

Certain, Right, Good – the Judgment of the Son of Man: Matthew 13:47-50

It has become fashionable to give content warnings before a talk if a speaker is going to be presenting difficult or offensive material during the talk, and so I suppose I ought to give this warning before my talk.

If you are someone who is determined and proud to have Frank Sinatra's "I did it my way" sung at your funeral as a summary of your life

If you think that 'my body, my choice' is an adequate justification for what you do in life,

If you think that you have the right to end your life at the time and in the manner of your choosing, because it is your life and you are not accountable to anyone else

If you have embraced a liberal theology that says no external authority, like the Bible, can be allowed to compel or establish truth, that your reason and experience are the ultimate authorities [Gary Dorrien Bonhoeffer Podcast 1:38 mins] of what you will believe

In short, if you think your life is your own, to do with as you please, and that nothing should be allowed to encroach on your autonomy, your right to choose for yourself what is right and wrong and what you will believe about yourself and your world and to live by that

Then what Jesus teaches in the very ordinary story he tells in Matt. 13v. 47 of fishermen going about their business on the Sea of Galilee will offend, for as you heard He talks of a final judgement, of an accountability to someone other than yourself, where that other person's evaluation of your life by His standards will determine your eternal destiny, whether it will be life or death, joy or eternal grief and regret.

But don't stop listening just because of that – listening may save your life. Why should you think that your assessment of reality is more reliable than Jesus'. In fact, I hope to give you reason to think Jesus is telling the truth, telling you the truth so that yours is not an eternity of regret and misery

Equally, if you are someone who thinks your life has no meaning or value, if you are just drifting along, uncertain if anything you do matters, you should keep listening too, for Jesus will say what you do matters

And if you are someone who despairs of the unkindness and cruelty of the world, is frustrated, impatient, even angry that so much wrong seems to go on unrebuked and unpunished, you too should listen to Jesus, to see that it will not be that way forever.

Matthew 13:⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea. It collected every kind of fish,⁴⁸ and when it was full, they dragged it ashore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but threw out the worthless ones.

This is a very ordinary scene Jesus describes and compares the reign of God to, especially for his first hearers.

He is telling these parables, these cryptic stories that you have to puzzle over to get their meaning, beside the Sea of Galilee,

Matthew 13: On that day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore.

So along the shore his hearers would be able to see the very scene he is describing.

Fishermen with what is called a seine net, a drag net that needed several people to operate, either between two boats, or spread out by a boat and then drawn to land by long ropes.

There was always a period of time between putting out the net and drawing it in, while the fishermen waited for it to be filled, and then when it was drawn in the fishermen would separate the kosher fish, those that met the requirements of the Jewish law for human consumption [Lev11: 9-12], from the non-kosher catch like eels and catfish, or from fish that were too small or diseased. The kosher fish would go into containers to be taken to market, and the useless fish would be thrown out.

It was an almost daily scene, barring the sabbath and bad weather.

But Jesus then goes on to apply it to the Kingdom of Heaven, to the reign of God through His promised King.

⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out, separate the evil people from the righteous, ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And even though the story, like the story of the wheat and the weeds earlier in the chapter, implies the passing of time during which the good and the bad, the evil people and the righteous, co-exist, Jesus focuses on the end, when that time of patient waiting for the net to be filled has concluded.

That end involves all – there are no exceptions. The wicked and the righteous are categories that include all people who have ever lived [Matt. 25:31-32, Rev. 20:11-15]. There is no third option – the not-so-bad, or the not-so-good. All people, you, will be one or the other, included amongst the wicked or the righteous, on that day

And the end will bring an eternal separation, a separation conducted by the angels, the servants of God. People are not electing which group they will be in. The angels, sent out by the Son of Man we were told in the earlier parable v. 41, make that choice. No discussion, no consent

Matthew 13:⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom all who cause sin^[a] and those guilty of lawlessness

And the fate of the wicked is as bad as you can imagine. The angels will ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That is the kind of language that gets Christianity a bad name amongst some, and may even make some of you embarrassed about your Saviour's choice of words.

But it is language Jesus uses consistently

Speaking of the lack of faith He had encountered amongst the Jews compared with the faith of a centurion Jesus said

Matthew 8:¹² But the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Or of the fate of someone who treated the invitation to King's wedding feast with contempt He says

Matthew 22:¹³ "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him up hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

And of the fate at the last day of those who had shown no love of Jesus in their neglect of His people

Matthew 25:⁴¹ "Then he will also say to those on the left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!

You can say it is picture language – fire and darkness seem incompatible – at least I used to think that until Black Saturday when the first thing I noticed was it becoming dark, the smoke covering the sun

But these are word pictures chosen to convey something

The fate of the wicked on that day is as bad as it can be, irreversible, and conscious.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth speaks of conscious, inconsolable, regret and misery

Jesus' confronting language raises a number of questions, doesn't it.

The first is, can he, should he, be believed?

And then the second is, if He can be believed, why does He speak like this, what is His purpose in speaking like this?

We'll look at the first

Can Jesus, should Jesus, be believed as He speaks of the end?

What is His authority to speak like this?

Why should you think He knows more about the end than you do, that what He teaches will happen should be preferred to what you would like to think might happen.

Real question

I mean, who can know the future, and Jesus comes from a very different context to ours.

He doesn't show any signs of knowing about computers, or AI, of having at his fingertips a vast body of scientific knowledge

Why shouldn't we think he is just repeating what was commonly accepted in His day, and which we can now dismiss because we are more enlightened?

Big question, and it has a big answer.

Let me give the summary, and if you want to know more, or question some of it, come and talk

Here's the summary: Jesus speaks with authority about the judgement and should be believed because of who Jesus is revealed to be in His teaching, life, death and rising.

Jesus did extraordinary things in His ministry

According to the eyewitnesses He Stilled storms, fed 5,000 with just five loaves and a few small fish.

He cast out demons, brought order and peace to those who had been oppressed by evil

He healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, made the deaf hear, raised the dead, forgave sins.

And he taught with authority, as someone who knew Israel's God, claimed to be sent from God

That was why people were listening to Him

And based on what they saw and heard Peter and His fellow disciples confessed Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God [Matt. 16:16] – a confession Jesus accepted.

Jesus was not some kind of random, pop-up teacher, sprouting his own opinions.

He wasn't a travelling sage bringing a new philosophy

He was someone who knew Himself to be part of the great movement of God through history to save, the climax of God's plan and purpose revealed over centuries in His dealings with the children of Abraham to have a people for His own who would dwell securely in God's presence

A plan and purpose God said He would accomplish through the coming of the Christ, the ruler of God's kingdom, the deliverer of God's people through defeating their enemies

Many found it hard to believe that Jesus was that Christ.

In fact they rejected that idea because Jesus just didn't seem to be the conqueror they wanted. He didn't have the trappings of power and wealth they expected, didn't seem interested in violently destroying their enemies

So they put Jesus to death as an impostor, shamed and humiliated him to demonstrate the absurdity of His claims to be God's King,

But that was a death Jesus said He would die, just as He said He would rise on the third day.

And He did what He said He would do

On the third day after being crucified, killed, placed in a tomb

He rose from the dead

The tomb was empty

And He convinced His followers who had fled from him and were hiding in fear that He was alive by appearing to them – to be touched, spoken with, to eat with.

Risen as God's King, the glorious Son of Man, with all authority in heaven and on earth

The King who had defeated the ultimate enemies of His people – the devil and death itself

As I said, a big story

But the reason we should listen to Jesus is

He is alive

He spoke the truth – including the truth about the future, and demonstrated and vindicated His truthfulness by saying He would die and rise again, and doing that

And as the risen Christ He has shown He is the Son of Man, the One to whom God is giving an eternal reign, the One who will be the judge on the last day.

Jesus should be believed when He speaks about the judgement not just because He can speak the truth about the future, but because He is the One who will bring the future He speaks of, He is the One who will judge.

That is what Jesus Himself said, Jesus' whose word is stronger than death itself

John 5:²² The Father, in fact, judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ so that all people may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. [Matt. 25:31-46]

It is what the apostles preach

Acts 17:³⁰ "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." [Romans 2:16]

Jesus' teaching on the future isn't his idle imaginings of what it might be like.

He is telling us what He will do, and He has shown in His ministry, death and rising that He has the authority to do it.

Think about it

IF you are going to prefer your view of what will ultimately happen to you over Jesus' teaching, you need to be very sure He did not rise from the dead

That He was not witnessed alive from the dead, risen from the dead, by the apostles and many other witnesses

Before you dismiss their witness – look at the evidence, the accounts of what His followers witnessed, accounts that have convinced many

Accounts that have brought the church into being and changed the course of history.

And if you think you have good reasons, reasons that will withstand scrutiny as to why those first witnesses are deluded or lying, come and talk – for every Christian is wasting their time if Jesus is not risen, if the witness of the apostles is not true.

Jesus who told this parable should be believed for He lives and reigns now.

And He is the one who after His resurrection, as Peter said

Acts 10:⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins."

Jesus has demonstrated His authority.

He knows This judgement He speaks of is real and certain – for He is the judge.

Our world is telling you lies when it tells you – you are accountable to no-one but yourself

That you can live as you please, live as if you are the authority over your life, the only one you need to give account to

That you can do it your way, and that's the end of the story

Our world tells you those lies in defiance of God's judgements in history – the flood, the plagues of Egypt, the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of Babylon

Tells you those lies in defiance of the risen King, as if repeating the lie will somehow return Jesus to the grave.

But having died once He is risen once and for all. He reigns, and the judgement He speaks of here, that separation of the wicked and the righteous at the last day, is certain and sure.

And the judgement Jesus speaks of is right and good.

I need to say that because our race is so invested in getting the true God out of our lives, in being the boss of our own lives, that judgement and talk of judgement is hated, misrepresented, and suppressed.

But judgement is right.

God in judgement gives people what they deserve for what they have done and that is right.

As both the Old Testament and New Testament affirm, God will

Romans 2:⁶ He will repay each one according to his works: [Ps. 62:12, Prov. 24:12]

Revelations 20: ¹² I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books. ¹³ Then the sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them; each one was judged according to their works.

And that is right, isn't it.

It is right that people are repaid according to what they have done, and awful if the wrong done were left unpunished.

Awful if God were indifferent to

The abuse

The violence

The greed

That mars the lives of people, people God says are made in His image

Awful if it didn't matter how you lived, if in the end those who did right were treated exactly the same as those who did wrong

If the mother who expended her life caring for her disabled child had exactly the same treatment as Yahya Sinwar

If you despair of the wicked in this world you can be comforted by knowing that the God who sees and knows all is determined that people get what they deserve for what they have done

You may not see it in this life, but they will not escape

Judgement is right – and our world needs it if there is to be a difference, an ultimate difference, between right and wrong, good and evil

And Judgement is good because of what it says of us, humans, and what it tells us about the future

Judgement says our lives and how we live them matter

Our choices are real, and we are responsible for them

Judgement dignifies us and sets us apart

You don't judge a tree or hold a rock accountable

If a shark bites someone, we say it is just their nature. We may take steps to prevent it, but we do not hold that shark morally responsible, or work to get it to change its choices

But if an adult bites someone, we hold them responsible – just ask the National Rugby League

Flanagan's four game ban

St George Illawarra five-eighth Kyle Flanagan has been found guilty of the charge of biting Bulldogs skipper Stephen Crichton after fronting the NRL judiciary on Tuesday night and has been banned for four matches, meaning he will only play again this season if the ninth-placed Dragons sneak into the finals. TheRoar.com.au

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If you are thinking your life is without meaning or significance, judgement says that is not the case. How you treat others matters. What you do with your life matters.

There is someone who sees and knows, and cares what you do

And judgement tells us there will be an end of wickedness – evil and good not co-eternal

The moral order, the reign of what is right and good, will be restored – never to be disturbed again, and with it the flourishing not just of humanity but of creation.

That God judges is a source of praise in the old and new testament

Psalm 96: ¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns.

The world is firmly established; it cannot be shaken.

He judges the peoples fairly.”

¹¹ Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;

let the sea and all that fills it resound.

¹² Let the fields and everything in them celebrate.

Then all the trees of the forest will shout for joy

¹³ before the Lord, for he is coming—

for he is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness

and the peoples with his faithfulness. Cf Ps. 98

And at the end of Revelation John hears

Rev. 19: After this I heard something like the loud voice of a vast multitude in heaven, saying,

Hallelujah!

Salvation, glory, and power belong to our God,

² because his judgments are true^[a] and righteous, [Rev. 15:3-4, Rev. 16:5-7]

Judgement is right and good

And a world without judgement, without justice – is a horror

And yet we regard it with fear, often resent its mention, because lurking in the back of our minds, or at the forefront of our consciousness, is an awareness that we deserve judgement for our moral failures

Where we know we have not been honest or kind

Have treated others selfishly

Not given our parents respect and thanks, and justified it by their failings

Given our word, and broken it

Lashed out in our own pain or exhaustion

Used another sexually

Squandered our money and resources

Where we know we haven't even always lived up to the standards we have set for ourselves, let alone what might be God's standards

Perhaps deep down there is even a consciousness that we have been ignoring, or rejecting, our Creator, the one who had given us life

And we don't know what we can do about it

We can't undo what we have done

We live with it – that sense of failure, and maybe the shame

Or we work hard to distract ourselves – either in busyness at work or with social anaesthetics like drink or gambling or

Or we seek to suppress, deny that it matters at all – for isn't it only my judgement of myself that matters

But that consciousness is there, and the steps we take to distance ourselves from our sense of it often just make us worse

Hard and selfish as we decide only to care about ourselves

Dependent on drink or drugs

Unwilling to hear criticism

Or even burying ourselves in a busy life of doing good

And yet none remove the wrong we have done, and an accounting remains

The just judgement of One who sees and knows all, who shows no partiality, who will restore right

Dreaded, not welcomed

All the more reason to ask why Jesus speaks with such confronting language about this time if there is nothing we can do that will undo the wrong we have done.

Jesus speaks of judgement to spare you from judgement, because what we can do nothing about, He can

He speaks so that you will find yourself among the righteous on that day, and not the wicked.

So who are the righteous, and who are the wicked?

And how can Jesus include those who have done wrong among the righteous?

The first hearers had no doubt

The righteous were those who kept God's law, who lived faithful to the covenant that God had made with the people Israel

Who shunned idols and worshipped Israel's God and obeyed His commands

And the wicked were those who worshipped idols and disobeyed God's commands

And they were right

But that is a standard that would condemn us all, for who amongst us has loved God and our neighbour all the time?

In fact we don't even need to go to the ten commandments to see that

Just a few chapters earlier in the gospel Jesus has spoken of the righteousness that meets God's standards

He said in chapter 5 that those who are angry with another will be liable to judgement, that those who insult and abuse will be held to account, that those who look at a woman with lust in their hearts had broken His command

That God expects us to always be people of our word, to be generous and willing to share, even to love our enemies, to be people who forgive, and worship Him alone, not money – or power or pleasure [Matthew 5 and 6].

By those standards all of us would have no hope on that day

We would all deservedly be among the evildoers thrown into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth

But Jesus speaks of judgement to spare us from judgement because He came to save us, all who will believe in Him, from judgement.

That is why the angel told Joseph to call Mary's baby Jesus

Matthew 1:21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

That is why the story of Jesus' life and ministry climaxes with His death on the cross.

Jesus deliberately journeys to that day when He will be crucified

Spoke of it as the work He was sent into the world to do

For there, in His words, He would give His life as a ransom for many

Matthew 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The price paid to set us free, to deliver us from what we justly deserve

There is a lot there

But that is the Christian gospel

Christ died for our sins, sent by God to die in our place, taking upon Himself what we deserve so that we could be freely forgiven

It is because Jesus knew who He was and what He had come to do that He could start that great sermon where He revealed God's standards by speaking of who would share in the Kingdom He brings

Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

The poor are those who know their need, who know their resources will never be sufficient to secure their lives, who have no power or influence to get their way.

The poor in spirit are those who know they are spiritual bankrupts, with nothing to offer God to secure a place in His Kingdom.

They have no confidence in themselves and their goodness or law keeping.

And knowing that, they look to another – to the one who can supply their need

Open their hands to be filled with another's bounty

They look to Jesus

Who are the righteous? Those who abandon trusting themselves to trust Jesus, who believe that He, crucified and risen, is the King of God's kingdom who has authority not only to judge them but to forgive them, and trusting Him they follow Him, they live by His teaching

Who are the wicked, the evil doers whom the angels will take to that miserable place?

Those who keep on ignoring God's king Jesus to live to please themselves – whether their lust, or lies, or love of power

Who keep on trusting their idols – their imagined god, or persevere in trusting themselves, relying on their own goodness

Jesus speaks of that final day so that you will not be amongst the evil on that day, facing an end that He says is horrible

If you have never listened to Jesus before, hear Him today, calling you to be amongst those who instead will be welcome into His kingdom, the righteous

Those who rely on Him to rescue them from the dreadful but just condemnation we deserve for what we have done or neglected to do

Who respond to Him as He calls us to – with repentance and faith

Repentance – changing our minds about who should be in charge of our lives, to say Jesus should be, He should be the boss and His will done in my life, not me and my will

And Faith – both believing Jesus was crucified for our sins and raised from the dead, the one now with all authority in heaven and earth, and trusting Him, trusting His promises

Listen to Jesus and act now. You should prepare now for the certain future

We prepare for uncertain futures

Think of the lengths we are going to as a country to prepare ourselves for the various futures climate modelling gives us

But the time Jesus speaks of is certain

He has told you now what will happen then – and it is certain for He is the one who will make it happen

And He has said

John 5:24 "Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life."

Believe Him and ask Him in your need for the forgiveness He promises

And if you are already a believer in Jesus let Jesus' teaching shape your life and thinking.

Live in light of the reality that judgement is certain, right and good

What does that look like?

It means we should live hopeful lives. There will be an end of evil. But that is hope in God, not ourselves. We are not utopians, people who believe they can remove all the evil from society before the end and commit themselves to that, with all the misery it inevitably brings.

Evil and good co-exist until the end.

Our hope is a bigger, better and surer hope – the removal of all evil, the renewal of all creation

And we will live lives of integrity, for we know God sees and knows all, and cares about what we do [2 Cor. 5:9-10]

We will live forbearing and forgiving lives. Knowing God will judge we are freed from the burden of having to avenge ourselves, and so we can break the cycle of wrong and vengeance in which those who think it all depends on them are imprisoned

Trusting the Lord Jesus we leave judgement to God.

*Romans 12: ¹⁹ Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, **Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay,**^[a] says the Lord. ²⁰ But*

If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

For in so doing

***you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.*^[b]**

²¹ *Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

– believing what the Lord Jesus says about judgement should give us a different life, a life that is good for us and our community.

And we will speak of judgement.

Many of us have become self-censoring when it comes to speaking of what is and has always been part of our faith.

“He will come again to judge the living and the dead” we confess

Sometimes we go quiet on judgement because when we speak of judgement we are accused of being morally co-ercive, just trying to get our own way, bullying. But that is to misunderstand why we speak

Moralists might speak of judgement to co-erce people into social conformity, but gospel Christians don't

When we share the gospel it is not to offer people a morality, or a more respectable life, or a path to personal fulfilment. They might follow but

We speak to save from a condemnation at the last day that is sure

Jesus is one who saves from the wrath to come [1 Thess. 1:9-10]

And sometimes I think we are reluctant to speak of judgment because we don't want to offend or disturb by using the language Jesus uses, or we feel we have to qualify what He said and it gets too complicated

We leave people thinking God is too polite to insist on His own standards, that judgment is not something to be feared by rebels.

The danger is not that our hearers will misunderstand the goodness and rightness of judgement, but that they will ignore it.

We are not kinder or more sensitive than Jesus by not speaking of judgement in the ways He spoke of it, just less loving, more afraid of people than He was

But at the heart of our reluctance to speak is sometimes something more serious.

A nagging doubt about God's desire to save the person we are speaking to, or His capacity – worn down by the hardness of heart we have met, or the hostility

But God tells us He desires all people to be saved [1 Tim. 2:3-6] and nothing is too hard for Him

He is able to save, even the most hard hearted

So speak of judgement. Return it to your conversation

When asked to share in something that is not right say

“I would fear to do that, for God sees all, and I will have to give account to Him”

Or when speaking to a friend about their behaviour say “If you keep doing that – whether it is that sexual immorality, or lying, or abuse – how will you be able to face God on the last day.”

When confronted by wrong ask “Don't you fear God?”

Who knows where the conversation will lead, and you have warned them of the danger they are exposing themselves to, as you ought if you love them.

The Lord Jesus said

Matthew 13:⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea. It collected every kind of fish, ⁴⁸ and when it was full, they dragged it ashore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but threw out the worthless ones. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out, separate the evil people from the righteous, ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

He speaks with authority for HE is the risen Lord who will judge.

Why would you trust your own view of the future rather than Him?

And He speaks to save you from the fate of those who persist in evil doing

Why would you not listen to Him?

And believing Him, why would you not share His word with others?

He loved enough to warn and to rescue from the danger He warned of at the cost of His life, to rescue you and I.

Will you love enough to urge others to flee from the wrath to come?