

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul has not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy, one of his fellow missionaries, who brings back a report about how the Thessalonians are doing and what issues they are facing. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sends this letter. In the first section of this letter, Paul reminds them of the gospel and of his love for them, and he defends himself against his critics' accusations and slander. In the section we are currently in, Paul transitions to instructions about how to live as a Christian. He mainly focuses on three areas of life: sex, work, and death. We have already looked at God's vision for our sexuality and our work, and last week we looked at death, Jesus' return, and the Christian hope. This week we'll look at the final judgment:

***1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11** - Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who **have fallen asleep**. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with **these words**. ^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 5:1** Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and **children of the day**. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our **Lord Jesus Christ**. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether*

we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

In the beginning of chapter 5, Paul references the day of the Lord, which will come like a thief in the night, bringing destruction on those who are not prepared. The day of the Lord is a common expression in the Bible for the day at the end of time when God will judge the world. On that day, we will all stand before God and be judged for how we have lived our lives.

***Hebrews 9:27-28** - Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

The writer of Hebrews tells us that we are all destined to die once and face judgment, and that Jesus will return to save those who are waiting for Him. **Now, let's be honest: judgment is not a terribly popular topic.** It is not something that is preached on often in American churches that would rather talk about how the Bible will improve your marriage and bank account or about social justice issues. But there is no getting around the fact that the Bible, including Jesus and Paul, talk often of the day of the Lord and the reality of a final judgment. And so, if there is going to be a final judgment, an evaluation of how you lived your life, then should we not consider what Jesus and the Bible have to say about it? After all, **think about when you took a class. When a test was coming up, what was the key question? What is going to be on the test, so that I don't waste my time on that which does not matter? I don't want you to waste your life on what does not matter.** If there is going to be a judgment, an evaluation of your life, on what will you be tested, so to speak?

My approach this morning in discussing what the Bible has to say about judgment will be to expose four misconceptions about judgment, and then to talk about what you will be judged on and what the rewards will be:

1) Judgment is a bad thing

As I said, judgment is not a popular topic, and is actually an embarrassing thing for many American Christians. But in the Bible, believe it or not, judgment is something to be celebrated:

Psalm 98:4-9 - Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; ⁵ make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, ⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn-- shout for joy before the LORD, the King. ⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. ⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; ⁹ let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Sing and dance because he comes to judge the earth! What does that mean? What are we missing that would cause the Psalmist to celebrate the coming judgment?

As NT Wright put in his book *Surprised by Hope*: “There will be a judgment where God will set the world right once and for all. For most people, judgment is a good thing. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.”

Not only is it good news that God will judge, it is good news that Jesus will be the judge, the man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, who loved sinners and died for them.

John 5:22-29 - Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. ²⁴ "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. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

This first misconception is closely related to the second misconception:

2) Believing in a judging God will cause his followers to be judgmental people

Certainly some think that the followers of a judging God will necessarily be judgmental themselves. But this should not be the case. The best explanation why this is wrong comes from Miroslav Volf, a Yale theologian and Croatian who lived through the violence in the Balkans, who wrote this in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*: *“If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God... My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many in the West... But it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence (results from the belief in) God’s refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die... [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.”*

For those who are used to oppression and suffering, a God of judgment is a thing to be celebrated. And as Volf said, believing in a God who will judge and put a final end to violence means that we do not need to get the sword and kill our enemies. We can love, forgive, and trust God to act in justice. This is a common theme in Paul’s writings:

Romans 12:17-21 - *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.* ¹⁸ *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* ¹⁹ *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for **it is** written: **"It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"** says the Lord.* ²⁰ *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

If there is no God, then justice is up to you. If people can steal and kill and rape and cheat and lie and get away with it in the end, then we must put them in their place. But if God will sort it out in the end, then we can trust Him to judge. Christians who believe in a God who will judge in the end should be the most loving people.

The third misconception is this:

3) We will only be judged on the basis of our works

Some mistakenly believe that all God is going to do is just weigh our good deeds and bad deeds, and that unless you did something really bad, you’ll go to heaven.

That ultimately judgment is about your spiritual resume, so to speak. To them, Jesus says this:

Matthew 7:21-23 - *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*

On that day, many good, religious people will be shocked to find that Jesus never knew them, that despite their good works, they did not know the Judge. Do you know Him? More importantly, does He know you? This salvation has nothing to do with your resume, but everything to do with whether or not you have repented of your sins and turned to faith in Christ, trusting Him for your salvation.

Romans 3:20-26 - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

John 3:36 - *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

No one will be saved on the basis of his or her resume. We will be saved on the basis of our response to Jesus and his offer of salvation from our sins.

This is why Paul can write in **1 Thessalonians 5:9-11**: *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

And for those in Jesus, there is no condemnation:

Romans 8:1 - *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

What does this mean? Repent. Turn to faith in Jesus and you will pass the final test.

The fourth misconception is:

4) We will only be judged on the basis of our faith in Jesus

The last misconception is that all that matters when it comes to judgment is whether or not you know him. You prayed a prayer of salvation; after that who cares how you lived. But that is not true.

2 Corinthians 5:10 - *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

Christ is the judge, and we will be judged based on what we have done.

On what will we be judged?

So if we are going to be judged on what we have done, what does that mean? Let me share four examples of what we will be judged on that are given in Scripture:

1) Whether we lived for Jesus or ourselves - How we have “built” our lives

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 - *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

According to this passage, some will be saved because Jesus knows them, but all that they have spent their life doing will be burned up in the end. How you build

your life will be judged. The good news is that every little thing you do for the Lord matters.

2) What we have done with the knowledge we had

We also see that judgment is based to some extent on knowledge. In Luke 12, Jesus tells a parable of a faithful and wise manager whom the master puts in charge.

Luke 12:47-48 - *"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. ⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

You will also be judged on the basis of what you know and what you did with that knowledge. In Romans 1, Paul also hints at that in discussing those who live under the Law and those who do not know the Law.

3) What you did with the resources God gave you.

Matthew 25:14-30 - *"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and **hid his master's money**. ¹⁹ "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' ²¹ "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and **share your master's happiness!**' ²² "The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' ²³ "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' ²⁴ "Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have **not scattered seed**. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' ²⁶ "His master replied, 'You wicked,*

lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it **back with interest.** ²⁸ "Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

How did you use the resources he entrusted to you? Selfishly, or for the work of His kingdom?

4) How you treated the least of these:

Matthew 25:31-46 - "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since **the creation of the world.** ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and **go to visit you?**' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did **not look after me.**' ⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' ⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' ⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Jesus' point is that we will be judged on the basis of how we treated the "least of these."

You will be judged. But what will be the reward? What is "treasure in heaven"?

Matthew 6:19-21 - "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What's the point of reward? We have God, and if Hell is so awful, who cares about rewards – just give me heaven! Or, God is enough reward – who needs anything else? So what does the Bible mean when it talks about reward? I don't know for sure, but allow me to speculate.

I would encourage you not to think about the concept of heavenly reward as getting a bigger mansion, or more jewels in your crown, or a house closer to the throne. Think of reward in another way: It's like all the hard work you put into your golf game so that you can receive the reward of being able to go out there and hit the ball straight and long. All the hard work you put into your marriage or friendship so that one day you really enjoy the other person. It's like learning another language so that you can read the great poets and philosopher in their own language. Or working at piano so that the reward is your ability to play freely and beautifully. **These are all example of rewards that are organically connected to the activity.** The reward of giving yourself to the service of God, delighting yourself in Him, is that one day you will receive the reward of that sacrifice and dedication, and it will make the sacrifice seem like nothing in comparison.

Or think of it another way – If heaven were a **basketball game**, the greatest reward would go to those who gave themselves fully to learning the game of basketball, for they would be able to most fully enjoy it and play most skillfully and have the most to contribute. What if heaven were an **orchestra**? Those who dedicated themselves to the instrument would enjoy it the most. The reward goes to those who worked to prepare themselves for what was to come. **But heaven is neither a basketball game nor an orchestra; heaven is love. It is service to God and service to each other. It is loving God and loving neighbor with all your heart and being loved perfectly in return. It is reigning over the world, playing a part in the recreation of the world.** The ones who will receive their reward in full will be those who gave themselves fully to that end on earth. Those who dedicated their skills

and talents to the service of God will see those talents enhanced and ennobled and given back to them to be exercised to His glory. Your striving for holiness will be rewarded in the holy new heavens and new earth, because you will be best prepared to live in that place.

This is why Paul says:

1 Thessalonians 5:1:5-11 - You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

There will be a judgment day, a final test. We will all be judged. Let us prepare each other for that day. Remember the end of Schindler's List, where Oskar Schindler, looking out at the sea of people he has saved, breaks down as he realizes that he could have done more? He is overwhelmed by the money he wasted, the car, the gold pin, the things that could have been sold in order to purchase the freedom of more Jews. While the regret may not be there in heaven, it is worth reflecting on that scene in the light of judgment day. On that day we will realize what really matters, and those who gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord will be rewarded, while those who wasted their life on things that did not matter will miss out on greater joy and reward.

Remember Paul in *1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 - For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

On that day we will see all the people who we influenced towards God, and they will be our glory and joy. Just like Schindler seeing all the people who were there because of him and wishing he had done more, we will likely glory in those who are there in part because of our lives. Live in the light of that day. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord so that your reward will be great on that day.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.