

“I believe in Jesus who will come again to judge us”

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne July 22, 2007

Intro to the Service: It's easy to imagine the day that is coming as a day of freedom and joy. No more tears, no need for fears. Our captive hearts set free, and everyone singing in harmony. That's a picture of a never-ending, joy-filled existence. There's certainly a promise of this in the scriptures which Christians hold dear. For some of you, though, it may sound too much like a dream.

Some think of this picture of heaven as simply too good to be true. For others it sounds like the answer to a prayer. I remember seeing a picture of a woman with three kids running around the house, she had an infant on her hip, a vacuum cleaner in her other hand, and a house that was a mess. On the TV a news headline said, “The end is near.” And the mother with her arms full could be heard to say, “I sure hope so.” If paradise awaits us, why not rush to get there? Only before you storm the gates of Heaven you may want to remember there's another part to this. Before paradise, Christians believe there is judgement day. The modern church seems to skip over that part, it's so judgemental you know. But it's a solid part of what Christians say they believe. If you're ready to accept the part of the Bible that gives you hope for the grace of Heaven, I don't know how you can dismiss the part of the Bible which teaches, “*Christ Jesus will judge the living and the dead when he appears to set up his Kingdom.*” (2 Tim. 4:1 NLT) Now just imagine what a day that will be. Jesus will stand up to judge all the living and the dead. What a day that will be. And since Jesus will not be skipping over the day of judgement, I'm not going to either. I'd like you to know why that day is important to you, and why you can accept judgement seriously, and even, joyfully. Yes, that's right, joyfully ... After all, we know who will be our judge. He is the one who has come not to condemn but to save. “*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” (John 3:17 NRSV) Please stand and join me as we gather to worship Jesus our Lord and Judge, and pray to Jesus our Savior ...

From the Gospel of John (12:46-48 NLT)

I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the darkness. If anyone hears me and doesn't obey me, I am not his judge—for I have come to save the world and not to judge it. But all who reject me and my message will be judged at the day of judgment by the truth I have spoken.

Reflection

Judged, but not judged. Well, which is it? A newer translation of this passage has Jesus teaching, “*If anyone hears what I am saying and doesn't take it seriously, I don't reject him. I didn't come to reject the world; I came to save the world. But you need to know that whoever puts me off, refusing to take in what I'm saying, is willfully choosing rejection ...*” (From The Message) Jesus teaches that rejection is real, it's just not his part of the deal. You have an invitation to join God, or you can walk away. God will honor your choice of whether or not you will honor him. It's up to you. Please don't make the mistake then of thinking it's not a real choice, with real, and even eternal, consequences. Jesus won't reject you, but will you reject him? Have you rejected him by your choices over the last week? No? Maybe not in obvious ways, but let's ask this way: How have you honored him in the last week?

Too often these days church leaders talk about God's love as if it were an automatic, undeniable, unstoppable force that you're going to receive whether you like it or not. Your choices don't enter into it. Your actions will all be forgiven and forgotten because God is so very loving. Only, that's not what Jesus taught, as you'll see later in the service. Yup, we sing about God's unfailing love, of his amazing grace. Just don't stop there. God can offer you his blessings all he wants, he can give them without measure as you'll hear next week. But ... but you also have the power in your hands to accept his grace or to walk away from it. The choices you make each day will someday become tallied up and the final score will get posted. For a day is coming, we're told over and over in the Bible, when God will blow the final whistle (or horn, or whatever) and then sort out the sides so those who have chosen to follow God can follow him all the way home ... and those who have chosen to do their own thing, or turn their backs on God, or simply ignore God's gracious invitations, will be allowed to continue to wander off into the darkness. Boy, that's a scary prospect.

Throughout history, judgement day has been connected with sights and sounds that are also very scary. There's all that

fire and brimstone, with God on his throne, or St. Peter standing at the pearly gates a bit like a bouncer at a fancy nightclub checking the list to see if you can get in. Most of those images give you no help and certainly no hope for what God has planned. A better image of judgement is this: What would it be like ... can you even imagine ... what would it be like to meet Jesus face to face? I think of that day and shudder. I will stand before someone who knows all that I have done, and left undone, who knows all that I have thought and dreamed about, who has heard all I have said and knows the things I wanted to say but didn't ... but that's not all. I'll be looking into the eyes of someone who I know has loved me and lived for me, and given his life for me. Can you imagine being in that moment? I can, and I imagine it as an overwhelming moment when I would be unable to do anything other than sink to my knees. Now that's judgement: to be with the one who has loved you even though you have disappointed him. That's judgement. Knowing you have not honored Jesus, that your choices have hurt him, that you have in small ways here and there rejected him. There he stands before you. And he reaches out his hands to you, and as you look down at them, because you can't raise your eyes to meet his, you see his hands are pierced all the way through as a sign of his love, which you receive though you do not deserve it. Can you imagine that?

I can only imagine

words and music by mercyme

*I can only imagine what it will be like,
When I walk by your side*

*I can only imagine, what my eyes will see,
When your face is before me*

I can only imagine, I can only imagine

Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel?

Will I dance for you, Jesus, or in awe of you, be still?

Will I stand in your presence, or to my knees will I fall?

Will I sing 'Hallelujah!', will I be able to speak at all?

I can only imagine ...

Intro to the message: The popular Christian song, "I can only imagine" asks what it would be like to be in Christ's presence. Would you jump up and worship him, or would you fall down before him? It sounds like you get to choose between those two. Only, between those two is something else. Between falling down before Jesus and jumping up to worship him is something called judgement. It's something I'm sure you'd prefer to jump over ... Judgement is not a happy thought. It's like going to the dentist. You know it will happen sometime in your life, but you'd rather put it off or not think about it, right? Let me ask you: Do you think of your dentist as an enemy or as a friend? Is he looking for things wrong in your

mouth, ready to punish you with that drill of death? Or is she a kind doctor who is trying to help you be healthy and live a long fulfilling life? I know my dentist is more of a friend than an enemy but sometimes I feel differently about him ... There's another way in which the dentist is like judgement day. You can't really fool a dentist. They know things. I've seen kids who were a bit lax in their regular dental hygiene, who have forgotten to floss more than once or twice since their last visit ... but on the morning of their six month check up, they spend a half an hour brushing and flossing. Of course, you can't

cram for a dental check up. The problems in your mouth build up over time, or they are kept away by the daily choices you make to brush, floss and the rest. You can't fool God either. You don't need to picture God with a drill in his hand, only remember this: cramming for judgement day will not help you. It's not the one choice you make in the final moment that matters so much as the choices you have made all through your life. God watches those pesky little every day choices

you make about how to treat your co-workers, or how well you tell the truth, or whether you honor him with your actions or take his name in vain. Judgement Day is not so much the final score of good and bad deeds as it is the moment you get to unveil your character. Have you become more like Christ? By your choices throughout your life have you developed a heart for God or a mind of your own? Has your attention been placed on God or have you been trying to be the center of attention? Have you been hanging around God or have you drawn close to God? That's going to be what matters.

From the Gospel of Luke (13:23-28 The Message)

Someone asked, "Master, will only a few be saved?" Jesus said, "Whether few or many is none of your business. Put your mind on your life with God. The way to life is vigorous and requires your total attention. A lot of you are going to assume that you'll sit down to God's salvation banquet just because you've been hanging around the neighborhood all your lives. Well, one day you're going to be banging on the door, wanting to get in, but you'll find the door locked and the Master saying, 'Sorry, you're not on my guest list.' You'll protest, 'But we've known you all our lives!' only to be interrupted with his abrupt, 'Your kind of knowing can hardly be called knowing. You don't know the first thing about me.' That's when you'll find yourselves out in the cold, strangers to grace ..."

Back to the message: That's an amazingly hard-hitting story. Jesus says, it's not enough to say you were hanging around in the 'hood. Knowing Jesus was near is not the same as knowing how to draw near to Jesus. When you think about it,

Can you even imagine what it would be like to meet Jesus face to face? I will stand before someone who knows all that I have done ... but that's not all. I'll be looking into the eyes of someone who I know has loved me and lived for me, and given his life for me. Can you imagine being in that moment? I can, and I imagine it as an overwhelming moment ...

what do you think truly matters to God ... What is it that gets you invited into the heavenly feast? Is it:

- ▶ If you are good enough, done enough good deed?
- ▶ If you have been baptized?
- ▶ If you believe the right things about God?
- ▶ If you have had a born again experience?
- ▶ A trick question because God is all-loving and always forgiving ...

It's none of those, though you can find churches and preachers that will swear by any or all of them. What I can see in the Bible is clearly another answer: it comes down to whether or not you know Jesus and whether or not you are following him, the best you can.

But surely, some will ask, don't we all get in free? Isn't salvation free? Skeptics ask me, "*How could you believe in a loving God who would send people to Hell for making mistakes?*" That question mixes up what loving means. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, God doesn't send people to Hell so much as let them wander off there on their own. He loves you enough to let you make your own choices. Even if they are bad ones. At the start of today's service we heard Jesus teach, "*If anyone hears what I am saying and doesn't take it seriously, I don't reject him. But you need to know that whoever puts me off, refusing to take in what I'm saying, is willfully choosing rejection.*" (John 12:46-48) All through this series of messages we've been focussing on how this works. I told you that your beliefs will change your behaviors. And to that I added, your behaviors will determine your destination. It really matters, then, what you believe. You see, what you believe about God will change how you act. For instance, if you believe God automatically welcomes everyone into Heaven, you will have no reason to watch what you do or how you treat others. Who needs any spiritual discipline if all you really need is a "get out of Hell free" card that you can show on judgement day? It would be just as bad to believe that if you do enough good deeds or believe the right things God will welcome you more than other folk. With that belief you'll be all too ready to look down on people who don't have whatever you consider to be the right beliefs or who don't act like their good enough for God, or for you. Christians have made that mistake all too often. You see, your beliefs will change your behaviors, and those behaviors will change your destination. That's why what you believe really matters so much. Your false beliefs can take you far away from God, even if you don't know it.

Take for instance the modern church's biggest challenge. The church likes to talk about God's overwhelming love for us, and his radical acceptance of all people. Church leaders, theologians and bishops all talk about the radical inclusiveness of Jesus. They point to how he welcomed all people. He accepted people just as they are. They then state the church must welcome all people and accept them just as they are. The problem here is that's not what Jesus did at all. He welcomed people, but his first message to all people was a call to be changed, "*The time has come to repent and return to*

God." He welcomed sinners all right, but he then told them to become saints. Talking about radical inclusiveness as if it were a birthright that makes no demands on who you are, leads us all away from knowing the real overwhelming love God has for us. Mr. Rogers may love you just the way you are, but God wants you to make some changes. That's not a message I hear in a lot of mainline churches these days ...

The modern church has forgotten grace may be free but it doesn't come cheap. God freely gives his grace, but there's a cost to it, one he paid with his life. How would you define grace? Grace means undeserved love. Undeserved love. Now don't rush it. It sounds good to talk about the love of God, but

don't rush over the "undeserved" part or you'll miss the rest. Today the church seems to talk about forgiveness as if you had a right to be forgiven. You don't. God doesn't have to forgive you. Does that seem wrong to you? Does it seem like if the all-loving God does not accept you just the way you are

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there's something wrong with him? Well, that's just wrong. When I was a teen, I read this book: *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He knew something about cost, too. He was executed after years in a Nazi concentration camp because of his courage in speaking out during the Second World War. It was because of this book that I gave my life to God and chose to become a pastor ... In his opening words he wrote about what he saw as the biggest evil in the church he knew. I think it's the same evil I see today among our church leaders who want so much to come across as pastoral, loving, inclusive. Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace."

The essence of grace, we suppose, is that our account has been paid in advance, and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. It's the kind of grace we bestow on ourselves. It can be seen in the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipleship, communion without confession ... cheap grace is grace without the cross, without Jesus.

Think of it this way: if there is no judgement, then there is no need for Jesus to be a Savior. What would you need to be saved from?

Judgement has to do with being held accountable. Judgement is not the same thing as punishment. Those words mean different things. That's part of our problem. We've made the two words mean the same thing. Yet we're taught Jesus will judge all people, but that doesn't mean he has come to condemn or reject or punish all people. Only to judge them, that is, to hold people accountable. Now let me explain why you want that to happen. Without accountability, there can be no grace. You can never experience the freedom of grace without being held accountable for what you have done or left

undone. Remember that grace is undeserved love. You have to know why you don't deserve it before you can know it's love. Rushing up to steal forgiveness before you know why you need to be forgiven doesn't work. It hurts you, because without coming clean you keep your shame for all that you have done. And shame, folks, shame is the enemy of grace.

You know how accountability works. You want people to be held accountable. If someone hits your car, you want them to pay to fix it. When a politician makes a promise you want to hold them to it, or if a senator speaks out about family values but gets caught with hookers, or when a congressman is arrested with \$90,000 dollars in marked bills in his freezer at home, you want them held accountable. It make sense. It's a matter of justice. Closer to home, you expect to hold the people you know accountable, like a husband who has an affair or a wife who maxes out credit card after credit card. You want them to be held accountable don't you? Or what about a parent who drinks and a teen who smokes pot? What about someone who lies about you? You expect to hold those people accountable for their actions. That's a universal desire, except when it comes to you personally. Few of us hope to be held accountable ourselves. Instead, we'd like to fly along under the radar and slide by undetected. Be honest: being held accountable for your own actions is not as high on your to do list as holding others accountable.

Emmet Tuttle was an old Mainer I knew back in my church downeast. The story goes that in our little town, Emmet had been picked up for being drunk in public. He came before the judge, a fellow he had known since grade school, and since grade school they had not gotten along very well. When Emmet was found guilty and fined \$10 it came as no surprise to him. He asked the judge for a receipt. *"What don't you trust me, Emmet?"* the judge asked. *"Well judge,"* Emmet replied, *"We're both getting older and sooner or later we're going to meet St. Peter at the pearly gates. Peter will ask me if I've ever been drunk, and I'm going to say yes sir I was, and he's going to ask if I've ever been arrested, and I'll have to say I was. He'll ask me if I ever went to court and I'll have to say yes sir, and he'll ask me if I was ever fined, and I'll have to say yes I was. When he asks me if I ever paid my fine and I don't have that receipt, then judge, they'll be looking all over hell for you to ask if I paid my fine."*

We don't want to be held accountable so much as we want everyone else held accountable. But without accountability there's no grace. If you don't allow yourself to be accountable you become, what the Bible lesson called, a stranger to grace. Know what that feels like? That describes shame. And I'm sure you've felt ashamed before. How about a show of hands on that one ... only the people without their hands up may be feeling a bit ashamed of doing so, you know, admitting in public, they've been ashamed ... Well, when you feel shame, what's your first response? You want to hide. You don't want anyone to know. Even God? Except when it comes to God, it's not like you can hide anything from him. Why try? On the other hand, if you allow yourself to be held accountable for your actions, you can also experience something else: the freedom of forgiveness. Once you remember God's love is

undeserved, you will know how sweet it is God offers to forgive you. On the other hand, expect that you deserve to be forgiven and you'll feel entitled to take forgiveness from God. Folks, that doesn't work. Forgiveness is his gift, and you can only receive it when you know you don't deserve it.

So the big question comes up again: What difference does this make to me? Well accountability is not a one time shot that happens on judgement day, and neither is the freedom you can feel when someone forgives you. When you are willing to be accountable, when you ask for someone else to forgive you, then, and only then, can you experience true freedom from shame. How often have you done that?

So that gives you a couple of challenges for the week ahead. The first challenge is this: choose one place in your life where you have been hiding something away, something you feel ashamed about. I know it won't be easy, but allow someone else to hold you accountable for what you have been hiding. That may mean you will need to make things up to someone else. That may mean you will have to bear responsibility when it would be easier, you think, to hope no one ever finds out. But the weight of shame becomes harder and harder to carry over time. It's time to be free of it. Shame kills your spirit. So even if it means taking responsibility, getting rid of the shame will bring you closer to God and may make real reconciliation possible with someone else. More than that, when you allow yourself to be held accountable there's a real possibility someone will forgive you. That's something you'll never experience so long as you remain a stranger from grace.

Your second challenge is to live in a more God-honoring way this week. Since your daily decisions are what build your character, and since they are what God will look at on judgement day, it's time to start paying more attention to what you're doing. You can't simply expect God will forgive and forget everything just because you've heard about Jesus. It's not knowing about Jesus that matters, it's knowing him for yourself. Do you trust Jesus enough to follow his lead? Do you trust him enough to accept his judgements on how you are living your life, on how you act, on how you talk to others, on what you watch or what you drink, on whether you live with sexual integrity, on how you use your money? Do you trust Jesus enough not to demand his forgiveness or expect it, but to ask for it, day by day? To help you with this I've enclosed a card in the bulletins you can use each day. On one side is a prayer of confession you can use as a way to remember you don't get grace because you deserve it, only because you ask for it. As the Bible teaches, *"If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. On the other hand, if we admit our sins, he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we've never sinned, we out-and-out contradict God—make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God."* (1 John 1:8-10 The Message) It's time to be honest about our need for God's help. Then, on the other side, there's a way to look back over your day and ask if you have been living in a way that honors God. Use this each day, and then in the final hour, there won't be any surprises. In that final hour you'll know how much you need God's grace, and how freely he's willing to give it to those who do not reject him ...