

"The People's Court"

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Matthew 25:31-46

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Anybody remember the TV show from the 80s *The People's Court* with Judge Wapner? Or maybe the similar show that is still on today, *Judge Judy*? Through the years there have been a number of these courtroom "reality" shows where people agree to have their case heard by one of these television judges. And these shows have all been very popular. *Judge Judy* has been on the air for 16 years and *The People's Court* has been running now for over 30 years.

The reason these shows are so popular, I think, is that as humans we have a sense of what's fair and when someone is treated unfairly, we want to see it made right. When someone mistreats another person we want it made right. When someone commits a crime, we want the criminal punished. What we want is justice.

Somehow, though, when it comes to ourselves we don't want that same justice. We don't want someone judging us. Even though we want to judge others by their actions, we want to be judged by our intentions, or better yet, we don't want to be judged at all. Today you hear lots of people saying, "don't judge me." In other words, they're saying, "what I'm doing with my life is probably wrong but I'm not going to change and I don't want to feel guilty about it."

I suspect that more than a few of us get a little uncomfortable with the phrase in the Apostles' Creed that says, "from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." But this morning we'll see that as Christians, as people who are chosen by God and followers of Christ, the idea

that Jesus is coming to judge us should be our greatest hope, not our greatest fear.

Most of us don't use the word "thence" very much these days. It seems a little outdated and so its meaning may be a little fuzzy. In one sense, it refers to a place - in particular the place just mentioned in the Creed, which we looked at last week. Jesus ascended to heaven, to the right hand of the Father, where he is seated, serving as prophet, priest and king. So it's from that place that Jesus will return to earth. But it can also mean something like "from a particular time" or "from certain circumstances." I think it's helpful as we study the word "thence" in the Creed that we remember all three of those definitions. The judgment of Jesus is not just at a particular time in the future; He is the judge right now.

In our passage last week from Acts, the angels told the disciples that Jesus would return the same way they saw him go. In our first reading today Jesus says that we "will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." In Revelation 1:7 we read, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him."

These are only two examples but idea that Jesus is going to return to earth, not as a helpless baby but as the king and judge of the world, is all through the New Testament. The early Christians expected Jesus to return very soon. They

thought it could happen at any time. The truth is, two thousand years later, Jesus could still return any time. We don't know when and we're not supposed to try to figure it out. We're supposed to be ready whenever he comes.

Our reading from Matthew 25 comes right after two parables that Jesus tells about being ready for his return. The first, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, tells of ten virgins waiting to welcome the groom coming to get the bride for the wedding. Five of them are wise and brought extra oil for their lamps while the other five were foolish and weren't prepared. They had to go buy more oil and while they were gone the groom arrived and they were locked out of the wedding banquet. Jesus says, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." The Creed says he shall come. Jesus is coming and we need to be ready.

The next parable is the Parable of the Talents and it illustrates that Jesus shall come to judge. In this parable, a wealthy man is going on a long journey and he puts three of his servants in charge of some very large sums of money. The first two invest the money and earn a nice profit. The third one, though, is afraid and hides the money in the ground. The master, when he returns, judges each man on what he has done with what was given to him. Those who did well are praised. The master says, "well done good and faithful servant." But the one who was not faithful with what he was given is condemned.

Each of us will be judged on how faithful we've been with what God has given us. In John 12, Jesus says, "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world

but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day." We have been given God's Word. And we'll be judged according to what we've done with it.

The third thing I want you to understand from this line of the Apostles' Creed is that Jesus shall come to judge. In other words, you and I don't get to be the judge of people. Sometimes as Christians we can feel so certain that we know what a person's thinking or feeling. We look at their actions and pass judgment on them. We may even say we know whether that person is going to heaven. But the Bible is clear that God is the one who makes those decisions, not us.

In 1 Samuel 24, King Saul is trying to find David and kill him. David and his followers are hiding in a cave. Saul comes into the cave but he can't see David so some of his men encourage him to kill Saul. Instead, David sneaks over and cuts the corner off of Saul's robe. When Saul leaves the cave David stops him and shows him the fabric that he had cut off, saying the he could have killed him right then. But David says, "May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you." What David is saying is that he is not willing to act as the judge against Saul. That's God's job.

The fourth thing we need to know is that Jesus is coming to judge the *quick and the dead*. The word quick is an old way of saying living. It doesn't mean that Jesus is going to judge fast and slow people. What we're saying is that we believe Jesus will come to judge both the living and the dead. Many preachers and scholars have

interpreted this over the years to mean that when Jesus returns he will judge those who are still alive at the time, and those who have already died, who will be raised for the judgment.

I think the Creed certainly means that but I think it means more than that. Verse 32 of our reading says that Jesus "will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." This passage has nothing to do with sheep and goats, by the way. In ancient Israel, shepherds frequently tended sheep and goats together during the day, but at night they were separated. The sheep slept outside but the goats, who needed to be kept warm, were kept in a stable of some sort. The point that Matthew wants us to know is that Jesus is able to know which people are the "blessed" and which are the "cursed." From our perspective we can't tell. But from God's perspective, He can identify His own without any trouble.

What this means is that the identification is not physical but spiritual. Jesus says in verse 46 that the ones who don't follow Him "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." You could say that Jesus is identifying one group as the "living" and the other as the "dead."

That brings us to the final thing we need to remember about the Judgment of God, which is that judgment is not the same as condemnation or punishment. Listen again to verse 34: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" In John 5 Jesus tells us that a time "is coming when all who are in the tombs will

hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."

So what is it that Jesus expects us to do? Since we know that we are forgiven for our sins, what is the basis of his judgment? Beginning in verse 35 Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,^[f] you did it to me.' "

Jesus judges us on how we treat each other, especially those that the world does not treat so well. William Barclay says, "the supreme standard of judgment is reaction to human

need. He who can see human need...without doing anything about it stands condemned." If we are truly saved, if we have experienced the love of Christ in our life, each one of us should be trying to find ways to serve other people, especially other believers. As the Church, we are the hands and feet of Jesus here on earth. I think Jesus is saying, "if you love Me then you will love My people and you will show that love during their time of need. That's what I will judge you on."

In our judicial system the only people who need to be afraid of a judge are people who have done something wrong. For those who have been harmed, the judge is the person who can set things right. The *hope* of Christians is that Jesus is coming to make everything right. For his followers, when he comes there will be no more pain or suffering or injustice. As people who have committed our lives to following Christ, we actually look forward to Jesus coming back and judging the world. Someone once asked John Wesley what he would do if he knew Jesus was coming back tomorrow. Wesley thought for a moment and then said, "I don't think that I should change any of my plans." John Wesley lived every day in a way that he would welcome the judgment of Jesus. That's how each of us should live every day as well.

The New Testament ends with these words: "He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" That's our hope as well, that Jesus would surely come soon and make all things right and that we would hear him say, "well done good and faithful servant."

Amen.