



October 25, 2016

*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dear Church Family,

We began a new series on the topic of judgment. While judgment is something that we all exercise in our lives, making decision and forming opinions, the word usually has a negative connotation when used today. If someone says, "You are judging," or "Why do you judge?" there is an accusation of wrong behavior to those statements. A potential title for this series was "The J word." Os Guinness has written, "playwright Bertold Brecht claimed that the eleventh commandment of the modern world was "Be good to yourself." Today it has been replaced by a new candidate: "Thou shalt not judge."" In this series, I want to wrestle with this aspect of the world that we live in, a world that is adverse to the idea of judgment, judging others and being judged. I will do this from the perspective of what Os has written about the call to be in the world but not of the world. "Having engaged the world, but before responding to it, we must discern the character of the world, so that we know what to embrace with gratitude and what to resist with courage." I believe that there are things that we can embrace with gratitude about our culture's emphasis on the negative aspects of being judgmental. There is a dark side to judging that is sin and motivated by our sinful flesh nature. We will be looking at that this coming Sunday. But I also believe there are aspects of our culture's negative view of judgment that we need to resist. There is a positive side of judgment that is necessary for the church and the world.

Resistance does takes courage. It is much more difficult to resist our culture, disagree with its values and perspectives then it is to embrace areas where we can agree. In areas of agreement (what we can embrace), we can be appreciated, liked and respected by the world while also being faithful to Christ. So, that is a pleasant experience for us. Areas of agreement can also be important points of bridge building with not yet believers, attracting them to the truth of Christianity. In our call to reach out and attract people to the Kingdom, these areas hold great promise. But where we need to resist the world in order to be faithful to Christ, we will not be liked or respected, but more likely reviled. And no one likes that. This is not a pleasant experience for us and that is why it takes courage. We would rather avoid this.

For many Christians who are committed to engaging the world, the predominantly negative view of judgment means that the church should avoid the topic of judgment in preaching the gospel and focus on the love and acceptance of God instead. Any message of judgment is going to be rejected and the church perceived negatively. No one wants to hear that they are wrong much less in danger of suffering any consequences for being wrong. It is a message of love and acceptance that will attract people to Christ and the church while any notion of judgment will turn people off. But can the idea of judgment be removed from the gospel as an unnecessary stumbling block in this generation? Or is judgment part of the essence of the gospel or Christian message? There are strong biblical reasons to view judgment as essential to the gospel.

Stuart observed that the love of God is not mentioned even once in Acts. How is it that what we would say is the essential message of the gospel, certainly what we would emphasize in sharing the gospel, is nowhere taught in Acts? Isn't it hearing about God's love that brings people to conversion? Well, not in the Acts story. But there is the theme of judgment. Paul *reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment* with Felix in Acts 24 when sharing about faith in Christ. He also spoke to the people of Athens that *he [God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness*. At the very heart of the gospel message is the truth that there will be a day of judgment by God that nobody will be able to withstand on their own righteousness. This was the message of John the Baptist

preparing the way for the Lord, (*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Luke 3:7*) The good news is that there is a way to survive that day, to avoid the judgment that you deserve and that is the grace that has been achieved by Christ on our behalf.

Are people able to truly receive the gospel as the Good News that it is if there is no message of judgment? Can they truly believe and celebrate the love and radical acceptance that is theirs in Christ if they do not first understand that they deserve to be rejected rather than loved because of their sin?

For Paul, it was the experience of being chosen to serve when he was aware of deserving judgment (in the wrong, the chief of sinners) that was primary in his own sense of being rooted and grounded in the love of God. It certainly wasn't what he experienced in terms of hardship and suffering in his life. His sense of Christ's love for him did not depend on whether his life circumstances testified to that love.

And that is where so many Christians struggle today. Their sense of the love of Christ is not rooted and grounded in them being delivered or saved from judgment for their sin. They do not appreciate the price Christ had to pay for their salvation because they have never really believed that they deserved condemnation or would have been condemned without Him. With the message of judgment either missing or being deemphasized, their sense of God's love and acceptance is missing a foundational element. Their own sense of God's love for them becomes based on how He is loving them in the circumstances of their present lives. So, when they encounter hardship or suffering, they struggle to believe that God loves them. And they struggle to be thankful or be devoted to Him. If our sense of the love of God is rooted and grounded in our being saved from condemnation by Christ's sacrifice, then the difficult circumstances of our lives will not undermine our sense of the love of God because we are still saved from condemnation. We may be suffering now, but our place in God's presence for eternity is secure. When the Day of Judgment comes, it is the love of God in Christ that will save us from condemnation.

Without being rooted and grounded in the love of Christ that is expressed and experienced in our salvation from judgment, we have a shallow sense of God's love for us and therefore have a shallow love for God. We become like the second soil. *And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.* (Luke 8:13) The gospel of God's love and acceptance depends on the reality and awareness of judgment and flows out of that awareness of judgment. So, we cannot effectively preach a gospel of God's love and acceptance without also talking about judgment.

I explored some other reasons why we need to resist the predominantly negative view of judgment in our world, but there is not space to summarize that in this letter. This Sunday we will be looking at judgmentalism that is sinful and we need to be on guard against as we embrace the role of being a people of judgment.

Pastorally Yours,

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