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WHAT JUDGMENT *Can* WE EXPECT?

I spent 8 months in Budapest, learning mathematics while realizing how blithely ignorant most Americans are to their own privilege. I overheard three men while enjoying some *Rántott Czirke*¹ at the *Kék Rózsa* one Saturday.

Evidently, they were all artists who ran orphanages for artistically talented children. The tradition is that any student who paints a picture worthy of a spot on the wall is assured room and board as long as he or she chooses to live there. Given the difficult economy, those who run orphanages have to be mindful of their budgets. The three men were discussing who got the spots on the wall and who eventually was told they could no longer have a place at the table. My Magyar is not particularly good, but here is how I translated their discussion.

György Szabó, a semi-famous still-life artist, spoke first:

“Sadly, none of them paint as well as I do, and I stopped hoping for that years ago. Now I just tell all of them that if they do chores around the house and come to lessons every day for five years, they earn a spot on the wall. I make the agreement with every one, and some fulfill their end. After they serve five years, I put one of their pieces up. I suppose if someone did paint a picture as good as my work, I would accept it outright, but that has never occurred.”

Csaba Petruska mocked this solution and offered his own:

“Don’t the paintings you put on the wall disgust you? I could not stand to live around all those catastrophes. Here is how I have chosen to deal with the problem. My son, who is as good a painter as I, comes into the orphanage once a year. He offers to paint a picture for anyone who wishes and even allows them to sign their own name to it. I put all those on the wall and reject the rest. Oddly enough, few choose to take advantage of the offer. They tender their own work

¹Essentially “chicken fried chicken,” which, as anyone bred in the southwest can tell you, is nothing like “fried chicken.”

instead, which of course I reject. This way I can be merciful to those who realize their shortcomings, and I do not have to live around a bunch of ugly paintings.”

Hermann Tóth practically exploded at this point: “What type of fools² you are! Why on earth would you expect these kids to paint as well as we do? They have had neither the years nor the upbringing that we have. Only an idiot would expect a four-year-old to paint like Monet!³ You two have the brains of mashed-up yams.”

Csaba and György were shocked but could hardly utter much in their own defense, so they asked Hermann what he did. He answered:

“I do the only thing a reasonable person would. I give lessons as I can when I’m at the house. My son eventually moved in and now is available to everyone for guidance. Though he is patient with those who desire guidance, not all his students took his teaching to heart and the unsightly results have, quite sadly, caused others to go it alone. In the end I consider what guidance each has had and what potential the painting shows. If I think the child will end up contributing to the goals of my house, I put the painting up. If not, I don’t.”

The first man clearly allowed orphans to earn their way onto the wall. If an orphan worked for five years and then was denied, that young artist would have a justifiable complaint. The second person gave away spots on the wall as a free gift. But what about the third?

It cannot be said that Hermann required people to *earn* their way since he was the final arbiter of quality, and no agreement was in place. He took what pleased him. It is not like an employee earning a paycheck. Nor did Hermann use a system based on grace, though clearly he showed it in considering the background and potential of each artist rather than only the painting itself.

Hermann’s system resembles a mother who buys her 2nd grade daughter an ice-cream cone when she brings home a pleasing report card. The mother is happy with the report card even though she could have done better herself. Further, she is not under any obligation to get the ice cream for her daughter, but graciously chooses to because of her daughter’s work. Her daughter didn’t “earn” the ice cream — her mother was under no obligation to buy the treat for her. Yet, her daughter’s actions were certainly the instigating factor, conspiring with the mother’s natural love for her daughter.

²Actually, the exact expression he used does not fit the timbre of this book, so we’ll pretend he said “fools.” This pretense should not be difficult, for the entire conversation is a complete fabrication. The restaurant really does exist though, behind a massive synagogue. If you go there, order the *Rántott Czirke* (it isn’t on the menu) and give Esther my regards.

³Had this conversation really occurred, I suppose someone might have interrupted them, pointing out that Monet did, in fact, paint like a four-year-old.

I bring up Hermann and the mother to illustrate that the question “Do you believe you earn your way into heaven, or is it by grace?” represents a false dichotomy.⁴ I’m not claiming Hermann’s method is exactly the same as God’s, but it is far more *consistent* with scripture than Csaba’s.⁵

Before giving my “two-line answer” to the question posed as the title of this book, I want to give some commentary on issues pertaining to how different types of people may be judged.

Those Who Came Before Christ

The question of how those who came before Christ are judged is not of practical concern, for we can do nothing for them. However, our understanding of the Judgment has to be applicable to them as well.

Clearly Enoch made it onto the wall. One would think the same of Noah and Job, who are called **godly men**. Yet, none of these hoped for a savior.⁶ God’s grace clearly extends to those who have never (and will never⁷) hear any kind of gospel, as shown by Jonah being sent to Nineveh.

Given the number of people explicitly commended or called righteous who were outside Abraham’s covenant (e.g., Abel, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Rahab, Job, the Queen of the South), one should assume that all peoples (those who knew of the Promise and those who did not) have some chance of being placed in the category Jesus describes in *John 5:29* as **those who did what was good**.

⁴I would further claim that a study of what Paul was calling **grace** would show it generally referred to God’s sending of the Spirit.

⁵Quite possibly Christ’s work opened heaven in a general sense. One could argue that had Jesus never come no one would be allowed in because, at the very least, the proceedings shown in Revelation could not occur. However, this does not pertain to individual deliverance.

⁶*Job 19:25* should not be construed as an indication that Job looked forward to a savior. The word translated **redeemer** is the word for an avenger or vindicator. The NET commentator puts it accurately: **The word “redeemer” evokes the wrong connotation for people familiar with the NT alone; a translation of “Vindicator” would capture the idea more.** Job is saying that God will vindicate him to those who have **turned away** from him (see *Job 19:19*). It is further worthwhile to note that the Hebrew behind *Job 19:26* is so inscrutable that H.H. Rowley says **The text of this verse is so difficult, and any convincing reconstruction unlikely, that it seems best not to attempt it.** In any event, Hebrew history knows no indication of hope for deliverance from the grave until 1500 years after Job is thought to have lived, and this is shown in the Bible by Job’s own remarks in *Job 14:10–12* as well as David in *Psalms 30:9*, Solomon in *Ecclesiastes 3:19–20* and King Hezekiah in *Isaiah 38:18*.

⁷Some believe Jesus preached to those who had died before His coming based on a reading of *1st Peter 3:19*. While an interesting possibility, the Reformed church rejects this interpretation.

One would think these people are judged based on all the things Jesus indicates. They will be judged as they judged others. They will be forgiven commensurate with their forgiveness of others. *Luke 12:48* indicates people will be judged by the light they have been given.

Those Who Never Heard the Gospel

People who came after Jesus but never heard of Him are generally considered a separate category from those who came before, though it is hard to see why a Jew born 300 years before Christ is judged differently than a Native American born 300 years afterward.

There are passages in the Bible that touch on this subject, but they do not portray some magical division in time after which no one receives forgiveness except believers in Christ. Rather, passages like *Acts 17:30* indicate that God is now calling all people to **repent**. When one takes into consideration how radically monotheistic the Jews were (see *James 2:18–19*), Paul's proclamation indicates the Father no longer tolerates idolatry and desires that all people (rather than just the physical sons of Jacob) come into covenant with the Living God. Jesus is not mentioned by name.

So, it seems the difference between those living before Jesus and those living later is that worship of idols and pantheons leads to greater condemnation. After all, Rachel's theft of the household gods (*Genesis 31:34*) is recounted without a hint of judgment, and men practiced idolatry before Noah, but the only sin given as a reason for the flood is **violence** (*Genesis 6:11–14*).

Those Who Reject Christ

Even though it goes against the idea that salvation is only through **faith in Christ**, many hold out hope for those who never hear "the gospel." But it's harder to find serious Christians who believe that those who actively reject Christ can still survive the Judgment. There is certainly some basis for this:

Matthew 10:33 **If you deny Me before men, I will deny you before My Father**

John 12:48 **The one who rejects Me and does not accept My words has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day**

On the other hand, we also have scripture such as *1st Corinthians 7:14*, **For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife. . .**

Furthermore, the Jews who stoned Stephen (*Acts 7:59–60*) are at the top of the list among those who reject Christ, yet what does Stephen say? **Lord, do not hold this sin against them!** It seems odd for Stephen to be concerned with this particular sin if those who were stoning him had *absolutely* no hope.

Let's temporarily put these verses to the side and ponder the notion of *rejecting Christ*. What does that mean?

Imagine a 13-year-old girl in an unreligious family. Let's call her Anita. Anita is home alone and a group of Muslims come by to tell her of Islam. If she closes the door on the Muslims, did she reject Christ? Most would say "no."

Now, imagine a group of Christian Scientists or Jehovah's Witnesses come by, and Anita remains uncompelled after listening to them. Did she reject Christ in doing so? Most conservative Christians would say "no" to that as well because these two groups are often considered outside the group of "true Christians."

Let's say a liberal Episcopalian friend invites Anita to a church get-together. The pastor sees Anita and tells her of Jesus' love. The conversation has little impact on her. Many (most?) conservative Christians would not consider this rejecting Christ either.

The question is, *how accurate a gospel do you have to reject before it counting as rejecting Christ?* If a disillusioned Catholic disavows and never hears the Protestant version, did she reject Christ?

If I'm correct and Christians today are not proclaiming an accurate gospel, is anyone really rejecting it?

The issue becomes even murkier when we realize that a person's acceptance or non-acceptance of Christ as Lord is not a single decision made at a particular time — we also have to consider the messages the unchurched get when they *are not being evangelized*. Christians are representatives of Christ. If our lack of love towards others, our pitiful record at modeling Christ, or a history rife with hypocrisy and corruption in the church cause people to reject Christ, I would say they no more rejected Christ than when Anita was visited by the Muslims. They were not shown Christ, so how could they reject Him?

John 3:18–20 says evildoers hate the Light because they don't want their deeds to be exposed. Is *that* the reason people reject Christianity? Or is it because our poor efforts to model Christ fail to compel them?

Consider the parable found in *Luke 12:42–48*, which discusses people God places in spiritual leadership positions. In this parable, an unrighteous steward treats the household unjustly and does not teach them to do their duties. When the master returns, we find that all are punished, for none were doing what they

should have been doing. However, Jesus says of those who received no guidance **But the one who did not know his master's will and did things worthy of punishment will receive a light beating.** Compare this to the servant who was put in charge and did not do as he was told: **the master will cut him in two and assign him a place with the unfaithful.**

The odd thing here, other than the obvious judgment by works, is that one wonders what a **light beating** means. It hardly sounds like a description of heaven... but at the same time we do not get the feeling from the Bible that there are nicer shades of hell. Of further interest is that the servant **was assigned a place with the unfaithful.** This suggests a punishment altogether different and worse than those who were ignorant.

It's possible, of course, that the present-age application of this parable only refers to those in the church. Christ's original targets here were the priests who **have taken away the key to knowledge. You did not go in yourselves, and you hindered those who were going in.**⁸ But if we are the salt of the Earth and a lamp on a hill with a duty to disciple all nations, then I could easily believe that the present-day application of this parable views the entire world as the household. Then one would argue that there is hope for those who reject Christ due to the behavior and poor ministrations of Christians. *John 12:48*, generally given as proof that those who reject Christ are condemned, actually works against that philosophy in this regard. If people reject Christ due to the corruption of the church, then they can hardly be said to have rejected *Christ's Word* (which we'll discuss more in chapter nine).

One final nitpick to consider is Christ's warning regarding blasphemy of the Holy Spirit in *Matthew 12:31*. Jesus has more than present-day forgiveness in mind — **whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age, or the age to come.** Since Jesus says that those who **utter blasphemies** or **speak a word against the Son of Man** *can* be forgiven, it suggests rejecting Christ need not constitute an *unforgivable* sin. Otherwise, why state at length that words against the Son are forgivable while those against the Spirit are not only unforgivable now, but also in the age to come?

The above notwithstanding, there *is* the major point that Jesus' teachings have been transmitted through the ages. Anyone with access can read and decide, as Jesus describes in *John 7:17*, **whether it is from God or whether I speak from myself.** Part of those teachings involve Christ's own Lordship and uniqueness. It is a very real problem to say you agree with Christ on a moral level but then reject His words about Himself. If we simply take from Christ

⁸*Luke 11:52*

what we already agree with, we have learned nothing. That's like only attending class on days when you already know the material. Submission to Christ is seen when we logically realize that if He has so much wisdom concerning things we already partially understand, then He also has enlightenment in areas we cannot understand due to our self-absorption.

There are teachings of Christ that we do not wish to believe, or more pointedly do not wish to obey. But the cost of favoring *our* desires is to claim that Jesus is a liar or insane. *We either believe Jesus has an understanding of God that far eclipses our own, or we do not.* If the former, we have no reasonable conclusion other than that Jesus really is the Christ, given rulership over all Creation.

Of course, we could claim, as some have tried, that Jesus never said all those things about Himself. But to do this is much harder than it might seem. Most of us are now far removed from the torture, persecutions, and martyrdom faced by early Christians, including many of the apostles. To deny Christ's position and uniqueness is to suggest a mass insanity wherein scores of people would rather be tortured over many years or publicly (and painfully!) executed than deny Jesus as risen Lord who showed power through the Spirit among His disciples.

Furthermore, to deny this uniqueness of Christ, you are more or less forced to deny His resurrection. It would be odd indeed for God to raise Jesus from the dead if He were merely a prophet or teacher. ***To deny the resurrection is to deny all Christianity.*** To accept the resurrection puts one in a difficult place if one does not want to also accept Christ as a unique figure in spiritual cosmology, the only path to God. While some of the New Testament's authorship is in doubt, there is certainly enough text that even the most liberal scholars agree were written by apostles to clearly affirm that Christ's position as Lord is an essential belief for any follower of Christ.

What's my point here? I am saying most people today lack excuse for not following Christ and accepting Him as Lord over heaven and earth. Anyone interested can read Jesus' teachings and consider their ramifications. However, those who do not choose to do such investigation may well receive clemency, for the church has not given them good reason to do such research. If non-believers do not see the good wrought in Christians by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ, can we blame them for not pondering Jesus' Word? Why should people look into what Christ actually preached if we Christians seem to care so little for it ourselves?

Those Who Believe in Christ

The fate of those who believe in Christ depends on what one means by *believe*. People who have been **enlightened** by Christ, as *Hebrews 6:4* puts it, have lost whatever clemency ignorance may have afforded them.⁹ Those who receive the most enlightenment are held to the highest standard. Even Paul says that he has to be careful for his own sake in *Acts 24:16*, and James warns in *James 3:1*, **Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly.**

None of the above should surprise us. As Christ says in *Luke 12:48*, **from those who have been given much, much will be required.** He reiterates the difficulty and danger of discipleship in *Luke 14:26–35*. That we are enlightened and freed from bondage to sin obligates us all the more to obey God's commands. This is Paul's point in *Romans 6*, but *James 2:12* captures it more succinctly, **Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law of freedom.** James' language in 2:9 makes it impossible to put a spin of grace on this.

The above warnings should not discourage us from sharing Christ. In addition to being commanded to tell others of Jesus, we should see evangelism as an opportunity to help others be the creatures they were meant to be. Also, believers are the only people who are assured of a positive fate if they stand firm, obeying Christ's commands, as Paul describes in *Romans 2:7*. The next chapter is devoted to a more thorough discussion of what this faith looks like.

My Answer

When *Revelations* describes life after the Judgment, John speaks of a new creation — a new heaven and a new earth. Those chosen by Jesus enjoy life within a vast, blessed city called **New Jerusalem** that God places on the new earth. If we see the Judgment as a beginning rather than an end, as the advent of a new blessed kingdom in this new creation, an answer to the question *Who really goes to hell?* presents itself. We can conjecture a rule that not only respects God's desires but also matches the scriptures' portrayals of the Judgment:

Jesus chooses citizens for New Jerusalem whose history demonstrates they will contribute to its purpose. All others are left outside (in hell).

God has indicated a desire for a righteous nation from ancient times. Should we not expect that eternal desire to inform the Judgment?

⁹c.f. *John 9:41; 15:22–23; Romans 5:13; and James 4:17*

Summary and Final Notes

Most details concerning the Judgment and the life thereafter remain unknown to us.

A biblically consistent answer is to say Jesus chooses for life in the hereafter those whose history indicates they will contribute to God's goals for the kingdom of the new era. This matches perfectly well with my view on Christ's purpose. *Titus 2:14* puts it well:

He gave Himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people who are truly His, who are eager to do good.

It also explains the particular condemnation given to those who cause others to sin (e.g., *Matthew 5:19; 13:41; and 18:6*). Obviously, this type of character is not what New Jerusalem needs.

We can say without fear of contradiction that people are judged by the light they have been given. Thus those who have been enlightened by Christ, freed from bondage to sin, are held to a higher accountability than others. However, such people are the only ones who have a promise to hold onto. Jesus assures us that an authentic faith will see all His followers through. In the next chapter we investigate what kind of faith He means.

I have placed online some thoughts on life and death after the Judgment.