

Only God Can Judge Me

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Please make your way to your seats and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 3. 1 Corinthians 3. It's already been such a full morning, hasn't it? To sing, Jesus I come before the throne. Grace alone is like a combo designed to reduce us to tears and then to hear this update from Redeeming Grace.

And this morning we get the privilege of again opening God's Word. It's amazing we have this Word. It's amazing we have it in the English language and then we get to read it and consider it together as a privilege.

You know, in the young adult book from the mixed up files of Miss Basil E. Frankweiler, young Claudia appeals to Miss Frankweiler to the value of continuing to learn.

[1 : 11] Claudia even says she desires to learn one new thing every day. In the midst of their conversation, the wise elderly Miss Frankweiler responds, No, I don't agree with that.

I think you should learn, of course, and some days you must learn a great deal. But you should also have days when you allow what's already in you to swell up inside of you until it touches everything. If you never take time to let that happen, then you just accumulate facts. And they begin to rattle around inside your head. And you can make noise with them, but never really feel anything with them.

They merely remain hollow, she says. Now that's incredibly wise counsel in this little young adult book. It's tempting to race after knowledge and race through book after book after book.

As a rule, I'm not a very good read books twice type of guy. But she is so wise to slow down Claudia.

[2 : 21] To let that knowledge swell up. You know, I have a similar desire this morning. My hope is that what we already know will begin to swell. My hope is that we'll begin to feel more.

Specifically, my hope is that what we already know about the gospel will swell up. Ms. Frank Wilder said all our knowledge should swell and touch everything.

How much more ought the gospel to shape and touch everything in our life and all that we know? Far more significantly than our knowledge about anything else.

The gospel should shape and color it all. And this morning, my hope is that the gospel will shape and transform, perhaps, all that we know about the final judgment.

So last week, Mike concluded, Ecclesiastes calling us again to similar wisdom all throughout that book. To fear God. To keep His commandments. And to await this final reckoning.

[3 : 24] This final judgment of our lives. Now there's no doubt we have numerous questions about the final judgment. What's it going to be like? What's going to happen? What will we say? Will we appear before a great white throne?

Will all of our sins and failings be recounted to us? Much like watching a video screen of our lives. And what's more, how are we to think about it now? Should we fear it?

Should we dismiss it like our culture that says only God or no one can judge me? Or should we do something else? And my hope this morning is that the gospel would shape it.

That we would never see the judgment of God in the same way after we consider these few verses this morning. So next week, we are beginning a new series on the Psalms.

But this morning, we're going to anchor down about seven or eight verses from 1 Corinthians to see how to live in light of the judgment to come.

[4 : 23] Look with me in 1 Corinthians 3 verse 21. There the Apostle Paul says, Let no one boast in men.

For all things are yours. Whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours.

And you are Christ. And Christ is God's. He continues, This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ, stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it's required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. For with me, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

[5 : 42] Then each will receive his commendation from the Lord. You know, in a word, where I want to go this morning is kind of arguing this point that we are called to live free in Christ.

I realize that raises a number of questions, but that's the goal, and hopefully I'll answer some of your questions. But live free in Christ. I'm going to unpack this in three points.

The first point is your new identity. Your new identity. Now let me set the context for us a little bit. Our text lands in a dense section of 1 Corinthians.

Paul's addressing the church about division. Here's the issue. Paul planted the church, and then along came Cephas and Apollos and other guys like them, evangelists, to come and help the church.

And so they kind of helped the church get going. And over time, people began to connect with different ones of them in different ways. They began to prefer one to the other. Some like Paul.

[6 : 48] Others like the Apollos. Still others like Cephas. Dave's right around here. Everybody liked Craig. Now they all like Jake.

And then Chris is coming back. But their preference morphed into love and praise, into boasting over one and pitting one against the other and dutifully following one over against the other.

So they would announce, I follow Paul. Another would say, I follow Apollos. Another would say, I follow Cephas. The church appeared little more than a political rally rather than a worshipping community.

Division was created. But more than that, factions were created. Parties were created. And so Paul writes to correct them. But in the process, he unveils to us the incredibly exalted freedom of our identity in Christ.

And it's just simply mind-boggling. You know, he does immediately say, don't boast in men. Right? You know, in the beginning of chapter 3, he says, what are men?

[8 : 08] Essentially, that's what he's saying. What are men? Men are merely servants. They're merely people through whom God works. Yes, yes, some plant, some water. But God gives the growth. He supplies the seed.

He causes it to grow. It's silly. Don't boast in men. They're just agents. They're just instruments. They're just things, persons used by God.

But he takes it a step further that I think just pushes the realm of comprehension. In verses 21 through 23, which we read together, so let no one boast in men, for all things are yours.

Now, that's kind of one of those sentences you've got to read over five times and still ask the Lord for clarity. I mean, what does that mean? Well, here's what's going on here.

The point is, what he's saying is, you don't belong to Paul. You don't belong to Apollos. You don't belong to Cephas. You don't belong to whoever preached the gospel to you or whoever baptized you, whoever nurtured you in the faith.

[9 : 16] You're not with them. You're not a part of their team. You're not serving them. Rather, you belong to Christ.

Look at that, where he continues. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas. Keep going. All are yours, and you are Christ, and Christ is God's.

You belong to Christ. These other things are merely servants brought to you that brought you to Christ, and Christ has given you all things. Okay, y'all tracking with me?

So he's saying, don't boast in men. If you boast in one of these, you cut yourself off from the rest. Now, that's a bit of a detailed concept. Let me try to break it out with an illustration.

Now, we all know that guitar is superior to piano. I mean, anybody can play piano, but musicians play guitar.

[10:18] But for the sake of my illustration, just hold on to that thought. That it would be silly to have an orchestra and to have a favorite instrument.

Now, obviously, we can have a favorite instrument. Quite obviously, you know which one mine is. But in a similar way, it would be silly to say, I'm all about the oboe.

I mean, that's kind of silly anyway. But it would be silly to just watch for their lines, to just follow their musical part, to watch for their entries and watch for their exits, and not listen to all the rest that's going on.

Or maybe you follow the drums because you like to march along, and so you're following the entrance of the drums. You're following his hands and what he's doing. And when he accents and how it changes the song, to follow one would be to miss the whole.

Does that make sense? So what Paul is saying is if you go and section yourself off and faction off with one of these men, you miss benefiting from all of them. And so he's saying the deepest loss is not rivalry and factions, the deepest loss is not benefiting from all that you have in Christ.

[11:41] So all of yours, all the evangelists, all the pastors and teachers. But he continues, not only do you have Paul and Apollos and Cephas, look down with me in 22, he says, you have the world and life or death or the present or the future.

All are yours. So it's just even more mind-blowing as he continues. These things, these five things, are the fundamental things that bind us and grip us in this life that seem so irrepressible, so unable to escape.

The world is always seeking to squeeze us into its mold. Life is always clamoring for us to live as if this world is all there is, to live like we're dying because there's nothing else afterwards.

Death hovers over us as if to steal away everything that matters. The present presses us with urgency. The future seems so unknown, so unpredictable, so scary.

But what he's saying, in Christ, you're freed from all of that. What he's saying is, it's as if in Christ you're perched above all the pressures of life in this world and exalted above these things.

[13:05] It's as if he's saying, what's life but a vapor before everlasting joy? What's death but a door to paradise? What's the present but the ordered circumstances of God's will?

And what's the future but the unfolding of untold good? We're not subject to all things. Rather, what he's saying is that all things are subject to us.

One of my favorite quotes on this aspect of theology is from Martin Luther. And he writes, every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that he is completely Lord of all things so that nothing whatever can do him any harm.

Yea, all things are subject to him and are compelled to be subservient to his salvation. Thus, Paul says, all things work together for good to them who are called and also, whether life or death or things present or things to come, all are yours and you are Christ.

These verses are not merely promises that we hope will come true. Romans 8, 28 is not merely a promise that we hope might work out.

[14:38] Rather, it is the guiding principle of the God of the universe in whom we have been called into fellowship and through whom works all things according to the counsel of his will and according to our good.

In a word, this is the identity you enjoy in Christ. All are yours and you are Christ and Christ is God. Now, what that means is that the ultimate meaning and purpose of your life is not uncertain or unknown.

The verdict has been rendered you belong to Christ. You need not align yourself with anyone or anything to secure the significance, meaning, and purpose for which you long.

The only jury that matters has spoken you belong to Christ and nothing else matters. So when we begin to think about identity, what is identity?

It's just who I am. But as Christians, when we begin to think about identity, we only plumb the depths of it when we press that to say whose I am.

[15:53] I love the way Jake began the service that we remember not who we are merely, but whose we are in Christ. It changes everything.

How would your life look different if you entered each day palpably aware of your acceptance of Christ? How would your life with your spouse look different if you didn't look for the only approval, if

you didn't look for the approval that can only come from God, from them?

He continues, you are Christ. Strikingly, in chapter 4, he kind of unpacks two words that he calls us to for a servant and they both underline this idea.

Look with me there. He says, this is how one should regard us now, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Now servants, literally there means under rower. The idea is that in the midst of a big old ship, there would be rowers down under, at the bottom of the ship that would do the rowing while the captain would stand on the deck and direct the ways of the ship.

[17:23] It's often used in scripture for a Roman official, someone who's under charge. That word for steward just simply means house manager. It's not the owner of the house, not the owner of the estate.

It's the one who looks after the estate for the owner. He keeps all things in order for the owner. And the point is emphatic there. We're not heads of anything. We belong to Christ.

We're bound to him and are his servants. So Paul continues, nothing else matters but faithfulness because nothing else matters but Christ. So live free in Christ.

Point two, your present life. Your present life. Now, even trying to unpack that first point is lofty.

And it feels so good, though, to consider our identity with Christ and know how exalted and free we are in him. It seems so far off and so distant from everyday life. Now, how do we live this way every day?

[18:34] How do we live this out every day? Look down in verse three and four, and Paul kind of opens up how to live this out. He says, but with me, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.

In fact, I do not even judge myself, for I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I'm not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

Now, it strikes me as a very odd way to talk about life. If you notice, threading through those two verses is this idea of a courtroom, this idea of judgment.

He says, judged, court, judge, any accusation against me, acquitted. It's odd. Is life a courtroom? Is life a judgment? Now, obviously, Paul is speaking metaphorically here, but the idea he's trying to press home is that everyday life is a series of situations, circumstances, and relationships in which we're thrown back into the courtroom, so to speak.

[19:45] While the ultimate verdict is in, and the ultimate meaning and purpose of our life is settled, that we're accepted, exalted, and free, in Christ, Paul unveiled the actual trouble with everyday life.

Tim Keller puts it this way, we look for that ultimate verdict every day in all the situations and people around us. Every single day, we're in the courtroom.

Every single day, we're on trial. That is the way everyone's identity works. That's a powerful statement. Every day we're in the courtroom, every day we're on trial, that's the way everyone's identity works.

So Paul says, it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. Paul's talking about, in provocative language, he's talking about what we would often call the fear of man. The fear of man is an excessive concern with what others think of me. It is this excessive concern with my performance in the eyes of others. It's a preoccupation with my thoughts, my actions, and my deed, with wanting others to think more of us.

[21:14] And it's so provoking that Paul likens it to the courtroom because that's exactly how it feels. The fear of man feels like a trial.

It feels like a courtroom. It could be about anything. It could be about how clean your house is when some distinguished neighbor comes by or someone you respect comes by or how obedient your kids are in the nice restaurant with quiet people eating around you or how well you pray at community group when your community group leader asks you to pray for someone or how strong you are at the gym or how fit you are or how much money you make in comparison to your fellow employees or where you live and so much more.

It happens so quickly. You know, in human interaction, we want a little encouragement, right?

And there's nothing wrong with encouragement. Actually, encouragement is vital to life in the community. But it happens so subtly and so quickly when we look for others to not merely give us the verdict on how we're doing but how important and how valuable and how significant we are.

And every day unfolds with innumerable occasions to stumble. Honestly, I found the fear of man to be one of the greatest challenges of my life.

[22 : 49] Not just in the big moments, so to speak, but in really silly stuff. By all accounts, I'm a very lousy golfer.

All my friends would tell you that. I think, you know, you go out to play a game of golf and you're thinking about being outside all day and you're so excited.

This is the way I tend to think. I'm excited about being outside all day, being excited about being with my friends. And, you know, I get up to the green and I know I have this horrible slice that I can't really do much about.

It just kind of goes there and I just got to play with it. But, over the course of a day, I may be playing. I remember playing one time with Bob Coughlin who was one of my, he is one of my Christian heroes.

He's a friend. He's also author, songwriter, worship leader, extraordinaire. And, playing with him, you know, I was so excited to play with Bob, but before long, as I stepped up to the tee box, my thoughts were not about golf.

[24 : 03] They were about gaining a good shot from Bob or way to go or something like that. And, you know, which does not help the tee shot at all.

And, for long, I'm just dribbling it off the tee box about 15 yards. And, I'll never forget at one point, one of the other guys we were golfing with said, you don't have to be a good golfer for us to like you.

I didn't know whether to cry or to smile, you know? We like you because you love God and love to worship God. And, actually, that helped.

But, it does show you and illustrates how silly this gets. Even out enjoying recreation, we can begin to want to compete and want to appear impressive and want to get applause.

And, so subtle. You know, it can come forth in talking too much or in talking too little. It can evidence itself in anger or anxiety, in overworking or staying in the bed, in envy, in boasting, and so much more.

[25 : 21] A little desire for praise can rear its head. Paul continues, though, on the other hand, he says, I don't even judge myself. You know, while the fear of man is an excessive concern with what others think, it's also an excessive concern with what I think about myself.

Whereas, fear of man can be focused on others and their opinion of my life can overshadow everything else. Paul's opened our eyes to see that fear of man can also be that my opinion and overshadows everything else in my life.

And so, no matter how many compliments I get, I see only my lame personality. I see only my small gifts.

I see only my ugly body shape. I see only my failures. I account only my weaknesses.

and wallow in my failures. And it's just as great a problem. So, Proverbs is right, the fear of man is a snare.

[26 : 45] What can deliver us from this snare? And thank God, Paul opens our eyes to this as well. He concludes verse 4 by saying, it's the Lord who judges me. It's the Lord.

truth. This truth pulls us out of ourselves and helps us realize that only one person's opinion of my life matters. Only the Lord can judge us.

Throng of applause do not matter. Your own self-assessment does not matter, is what he's saying. No one can judge, but God, in the wonder of it all, is that the one who actually and truly judges is the one who has freely accepted us in Christ.

That's what he's trying to get at. This is what makes Christianity utterly unique. As Keller has said so many times, the verdict comes before the performance.

No other religion is like this. In fact, this turns religion on its head. All other religions are working for a verdict. Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam are all a performance first religion.

[27 : 54] But Christianity is the opposite. Peter wrote, For Christ has suffered once for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

The point of that verse is that the righteous suffered for the unrighteous so that he might take up all our sins upon himself. All of our lousy performance might be laid upon him, and it might be exhausted and finished with, but it also means the righteous also stood in the place of the righteous so that all his righteousness might fly over to the sinner who says, Woe unto me, I have unclean

lips.

And so all his perfect righteous record was transferred instantaneously to us so that we are brought to God, accepted freely, once for all, no questions asked.

That's what gives us this freedom in life, not the applause of the people around us, nor the convincing of our own heart, but the righteousness and the full performance of Jesus Christ that transforms everything.

And, beloved, if there's anyone in here that's not come to the knowledge of these things, maybe you've spent this week falling off the treadmill of performance, dropping innumerable plates of trying to please others, of wallowing in your own despair and despising yourself, I want to call you to come to Christ.

[29 : 43] He doesn't say clean up. He says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, I'll give you rest. Live in Christ. Live free in Him.

Point three, your future judgment. Your future judgment. This identity transforms judgment because it prepares us for the only courtroom that matters.

He's told us all the courtrooms that do not matter. He's told us the opinion that does matter and now He's preparing us for the courtroom and the only courtroom that does matter. In verse five, look with me there, He says, do not pronounce judgment before the time before the Lord comes who will bring all things to light, the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Jesus promises again and again that what's hidden will be revealed. That there is a day that what's hidden will be revealed. That's what Jesus says again and again and again. And on that day, all that's hidden that's in the darkness will be brought to light.

Everything unknown, everything done in secret, everything covered up, every secret sin will be brought to light. He also says the purposes of every heart will be disclosed.

[30 : 59] All the thoughts and tensions of every heart will be revealed. Man looks on the outside. God looks at the heart. And on that day, the hearts of all will be exposed.

So it's so right that he begins his first saying, stop judging others now. Don't prejudge. Don't assume.

Don't draw conclusions. Don't criticize. How many times have we been proven wrong by the assumption we drew in our own heart and life? Be careful.

God knows the end of the story is what he's saying and the Lord will render judgment at the proper time. But then he keeps going. And this is incredible. When he comes, Paul opens our eyes to see that the Lord will reward his servants.

Now, Scripture repeatedly talks about rewards. It says, rewards await the Christian. Nothing will be forgotten, not even a glass of cold water. And Scripture makes clear that some will get more rewards than others.

[32 : 04] And we know that's true. But here, the essence, the essence, the core of what the rewards is all about is unveiled to us. Each will receive his praise and honor from God.

Look what we there, verse 5, last sentence. He says, then each one will receive his commendation from God.

God. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. Now, what's going on here? When our hearts are exposed and everything hidden brought to life, each will receive his commendation from God.

This can't be the final judgment. This is a travesty of justice. But, beloved, this reveals the deepest mystery of the final judgment.

While, yes, like 2 Corinthians 5 says, we will give an account for every deed that we've done in the body, whether good or whether bad. All that was bad and all the judgment for those sins and failings was exhausted at the cross and nailed to the record where Christ suffered in our place.

[33 : 21] Now, all that is left is the delight and praise of our Father in heaven. Jesus told a parable the last day in which the master said, well done, good and faithful servant.

Enter into my joy. Similarly, Hebrews said, Jesus endured the cross, despising its shame for the joy set before him.

Now, what is that joy? Well, this is it. It's the delight of God overflowing in honoring his servants and bringing them into the joy.

This is the imperishable wreath. faith. This is the unfading crown of glory. This is the great reward. So often in our world, we think of rewards in monetary and material terms, but this is far better. This is the weight of glory, as C.S. Lewis calls it, and it's all that matters. And it's the essence of what awaits us in the final judgment. recently I read a book about a minister, a priest in L.A., and he told this story about the Lord and about how his view of the Lord changed when he heard this story from a friend.

[34 : 44] He writes, a memorable image of God comes through the story of my dear friend, Bill King. He writes, years ago, Bill took a break from his own ministry to care for his father as he died of cancer.

His father had become a frail man, dependent on Bill to do everything for him. Though he was physically not what he had been, and the disease was wasting him away, his mind remained alert and lively.

If you've ever been to these moments, you know how these moments go. You know, in the role reversal common to adult children who care for dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done when he was a child.

Bill would read some novel, and his dad would lie there staring at his son smiling. You know, Bill was exhausted from the day's care and work and would plead with his dad, look, dad, here's the idea.

I read, you sleep. I read to you, and you fall asleep. Bill's father would impiously apologize and dutifully close his eyes.

[36 : 07] But this wouldn't last long. Soon enough, Bill's father would pop an eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, now come on, dad, you know the rules here.

The father would again oblige to catch a glimpse, wait, would then oblige until he couldn't anymore, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son.

This went on and on, and after his father's death, Bill knew that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid. How much more so of God?

Now, maybe you think that's just a cheesy story, and it kind of is, but it gives us a glimpse, a faint glimpse, a very faint glimpse into the heart of our father in heaven.

One who said, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased, and the one who's called us and brought us up into him is the one whose delight is in us because of the work of his son, and the father's delight in you as his child is not one of reluctant tolerance or mere acceptance or even moderate satisfaction.

[37 : 29] It is one of deep, rich, bountiful delight. I love the way C.S. Lewis says it at the end of the weight of glory.

He says, how God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important.

The promise of glory is the promise almost incredible and only possible through the work of Christ that some of us, that any of us who really choose, shall survive that final examination and shall find approval, shall please God.

To please God, to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness, to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work and as a father and his son, it's almost impossible.

It's a weight and a burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain, but so it is. It's the way Lewis is, and so it is with you.

[38 : 38] If you've trusted in Christ, this is a thought that's hard to sustain, an unimaginable weight, but so it is. It changes everything. To believe this, to cling to it, to believe that I really am by the work of Christ pleasing to God, and to believe that God truly does delight in me before I do anything, changes everything.

Would you believe it? Would you bank your life on it? Would you live such that you know it's true and that all your life flows on it, and would you let you change all the trials and courtrooms you face?

That's what God has for us. That's what awaits us. And that's what we enjoy today through Christ. Live free in Christ.

Yeah, I want to say two things in closing, just two simple applications. You know, I just want to encourage you to take several of these phrases into your life.

Often, we think of Scripture memory, and it's overly intimidating to memorize verses at a time, and obviously verses at a time are great to memorize, and we should do that.

[39 : 56] But we overlook the power of phrases. And there's two incredible phrases here. It's a very small thing is an incredible phrase.

It'll change your swing thought, so to speak. It'll change the background noise inside your head.

When the approval or disapproval of others seems so deafening, cling to this.

It's a very small thing to me. It's a precious phrase. Another one is, I don't judge myself.

hedge off your thoughts with a phrase like that, such that you stop short of endless evaluation of your performance.

And I also love this contrast that's through this text, and it's powerful as well. Take in the now and the then that remain there. On the one hand, we take this now, and that's the reality of life in this world where we do experience disapproval and slander and gossip.

[41 : 14] We experience rejection. We experience despising. We experience not feeling approved in different ways and contrasted in your thoughts with the then.

All those voices are gone, and even your own heart is silenced. And each receive his praise from God. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we thank you for this morning, and thank you for these few minutes. God, I pray that you would help us. I so desire to live this out and walk this out and cling to these truths.

God, I pray that you'd give us grace and help us. Lord, I pray that anything that was unhelpful would be forgotten, and that anything that was helpful would lead us to Christ and cause us to fall before him, to live for the only opinion that matters, and to live for the praise of him.

God, we thank you. We praise you. We commit our lives to you. We pray that you would find them pleasing and acceptable in your sight. In Christ's name, amen.

[42 : 28] You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.

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