

Judgment:
A Theological Position Statement

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Introduction

In this paper I will explain my understanding of the final judgment of human beings at the end of human history. It is important to understand that although we don't know every detail about the final judgment, we do have the assurance that God is righteous and fair in his judgment (Rom 2:5; 3:4). People will not be indiscriminately judged by a God without standards, but will be judged according to principles and laws that have been clearly established and made known to everyone (Rom 2:15). The fact that there will certainly be a judgment at the end of time serves as a reminder and warning to us that we as human beings are responsible for the life that we choose to live (Acts 24:15-16; 2 Peter 3:7,11). Because one day there will be a 'reckoning' of everything humans have done, we are accountable for our actions. Because the God who created this universe is a just God (Psa 89:14; 98:9; Rev 15:3-4), every action will invoke just consequences (Gal 6:7).

Who Will Judge?

Although the Bible makes a few statements regarding the fact that God, whom we address as our Father, will be the judge of the universe at the end of this age (1 Pet 1:17), the most distinctive and prevailing disclosure is that the Lord Jesus Christ will be the one actually doing the judging. Therefore, in Acts 17:31, the Apostle Paul argues that the God who created this world "has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."¹ In preaching a sermon to those in Athens who were unfamiliar with who the true God was, Paul revealed that God's judgment would be through Jesus Christ. Because the Bible reveals the fact that there is unity in the triune God, even as Jesus Christ judges, it is God himself performing the

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judgment. Thus the Bible declares that God the Father “has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22) and that Jesus Christ “is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42).

In emphasizing the fact that it will be the resurrected God-man who does the judging, God has further revealed that his judgment is righteous and just; it is the incarnated God that is judging, not a God who is far removed from human beings. Therefore John 5:27 says that the Father “has given [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”

When Will Judgment Be and Who Will Be Judged?

The Bible reveals that the final judgment will be when Christ returns at the end of this present age (Matt 13:40), immediately after the resurrection of all humans, the just and the unjust (John 5:29; Acts 24:15).

The Bible emphasizes the fact that every human being that has ever lived will be judged, both those living at the time of Christ’s return and those who have already died (Acts 10:42). The Bible not only mentions the fact that every individual who has died will be raised in order to be judged (John 5:28-29), but it also speaks of coming judgment for “all the nations” (Matt 25:32). In enumerating who will be judged, Paul mentions both those who have done good deeds and those who have done evil (John 5:29), including Jews and Gentiles (Rom 2:6-9). In other words, no individual person is exempt from this final judgment that will take place.

Contrary to what some may think, this judgment even extends to Christians. In quoting numerous passages from the Old Testament (cf. Psa 135:14), Hebrews 10:30 says, “The Lord will judge his people” and Paul says that “all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor 5:10; cf. Rom 14:10). When Paul uses the phrase “all of us” in his letter to the

church at Corinth, surely he was telling them that we as Christians must give account of our lives to God at that final judgment. (Cf. also Jam 3:1; 1 Pet 4:17). However, as will be shown, there is no reason for Christians to be fearful of this judgment. The outcome of this judgment for us is sure since there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1) and we have already been declared righteous through faith in Christ (Rom 3:22) and reconciled to God by his blood (Rom 5:9; Eph 2:13).

The Standard for Judgment

The main criteria by which people will be judged is whether or not they have believed in Christ Jesus and thus entered into union with him. In making this point absolutely clear, Jesus says in John 5:24, “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.” Then again in John 3:36 that “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.” (Cf. also Rom 8:1). Those who believe in Christ will be assigned to “be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess 4:17). Those who have rejected the good news of the gospel of Christ will be condemned to be eternally “separated from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:9).

If people are saved from condemnation by faith in Christ and will be judged on the basis of whether or not they have this faith, why does the Bible so consistently talk about a person being judged by the works they have done? For instance, Revelation 20:12 says, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. . . . And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.” (Cf. also Matt 16:27; Rom 2:6; Rev 22:12). This mention of works seems to be due to the fact that there is an intimate connection between faith and works; a person's deeds reveal whether they have true faith. This is clearly

stated in James 2:18: “I by my works will show you my faith.” (Cf. also Jam 2:26; Matt 7:21; 2 Cor 5:10; Gal 5:6). As John Calvin has so appropriately said, “It is ... faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”²

However, what about those people who have never heard the good news of Christ and thus did not have a chance to believe in him? Will they also be condemned? Although God has chosen not to reveal every detail of judgment regarding this category of people, the Bible seems to indicate that the standard for judgment for them will not be as precise, but more subjective, according to God’s intimate knowledge of each person’s heart and motives (1 Cor 4:5; Heb 4:13; Rev 2:3). Paul tells us in the book of Romans that God has revealed his divine nature to people through his creation (Rom 1:20) and that people have the very principles of God’s requirements written on their hearts and consciences (Rom 2:15). So when people choose to do wickedness, for which their conscience condemns them, they have disobeyed the part of the ‘gospel’ that was revealed to them. These people are “without excuse” because “they knew God” in some degree, yet chose not to “honor him as God” (Rom 1:20-21). Those practicing such wickedness will justifiably be subject to the wrath of God on that judgment day (Rom 1:18). However, those who “do instinctively what [God’s] law requires” (Rom 2:14) will in some sense “be justified” (v. 13) and will perhaps be ‘excused’ from God’s wrathful judgment on that day (v. 15). We do not preach this as an excuse for people not to believe in Christ since those who have heard the gospel are no longer in the category of those who have never heard, but will be one that has either received or rejected the good news of Christ. It is worthwhile pointing out once more that the Creator is a just God and will execute judgment fairly and righteously; those who live righteously according to their knowledge will have nothing to fear on the Day of Judgment.

² *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote*, Sixth Session, on Canon 11; in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. H. Beveridge, III, 152; as quoted in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979) 261.

Jesus also seems to indicate that those who have greater understanding and revelation of God's truth have a correspondingly greater responsibility to be faithful to what they know. He says in Luke 12:47-48, "That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." As an example of this relative amount of responsibility, Jesus speaks to several cities that refused to repent after seeing his miracles and hearing his message. He warned them that in the final judgment they would receive a more severe punishment than would the wicked city of Sodom (Matt 11:20-24).

Rewards

If the eternal destiny of each Christian has already been determined based on their faith in Christ, why should there be a judgment for Christians on that last day? One reason would be to determine if the person in question was in fact a true Christian as opposed to a pretender (Matt 7:21-24). Another reason is that the Bible indicates there will be a variation of the rewards received by God's people on the Day of Judgment. In Luke 19:12-27, the Lord Jesus told a parable concerning the Kingdom of God, which was likened to a nobleman who went into a distant land and left differing amounts of money with his stewards. When he returned he gave to each one a reward corresponding to their diligence in handling the amount with which they had been entrusted. Then Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 that as Christians we are co-working with God on his spiritual building, which has the foundation of Jesus Christ. On the Judgment Day "fire will test what sort of work each has done" (v. 13). Based on what kind of material we use in this building, whether spiritual or earthly, we will either be rewarded or will

“suffer loss” and “be saved, but only as through fire” (v. 15). Thus, based on the quality of their Christian life, some believers will receive a reward and others will not. (Cf. also Matt 5:12; 25:23; Luke 6:35; Mark 9:41).

The motivation in looking forward to a reward on that day is surely not one of competition with others, nor is it for a selfish or personal gain. A selfish desire for reward is itself a type of covetousness, a sin that is surely displeasing to the Lord. Hebrews 11:6 identifies the fact that our motive should be to try to please the Lord, the byproduct of which is to be rewarded by him. Time and again the Bible mentions that our aim and desire is to live a life pleasing to the Lord. As we realize that God “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into [his] kingdom”, has forgiven our sins, and “has enabled [us] to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light,” we can’t help but “giving thanks” to him and desiring to “lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” (Col 1:10-14). This should be the proper motivation in our Christian lives, even concerning the rewards that he will so graciously give to us. Notice the attitude taught by the Lord Jesus in Luke 17:10, “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

Conclusion

The Day of Judgment will reveal each person’s eternal destiny based on their relationship with Jesus Christ. That Day is inescapable and underscores the accountability that we each have for the way we choose to live our lives. As Christians, knowing about this final reckoning should motivate us to share the good news of Christ with others. God desires all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:3-4) and they will not have a chance to enter into a relationship of faith unless they hear the gospel (Rom 10:13-14). This should also cause us to strive to live a life pleasing to Lord (1

Thess 4:1; 2 Tim 2:4; Heb 11:5), since we know that on that Day there will be rewards given, based on what we have done in this life.