

LIFE TOGETHER SERIES
#6 - "The Judgement of Jesus"

Matthew 21:12-17

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What a day! What an unbelievable, roller coaster ride of day it must have been for the disciples and others who followed Jesus into the great City of Jerusalem.

There were the crowds lining the entry way—shouting, laughing and daring to hope that perhaps, their long awaited Messiah had come. There were the frowning Pharisees and the other religious leaders, silently fuming over the amazing popularity of this peasant preacher. And there, in the background, were the wary Romans soldiers—on high alert for any sign of insurrection. It was a parade unlike any other—a giant moving party that wound its way through the city streets.

But this was more than merely a staged entry—designed to whip up the crowds and rattle the cages of the religious leaders. No, Jesus had a destination in mind...the destination of the Temple—the very epicenter of Jewish life. It was, of course, the Temple that gave the Jewish people their identity. It was the Temple that reminded them of who they were. It was the Temple and its use of law, tradition and ritual that held them together like glue.

So it was not by accident that Jesus chose to make his first stop at the Temple. It was by strategic design. In his dramatic choice to overturn the tables of the vendors and those who sold sacrifices, Jesus was making a statement—a bold and prophetic statement that challenged all that the Temple had come to represent and all that it failed to fulfill.

Quoting the words of the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus declared, **"It is written. My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers."**

His message could not have been more clear. Jesus was indicting the Temple establishment for perverting the true purpose of the Temple. While it was intended to be a place of honoring God through prayer and worship, it had become a place that was used to primarily to make a profit for the benefit of those who were a part of the establishment. To be sure, they carried on as if it was their purpose to honor God, but, in reality, it simply wasn't true.

In his choice to overturn tables and create what must have been complete chaos, Jesus was, in effect, exposing their pretense and their posturing. He was making public their secret intention to work the system for their own benefit.

We remember that it was just two or three years ago there was a movement generated by a group who chose to "Occupy Wall Street" in an effort to expose the greed and the corruption that existed within some of the financial dealings taking place. They were, of

course, very vocal and very public in their demonstration—seeking to interrupt business as usual.

In its own way, Jesus' bold prophetic act in the Temple courtyard might be described as his attempt to "Occupy" the Temple and to call public attention to the greed, self-centeredness and corruption that was flourishing behind its beautiful and impressive walls.

This is, of course, a side of Jesus that we don't see very often in the gospel accounts. There is nothing here that would portray Jesus as meek or mild, or even as even tempered. This is a picture of an angry Jesus, a Jesus who was so angry that he chose to oppose and obstruct, in symbolic fashion, all that the Temple had come to stand for...

"My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves."

So, the question is, "what do we do with the Jesus that Matthew describes—the Jesus that overturns tables, the Jesus that shouts his protest, the Jesus that levels his judgment against the Temple establishment and all that it stands for?"

More often than not, I suspect, we do very little with this picture or this impression of Jesus. After all, it is much easier and certainly less troubling to turn our Palm Sunday attention to the joy of the crowds and their celebration of the long awaited "Anointed One." That is such a happy and hopeful picture that it is hard to resist. Nine times out of ten, that is the direction that most Palm Sunday sermons take.

But on this Palm Sunday, I wonder...what about the angry Jesus? What about the table turning Jesus who offers judgment?

Some of us really struggle with the idea of Jesus as judge. After all, it doesn't fit easily into our picture of Jesus as accepting and inclusive and grace-full. And yet, there is, I believe, reason to reflect, this morning, upon the judgment of Jesus and the implications that it has for our own lives today.

In doing so, I would like to begin by distinguishing between judgment and judgmentalism. Jesus, of course, warned, "judge not that you be not judged." I believe that this warning was, essentially, a warning against judgmentalism—the very human tendency to elevate oneself by condemning another. We can, of course, so easily play God as we decide who is in and who is out, who is worthy and who is not. There are lots of examples of judgmentalism in our current culture. Judgmentalism is focused upon the worthiness or unworthiness of the person.

But judgment, on the other hand, focus its attention not upon the person, but the specific behavior of the person. It does not indict or condemn the person, but judges the behavior of the person to be either acceptable or unacceptable. There is, I believe, a certain humility that accompanies judgment—a humility that fully recognizes one's own faults as a prelude to identifying the fault of another. Judgment then, focuses its attention upon the behavior of the other person—not upon that person's value or worth in the sight of God.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to navigate life successfully if we could not make judgments about various types of behaviors as being good or bad, helpful or unhelpful, healthy or unhealthy. My decision not to smoke is based upon my judgment that it is potentially very dangerous to do so.

So I would like to establish the idea that judgment is a natural and indeed, a needed part of life. Without it, we would find ourselves in trouble. In this understanding then, Jesus did, in fact, make judgments about what was true and what was false in the living of life. He made judgments as to what was pure and what was pretense, about holy and what was not.

There is yet another dimension of the judgment of Jesus that I would like to reference. When we think of the judgment of God, we sometimes are inclined to think of God as playing a proactive and even aggressive role in passing judgment. We may even speak of being struck by a lightning bolt or being zapped by a god who, in the imaginations of some, has nothing better to do than sit at a control board in the heavens that monitors each and every person's behavior. When an indiscretion is committed, when an offense is registered, this god simply presses a button or pulls a lever to initiate the punishment—whatever it might be. We sometimes joke about this god that will quickly zap us if we do something wrong.

Suffice it to say that this isn't the understanding that I have when I think about the judgment of God. My understanding is, instead, rooted in the awareness that God has created our world with certain principles or values in place. I am thinking, for example of the principles of love, respect, kindness, compassion and dignity. These principles are a given. They operate continually whether we acknowledge it or not. And when we violate these principles, when we act in ways that are contrary to their values, we will, inevitably, bring judgment upon ourselves.

This understanding is captured in the biblical observation that if you "sow the whirlwind, you will reap the whirlwind." Another way of phrasing it is to suggest that "what goes around, comes around." The point is that judgment is not something that God initiates, but something we initiate, something that we bring upon ourselves whenever we violate the ground rules of the universe. There is, you see, a truth that God has set in motion and when we violate that truth, when we disregard it or ignore it, there will be consequence.

When we think about judgment in this light, we begin to understand that the judgment of **Jesus, as it was so often expressed, was simply a witness to the consequence of disregarding God's truth.** If we choose to disregard the rights and needs of others, if we choose pretense over what is real and authentic, if we choose to live not according to God's will, but their own, there will be a consequence. What goes around, comes around.

It's not that God is "up there zapping us." It's just that there is a price to pay for our failure to live according to God's will and way.

In this understanding, then, allow me to ask, “In what ways have you experienced the judgment of God? What consequences have you experienced from your own failure to live according to God’s truth?”

And what about our life together? In what ways have we experienced the judgment of God for our failure as a church to live up to our calling: to be a voice for the voiceless...to be an advocate for the powerless...to be the hands and feet of Christ to a broken and bruised world?

It is significant to note that Matthew’s account of Jesus’ “tempest in the Temple,” is followed by the description of Jesus healing the sick and the lame. In the aftermath of judgment, Jesus offers the witness of grace.

While judgment is a reality that we cannot ignore, it is a reality that must be viewed through the lens of grace...not a cheap grace that fails to be accountable for the gravity of our guilt, but a grace that recognizes our brokenness while affirming that God’s love and acceptance of us is greater—far greater than the sum of our sin.

The failure to live according to the truth that God has set before us does have its consequences. Judgment has its place in the equation of faith. Yet, as Jesus would make abundantly clear by his witness on the cross, it is grace and grace alone that has the final say.

Amen.