

"THE DAY OF RECKONING"

INTRODUCTION The sermon this morning is about judgment, and judgment simply means that we are held accountable for what we do - our conduct, our wrong doing. I would venture to say that this is not a particularly congenial notion to us, for we would like to think that we can do just about what we want to do and never be called to account for it. We like to think that everything will come out all right in the end. Christians try to get around this idea of judgment, especially we modern Christians, by saying that God is too kindly, too friendly, too fatherly a God to make any of His children uncomfortable. We have presumed to remove God, so to speak, from His judgment seat and put Him into an easy armchair from which He watches his foolish children with an indulgent eye.

People who are not Christians and not committed to any particular religion try to get around the idea of judgment by saying that there isn't any judge - that we're not held accountable for what we do because there isn't anyone to call us to account - no standard, no inflexible moral law, no God. Rupert Brooke, in one of his poems, spoke for these people. In a moment of frustration, He climbed his way to heaven and in a poem wrote what he found when he got there. To his amazement, there was nothing at all....nothing but emptiness.

"All the great courts were quiet in the sun,
And full of vacant echoes, moss had grown
Over the glassy pavement, and begun
To creep within the dusty council halls,
And idle wind blew around an empty throne,
And stirred the heavy curtains on the walls."

The Bible, on the other hand, never makes any attempt to get around this idea of judgment. You find it on a great many of its pages. Almost the last words of the Old Testament are these: "Then will I draw nearer unto you for judgment, saith the Lord". And Paul speaks for all New Testament writers when he said: "For we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ".

Such a matter as this, therefore, is not to be taken lightly. If it's true that we are held accountable for what we do, that we face a day of reckoning, then we ought to know it and pattern our conduct accordingly. Therefore, I make no apologies for preaching a sermon on judgment, even though some persons may find it discomfiting. But I do this in light of the recent tragedy that has touched our nation, and also because we are in the Season of Advent and part of the theme of this season is that of judgment.

JESUS AND JUDGMENT We find that Jesus told an unforgettable story at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that will help us and start us on our way to an appreciation of what this idea of judgment is all about. It was a very short story with almost no details - a story about two men who built houses. As far as we know, both houses were good houses and both men lived happily and in safety. One day, however, there came a storm. It was a severe storm. And the man who had built his house on a rock foundation found that his house stood the test of the storm, but the man who built his house on sand soon discovered that his house could not withstand the storm and it fell. Why did it fall? It fell because it was not built on a solid

foundation. You see Jesus wanted them to see that there is a requirement in the natural law of things that if you wish to build a house that will withstand the strains of the weather, you must build it then on a solid foundation. If you do not do this, it will fall. This was the thought he was anxious to convey. One man was foolish and did not fulfill the requirements of the natural order. He suffered the consequences.

Jesus makes this very clear about judgment, and it's something we need to grasp and understand. Judgment is not punishment inflicted arbitrarily from above, but rather consequences incurred from within because of a failure to fulfill the requirements.

Another story told by Jesus helps to illustrate the same point. This was a story about ten young women. There were ten of them that were invited to a wedding and all went. Five of them were wise young women and they went all prepared, and five of them were foolish thoughtless, careless and they went ill prepared. They took no oil for their lamps, and while they were waiting for the party to begin they thought they could repair the damage of their carelessness and went to town to buy their oil. While they were gone the party began and the guests were admitted and the door was closed, and when they came back they found that they were left out. It was not that they were punished; no one sat over them and read a decree of punishment. It was simply that they had not fulfilled the necessary requirements involved in the situation, and they suffered the consequences thereof.

In all of this, Jesus did not show us a picture of an angry God taking almost peevish delight in punishing us when we have made mistakes. Heaven forbid. He shows us rather a moral God who stands by his laws and lets his children suffer the consequences of their foolish ways no matter how severe their suffering may be. In other words, Jesus wanted us to see that there are certain moral requirements built into the order of the universe - moral requirements which must be met and mastered or else we go down. We do not get in; the door is closed; the goats are separated from the sheep; the wheat and the tares are divided, once and for ever; we miss the buss, we lose our chance. We are in desperate need of being reminded of the solemn fact that there are requirements of God, which if we do not meet them, bring upon us the consequences involved therein. We are accountable in the long run for what we do. Only the foolish ones, said Jesus, will ever forget this.

ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES

Jesus, in the first story about the two men and their houses, makes clear to us that these consequences do not always occur immediately. Picture the two men who built the houses living in them happily for a long time. The man who built his house on sand may have thought to himself, "How smart I was....my house cost a lot less than my neighbor's house because I built it on a sand foundation...look at me....I'm doing all right. My house is just as good as his house and everything is going well". It wasn't until the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds beat upon that house that the weaknesses involved were revealed. And in that moment of judgment, the house fell and the man suffered the consequences of it.

It usually works out this way. We think of that time in our national history that we call the roaring twenties. People speculated wildly and without any caution whatsoever in some cases. They made money, they were successful. They went on from strength to strength and bigger dividends to bigger dividends and took greater and greater risks, winding up the economic top tighter and tighter every day, thinking to themselves - see what we can get away with....we're making all the money we want...reaping all of these profits:...nothing is happening to us. And it wasn't until 1929 that the rains descended and the floods came, and the winds beat upon that house of cardboard and it fell and great was the fall of it and we called that event in our history - the Crash.

The same thing happens in personal life. For instance, you see a couple who have been joined together in holy wedlock. They launch out on that new relationship with high hopes, with real sincerity, and with real devotion to each other. But then as you watch them you begin to detect a difference. You discover that they are more and more irritable with each other....more and more casual in the way they treat each other....both drink too much... they see less and less of their children....they spend less time with their old friends that they use to enjoy....they have given up their interest in the church and community activities that they once took such great interest in. And yet, you see them go on year after year. They apparently get along pretty well and they may say to themselves, "Well our marriage is not what people think marriage ought to be, but we're getting away with it". And then the man loses his job, or the wife loses her health, or temptation in the form of some other relationship enters the picture...or some other event occurs. Then, you see, when the rains descend, and the floods come, and the winds beat upon that flimsy marriage that has been sowing seeds of decay for years....perhaps that is when the judgment comes and that is when the house falls.

Rome, we know, was not built in a day, nor did it fall in a day. Two or three centuries before the actual fall of Rome, Roman citizens were gaily wasting their substance in riotous living. They were playing with their resources, they were using their extraordinary power and position in the world for ends that were not according to the requirements of God. We can imagine some of them rather smugly saying to themselves, "See we are defying all the laws of the prophets and we are getting away with it. We are having a wonderful time. Rome was never brighter, never happier, never gayer than it is at this moment". Then the barbarian hordes came down from the north like an avalanche and then the civilization which had been rotting for years revealed those cracks and channies in its foundations and could not stand the strain of the storm and it fell under the judgment.

All of this give us solemn thought about our country which I shall not put into many words because if the death of our late President has not made it plain to the people of this land, then nothing any minister can say can make it plain. His death, as I see it, was the exposure of a deep wound, a growing cancer of hatred,

bigotry, and violence in our national life. It has made us more aware than ever before that something is radically wrong in the life of our nation when this sort of thing occurs. Our values are all twisted. These days have made us aware of the seeds of hatred that are buried in all of us.

Judgment has a way of creeping up on you, catching you unawares. You can go along for a while - dissipating your energies, cutting the various corners - living the free and easy life - living a loose life - basing your life on the vulgar, the cheap - making occasional assassinations of others through violence of the ill considered criticism, vicious gossip....you go along for a while and nothing seems to happen and you think, "I'm not being held to account for this. All this talk about God being our judge is so much nonsense." Then the rain descends, the floods come, the winds beat on that flabby, weak soul of yours and you fall. And you suffer the consequences of your own failures to meet the requirements of God.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS

There is one further consideration for us to face and that is: what are the requirements. If I am to be held accountable for what I do and if I am to fulfill the requirements, what in the world are they. Jesus in that same story about the two men who built the houses made it clear. He said that the wise man who built his house on rock was like the man who heard what He said and did it. The foolish man who built his house on sand was the man who heard what he said and ignored it. In other words, Jesus had what we might call the sublime audacity to make himself the requirement and himself the judge.

So, it is not that we do not know what the requirements are, is it? There's no use in deceiving ourselves about that. We know all too well what they are. Love God with all your heart, mind and soul. And love your neighbors - the people around you - as much as you love yourself. Love your enemies. Do good to them that hurt you and persecute you. Trust God the way a child trusts his father. Be humble, not proud. Be gentle, never violent. We could go on at great lengths to enumerate the requirements. They are all found in the sermon in the Mount. We, I think, know what they are, but we try to get around them, or water them down.

Now some of you may not like the theme and message of this sermon because it is too hard and severe. Christians ministers, as I see it, are not ordained to preach what people like to hear, but what they believe to be the Word of God and I believe this to be the Word of God - for us, for America at this time - that every one of us has his day of reckoning to face sooner or later; that each of us is accountable for what we do; that a nation has its day of judgment, its moment of truth - and in the long run, whether our house stands or falls will depend upon the acceptance and practice of the lessons that were given to us long ago...in the life and the teachings of Him whose day of birth we shall soon be celebrating.

LET US PRAY:

O Christ, who art not only our Saviour, but our Judge - open our eyes to the realities of life; draw us back from any attempt to escape or evade the fact that we must suffer the consequences of our wrong doing. Forgive our foolish ways of narrow prejudice and malicious hatred; help us to look forward to the future, not backward to the past. Amen