

The Bible and the Afterlife: 3) The Last Judgment
2 Corinthians 5:9-10; Matthew 25:31-46
May 3, 2009

It's springtime. In the academic world that means the time for final exams. School years or semesters are nearing their conclusion. Educators need some proof that students have learned what is required. Finals are one way we measure the knowledge accumulated over time. I still remember the pressure I felt as the end of the semester approached. I really wanted to prove myself, to make the grade. I studied and reviewed and crammed to do the best I could. Somehow I thought that my grades were a reflection of my worth. There was value placed upon them by others, especially as I applied to college and for scholarships. Merit was rewarded.

The same concept is often applied to the human lifetime. The scriptures and church tradition have fostered the notion that life culminates in the Last Judgment. The right and wrong one has done in the span of a life make a difference and there will be some kind of accounting at the end.

It is easy to think of the Last Judgment as a final report card:

Some people flunk...and go to hell.

Some get C+...and barely squeak into heaven.

A few get *summa cum laude*...and become saints.ⁱ

This idea of a final transcript wrongly suggests that our relationship with God is based strictly on merit. If we are truly honest, on the basis of a system of rewards-and-punishments nobody could claim divine favor. Salvation, or eternal life with God, is a gift – it cannot be earned or bought. However, the symbol of the Last Judgment does stand as a reminder that we are responsible before God for what we do with our lives. As the prophet Micah says, God requires that we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.” The idea of a judgment means that what happens in human life has lasting consequences. Right and wrong are significant and do make a difference. Some kind of accounting will be made concerning them.

We don't know exactly how this examination will take place. The parable of the dividing of sheep and goats provides a vivid picture of how it might take place. We have a choice. We can choose to take the idea of a final judgment literally, as a king judging his subjects on the basis of deeds of compassion being done or not done to all of his subjects, including “the least.”

The other option is to take the story of the judgment metaphorically. Jesus often spoke in metaphor and simile and frequently used hyperbole in order to make his point. Here he uses the language of a final judgment to reinforce the importance of acting compassionately. The judgment will not be based on membership in a group, or on right beliefs, or on rule keeping, but on deeds of

compassion. He was less concerned about life beyond death; his mission and message were focused on life in this world. What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people. When people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ.

Too often Christians have claimed for themselves the ancient notion of a chosen people. They have considered their orthodox or right beliefs as criterion for passage into eternal life. But Matthew is clear that the sheep are surprised to find that they are the elect; they were compassionate, not to earn a reward, but because they were in solidarity with the sufferers. The judgment is not between believers and unbelievers, or Christians and non-Christians or between church members and non-church members. The judgment is not based on the desire for salvation, doing good works, or the quality of one's character. It is contingent on whether one has responded humanely and compassionately to the needs of the marginalized, the nameless, the criminal element, the homeless, and the disreputable.ⁱⁱ Wink

Mother Teresa put it this way: "The gospel is written on your fingers." Holding up one finger at a time, she accented each word: "You-Did-It-To-Me." Then she added, "At the end of your life, your five fingers will either excuse you or accuse you of doing it unto the least of these. You-Did-It-To-Me."

One of the surprises of the parable is in verse 32: "All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another." In Greek the grammar suggests that the nations as such are not judged, but individuals are judged by how their nations have treated the needy – in effect, by their nations' system of welfare, judiciary, prisons, and health care. The ultimate principle of humanness is depicted in how the nations treat the marginalized of society. Each person must take individual responsibility, as far as we are able, for the behavior of the corporate systems to which we belong.

One of my models of discipleship was Mrs. Kaiser. She was the organist for my home church in Sparks, Nevada, and my piano teacher. Sometimes she even had me playing the organ and chimes for worship! She was a nurse for 30 years, before obtaining a degree in social work. Our church sponsored a Vietnamese refugee family with nine children. Mrs. Kaiser was instrumental in their settlement and then she adopted two teenage sons who had lost their parents in the war. For 8 years she was Director of Community Welfare, providing food, lodging, and fuel to those in need.

Mrs. Kaiser died recently and I've been composing a letter to her family in my mind. I was pleasantly surprised this week when a newspaper clipping fell out of my file folder on Matthew 25. It was a letter to the editor of the *Reno Gazette Journal* written by Mrs. Kaiser in 1992. This is her letter:

I was hungry. You said, 'Apply for food stamps, it only takes a few weeks.'

I was hungry. You said, 'The state Legislature meets again in '93, tell them.'

I was hungry. You said, 'Why don't you get a job?'

I was hungry. You said, 'We're only hiring part-time help now...we don't need anyone till next month.'

I was hungry. You said, 'Blame it on the Republicans/Democrats/president/vice-president/Congress/governor/state Legislature/recession....'

I was hungry. You said, 'The funding priorities have to be for prisons and higher education.'

I was hungry. You said, 'Aid has to go to Las Vegas first, they have more hungry people.'

I was hungry. You said, 'Get organized, get a bunch of people together and car-pool to Carson, talk to the governor.'

I was hungry. You said, 'The office closes in 10 minutes for lunch...come back next week.'

I AM HUNGRY.ⁱⁱⁱ

This was the second time the letter was in the paper because it was given an award for the best letter published the previous week. The first time it was published, Mrs. Kaiser received 53 phone calls offering assistance, including two from district judges. She was delighted with the response, but she was not in need herself. She was writing as an advocate for those who are in need.

In addition to our personal responses of compassion to the most vulnerable, we are also accountable for our corporate societal response to the marginalized. We are called to exercise our citizenship in order to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

I'm not sure that there will be a final examination, a Last Judgment, when we die to determine the nature of our afterlife. I am clear that the idea is a motivation to live our lives responsibly and ethically, to perform deeds of compassion as if another were Christ himself. The call is to live a life devoted to deeds of justice and compassion. And even if there is no final judgment, following an ethics of love and mercy is a meaningful and worthy way to live.

ⁱ Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1955), p. 209.

ⁱⁱ Walter Wink, *The Human Being* (Augsburg Fortress, 2001). Quoted in *The Bible Workbench* 15:7.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Reno Gazette-Journal*, July 26, 1992.