

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Show Stoppers

Judgment

(Romans 1-3)

Study #6

Introduction: With liberty and amnesty for all...

After five weeks of addressing topics and themes that inquiring minds are curious about (the existence of God; the presence of evil in the world; the reliability of the Bible; the possibility of miracles and hypocrisy in the church), I've decided to tackle an issue that is sure to raise some eyebrows this morning.

Today, I want to speak to the issue of God's judgment.

And of all the topics I have chosen to address during this series of messages where we're dealing with critical life and God themes, this one may be among the most challenging - both to give and to receive.

Timothy Keller records comments from two friends in his excellent book, The Reason for God,¹ that express what many, many people believe about the whole idea of "God as judge."

"I doubt the existence of a judgmental God who requires blood to pacify His wrath. [We're taught that] Someone had to die before the Christian God would pardon us. But why can't He just forgive?"
and

"I have even more of a problem with the idea of Hell. The only God that is believable to me is a God of love. The Bible's God is no more than a primitive deity who must be appeased with pain and suffering."

Those are widely held opinions today, and you may have talked with people who have similar thoughts. I certainly have. You may have had or may presently have such thoughts.

So, is it true that the whole notion of God's judgment is mean-spirited and outdated? If God judges, does that contradict His love?

These are great and challenging questions, and they deserve some attention. We'll give attention to them today. But on the way to considering the possibility that God judges, I'm going to ask you to think with me, first, of judgment more broadly.

As distasteful as the judgment of God may be to some people, it would be difficult to picture a world without judgment.

Imagine...

What would happen in society at large if there were no consequences for misbehavior?

What if men and women knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that they could commit whatever crimes they wish and never have to either pay restitution or serve time in prison?

What if, today, governors in every state declared amnesty (not just pardon; not just commuting a sentence) for criminals in penal institutions across the country? No more judgment. No more punishment for crime.

It's quite a thought. That would be quite a world. It's the kind of thought that would prompt many of us to want to stay inside!

A world without judgment would be a scary place. It would be an unjust place.

And what I propose we consider this morning is that as bad as it would be if we had a **world** without judgment, to have a **universe** where God did not judge would be unimaginably worse.

Let's start our consideration of judgment with a consideration of God Himself. What kind of a God is God?

¹ Keller is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York.

I suspect that if we conducted “man on the street” interviews with people in San Antonio, asking, “*What is the most prominent attribute of God?*” the answer we would hear most often would be this, “*God is love.*”

That’s certainly a fine answer. But where do we get this idea that the sovereign God who rules the world is primarily a God of love?

Maybe we get this idea from a study of history.

The God the Bible Describes

Evidence of God’s Love...

from history...

I think the study of history is fascinating. While I don’t read as much history as I’d like to, I’ve dabbled in it over the years and have been impressed with humanity’s propensity for - war. I don’t think it would be far off the mark to say that the story of the human race is the story of war.

General violence, injustice, forced famines, and greed cluster for second place. But war is the predominant fact of the thousands of years of recorded history.

People who look at history don’t usually come away overwhelmed by the evidence for the love of God.

Or maybe we get this idea about “God-as-love” from current events.

from current events...

Did you read the paper this week? Did you check the Internet for news, as I did? Were you, as I was, mostly impressed with new reports of plane crashes, the abuse of children, embarrassments in high places, power plays by muckety-mucks and scandal?

To be honest, knowing what’s happening in the world today I wouldn’t necessarily jump to the conclusion that the prominent attribute of God is love.

Or perhaps it is a study of world religions that leads us to the idea of God’s loving nature.

Evidence for the love of God from the religions of the world...

BUT, most of the religions of the world don’t cotton to the idea that God is love.

- Islam is all about the absolute power and sovereignty of God. Talk to a Muslim about the love of God and your Muslim friend will become uncomfortable.
- Buddhism and Hinduism don’t dwell on the personal nature of a “god” at all.
- Animists and pagans worldwide know to fear their tribal deities, but don’t have a category for “God’s/god’s love.”

You and I may well believe in the love of God. But to hold to that belief requires a bold act of faith. Not only is there no evidence for it in the natural order, there is little support for it in history or in religious thought.

No. I am only aware of one place where we find the message of the love of God - and that is in the Jewish/Christian Scriptures.

Evidence for the love of God from Scripture!

This message of God’s love is unique to the message of the Bible. When the God of the Hebrews declared His love for His people in Old Testament times, it was revolutionary. And the message of the Christian Gospel elevated that message of God’s love to the nth degree.

Our church’s memory verse for the month of February emphasizes God’s love:

[John 3:16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

In addition to John 3:16, though, we could add many, many verses, passages, and stories from the New Testament that showcase the love of God.²

But to put the final exclamation mark on it all, to show the love of God in boldest relief, we would point to the cross of Jesus where the Son of God offered up His life.

There, we see the love of God more clearly than any other place. As the apostle Paul writes, [*Romans 5:8*]...*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

There is no question about it. The source of the idea that “God is love” is the Bible.

And the Bible tells us that this loving God is also a Judge who will, in the end, put all things right. We find lots of evidence of God’s judgment in the Old Testament.

Evidence of God’s Judgment...

from the Old Testament

When God sent a flood that saved only Noah and his family and destroyed the rest of mankind, He was acting as a Judge executing **judgment** on a world gone wild in sin and violence.

Every time there is mention of an animal sacrifice, there is the implicit message of **judgment**. God’s righteous **judgment** against sin is poured out on a sacrifice that dies in the place of a sinful human being.

When God told His people, Israel, to militarily defeat Canaanites and other tribes living in the land of Palestine, he was telling them to be His tool of **judgment** against people who had been rebelling against Him for centuries.

So, judgment is a prominent theme in the Old Testament. But we also find the idea running through the New Testament as well.

² A brief “love of God sampler”: Romans 5:5; 8:39; 2 Cor. 13:14; 2 Thes. 3:5; 1 John 2:5; 3:17; 4:9; 5:3; Jude 1:21

from the New Testament

To demonstrate that this is the case I want to key in on one particular idea that lies at the heart of the Christian message. The concept of judgment is captured in the word *propitiation*.

Propitiation is an important word that conveys a very important truth.³ It is the idea of turning away God’s righteous anger by means of a sacrifice.

Thus, when we read in 1 John 4:10 that Jesus, God’s Son, was sent “*to be the propitiation for our sins*” we understand that by His sacrificial death on the cross Jesus turned aside the wrath of God the Father. And now, the Father - the Judge - need NOT judge us, but can accept us fully in love when we place our faith in Jesus.⁴

It would not be an exaggeration to say that God’s judgment is central to both Testaments. In fact, the whole reason for Christ’s coming to earth was to save us from God’s **JUDGMENT** by taking the punishment that was due us!

Summary:

So, what kind of a God is the God the Bible describes? He is a LOVING JUDGE. And as we consider this idea that God is a judge, I’d like to highlight a couple of things.

****The presence of BOTH love and justice is not evidence of divine schizophrenia.*

First, we should be assured that this combination of “love” and “judgment” is not evidence of a divine schizophrenia, as if God can’t decide whether to be loving or just.

³ The New International Version translates the Greek word (hilasterion) by “atoning sacrifice.” I grant that propitiation is not a commonly understood word today. Nevertheless, I think something is lost by the loss of the word propitiation in the NIV.

⁴ See also Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17 and 1 John 2:22, along with the contexts in which these verses all occur for a fuller understanding of propitiation.

The reality is that love without justice, love without judgment, is no love at all!

Rebecca Pippert ([Hope Has Its Reasons](#)) writes, “*Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or [damaging] relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance? Far from it! [We get angry! But] anger isn’t the opposite of love...[So] God’s wrath is not a cranky explosion, but His settled opposition to the cancer which is eating out the insides of the human race He loves with His whole being.*”

It would hardly be loving for God to never punish those who have committed evil and caused suffering for innocent people, and the Bible teaches that God’s wrath and judgment flows from His love.

And here’s another thought about God’s judgment.

****Belief in God’s judgment does not enhance the likelihood of brutal human behavior.*

I have read of some people who are afraid of God’s judgment.

Not that they are afraid that they will be judged by God. No, they are afraid of what believing in the concept of God’s judgment will do to them if they embrace the idea.

These folks are concerned that if we believe that God judges, we will become more judgmental, more violent ourselves.

I appreciate the concern. But I don’t think it is a concern worth having for the simple reason that the most brutal regimes of history have been those that DENY God’s judgment, not those that believe in it.

Exhibits A, B, and C might be Nazism, Communism and Fascism! The legacies of these atheistic philosophies tell us that increasing violence and brutality result IF we are free to shape life and morals any way we choose without ultimate accountability (i.e. - God’s judgment).

Many people who have seen the atrocities of an atheistic orientation to life argue compellingly that the doctrine of God’s final judgment is a necessary foundation for decent behavior.⁵

And, for those who still find the whole idea of God’s judgment offensive, a question...

****There is equal opportunity to find offense in: (a). a God who is a Judge; and (b). A loving God who does not judge.*

If you are troubled by the idea of God’s judgment, isn’t it just as good a question to ask why you don’t find the idea of forgiveness offensive?

You who believe in God’s forgiveness but balk at His judgment should know that there are lots and lots of people around the world who hear the idea that God will forgive wrongdoers and find that idea ludicrous. Even morally repugnant.

To those who have suffered terribly, forgiveness appears to violate justice. To you, judgment seems to violate love.

But the Bible presents us with a God in whom loving forgiveness and righteous justice have met.

So let’s explore this thought that God does judge a bit more. How does He judge? And what does He expect from us?

The Basis of God’s Judgment

Pass/Fail? On a curve? Perfection?

If He is judging on the basis of our works (and the Bible is clear throughout that this is the basis of His judgment), how will we be graded?

⁵ Keller references Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who has seen the violence in the Balkans firsthand and Czeslaw Milosz, Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet, who wrote “The Discreet Charms of Nihilism.” Both of these men have personally seen that a loss of belief in a God of judgment leads to brutality.

- Does He judge on a curve in such a way that those in the top 50 percent of moral human goodness pass, while those below that line fail?
- Does He judge on the basis of how hard we try to be good? And if so, how often do we have to try to be good to pass?
- Does He judge us on the basis of our intentions to do good? And if so, how often do we have to have good intentions?

All of these guesses might make sense. And there is a certain attractiveness to the idea that God will judge me on my intentions, or that I only have to outperform a few troublemakers to leap over the bar of His judgment.

Well, we are not left to our guesses. The Bible actually tells us how God judges. It is not on a curve. His judgment of us is not made on the basis of our intentions or as compared to other people.

Scripture says that God judges us on the objective basis of perfect obedience to His commands.

Nobody is saying that doing good, trying to be good or good intentions aren't important. Of course it is good to be good!

But the Bible clearly says, **[Romans 3:23]...ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**

The picture here is of an archer aiming an arrow at a target and missing. Some, of course, get closer to the bull's-eye than others, but all of us miss. All of us disobey God's commands. We don't perfectly keep His commandments and we therefore fail His judgment.

THAT is a tough standard of judgment!

"But," you may well ask, "How is this judgment fair?" After all, not all people even have knowledge of God's standards.

That's a very insightful question. And it is one that the Bible anticipated. The apostle Paul answered the question for us in his letter to the Romans.

Paul says that in order to be perfectly fair, God judges every person on the basis of the knowledge he or she has received of Him and His ways.

OK. What kind of knowledge?

Response to the Light Given

Response to external revelation (Romans 1:18-25)

Paul tells us that all people everywhere can see the evidence of God in creation. Nobody is totally ignorant of God.

The creation points beyond itself to the One who made it. Nobody can plead ignorance of the Creator. All people have access to this general revelation of God. Included here is knowledge about God's eternal power and divine nature.

And knowing about God's eternal power should prompt everyone everywhere to worship and serve Him.⁶

In addition to this general revelation, though, God has given everyone everywhere "internal revelation" of His existence.

Response to internal revelation

Internal sense that God is

Here's how Solomon says it in the book of Ecclesiastes - **[3:11]...He has also set eternity in their hearts...**

There is the innate sense within the heart of every person that this life is not all there is, that this world is not all there is, that there is something else - someONE else! - above and outside of what we see.

And in addition to this "God-sense" within us, God has given another source of internal witness in the gift of conscience.

⁶ See also Psalm 19 where we read that "the heavens are declaring the glory of God"; Acts 14:15-17 - God did not leave Himself without witness through the creation.

Conscience

It is true that not everyone has access to God's explicit commands as recorded in the Bible. But, everyone has been given a conscience. And conscience is a God-given internal indicator of our true standard of morality.

Not everyone's conscience agrees with everyone else's conscience. But everyone has certain things they believe to be morally right and certain things they believe are morally wrong.

I've heard it suggested that we could determine what each person's internal true moral standards are if we could just hook up a recording device that was "criticism activated."

If this "criticism activated" recording device was somehow connected to both our mouth and our brain, it would record every time we had a critical thought or spoke a critical word against someone else for something they said or did.

Each one of us might not complain about the same exact things. But each person would complain about some things - be it dishonesty or lying or cheating or being rude, etc...

Then, once we determined what a person's complaint list consisted of, we would have an objective and fair standard by which that person could be judged by God.

So, given that God is a loving Judge AND that He has provided us all with evidence of His existence which should prompt us to worship Him AND that we all have standards to live by, how are we doing?

Sadly, not too good...

So, How Are We Doing?

The heathen doesn't measure up (Romans 1:24-32)

Paul says that people who have access only to the evidence of God's power in creation not only do not worship and serve Him, they invent gods of their own imaginings which they can manage.

The moralist doesn't measure up (Romans 2:1-11)

And the person who has no access to the written revelation of God through Scripture - but does have a conscience - consistently violates that conscience. No person perfectly abides by the standards he/she would put in place for others.

The Jew doesn't measure up (Romans 2:17--3:9)

Then, those who, like the Jews, actually do possess and know the written record of God's Law, consistently violate them.

I don't measure up!! (Romans 3:9-20)

And people like me - who not only know about God from creation and have a conscience and know the Bible, too - well I don't measure up to the standards I know I should keep.

In other words, none of us are doing very well at all!

Some are doing better than others, but ALL of us have sinned. We all, therefore have fallen short of God's standard and we all fail God's judgment.

Another way to envision measuring up to God's standard is to picture all of humanity standing on the Pacific coast of California, set to swim to Hawaii. For the purposes of this illustration, imagine that the ability to swim is linked to each person's moral goodness.

A serial killer, who has a score of about "0" on the scale of relative human goodness, would step into the water and immediately drown. I, on the other hand, would score much higher on the scale of relative human goodness, and would be able to swim a few hundred yards before drowning.

You are certainly more moral than I am and are therefore able to swim for several miles.

And then great people - Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, humanitarians and philanthropists - who score in the top 1% on the scale of relative human goodness, could swim on and on for hours, making it ten, fifteen, even twenty miles before drowning. Now that is an impressive swim!

But the bottom line is that the most moral person who has ever lived suffers the same fate as the worst of us. We have all sinned and therefore can't make it to Hawaii!

So what have we learned about God's judgment? First, being perfectly fair, God's judgment of each person will be proportionate to the revelation each person has received.

Summary:

****Responsibility before God is proportionate to revelation received*

God knows exactly how much revelation each person has received and exactly to what degree he/she has responded to that revelation. And, because He is fair, God will not hold anyone accountable for any knowledge they have not received.

But, God is also holy and will judge everyone on the basis of how they have measured up to the light they have been given and the moral standard that they personally acknowledge.

And second, NOBODY measures up to the revelation God has given them.

****The plight of humanity*

Every person alive is infected with a cancer called sin. This cancer manifests itself in our disobedience to God. Sin is seen in our refusal to worship Him.

And, because everyone has sinned against BOTH God's standards and against what they each know to be right, everyone is under God's condemnation and judgment.

We have all failed God's judgment.

And what is the end result for those who cannot stand before God in judgment? This brings us the most sobering theme in the Bible. But it is one we simply cannot avoid.

The result for the person who fails God's judgment is eternal separation from God in a place the Bible calls Hell.

The End of Judgment

The End of Judgment WITHOUT Christ

Jesus, on Hell

We are not told a lot about Hell in the Bible. Scripture tells us much more about Heaven than it does about Hell. But a good bit about what we do know about Hell we learn from Jesus.

Jesus actually spoke more about Hell, warned about its dangers, and described its horrors more often than anybody else in the Bible.

That stands to reason. He, more than any other Person who has ever lived, knew what Hell was like and knew that Hell was a reality. And He, the most loving Person who has ever lived, would want to alert people to the danger of Hell.

And when Jesus spoke about Hell, He would often use the vocabulary of fire.⁷

Hell and fire

Why fire? Well, fire destroys. If you place something that is combustible in a fire, that thing is soon burned beyond recognition. The essence of what that thing is has been changed by the fire.

Now it may be that what Jesus was saying by speaking of the fires of Hell is that it is a place of burning, truly and literally.

⁷ Matthew 5:22 - But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Also see 5:29-30; 18:9

But many who have thought deeply about these things have suggested that it might be that Jesus was using “fire” to describe Hell as a place of personal disintegration.

A lifetime trajectory “writ large”

Men like Timothy Keller and C. S. Lewis have wondered if Hell is a place where what happens to a thing placed in a fire happens to a person; that Hell is a place where the essence of a person as a noble and beautiful made-in-the-image-of-God being changes, eternally changes, into something increasingly grotesque, self-absorbed, isolated, and deluded.

That Hell involves continuing on the same trajectory a person followed throughout his or her time here on earth, on into eternity.

Think about it.

According to the Bible, what does God do with people who reject and then continue to reject Him? In Romans 1, Paul says that He “*gives them over*” to do what they want to do. God removes His protective, guiding, disciplining hand.

This is God’s wrath, the removal of His presence from a person’s life. This, more than anything else, will be the essence of Hell. The place where God is NOT.

And where God is not, people follow a path of destruction.

In this life, the sin of selfishness, unchecked, leads to bitterness and nauseating envy, and paranoid thoughts. Greed leads to paralyzing anxiety. Addictions lead to greater and greater addictions. Sin leads to increasing sin.

Hell is our freely chosen, apart-from-God identity followed into eternity and infinity.⁸

⁸ *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis describes a busload of people who travel from Hell to the outskirts of Heaven. They are given the opportunity to stay in Heaven IF they will abandon the sins that have trapped them in Hell - something that they steadfastly refuse to do.

As Lewis once wrote, ultimately there are only two kinds of people - those who say, “*Thy will be done*” to God; those to whom God says, “*Thy will be done.*”⁹

Hell is a sobering reality. But Hell is completely avoidable! God, this loving Judge, offers an alternative eternity.

The End of Judgment WITH Christ

If Hell is the fate of those who are separated eternally from God because of sin, Heaven is the fate of those who, faced with God’s judgment for their sin, rush to Jesus Christ to find salvation!

[2 Corinthians 5:21] He (God) made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

We all have the cancer of sin - and Jesus is the antidote. We are bound for Hell, not because we don’t believe in Jesus, but because of our sin.

But, if we will take the antidote God prescribes and place the full weight of our trust in Jesus and in Jesus alone - the One who bore our **JUDGMENT** - Heaven is ours!

Conclusion:

One of the biggest objections to Christianity today is the idea of God’s judgment. And because of that I have wanted to present the rationale and the reasonableness of the Bible’s teaching that God is a Judge.

But don’t think that I think I’ve wrapped up this topic in a nice, neat, complete package. No way! There is so much here that I have not touched on - and I know it!

I haven’t addressed what God does with those who have never heard about Jesus, what judgment those face who may call their god by a different name, the fate of infants and the mentally incapable, or what happened to those who lived before Christ.

⁹ Lewis also wrote, “Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom.”

All of these questions need to be addressed. And if you and I talk about them, we'll have helpful and productive conversations over coffee in Community Blend or over lunch or breakfast tacos at Taqueria Aguascalientes (my office away from the office)!

But, as we wrap up today, I'd want to be quick to point out that today, I'm not speaking to people who have never heard the name of Jesus or to people who lived before Christ. I have the privilege of speaking to you!

And the question I would pose to you is the question that the woman who led me to Christ asked me, "*What are you going to do with Jesus?*"

Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, ***[Luke 19:10] ...the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.***

If you aren't trusting in Jesus, you are one of those lost people Jesus is seeking right now. And He invites you, today, to come to Him to find eternal and abundant life **NOW** and **FOREVER**.

[John 3:16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.