

DOES BEHAVIOR MATTER?
(Judgment Day)

There are some things we need to get and keep if we are going to grow and thrive as Christians. One of them is a working familiarity with the relationship between Law and Gospel. Happily this is no new subject for anybody who comes around here very often. Nevertheless, there are so many facets to this topic that a new experience, a passage of Scripture we have not pondered very well, or a comment from a friend can come along and things can get hazy again. Gospel is not our native language; it is never our normal way of thinking. We must stay alert and continually reorient our lives to this strange New Way of seeing and believing. The Scripture reading this morning is picturing the Judgment Day: *“And the sea gave up the dead in it, death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done.”*

Most people today think “judgment” is condemnation, just like they think criticism is always negative. Sometimes judgment ends up condemning, but the judgment itself is evaluation. Many of you know that sin is alienation from God, and that faith is trust in God. How long before you know and trust that Judgment Day is Evaluation Day, and that the evaluation will come from a loving God who wants you to have clarity so you can go on growing and learning in the coming realms? Getting rid of all the familiar and traditional fear about Judgment Day is a tall order. We would have to believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ to come to such an incredible new perspective. We would have to believe in the mercy and love of the God revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. What are the chances of that?!

In any case, the comment that “we are to be judged by what we have done” will cause any astute Bible Study group to say: “I thought we were saved by faith, and not by works.” *“We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified.”* (Galatians 2:15-16)

“All were judged by what they had done.”

“By works of the law shall no one be justified.”

It is possible to sense here an inconsistency. If you believe in evaluation coming from love, this is no contradiction. But few hear it that way. So should we stop reading Galatians, or Revelation? If it comes to a choice you cannot escape, stop reading REVELATION. Never ever stop reading GALATIANS! On the other hand, some of you would be hard put to stop reading The Revelation – how can you stop what you have never started? The best suggestion of all is to keep on reading *both* Galatians and Revelation, and the rest of the Bible too.

That brings us to a second possible confusion. Am I really allowed to pick and choose what I think is valuable in the Bible? If I put myself in charge of deciding what is valuable in the Bible, does that not give me an uncomfortable authority? If I am going to think and choose, then that puts the Bible – at least when I read it for myself – under my ability to evaluate. What do I resonate with? What do I claim for my own? What do I truly embrace and believe? Well, if I am the one who gets to decide, then I am also the judge. I am the one deciding what is true for me – what I will actually try to live by. In short, while I may give the Bible huge authority over my life, I am also exercising my free will to choose what from the Bible I can comprehend and value enough to build into my living. The Bible is about human experience with God, and I must weigh *my* experience with the experience of those who went before me – I must weigh *my* revelation with the revelation of those who went before me. Scary as this is (Philippians 2:12), there is no help for it. The Bible cannot do this for us. Either we do it, or we let somebody else do it for us.

As you know, the vast majority of Christians in our time try to claim that this is not the case. They say the Bible is clear and plain to everyone who trusts it and has faith. Why then do they constantly argue with each other, never mind me? Never in all of history have sincere and devoted Christians been able to agree about what the Bible says or means about almost anything. Agreement – and knowing all the right answers – is not the purpose of the Christian WAY. Growing in the Spirit – learning, coming into more and more appreciation and obedience, trusting God’s love enough to start being more loving ourselves – that is far more difficult and far more important than claiming to have “right views” about everything. As anyone who has been married can testify: agreement does not create love, and disagreement does not destroy it.

In any case, if mere mortals cannot get into sincere and genuine conversation with the Bible, then the Bible is of zero significance or importance to mortals. Jesus comes to us on our level so that we can

relate – doubt, question, do whatever we have to – until we repent, believe, and are reconciled to God and redeemed. If the Bible does not want us to engage in this honest and genuine process, then everything we claim to believe is mere pretense. You do understand pretense? “You hurt your sister. Now say you’re sorry.” Mama *making* me say it does not make me sorry. One time I really *did* hurt my sister, and Mama did not have to make me be sorry. I cried for days. I was four at the time, and the memory still makes me cringe. I am just saying that the power is in what we really know, not in the pretense, and not in what others try to make us say or believe.

Speaking of the Bible, I can assure you that I don’t get as much from Exodus 22 (rules and regulations) as I do from the fourth chapter of Luke (Jesus’ wilderness temptations and His own proclamation of the basis of His ministry). That does not have to be true for you, but it really is true for me.

However, unlike some of you, I still read Exodus 22. I have no intention whatsoever of patterning my life after some of it. For example: *“If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her [not to her, with her, though in this case it is approximately the same thing], he shall give the marriage present for her, and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equivalent to the marriage present for virgins. You shall not permit a sorceress to live. Whoever lies with a beast shall be put to death. Whoever sacrifices to any god, save to the LORD only, shall be utterly destroyed.”* (Exodus 22:16-20)

Well, it’s not that easy to find a virgin in our time. On the other hand, any psychologist can tell you – and most of us would agree – that marrying a person because you went to bed with them once is not a sound basis for marriage. (You may have noticed that it doesn’t say anything about the woman being pregnant.)

As some of you know, in early New England days (September 8, 1642, to be precise), our Puritan forebears put a boy to death because he was caught doing a bad thing with some animals. It seems clear that they felt no rage, only sorrow. But either you take the Bible seriously or you do not. Isn’t that right? At least that’s what they thought, and that’s how it is put in many places still today. This colony of Puritans was in dead earnest about being obedient and faithful. It was a new world and they had a chance to be the New Chosen People in it. They were not going to betray the covenant no matter what it cost them. And so it was clear

to them that taking this nineteenth verse from Exodus 22 as God's immutable law required that they kill this boy. But it tore up the whole community with grief and remorse. When he could no longer deny it, Thomas Granger, age sixteen, tried his best to cooperate with the justice of his community: its faith and its Bible. It was a heartbreaking scene. Young Thomas had to identify the animals he had defiled, and they also had to be put to death. (Leviticus 20:15) His own life was already forfeit, so Thomas wanted to do the "right thing." If he missed a defiled animal, it would break the biblical law and curse the community; if he named an animal, he knew it would die. But in some cases he couldn't remember for sure. He felt incredible remorse for causing the deaths of these animals. It was not their fault; it was his alone. And while he accepted his own punishment as just and, in true repentance, he wanted to be truthful, he was not certain about which animals. He was so afraid that he might leave one out and thus further offend against God, but he was equally afraid he might point to an innocent animal, thereby causing its death and offending against God. For me, it brings new meaning to the phrase "Holy shit!" Do you want to see inerrant Scripture in action? There it is. And what happened to "Love one another as I have loved you"? In any case, they killed the animals before Thomas' eyes and then executed him. (A mare, a cow, two goats, five sheep, two calves, a turkey – and a sixteen-year-old boy.) (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, page 320.)

Yet the Law can be beautiful too: "*You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*" (Exodus 22:21) Don't you wish everybody in the world thought that was the true word of God?

Or: "*If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him. If ever you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.*" (Exodus 22:25-28) Don't you wish everybody in the world thought that was the true word of God?

But why pick a Scripture reading if I'm going to talk about every place else in the Bible instead? John ends his book (of Revelation) with scenes that to him are consistent with the beliefs of his day, and with the message he has so creatively and powerfully portrayed throughout his writing. As many of you know, I read The Revelation a lot and find fascination and truth and encouragement there. But by the end of the

book, I know that while the message is good and true, the details are wrong on almost every count. I am quite sure, by the way, that John meant us to take the details as image and symbol, not as fact. In any case, the world does not end as John told us it would. We do not get an evil emperor worse than Nero (at least not in John's time frame). John would have been totally and completely dumbfounded to learn that, in two hundred years after his writing, not only would the Roman Empire still exist, but a Christian emperor named Constantine would reign and the vast majority of the Empire would turn Christian. So if someone wants me to take the Book of Revelation as literally true in every detail – if they want me to imagine that the end time or the Judgment Day will happen, and will take place in any way even remotely similar to what the Book of Revelation describes – how am I to take such a ludicrous and ignorant suggestion seriously?

If John is speaking about spiritual principles and is using creative imagery to remind us of the warfare going on here between good and evil – between obedience to God and doing things our own way – then I am grateful and fascinated. And by the way, many of us spend years here without realizing that there is any spiritual warfare going on. We just go through our days trying to pay bills, be successful, and get along okay, and we never attribute all the misery and mayhem in our world to anything more than chance or happenstance. Talk about oblivious!

On the other hand, if John really means to be talking about history and timelines and the details of what will happen and how, then he is profoundly mistaken. Nothing has taken place as he predicted, if you want to read The Revelation as prediction. So if we are studying The Revelation together and you start talking as if what John is saying is actually and accurately a description of what is going to take place, I have to say: “What’s wrong with you?! Are you sleepwalking? Are you not paying any attention whatsoever to what you are reading?”

John never intended his readers to take his imagery as some kind of physically accurate fact. When he speaks about the whore of Babylon, I don't think he is into pornography, but I *do* think he is talking about Roman idolatry – and reminding us not to put our faith in earthly kingdoms, no matter how powerful and wealthy they may seem in the moment. For any of us who still read the Book of Revelation and ponder its meaning, how is it possible to never wonder if the United States itself carries any of the marks of the whore of Babylon? Is it possible to be rigid in our beliefs and really blind to truth at the same time? Wherever Christendom encourages blind faith, that is what it leads to.

So John ends with pictures of an apocalyptic end time. People come out of their graves because when they died, there was no place else to put them until after the close of the age. Real estate was really limited back then: flat earth, no space, no dimensions beyond this one. So the end time all takes place on earth, and the same flat earth will be re-constituted for the heavenly dwellings of eternal life. For how many more centuries will we try to keep God, his purposes, and the eternal realms so incredibly ludicrous and minuscule? It is not John's fault that he lived at the end of the first century A.D. It is not John's fault that he was a child of his age. But it is *your* fault if *you* are a child of his age. Can we not find enough errors in our own age, that we have to go blindly back to his?

The wonder is that John saw so far beyond most of his contemporaries, and felt the presence of Jesus changing his awareness and his expectations so dramatically. But if we use John to go back to where he was – instead of expanding our own expectations in the light of Christ's coming and His presence with us, like John himself was doing – then that is a travesty of real faith. Jesus, by the way, was not apocalyptic in His thinking, and many of our worst errors have come from trying to force Him back into apocalyptic modes. When the Gospel writers garbled predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem (which happened about thirty-five years after Jesus died) and interpreted them as sayings about the end of the age, I have to suspect that they misunderstood Jesus. Now, maybe Jesus was wrong and was still locked in to the errors of apocalyptic predictions, but I do not go there easily. There are more likely possibilities. The thief on the cross, the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus telling the Sadducees that God is not the God of the dead but of the living – these and many other clues tell us that Jesus was way beyond the apocalyptic expectations of His time.

Speaking of being stuck in past modes: When I read the Old Testament prophets, there are great glimmers of light breaking beyond all the assumptions of their time and place. That is why they were so often in terrible trouble. Yet for the most part, the prophets had a faith that I do not share. They trusted God to bring justice, vindication, righteousness ... here on earth. They thought Israel and Jerusalem would someday be preeminent here on earth. This has been an enormous error, at least for the last three thousand years. I think Jesus put this error in perspective and surprised us all by being a Messiah unlike anything we wanted or expected. And much of Christendom cannot fathom it or

remember it to this day. The justice, righteousness, and vindication come in the next realm, not in this one. And even there, not as automatically as we would hope – for we must learn it and grow into it. Can there be righteousness in Heaven if we are there and we are not righteous? And how will we suddenly become righteous? Will it be forced upon us or granted to us simply because we were wise enough to die? If it does not come from the heart and soul – from within – then it is not true righteousness. We go to Heaven and then lose all choice and free will? Ah, slavery at last – and through all eternity. Is that the only way we can imagine Heaven? That Jesus is not really the Lamb who wins the hearts and souls of His people? That He is the great Slave-Master who kills off all the undesirables and totally controls all the rest? That’s exactly what most people picture from reading the Book of Revelation.

So I do not trust the hope depicted by most of the prophets most of the time. But there are some things I do trust. I trust Jesus to *know* the Old Testament cold. Whatever I read there, I know that He also read it and pondered it. How do I know? Because everywhere I turn I find His sayings imbued with Old Testament influence. His teachings reveal profound familiarity with the Scriptures. (Why is it necessary for us as Christians to study some portion of the Scriptures each day? Because Jesus did! There are other reasons, but if we want to understand our Lord, we have to at least learn His “language.” And I don’t mean Hebrew or Aramaic; I mean the language of His heritage and thought-frames.) Only, Jesus did not merely quote the Old Testament, though He did that often. He was unafraid to put it into new light, and unafraid even to contradict it. Why do you think He was in such hot water most of the time? There was always His own stamp of awareness and reflection when He used the Scriptures. Who ever thinks that we should follow Him in this way also?

“It was said to you by the men of old ... but I say unto you” It is not just my opinion; the record is clear: Much of the hot water Jesus got into was a direct result of His fresh and very troubling way of understanding the Bible. So I trust a second thing: I trust that the followers of Jesus did *not* “get it” all. He was too new and too deep for them. How surprising that the Son of God should be hard to track and hard to grasp, and that some dimensions of His thought and Message could be beyond us. And you know this if you think at all: Our records are *not from Jesus*, but from His followers. This means that anything they misunderstood or failed to grasp is passed on in the New Testament. Any omission or misunderstanding is now cemented in Holy Scripture –

unless you go on pondering; unless you go on wanting to know Him: wanting to know His truth deeper than ink on paper from a far-off age. The presence of our Risen Lord with us – coming to us as Holy Spirit – means that prayer outranks Scripture! At least it did in His life.

Therefore, if I want to understand, I must look beyond single statements and impressions – as Jesus Himself did. I must keep searching and learning all my life. And I will never “get it” all either. But I can certainly get more than some of His followers did. We do not have to kill little boys or little girls who have not learned yet what to do with their instincts. We can teach them and love them. And gratefully, we ourselves have the eternal realms in which to go on “getting it” – to go on learning and growing.

There is great fear among the *orthodoxoi* (the right-thinkers) that if people are allowed to question – to think for themselves – they will end up like the agnostics, the atheists, the heathen ... and end up believing nothing. So the *orthodoxoi* insist that there are certain things that must not be questioned. In most modern Christendom that means things like the Virgin Birth; the authority of the Bible; the Second Coming of Christ; the identity of Jesus as God himself, often expressed as “Jesus is the Son of God,” which for some unfathomable reason they think means the same thing.

And you know that this concern – this fear – is valid. Many do lose faith. It has been going on since the dawn of human history, starting, if you want to get pushy, with Eve: “I don’t see why I should have to do what he says!” And if we care about people, shouldn’t we try to protect them from the ravishes of their own minds, which, with Satan’s help, are bound to steal them away from Jesus, and hence from God?

The ironic thing is that Jesus Himself was in trouble with the *orthodoxoi* of His time. As were Paul, Peter, Origen, Huss, Luther, Teresa of Avila, John Cotton, Jonathan Edwards, and most everybody we have ever admired. Until, of course, they themselves long afterward became the center of a new *orthodoxoi* ... which would teach its followers never to question anything these radical founders had come to. Follow the leader without ever being anything like the leader? Must that always be the anatomy of Christendom? I know, most people are much too busy making money and taking care of the kids to seek the truth. “Just tell me what to believe and I will believe it.” Perhaps we deserve the kind of religion we get.

But I will tell you a secret: The *orthodoxoi* also turn many away from God and from Jesus.

The real truth is: Jesus is not the Son of God because somebody else told us He is. He is not the Son of God because somebody threatened us with dire results if we ever dared to question it. That does not turn anybody into the Son of God. Jesus is never the Son of God en masse, by group-think, or because everybody got together and took a vote. Jesus is the Son of God for each one of us individually: as we encounter Him, and wonder about Him, and question Him, and try to comprehend who He is and what He is about. From time to time, between the encounter and the pondering, He simply goes off the charts of everything we know and understand about human life here. In the old language, we get converted. Then it is no longer just mouthing words somebody else tried to force upon us. Then we truly believe, truly trust Him, truly follow Him. We do not have all our questions answered. Falling in love is not about good answers to all the questions. To love, honor, and obey – until death do us part – is a different category from “questions and answers.” And the church is the bride of Christ, remember?

So even if it is dangerous, disregard the *orthodoxoi*. Go for the real thing. If you want to hear this from Jesus: “*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.*” (Luke 12:1-2)

Jesus’ mission and Message of our reconciliation with God is bigger and truer than anything His church is yet reflecting. If some of the followers down through history retained vengeful and punishing attitudes, I must at least suspect that this was a carryover from their own former opinions, and not automatically the pure essence of Jesus. His God is not the tiny little god that fit the images and expectations of His day and time, or that fits so many of the images and expectations of mindless Christians still today. I do not mean that they lack intelligence; they simply believe that to use their minds would be a mark of unfaithfulness – a lack of trust in the Bible or whatever. Jesus, as we mentioned, believed that the Old Testament was full of error or He would not have questioned and reworked its message so incredibly. Paul, following in Jesus’ wake, also thought the Old Testament was in error – so in error that we needed a New Testament (Covenant), one based on Gospel instead of on Torah. Paul wrote Galatians in flaming contradiction to what nearly everybody in his time believed to be the core and essence of Torah.

So back to where we started: Does behavior still matter, once I know the Gospel of God's love? We start from a premise that comes from Jesus. Behavior from the outside – superimposed upon us – cannot be relied on. Behavior from the inside – welling up from who we really are and what we truly know, trust, and believe – that is what matters. And that is what will last and grow and go on, because even the fires of Hell cannot burn it away.

To be sure, your behavior impacts me – sometimes dramatically. I might be tempted from time to time to find some way to control your behavior from the outside just so I do not have to suffer for it. But that will never work in the long run. And frankly, I care about my own behavior even more than I do about yours. Sometimes my behavior pleases me and sometimes it appalls me. What I do or do not do gets more inner attention than I ever let on. There is always a running dialogue going on in my head about how I am *doing*. And the truth is, just like you, I *want* to be more, better, wiser – more caring – than I am. It is a link between me and my Lord. It is part of the *imago dei*. He made me; I did not make me. And my life reports to Him, like it or not – admit it or not. And this happens more and more from the time I call Him Lord and Christ. But I have learned that I cannot change my behavior at will. Only He can help me – starting from the relationship going out, not from the behavior going in.

When I discover that God (in Christ Jesus) cares about me – when that love-bond is established and I finally come to truly trust it – that does not result in my no longer caring about my behavior. The terror is gone; the threat of coercion no longer rules. But I start caring more than ever before about my behavior. I want it to reflect the reality of the bond between us. I want it to somehow honor and please Him. Gratitude for His love is a palpable force I cannot control or deny. It calls forth a desire to respond, to do things – to try my wings as never before.

In my experience, then, it is not that Torah leads to good behavior and that Gospel leads to no behavior or to pious, irrelevant behavior. This is what many people keep trying to imply. In my experience, Torah leads to behavior on the outside, and Gospel leads to behavior from the inside. Whether or not an outsider calls the behavior good or bad or unimpressive or indifferent, well, that depends mostly on the perspective of the spectator. And Christianity is *never* a spectator sport.

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In any case, I am astonished at how easily Christians are still willing to throw out GRACE and MERCY – and yes, LOVE. *Of course* we care about our behavior. But that is not the mystery or Message of the Gospel. We are not judged, evaluated, or condemned according to what we do. What we do is only the outermost layer of our being, of what we intend, of how much we care. **We are judged according to the heart.** And I am not talking about your heart – I am talking about God's heart!

Have you ever loved someone who did not yet deserve it? Even your own children? Isn't it weird how often we imagine that we are more loving than God? Or perhaps we simply forget that God also has children.