

You are going to be judged.

Maybe you're different from me, but when I hear words like that, I get a tiny shot of panic in my chest. After all, being judged is usually no minor matter. Even when the outcome is minor, the questions can shoot through your mind. Did I do well enough? What if I don't measure up? Did I do all I could? And some of the questions that hit us are completely out of our control. What about the ones doing the judging? Are they going to really be fair and impartial or will their personal feelings get in the way? Are they honest or have they been bought? You never know! Will they see it my way?

Human judgment can be stressful for any number of reasons. There's uncertainty on both sides. Even if you're confident in your own performance, you have no control over the one doing the judging. In theory, this shouldn't be the case, right? That's the point of a judge. Someone who is impartial that considers the evidence and decides what the truth is and the appropriate action. The only problem is that the judge is a human being. And so sin can get in the way. And even without that, the judge is not clairvoyant. He or she cannot know everything about the situation and often must make deductive leaps and assumptions to arrive at a judgment. That can be a little scary too, because what if they do it wrong?

What if there was a judge that didn't have those hang-ups? What if there was a judge who could not only know absolutely everything about a situation, but also could perfectly distinguish between right and wrong? He would not only have absolutely every single fact about everything, but he could process that information and produce a perfectly just judgment out of it. A judgment based only on the truth and perfectly tuned to what the laws require or allow. There would be no guesswork or supposition, no gaps of knowledge and no actual judgment calls. The truth would simply be presented and the verdict would simply be the natural result of those facts. There would be no need to fear or doubt this judge because he is not changeable, you could know what he would say before the judging even starts.

Hopefully you've already figured out that I'm talking about Jesus. He said as much about himself in our gospel today when he said, **"Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,"** and, **"By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me."** So Jesus is the judge, and as we know, being God, he has all knowledge. He tells us that he, as a person, does not actually enter into it. He does nothing of his own in this judgment. He judges based on what he knows, which as we said, is perfect knowledge. And the results of his judgment are not his own, they are done not for himself but for the Father who sent him. And so his judgments are perfectly in line with the perfect will and law of God.

What does that mean for us who are judged then? It means there is no fear or uncertainty for us on behalf of the judge himself. We needn't worry that he will misjudge us. The judgment that is handed down will be perfectly in accord with the facts of the matter and will be perfectly in accord with the laws and justice that God himself established. There will be no room for error or personal sway, no trickery of lawyers obfuscating the truth. What is done will be known and the sentence will be based on that alone.

If that is the case, and if we know ourselves, then we are able to look ahead and know exactly what the outcome will be long before we ever see the judge in person. God has shown us his law and his system of justice. Using that, we can hold ourselves up to that system and see how it will end. If the judge is perfectly just, then there's no apprehension about how it will come out. We can know right now what it will be.

In fact, Jesus summarizes his basis for judgment and the possible results in this very section when he says, **"...a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."** And there you have it. At the end of this age, everyone will be brought before the judge and if you have done good you will live forever in paradise with your God. And if you have done evil, you will be condemned to an eternity of separation from his goodness, tormented endlessly in hell. Seems fairly obvious and straightforward, no?

Well, no, not necessarily, you might be thinking. After all, what do you mean "done good" and "done evil"? Aren't those rather nebulous concepts? That could mean a dozen different things depending on whom you ask. True enough, but we only have to ask one person; God himself. He is God so no matter how you might feel about it, he gets to set the rules. And his standards are rather clearly laid out for us in his word. To be good is to love the Lord your God with all your being above everything else in this world and then to love your neighbor as yourself. How well you must keep this up is very clearly defined when Jesus tells us to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Well, then. How's that look for you? Without looking at God's standards you might have a different answer. After all who among us would say "no" if you were asked the question, "Are you a good person?" You may not answer a resounding

yes, but I'm going to guess it would be more like, "Basically", "I do my best", or "I like to think so". Would you really admit to another person or even to yourself, "No, not at all."? We like to think of ourselves as decent people who make mistakes occasionally, give into those temptations once in a while, but overall the good balances out the bad pretty well.

God's justice does not work that way. It's not a balancing act, it's not a majority vote. It is all or nothing. And if we take the time to study his law properly, we would walk away knowing that we are nothing. The good doesn't even balance out the bad like we want to think it does. We put aside loving our Lord constantly in order to love ourselves. Half the time we do something for him it's just to earn the praise of men or to feel good about how happy we made him. And when we show love to our neighbor we're careful that we get something out of it too. Even if it's not material reward, at least that person will know how nice and kind and great we are. We aren't even kind of good, we are selfish through and through. Nevermind being perfect, we couldn't pull off "good" for an hour, let alone a lifetime.

That doesn't sound so good for us. Based on what the Judge has told us, we will be condemned. When the Judge looks at the record of our lives, all we can do is wince with the harsh sentence we know should be coming. We haven't done good. We've done evil. It's not something to look forward to, but the judgment is just.

But now, wait. Didn't Jesus say something before that? Something about life and it had nothing to do with doing good or evil. He said, **"I tell you the truth, 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. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."**

With an oath Jesus makes us this promise, that life does not depend on doing good or evil. He says those who hear and believe will not be condemned, they will have eternal life. He says those who are dead will hear his voice and that will make them alive. That's it. That's all. There's nothing here about what we do or don't do. Does this contradict what comes after? Why would we be judged on our deeds if our life or death depends solely on hearing and believing our God? How is it that both statements can be true?

But they are. And the truth of both together brings us a quiet peace and confidence as we look forward to the judgment that will come on us. The promise of Jesus here stands. Those who hear his words and trust God to save them will be saved, they will not be condemned. That is certain. And before we start worrying about whether we "believe enough" or "trust enough" let's remember that our faith itself is the work of the Holy Spirit, not of our own doing. In this regard we either have faith or we don't, our performance does not enter into it.

What Jesus promises here has happened to you. When he says that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and live. He tells us this time has already come. He's not talking about the resurrection on the last day here, that comes later. He's talking about you being born dead in your sin and being brought to a new life by faith in God through his power. You have heard the voice of Jesus, the power of that voice has brought you to trust him, and by that voice, by that trust, you are alive with God, no longer cut off from him by your sin.

These are promises. They are facts. Then how can Jesus say he will judge us by our deeds and keep these promises? Wouldn't our deeds necessitate our condemnation? Our deeds sure. But we will not be judged on our deeds. If it were even possible for us to stand on our own merit, there wouldn't need to be a savior. But there is a savior. There is Jesus Christ who took all your sin away from you and stood in your place as he hung on the cross. And at the same time, as he stood in your place suffering for your crimes, you now stand in his place, counted as having lived the perfect, obedient life of good that he lived. Remember this great exchange that God arranged. Jesus became you, covered with your sin. You became Jesus, covered with his life of perfect good.

When we are judged by anyone, the apprehension can come from uncertainty on both sides. Will the judge deal fairly? Do you, in fact, measure up? The promise of our Savior Christ is this: He has taken care of both. He is the judge who will mete out justice perfectly and fairly. We can be perfectly certain what his standards and his judgment will be. He is your righteousness, his perfect life has been given to you freely to wear. By faith, you will be judged by *his* deeds, not yours.

Brothers and sisters, God has done it all, and God has done it well. Have peace and confidence in God's perfect works and the outcome he has promised you. You will face the judge at the last day. And the just judgment handed down to you will be, "Not guilty." You have heard the voice of Jesus, you have crossed over from death to life. You believe in the one who sent him and because of everything he has done, you have eternal life. Amen.