

Advent 3: Judge Nothing before the Appointed Time

Series: Advent 2023

Texts: Isaiah 11.1-9; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 11.2-15

Date: 17 December, 2023, Advent 3

Location: St George's Battery Point

5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Judge not, lest ye be judged.

If there is one line from the Bible our culture loves, it's this. Something right about this - we all hate self-righteous people who look down from their tower of moral superiority casting judgement upon those who don't meet their impossible standards. We're all wary of Pharisees. Things can get a little muddy though. We can be like the Sunday school teacher who did a lesson on Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

You remember the one.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. The Pharisee stood there and prayed: "God I thank you that I'm not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like that tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all that I get."

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus finished the story by saying, "It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee who went home in the right with God."

At the end of the lesson, the Sunday School teacher said, "Now kids, let's all thank God that we're not like the Pharisee."

Jesus highlights the problem with another parable - don't look at the speck in your brother's eye and miss the log in your own eye. We don't like others judging us, but it's all too easy to judge others. We're good at seeing specks and missing our own logs. And so "judge not" sounds like excellent advice.

But why are we talking about not judging 1 week out from Christmas? We're in Advent, that season where we look back to Jesus first coming in humility and forward to his coming again in glory - when he will *judge* the living and the dead.

Our temptation can be to think that God is like us. We're liable to miss the log in our for the speck in someone else's eye, so don't judge. And we think God must be like that too, never judging, always letting things slide, because he knows his own failings.

But this is a grave misunderstanding. God is most definitely not like us at this point. He is holy, pure, perfect, righteous and good. Our second reading, 1 Corinthians 4.5 unfolds for us the underlying logic of why we are not to judge: we don't judge *because Christ will judge*.

Sometimes people can be very sceptical of the idea of the day of judgement, saying that if you believe that it will make you a very judgmental person. But Paul's argument here is that believing in the day of judgement actually does exactly the opposite.

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We don't judge, not because judgement itself is bad, but because *our* judgments are imperfect and fallible. We don't have the whole picture. Our own interests and biases are likely to skew how we see things. And it's not within our power to peer into people's souls. But when Christ returns in glory he will judge the living and the dead. His judgement will be utterly true and right and good, because he sees things as they really are.

He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.

The challenge for all of us is that what is now secret will be made known, what has been kept in the dark will be exposed. We all will one day stand before the judgement seat of Christ. We would do well to let that sink in.

But this fact need not be cause for dread. There is great comfort in the gospel of Christ. For those in Christ, who trust in him the one who has been judged in our place, the promise of God is that we will stand because the Lord will make us stand. (Romans 14.4)

There is no condemnation for those in Christ. (Rom 8.1)

The reality of the day of judgement can make a real difference in the way we live.

First, the day of judgement is a source of hope. For those who suffer grave injustice, violence and devastation. For those who have seen loved ones slain. For children whose homes and schools and hospitals have been bombed. For those for whom there will likely be no justice in this life, the fact that one day Christ will judge and bring justice and peace is a day of hope. It's that vision of Isaiah that we long for:

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ...

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
 with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
 He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
 with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.¹

And for the leaders of nations, this is a reminder that on that day they will have to give an account for the decisions they have made. It's why we pray during the season of Advent the most ancient Christians prayer, the prayer with which the Bible closes: Come Lord Jesus, Come!

Second, the day of judgement is a healing word for our current time, where on the one hand we don't want anyone to judge us personally, and on the other we're told we should judge people for transgressing all sorts of moral boundaries, some of which seem to be moving like shifting sands. What is the twitter pile on if not the judgement of the masses? This is the great paradox of judgement. We want justice and so need judgement. And yet we don't want it for me, thank you very much. That cuts across my freedom, to live my life my way, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone. The great danger of course with judgement is that we will judge others and give ourselves a free pass. We can even signal our own virtue by vocally judging others.

In December 2013, as she boarded a plane from Heathrow to Cape Town, PR woman Justine Sacco tweeted to her 170 Twitter followers: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get Aids. Just kidding. I'm white!" The joke was intended to mock her own bubble of privilege, but while she slept on the plane Twitter took control of her life and dismantled it. She became the worldwide number one trending topic that night: "We are about to watch this Justine Sacco bitch get fired, in real time, before she even knows she's being fired", and so on, for a total of 100,000 tweets.² When she got off the plane 11 hours later she had indeed lost her job.

This command to "*Judge nothing before the appointed time*", reminds us that we would do well to remember the imperfectness of our own judgments. This is in fact why the Bible says that God ordains judicial authority. Because in private hands it can easily spill over into revenge. The public nature of the law court is to see that what measure of justice that is humanly possible is done and seen to be done justly and fairly. And yet these verses remind us that even the best of human justice is imperfect and will one day give way to the perfect justice of God.

Third, this text makes a huge difference in how we see ourselves, our self talk.

1 Cor 4.3:

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

¹ Isaiah 9.5-6, 11.4-5

² <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/dec/20/social-media-twitter-online-shame>

There is great freedom in having only the Lord as my judge. We do not need to be a slave to the opinions of others. We can be free from the pressure to perform for the approval of others, free from fear of how others will respond. We're set free to live for the praise of God's glory. We can be free to not react to others, free to not play the games and unhealthy ways of interacting that others would draw us into. Rather we can move towards others with purpose, with Scripture as our guide. What's more, we're set free from our own internal voices of self doubt and condemnation - no, it is *The Lord who judges me*.

Fourth, this text can shape how we treat others. One way to look at judgement is as discernment. We can discern the truth, using the gifts God has given us, being wise and not naive and gullible, but also recognising our judgments are provisional, there may always be more to the story. Humility is a key virtue. But also we can make judgments and act upon them, without being judgmental. We and everyone else all stand equal before the judgement seat of Christ. We can only stand because of his grace, not anything we bring. Therefore we have no reason to lord it over others, but can move towards them in grace. We can treat others as bearers of God's own image.

In a judgmental culture, the promise of the coming perfect judgement of Christ offers a breath of freedom and life. That day need not be something we fear because we can rest in the forgiveness he has purchased for us on the cross. As we look for that day when Christ will bring to light what is hidden in darkness, his invitation is for us not to judge others, but prepare for his coming by turning our hearts to the wisdom of the righteous. His promise is peace for those who trust in reconciling death.

Collect for Advent 3

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Collect for Advent

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came among us in great humility, that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.