us? How do we reconcile these ideas with the teaching of the scripture that we are saved from wrath by God's grace, through faith, and not by our works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Let's end our study looking at the "Day of the Lord" again – Read II Peter 3:8-14. This weekend we will turn our attention to what heaven will be like – invite a friend to worship!

“The Last Judgment – A Biblical Study of Judgment Day”

Theme: “The Bible and the Afterlife”

April 29, 2007 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

II Corinthians 5:10 and Matthew 22:11-14

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SLIDE 1 The Last Judgment – A Biblical Study of Judgment Day

As you are seated I invite you to take out of your bulletin your sermon notes and your study guide. The sermon notes are a chance for you to follow along and I encourage you to take some notes today and write down things you would like to remember. The study is an opportunity for you to read the Bible on your own and what you will find here are Scriptures that relate back to today's message. They are Scriptures about the last judgment. Each one will give you an opportunity to reflect upon this question, "What does this teaching of the last judgment and what does the Scripture mean for my life today?" I think you will be blessed as you take his home and read this in the days ahead.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons on the Bible and the afterlife. We are trying to make sense of what happens to us we die. We began our first sermon by talking about the Christian hope of resurrection. We believe that we continue to exist after our death and we have the opportunity to be with God for all of eternity in Paradise because of the resurrection of Christ. That is our hope as Christians.

Last week we looked at the dark side of the hope for eternal life. Some people might choose to reject God's grace and if you walk away from the grace of God what you have left, if you go somewhere away from God, is everything that is the opposite of heaven. If you take all the wonderful things we attribute to heaven, and all a wonderful things that come from God in this life, what you have left is hell. God does not send us their but people choose that by our decisions and our choices throughout our life.

Next week we will end this series of sermons by looking at heaven. What is heaven like? What do people do in heaven? What kinds of things might we experience there? We are going to study the Scriptures and see what we might learn from them what will happen when we die if in fact we have the opportunity to go to heaven.

Today we are going to turn our attention to how it is that we are judged at the end of our lives. We will look at the criteria that are used to determine if we in fact will go to heaven or we have chosen something else. We're talking about the Judgment Day.

There are a lot of different ideas about the Judgment Day. Some people are scared about it and some people are excited about it. Some people don't think about him very much. What do you think about the Judgment Day? Do you have any idea about what happens on that day or how it works?

We thought it would be good to ask to people this question just as we have been asking people on the street questions throughout the sermon series. Now I thought when it came to Judgment Day it would be good to find an appropriate place to ask the questions, "What do you think the end times will be like? What do you think about Judgment Day?" So I started off down at the county courthouse. As people were coming out of court I asked them if they had any thoughts about the final judgment. After about the fifth person sneered at me and one person even told me where to go with my question, I realized that my attempt at a little humor by asking people about the Judgment Day at a courthouse was not very appropriate!

So then we went down to Main Street again and were actually able to get some responses. We just stop people on the street and asked them, "What do you think happens to us on the Judgment Day?" This is what they said.

VIDEO The Last Judgment

SLIDE 2 The Terminator – Judgment Day

I actually had one guy who would not go on camera say, "I'll be back," making a clear reference to Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator in the movie ***T2 - Judgment Day***.

One gentleman told me that he hopes to get a "thumbs up" verdict. That probably sums it up for many of us. We hope to get that thumbs up

verdict. But how do you get that verdict? What does this look like? That is what we're going to focus on today as well as a series of other questions that spring forth from the Bible's teachings about the last judgment.

I studied much of the Bible's teachings this last week from the Old Testament all the way through the New Testament on the Judgment Day or the last judgment. Let's start off by remembering that Paul tells us in a Scripture that we read just a few moments ago from 2 Corinthians Chapter 5 that all of us will in fact stand before the judgment seat of Christ. At that time we will receive recompense for what we have done in the body whether good or evil. That is the image that the scriptures paint for us of what happens to us at our death.

The Scriptures also painted for us a picture of final judgment where God will call to an end everything that exists and he will create a new heaven and a new earth. A final judgment will take place.

The most important question that you can ask when you study the Bible's teachings about the last judgment or about your own personal Judgment Day is this.

SLIDE 3 “For me on the Judgment Day, will it be a day of blessing or a day to be terrified?”

That is the question you are supposed to ask. What we will find is that the Bible tells us it can be either of those two choices. The Bible says that for some it will be a terrifying day, a day of darkness and gloom. For others it will be a day of great relief and victory. You have to decide, "Which will it be for me?"

It is sad that W.C. Fields was in his hospital room just before he died and he was frantically looking through his Bible. Somebody asked him, "W.C. what are you doing? You have not been known to read the Bible a whole lot?"

SLIDE 4 He said, "I am looking for loopholes."

That is how many of us approach the Judgment Day and probably for all of us there is a little bit of anxiety about what that might look like we stand before Christ. I know that we conduct annual reviews of our staff here at First United Methodist Church, including us pastors. I am in the process right now of being reviewed by our personnel committee called the Staff Parish relations committee. Many times for us annual review time is

the time where you feel a bit anxious as you are being held accountable and you recount how things have gone in the last year of your life and ministry. That is how I suspect some of us will feel at the last judgment.

You might be aware of some people in your work life who were at the top of the sales chart. They have had the best year they have ever had and they can't wait for their annual evaluation. They know it's time where they're going to get encouragement and they may even get a big pay increase because they had a great year.

But then there are people who are not at the top of that list and they might even be closer to the bottom. They are going to be afraid and they might even wonder, "I wonder if I will still have a job after this year's annual review?" You may have been in both of those places at some point in your life.

Last year I got a phone call from my boss who is the bishop. Actually his secretary called and left a message and said, "The bishop really needs to speak with you and it is very urgent. He would like a conference call with you tomorrow at 3 p.m."

I have to tell you that I hate it when people call and don't tell me what they want to meet and talk about, especially if they're my boss. He didn't say what he wanted to talk about he just said he wanted to meet. I got that call and I had an entire day to imagine what I had done wrong that the bishop would personally call me and want to visit with me. I began recounting all the sermons I had preached and all the things he might have been unhappy with in my sermons. I began to think about people I had ministered with and what I might have done wrong. By the next day I was a nervous wreck. Was he going to ask me to move to Last Chance Colorado! That's kind of the standing joke in Methodist preacher circles here in the Rocky Mountain conference.

Finally 3 p.m. came the next day and the bishop calls. Do you know what he asked me? "Jeff, I know you are helping to plan the pastor's retreat in the fall. Can you tell me what the dates are for the event and when I am supposed to be there?" I love my bishop but I could have killed him! It had nothing to do with anything I had done wrong and it was a good thing he did not know about that long list of stuff I had figured out I had done wrong during the last year!

That's the way it is with us is in it? We get anxious about what is to come when we don't know what it will be like. When it comes to the final judgment, the day in which God will determine which way you go, that should be something that we really wrestle with. We are meant to think about this seriously when we think about the Day of Judgment.

Let me say up front that the Bible does not give us one consistent picture about the Day of Judgment. It offers us several ideas, some of which seem to be contradictory. All of them are simply designed to move us to ask the right question. The Bible is not trying to tell us every single detail about what happens after we die. It is painting a broad picture and moving you towards a certain faith response. That is the aim and so a lot of the language metaphorical as we talk about what happens after death.

SLIDE 5 What does the Bible say about Judgment Day?

Here are a couple of the big picture items. There is the idea of a final judgment day in which God gathers all the nations before him and he separates them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. That is our final judgment happens in this picture. God will separate those who are righteous and they will go into everlasting life and the wicked will go into everlasting damnation. That is one picture that we have in the Bible.

Another picture we have is that when you die you immediately are judged and stand before the judgment seat of Christ and it is immediately determined if you go to heaven or hell at that time. We talked about this two weeks ago in terms of what happens when you die. I am one who believes that when we die we go to be with the Lord at that time directly, which means we stand before the judgment seat of Christ at our death. Otherwise, what would happen to us?

But there is some final, cataclysmic judgment in which God says, "Enough is enough. This is the end of the earth as you know it and there will be a new heaven and a new earth." I don't need to make those two ideas to fit together perfectly. I just believe those are both things that will happen.

I believe in a personal judgment that happens right after our death in part because of what the Scriptures teach us, and in part because of some of the experiences that some of you have had. A number of you have sent me e-mails or called me and shared with me experiences that you have had with loved ones after they have died. We don't build Christian doctrine

upon these experiences. They are all subjective and so we are careful about them, but sometimes they can confirm that we are heading in the right direction in our interpretation of the Scriptures. Let me share with you a few stories I found intriguing and meaningful over the past few weeks.

One woman shared, "I went to be with my father as he was dying of cancer. I had to take my daughter with me because she was only three at the time. I was at the hospital with my dad when I got word that my daughter needed me. I left the hospital to put my daughter to sleep at the house where she was staying. I rocked her to help her fall asleep and just before she went to sleep she looked up in the room when the lights were out and said, 'Hi papa! There's grandpa!' I looked around her room for a picture of my dad on the walls that she might have seen but there was no picture of him there.

"I put her to sleep and walked out of the room. The doorbell rang and I went to the front door. It was one of my cousins who came to tell me that my dad had died just a few minutes ago. I drew great strength and peace from feeling that my father had stopped by to see his granddaughter one last time before he left."

Another person told me about a brother and sister who are traveling across West Texas to go be with their father who had a massive heart attack. They were hoping to see him before he passed away. They were driving through the middle of the night to try and be with him. At 2 in the morning as they were driving down the highway, their father appeared to them in the car. I don't understand how this looked are what the experience was exactly like but they both heard him say to them, *"It is all going to be okay."*

They were so startled that they pulled the car over to the side of the road thinking the driver had fallen asleep. What struck me is that not just one of them saw this but they both saw the exact same thing at the same time. After they shook off the shock of the experience they began driving again. When they finally got the hospital early the next morning they found out their father had died at 2 a.m. that morning.

A woman told me, *"I am not prone to emotionalism. I don't have experiences like this."* Actually most people who have told me these stories have said they have never shared this with anyone because they are afraid people will think they are crazy.

She said, *"My son died when he was 33 years old in a car accident on the highway. Two years after he died I was awakened in the middle of the night at 3 a.m. I sat straight up in bed and the room was dark except for a warm glow, a light in the mirror. I looked in the mirror and there I saw my son looking at me and he began to speak to me. He began to tell me all the people who were there with him, all of our loved ones who have gone and died before him.*

"Then he said this, 'Mom, in this place we are all surrounded by another kind of love.' That experience was deeply satisfying to me. I have this sense that my son was in that place where God's love permeated everything."

I believe, because I've heard things like this so many times, that there is a deep truth in them. I don't think they are hallucinations and if there is any truth in them then we would have to say that persons, after their death, stand before the judgment seat of Christ and then proceed to whatever place it is they have chosen in their lives to be.

So we have these two ideas of a personal judgment that happens after our death, and a final judgment when Christ shall return. We need to be clear that the final judgment that is pictured in the Scriptures is something cataclysmic. It is almost frightening.

The idea of this begins in the Old Testament with the prophetic writings. The prophet Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah and Malachi all mention the "Day of the Lord." Listen to what Zephaniah says.

SLIDE 6 **"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," says the Lord. "I will sweep away humans and animals. I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth."**

Those are the kind of word pictures that we have in the prophetic teachings about the day of the Lord—***"The Day of Judgment and a Day of Vengeance of our God—a day when they'll winepress of the Lord's fury and wrath is tread out."***

This is what we see in teachings about the day of the Lord. I have to share with you that it is difficult for me to picture God in this way at times. I think of God as a loving father. I think of the father of the prodigal son with a shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep. When I read these

passages about the vengeance and wrath of our God they are sometimes troubling to me. They don't fit with the picture I have of God as a loving and nurturing God.

But when I take time to think about this carefully I can begin to see both sides of God's love and that his justice and his judgment is a part of his love. I experienced this when I was a campus pastor and took a group of college students to Washington, DC to study urban homelessness and poverty. We went to our United Methodist building right across the street from the US Supreme Court which houses our Global Board of Church and Society. Their main concern is with justice issues in the world.

SLIDE 7 Photo of inside of the United Methodist building in D.C.

When you walk inside the building there is a photo display of people who have been wounded under terrorism and awful acts and atrocities. You see the inhumanity of one person to another. They have photographs of children in Africa who had been beaten with machetes because they were of the wrong tribe. They showed the places where their flesh had been torn across their faces and children whose arms had been taken off. I looked at these pictures and inside I became angry. I became angry that this was a world that we live in, and that these kinds of things happen.

For a moment I could begin to understand the day of the Lord and the Day of vengeance and the day of retribution. I think when God looks and sees that there are tens of thousands of children who die every day of malnutrition in a world where there is plenty, there has to be a day where God says, "**Enough is enough.**"

I think when God sees the inhumanity we do to each other and the abuse that we do towards one another, and the ways we turn our backs on God, there must come a day where God says, "**Enough already. There will be no more of this!**"

When you see all the pain that is inflicted upon other human beings then you begin to be able to say with the writer of the book of Revelation...

SLIDE 8 "Even so, come Lord Jesus, come. Put an end to all of this. Stop it."

It becomes a day of longing because we long to see a world that is no longer like this anymore. We begin to understand the fury and the wrath of God that the Scriptures talk about.

We also have another picture of judgment in the Scriptures and it is a picture of hope and heaven that is offered to each one of us as we follow Christ. So we have the major final judgment when Christ shall return, then we have the personal judgment where we stand before the judgment seat, then we have the Day of the Lord as a day of wrath, but then we have this other picture where we stand before the Lord and he says, "**Well done good and faithful servant. Enter in to your rest.**"

On that day and God offers blessings and complete healing. There is restoration and no more tears and no more sorrow and no more suffering. For some people the day of the Lord is a day of vengeance and a day of retribution and a day to be afraid, but for others it is a day of deliverance and a day of hope. It is a day when finally Paradise will come and all the evil of this world will end. The question again that you were supposed to ask when you study the last judgment in the Scriptures is this...

SLIDE 9 Which day will it be for you?

Will you dread that day or will you look forward to that day with hope? We are going to look at that question for our lives in more detail in just a minute, but right now I want to turn to a few logistical questions that you ask. These are some of the thornier questions about the last judgment. One of those questions is this.

SLIDE 10 Who? Who will act as our judge?

Who are we going to stand before on the Judgment Day? Is a God Almighty on the throne of God or who? Michelangelo captures for us what the New Testament teaches about who we will stand before on the last day in his fresco, *The Last Judgment*.

SLIDE 11 Photo - Last Judgment.

SLIDE 12 Photo - Last Judgment detail of Christ.

This is Jesus who is at the center of the fresco. He is this magnificent figure and you can see him here up close. If you look at his face he is not angry. He is not vengeful. The look on his face says that he is determined. This is a day that must happen to make all things right. He is strong and magnificent. He has his hand raised and he is ready to bring about the judgment with a swirling hand.

In his fresco you see both those for whom this is a day of great joy and hope and those for whom it is a day of great dread and remorse. Both

are captured in that painting in the Sistine Chapel wall. Jesus is the one we stand before and the last judgment. I find great joy and encouragement in that and I'll share with you why in just a few minutes.

Here's another question that we ask.

SLIDE 13 When? At death or at the Second Coming?

This is a great question. Of course when it comes to your personal judgment and standing before the Lord, that happens at your death. But we don't know when we are going to die do we? Would you want to know when you were going to die if you could know the exact day? Some people would. I would not. I want to know when I'm going to die because I would spend too much time thinking about it and worrying about it. I want to just enjoy each day to its fullest and not worry about when that day comes.

The one thing I am aware of is that it could come any day. It could come tonight for me. It could come today after church for some of you. None of us knows that time.

The Scripture says we are also judged at the second coming. When will that happen? Nobody knows. Jesus said that he did not even know. No one knows, not even that Son but only the father in heaven knows the day in the hour when he will come. The earliest Christians believed that he would come back in their generation and every generation since then has believed that Jesus would be coming back in their time.

Tim LaHaye wrote his books, the Left Behind series, and many people have read those books and said, "Maybe it's now." Maybe it is!

That is sort of the purpose of the teaching about the second coming. It is left open ended so that every generation would struggle with this and say, "Maybe the Lord is returning. The signs said the time appears to be near. Maybe the Lord's return is eminent."

The Lord could return in our lifetime, or it could be 10,000 years from now, or it could be today. We don't know.

How would you respond if I told you, "I know exactly when Jesus is coming back? He will be back March 16 of next year at three in the afternoon." I'm pretty sure if I told you that there are some of you that I would not see again until March 16 at about noon. We would be living like a devil between now and then and then at that day we would want to repent

and make everything right because you knew he was coming back and you want to get it all straight at the last moment.

But God says, "That is not how it works. I want you to be faithful all the time. I want you to be living for me all the time so that you will be ready when ever the master of the house returns. You will be ready because you have been a faithful servant with what I have entrusted to you."

So we don't know when and it can come at any time. What we do know is that there will be a day when the Lord will return and all of us at our death will stand before Jesus.

The New Testament teaches that every single person will stand before Christ—the Jew, the Buddhist, a Muslim, the Hindu, the atheist will all stand before the judgment seat of Jesus one-day. It is not just Christians. That is a powerful thing for us to think about and it raises even more complicated questions. These are the kinds of questions that thoughtful people wrestle with, especially in today's environment.

There was a time when many Christians didn't know anyone who is Jewish or Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim, so you really didn't worry too much about people he didn't know about. If you didn't know anybody it was easier to damn them all to hell because they were not Christians. But when they become your friends or your neighbors or your in-laws, you begin wrestling with that a little bit more.

You begin thinking, "How do I put together the love of God and the justice of God and the mercy of God and the judgment of God with people who I know who are faithful adherents of other religions?" I'm not talking about the backsliders of all the other religions. Just as Methodism and Christianity have them, every faith tradition has those who were not really walking the walk. They just claim to be something without really walking it or living it.

But in every faith there are people who are serious about following God and trying to understand God in their tradition. There are Muslims who get on their knees five times a day and submit their lives to God. There are Jews who are seeking to be faithful and obey God and his commandments for them. What do we do with this?

The other question I get is this, "What about the person who lives on an island all by themselves and there has never been a Christian who has come there?"

SLIDE 14 What about those who never had the opportunity to know Christ?

How will they be judged at the last day? They've never had the opportunity to know about Jesus. We also wonder about those who are our friends or our loved ones who never professed Christ. What about them? These are the questions that we are going to wrestle with for a few minutes.

First let us start with those who have never had the opportunity to know Jesus and those who are people of other faith.

SLIDE 15 What about those who are faithful members of other religions?

When we were doing our world religions sermon series in January I had a member of our church say to me, "One thing I recognize is that I'm a Christian today in large part because my mom and dad were Christian. I was raised in a Christian culture and a Christian society and in a Christian home. But if I had been raised in Iran or Iraq and my mom and dad had been Muslims I'm pretty sure I would be a Muslim today. And I would try to be the best Muslim I could be but I don't think I would have become Christian if I had parents who are Muslims and I was living in the predominantly Muslim culture. That causes me some turmoil in some trouble."

There are three basic Christian responses to this question and we talked about these a few months ago. There are lots of variations but let's look at those three again.

The first one is a position called universalism. Universalism says that God has created all human beings and God loves all human beings. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world and that in the end, even if it is after our death, God will work out the salvation of every single person so that all will be saved and none will be lost. God will have a way of making sure that this happens.

I like the idea of that, that none will be lost. I am not certain that I believe it. I don't believe in part because there are Scriptures that indicate that there are some that will be lost. There are some that will turn away and reject God's grace. I do think God's grace is resistible. I think one can actually turn away from God and reject his grace. I do think God is always trying to woo us towards him, but I don't think he ever forces anyone to receive his grace.

I am also not certain there are people who would want a universalism to be true for them who are not Christians. Even after their deaths and to discover that Jesus was the savior of the world I think there are some who do not want any part of that. So I'm not a Universalist but there are some Christians who do hold that view.

The opposite of that stance is exclusivism. It is sometimes called particularism and is a view that says unless someone receives Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. If they had not personally accepted him and there is no way that they could possibly be saved.

So you ask, "What about those who were Native American who lived on this continent for 1400 years before the first Christian missionary arrived—what about them?" The Bible says that every soul is a gift from God. God gave them life and God knows their names and he has heard their stories and their prayers. What about those who sought to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly before God as best they knew God? What about those who gave something to those who are hungry and thirsty and naked and visited those who are in prison? What do we make of those folks?

I asked this of a person who is a very conservative exclusivist. What do you make of these folks and what do you say about that? He said, "They are damned." I said, "But they had no idea and no opportunity to even know about Jesus. There was no opportunity for them to even respond to the grace of God." The response was that, "I believe that if God had wanted them to be saved he would've appeared to them and a vision or something so they could have been saved. Otherwise, I believe they are damned."

That can be a pretty hard word. There are some Christians who believe in double predestination. This theory says that God has elected some people to be damned from before the time they were born. What I find interesting about that theory is that those who hold to it never believe that it was any of their loved ones who were selected to be damned from the beginning of time. When I begin to think about it, if one of my children was predestined or chosen by God to be damned before they had ever been born, that would be a problematic picture of God for me. But that is what some people believe and so they are not concerned about those who might perish.

But for many of the rest of us we wrestle with this question of how the justice of God can be done if someone has not even had the opportunity to respond to the grace of God, or if they were raised in a family where it would be very unlikely for them to truly respond to the grace of God.

What I would call myself is an evangelical inclusivist. Inclusivism is very broad, but what I hold to is something like this. God's mercy is probably broader than what we imagine. God will be just in what he does and we can trust God to be just. It's likely that God will look at people and measure them according to a certain standard that he has chosen for them. You will look at them and see what they could have known and how they responded to his grace as it was available to them.

Then what those of us believe we hold this position is that every person, every Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, will stand before Jesus on the last day. Jesus will look at them and they will all recognize at that moment, "Oh, you were the savior of the world." Jesus will look and see how they live their lives and what they did.

Now they will not be saved by their works because the Scripture is very clear that we are only saved by the grace of God through faith. These people have faith but they did not have knowledge. At that point Jesus could turn to God and say, "Father, I would like to appropriate some of the saving work that I offered through the cross for this one. I gave them the gift of my righteousness." All in the end will be saved by the grace of Christ and no one else. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the father but by him. There is no other name under heaven and earth by which people may be saved, but in the end, if they are saved, it is because Jesus looked at them and judged them according to what they could know of God's grace and gave his saving work on their behalf.

I'm not saying you have to believe that either. What I am saying is that as I have wrestled with this question and read Scripture and considered the heart of God, this is where I end up.

I will say that I'm not just making this up. Polycarp and Justin Martyr, two of the early Church fathers held to this view. Among the three great reformers in the Protestant Reformation, Zwingli held to this view. John Wesley, the great Methodist founder, held to a view like this. C.S. Lewis the great Christian evangelical writer of the 20th century held this view. There are many other evangelicals today who hold this view, but it is not the

predominant view held by conservative evangelicals today. It is probably the common view among many mainline theologians and pastors.

In the end what I say is this, "You know what? I don't know the mind of God. I just don't know all of that. What I know is that God is just and he loves and I can count on that." I've the feeling that when we get to the last judgment and we are standing around there at the seat of Christ, we are all going to watch and go, "Of course that is what he would do. How could we have thought anything else?"

I would say that if you are troubled by this idea, the most important thing is for us to have a little bit more humility when it comes to how we pronounce judgment upon other people. It would also be good for us to say that we can trust God to do what is right and just in his eyes.

Some of you might say, "Well if that is the case, then why in the world would we try and share Christ with anyone else? Why do we send missionaries to other countries and in any way try to win people to Christ?" The reason that we try to win people to Christ and send missionaries around the world and share our faith is because Jesus is the Way, the truth and the life.

We believe as Christians that he offers the fullest life possible in the abundant life. Why wouldn't you want to introduce people to the person they will stand before the last day?

This last week as I was downtown interviewing people about the last judgment there was a couple sitting on the bench next to where we were filming. They begin to talk to me when we had a break and asked me if I was getting any interesting responses. The woman told me that her parents had both died in the last year and that she had been with her father when he had taken his last breath. She wanted to be sure about where he had gone.

I shared with her that what I believe is that God sent Jesus to help us deal with this very anxiety that we feel about death. All of us want to know there is something after this life. We want to know that there is a hope for us. We as Christians believe that Jesus came and he gave his life for us, and that he died, but that he rose from the grave. His resurrection gives us the hope and the assurance that there is something beyond this life.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will never die." Now I didn't want to push this too far so I just stopped right there to let her think about it.

I'm a friend back in Denver who is Jewish and who is very faithful in his religious practice. We sat down for lunch one day and he said, "Are you willing to try and convert me?" I asked him, "Did you think it would work?" I then asked him, "If I believed that Jesus was your messiah, how could I not want you to know that too? But as I sit here I actually want to know that I care about you more than anything else. As we share I realize that you probably are looking at me and wishing that I thought that Jesus was just a rabbi. I'm expecting that you're going to hope I might see things from your place. That's okay. But at the same time I recognize that there is wideness to God's grace and how he looks at each one of us and how he loves each one of us. I just wish you knew there was something more."

I believe we let our light shine for Christ. We share with people love of Christ without judging them. We might just be a little more hesitant about passing judgment so quickly on how God looks at other people who are seeking to serve him but don't yet know the love of Jesus.

That leads me to one last category of people.

SLIDE 16 What about those who die but do not appear to be Christians?

What about them? I discover that most of us can easily pass judgment on all those people until it is one of the people that we love very much. I have conducted over 115 funerals since I've been a pastor. Some of those were for kids who were not following Christ at the time. They've been baptized and maybe even confirmed but they weren't walking with the Lord at the time. And in those moments, with parents who often looked at everything as black and white, they find themselves saying, "I hope God's mercy is bigger than I thought."

While I was in seminary in 1990 both of my grandparents died. They were my dad's parents and they had been Catholic since they were kids. My grandparents had sent my dad to a Catholic high school and so when grandma died my dad said to my grandpa, "Where are we going to have the funeral mass?" You see neither of them had been to church in years and my dad stopped going to the Catholic Church when he was finished with high school.

My grandfather said, "I don't believe in any of that stuff. Just put her in the ground." My data was shocked and said, "How come you sent me to those Catholic schools my whole life then?" My grandpa's only response was, "Hey, you got a good education didn't you?" My dad and then said with me standing in the room, "How about if Jeff does the service?"

Jeff was not even a pastor yet! I only had one near seminary and let me tell you in that first year they don't tell you how to do a funeral. But grandpa said that would be okay and so I was stuck. Grandpa also said he wouldn't come. When I came to their apartment the next day to put together the funeral my aunt met me at the door and said, "Grandpa is going to come to the funeral. He died this morning."

In the next few days I found myself wondering where grandma and grandpa went. They hadn't darkened the door of the church for decades and while they were baptized as children they had not really walked to the faith. I now was not even sure that grandpa believed in God. He didn't really try to serve the Lord. He was honest as was grandma and they were good people, but that was about it.

So what was going to become of them? All I could do was pray. I prayed that their hearts would be opened as they met God and as they met Jesus. I prayed that they would be together and they would see each other in heaven. I prayed that they would remember their baptisms and that when they were babies God had claimed them as his children. I hope they remember that in their last moments and they were able to say yes. I prayed they would let God hold them and keep them.

I don't know what happened. I was with grandma when she breathed her last and I prayed for her. But I don't know and I have to plead agnosticism here. I have no idea what took place when they died.

Here is what I do now. Here is what I have said to people who have lost loved ones and we didn't really know what they believed. "I don't know what happened to your loved one. I'm not certain because we don't know what happened in their heart of hearts. We don't know what God was doing in their life at that last minute. We simply don't know those things. What I know is that God is merciful and just, and the Jesus that they will stand before is the one who said, 'There was a shepherd who had a hundred sheep and one of them wandered away. The shepherd went and searched high and low to find that one lost sheep and bring it home.'"

"What we can do is place your loved one in God's hands and we can trust them to him. We can trust that he will do whatever is right, whatever that is."

I have to tell you that it's a lot more fun to do a funeral for the person where you knew where they were going and it's no question. You know they had claimed Jesus Christ as their savior and they had followed him faithfully all of their days.

This week as I was preparing this sermon I prayed and asked God that as your pastor and one of your shepherds I would help you be ready, **so that on that day when you meet God face to face you will not be afraid but your hearts would be filled with joy because you have received him.**

SLIDE 17 Parable Picture

That brings us to our parable for today. Jesus used several different parables to teach about judgment throughout the gospel of Matthew to try and tell us what he's looking for in our lives. But this is an odd and perplexing parable. We started it last week and we learned about the King who is throwing a party for his son. It was a wedding banquet and he invited all these people to come but most of the people refused his invitation. They say they are not interested in coming and that of course is what happens in life. Many people turn God down the invitation to go to heaven.

Then he goes out and invites lots of other people. He tells them that he has wonderful food and an amazing party that is set. All of these guests decide to come and these are the Gentiles who are to become part of the church and the parable.

But then something interesting happens when the King looks around the wedding banquet. He sees one person who is not appropriately dressed for the banquet and he says, "Where are your wedding clothes?" The man is speechless and has nothing to say until finally the man is taken out, bound hand and foot, and thrown into the place where there is outer darkness weeping and gnashing of teeth. We look at that and we say, "What is that about? That is the strangest thing."

Here's what you are supposed to understand. Even the people that live on the streets would've tried to find some decent clothes to wear to his banquet. They would have tried to brush their hair and brush their teeth

and look decent by putting on their best blue jeans and their best T-shirt when they come to the wedding banquet of the Lord was throwing.

This one man said, "You know what? All I really care about is the food. All I care about is the open bar and free party. I really care about anything else. I just want to make sure I don't go to a bad place, so I am going to show up." So he showed up wearing his old grubby clothes.

Remember that the clothing that is on the outside is meant to represent your old sinful nature. That was all of his pride and arrogance and everything else that was dark in his life. He was unredeemed and didn't really care about what he looked like.

Every once in awhile I get invited to a fancy dinner. It's kind of fun to get dressed up in tuxedos and formalwear. It's been years since I've been to prom and getting dressed up like that can be kind of fun. But I try to imagine that this person who pays for this party and goes for all this trouble, and what would happen if I just showed up in my ratty old blue jeans and a dirty shirt and I didn't get cleaned up when I came. First of all my wife would leave me at home.

But really what I would be saying to the person who invited me was this, "All I really care about is your food. This is important to me. You are not important to me." I would just be making a negative statement by showing up that way. This man came and he thought that he could be saved by wearing the same old ratty clothes—that clothing had to do with his heart and his life.

Paul helps us interpret this in Romans and Galatians when he says, **"As many as have turned away from sin and chosen Christ, they have clothed themselves with Christ."**

Here is what God is looking for and what God expects of you now that you have heard the word. He expects that we would say, "Jesus, I realize that I have no right to be at this banquet on my own. I need your grace. Wash, re-clean and make me new. Help me to follow and to serve you." The question is simply this:

SLIDE 18 What Will You Wear to Meet the King?

And we seek to turn away from darkness and to walk in the light. You can get downright depressed if you were to go through and read all of the passages of judgment in the Bible. As I read through some of them this

week I found myself saying to God, "Lord, you are going to be awfully lonely in the kingdom of heaven. There is not a single person who can make it there based upon all those standards."

And I felt like the Lord said, "That is exactly right Jeff, which is why I sent Jesus." Clothe yourself in his righteousness. What we do is we say yes to Jesus and we say, "Lord I would like to humbly walk before you. I would like to live for you and serve you."

Here is what brings me great comfort as I close. I know I have blown it so many times and I have made so many mistakes in my life. I hope to get in by the skin of my teeth as your pastor. But here's what I know. The Jesus who I will stand before the last day is the same Jesus that every day I try to talk to and say, "Lord I love you and I want to follow you." It is the same Lord I discovered in the Scriptures and it is the same Lord that I seek to honor in my life on a daily basis. It is the same Lord who went to find the lost sheep and bring them back home.

That gives me the confidence to know that on that day I can stand before him and he will say, "Welcome home. I am ready for you." I would like him to say that of you. Let us pray together.

Last week we invited you to accept Christ as your savior. Maybe you weren't here last week. Maybe today is the day you would like to make that commitment all over again.

I would just like to invite you to simply say, "Lord, I accept you. I receive you as my savior. Cover me with your grace. Thank you for your mercy. Help me to bear witness for you, so that on that day I can stand and he will welcome me into your home," in your holy name. Amen.