Jesus and Judgment

Steve Case, Sunday at 1:30 PM

(Read Revelation 20:11-15)

(Begin with empty stage/platform, but live mic on Steve.)

Stand if you love Jesus.

Sit if you consider yourself to be a judgmental person.

(Steve takes the stage.)

On the whole, we are very quick to make judgments! According to Princeton psychologists Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov (<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/how-many-seconds-to-a-first-impression#.WG15CrGZO-o> accessed January 4, 2017) it takes us only 1/10 of a second to form an impression of a stranger.

 Given more seconds, viewers were more confident of their first impression.

 We judge how a person looks in just 1/10 of a second. Forget your smooth opening line, the observer has already made their judgment!

Please take a seat now if you’ve made a judgment about how I look.

 If you haven’t made a judgment about how I look, that in itself is a judgment.

(Steve temporarily walks off the stage, removing his ugly hat, sports coat, and clashing tie, then returns.) The only judgment made faster than how a person looks is whether or not you can trust someone. Oh no! I’m afraid my evil twin brother was up here first. He sure makes a terrible first impression. I have to spend a lot of my time trying to reverse that. If you’re not willing to give me a new start, a fresh chance, then let me direct you to the coloring sheets and colored pencils on your table. If you’re not an artistic, right-brain person, just turn over the page and there are lots of words about Jesus and Judgment found in the Gospel of John, often quoted out of context, that I won’t get to in this presentation on Revelation 20:11-15.

Now, for those who are going to give me a fresh chance. . .

We love Jesus but we tend to have an aversion to judgment, don’t we?

If I say, “Jesus” we tend to think of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

If I say “Judgment” we tend to think of guilt, punishment, and bad outcomes.

My daughter, Kate Case, has challenged my perspective on “Judgment.” She works for International Justice Mission. This Christian organization seeks to bring about justice in a world rife with injustice. They believe they are doing what Jesus would do. If you want to find out more, ask her—she’s right here today.

My wife, Marit, has brought this home to me by sharing one of her books about incredible injustice happening right now in the United States (*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson). If you want to know more about this, ask her—she’s here today as well.

I’d like to mention Pastor Day Wysong, who co-authored with me *Finding Jesus in the Book of Revelation*, for giving me input and feedback for this Reflection today. And to Bob Schubert, my mentor and prayer partner, for challenging me every step of the way. However, these men should not be blamed for what you hear me say.

Back to my issues of judgment, because of my own personal guilt, often unresolved, buried, denied, hidden; and because I have come to expect that injustice is more likely than justice, I have an aversion to judgment. How about you?

The closest I come to judgment or justice is the following:

I want justice on you, and mercy for me.

In contrast, God wants justice by me, and mercy for you.

Let me repeat that:

I want justice on you, and mercy for me.

God wants justice by me, and mercy for you.

Here’s how God already communicated it:

Do justly; love mercy, walk humbly with God.

I need a new perspective on Judgment and Justice. I need to be able to release what seems normal to me—the American culture in which I seek to diminish judgment or make it irrelevant.

I need a paradigm shift. And I can get that miraculously by taking a Hebrew perspective. If you’d like to go for this, just wave your hand and shout, “Yahweh.” Are you ready for a Hebrew perspective on judgment? It includes three elements:

1. Turn to God
2. Stop what’s wrong
3. Set the oppressed free

The Biblical book called “Judges” reveals one judge after another, like Gideon, Jepthah, and others, who prompt these three actions. The book of Daniel, whose name means “God is my judge” does the same thing. These three actions can be summed up in one word. It’s a word that has fallen out of favor, and out of use. That word is: REPENT. Personally, I don’t like it. At all! It calls for me to say three things I don’t like: 1) I’m wrong; 2) I’m sorry; and 3) I want to change. These are unnatural, foreign and repugnant to me for three reasons: 1) I’m an American; 2) I’m male; and 3) I’m human. However, Alcoholics Anonymous got this right. Let me introduce myself, “Hi, my name is Steve, and I’m a sinner in need of repentance; with a God who freely gives the gift of repentance.” I struggle to accept this gift. How about you?

And yet it is definitely worthwhile. It heals the breach between God and me, and the breach between others and me. No wonder God provides us the gift of repentance!

In our current culture that professes “tolerance” we have removed the word “sin” from our vocabulary and replaced it with words like “choice” and “personal preference” in all areas of our lives. Perhaps we misused and abused the word before. Too often we have focused on the speck in another person’s eye while being blind to the log in our own eye. Jesus admonished people to repent of their own sin first, and then they would be able to help rather than hurt others. But now we no longer even speak of sin, which renders the word “judgment” irrelevant, and eliminates any need to repent. The result is our refusal to accept the gift of repentance Christ offers.

Repent—not only did the judges in the Old Testament use the word, but you can find it at the start of the New Testament with the message, “Repent, because God’s kingdom is here, now!” John the Baptist started his ministry by proclaiming this (Mt. 3:1-2), and so did Jesus (Mt. 4:17). Few things are more unnatural to a carnal heart and mind than repentance. Few things are more biblical and transformative than repentance.

Because the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the last book of the Bible, has judgment as one of its repeated themes, the call for repentance also permeates its pages. It turns out that Jesus pairs nicely with judgment; Jesus pairs nicely with repentance. The actions are the same:

1. Turn to God
2. Stop what’s wrong
3. Set the oppressed free

This is another way of saying:

1. Do justly
2. Love mercy
3. Walk humbly with God

The first segment of Revelation pictures Jesus walking among the seven lampstands—the seven churches. The most common message to these seven churches is: Repent!

The next portion of Revelation describes the enthronement of Christ in heaven following his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. From heaven, a series of seven seals contains multiple judgments with messages of repentance. These relate to the entire Christian Era. The fifth seal pictures martyrs under the altar of sacrifice, calling out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you JUDGE the inhabitants of the earth (God’s code for the wicked) and avenge our blood?” (Revelation 6:10) They are told to wait, and it certainly requires patient endurance to wait for God’s final judgment. He seems way too merciful in contrast to our limited time perspective.

Following the seven seals are seven trumpets, giving a warning call with judgments to get people’s attention so they will repent prior to God’s final judgment. These remind us of the Old Testament Feast of Trumpets that included 10 days with a focus on repenting and getting right with God before the Day of Atonement—the final judgment brought to mind by the yearly round of feasts and festivals the Israelites practiced.

At the heart of the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, an angel flies through the heavens with the everlasting Gospel for the entire earth. Note the key words: “everlasting” Gospel, not a new message or something limited to the end times; it is the forever Gospel. And “Gospel” is the Good News of Jesus. This gets spelled out is a vertical manner rather than the horizontal: do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. The vertical version is:

1. Fear/Honor God
2. Give him glory/put all you have into God
3. God’s final judgment has come
4. Worship the Creator

Do you find Jesus and Judgment in the heart of Revelation? I do!

Another way to perceive this through Hebrew eyes is a consideration of Hebrew cosmology—how God’s people viewed the relationship between heaven, earth, and hell. This could be pictured as a flat earth—something Columbus challenged more than a millennium after John received his visions on Patmos. Above the earth was heaven, shaped like a dome. And below the earth was hell, called *hades*, the place of demons and the dead. Heaven had direct access to earth. The passageway between the earth and the underworld or *hades* was through the sea.

I’m not saying the earth is flat. But to better understand the message John received, we need to put ourselves in John’s day and understand things from his perspective. Then we can make the application to our current situation. If the idea of hell, *hades*, demons, death, and the underworld being accessed by the sea doesn’t make sense to you, consider some stories from the life of Christ.

When Jesus was on the Sea of Galilee, it seemed common for incredible storms to threaten his life and the lives of his disciples. The powers of the underworld were out to get him. But he commanded, “Peace be still,” and all became calm. The panicked disciples wondered who he was since he obviously had power over both natural and supernatural elements.

When the disciples went onto the Sea of Galilee one night and Christ later came to them walking on the water, we think, “Cool! Would that feel like walking on Jello?”, and we miss the significance of what this would mean in John’s day. To walk on something indicated you have dominion over it. Jesus has dominion over Satan, the demons, the underworld, hell. And so do his disciples, as long as they keep their eyes on Jesus.

How about one more example? When Jesus cleansed the demoniac, the demons asked to go into a nearby heard of pigs. Jesus granted their request. The demons entered the pigs and the pigs went where? The demon-possessed pigs went into the sea. We could say they went home.

And this is why the Old Testament records that all of our sins will be cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

What does Hebrew cosmology have to do with Jesus and Judgment? We’ll consider it one level at a time.

The top level, heaven, is where Jesus is right now. And judgment takes place in the heavenly realms regarding the earth. The seven seals and the seven trumpets come from heaven. Before Christ takes people from this sin-filled planet, all the heavenly host must have their questions answered. It’s not that God needs a pre-Advent judgment to find out who goes to heaven. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament testify that God knows who are his (Nahum 1:7; 2 Timothy 2:19). After all, he is God! But God, faithful and true, wants all heaven to fully understand so they trust his judgment. According to Revelation 16:5-7, two heavenly witnesses—an angel and the altar under which the martyrs cried out for justice—testify that God is just in his judgments. Just before Christ’s Second Coming, John heard the “roar of a great multitude in heaven” as they proclaim the judgments of God are “true and just” (Revelation 19:1-2).

The middle level, earth, is where the Holy Spirit is right now. And judgment has been taking place ever since the entrance of sin. That’s why repentance needs to be our daily posture—our daily practice. That’s why even though the penalty of sin was fully paid by Christ’s blood on the cross, the power of sin must be overcome in our lives by the water/washing of the Spirit (Titus 3:4-7; Romans 6:1-14). That’s why John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). God’s people are judged based on the good works that the Spirit does in them and through them. Saved by God’s grace, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). That’s how we are “saved by grace, and judged by works”—both are gifts from God. Our part is trusting God for our salvation, *and* trusting God to do the very things He wants to do through us. When Christ comes to earth the second time, he takes his people back to heaven with him (Hebrews 9:28). Revelation 20:4 describes his children reigning and judging during the millennium. This is the time when all of God’s people get to have all of their questions answered about God’s judgments. And their testimony will also be that God is just in his judgments.

This takes us to our passage at the end of Revelation 20. The time period is the end of the millennium. This is Christ’s “third coming” to earth. The only ones who are “dead” at this time are the wicked. Why does Jesus resurrect the wicked, just to judge them and then kill them again? The purpose of this resurrection is for the wicked to have all of their questions answered, too. This is going to take some time. But God has all the time in the world. God is doing this, judging, for all heaven, earth, and those “under the earth.” Every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). Even Satan will bend the knee, along with all of the wicked. And then Satan will deceive them again and they will choose again to try to overthrow God’s kingdom. It’s just like when Pharaoh acknowledged that Yahweh was God and let the Israelites leave Egyptian bondage. But he later chased after them to bring them back to Egyptian slavery. He will keep doing that until he is destroyed.

Couldn’t God just leave Satan, his evil angels, and the wicked on the earth? He could make it the garbage dump of the universe—for those who refuse to “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Why does God eventually destroy the wicked? He does so for at least two reasons.

First of all, because God will dwell on earth, without separation that has been present ever since sin entered this world. What happens when God shows up face-to-face? According to both the Old Testament and the New Testament, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29) when he encounters evil and sin. In contrast, those who do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God receive from him new bodies that are non-combustible in the presence of God. This is like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were unharmed by the flames as they walked with Jesus while those who threw them into the fire died because of the flames. Sin and wickedness go up in fire in the presence of God (see Genesis 19:24-29—Sodom and Gomorrah; and Revelation 14:9-11—those who worship the beast and its image).

Secondly, God is preparing a place for his people at the “wedding supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). That place is Planet Earth. The millennium in heaven is just the honeymoon. Heaven moves to earth after that. In order for God to prepare a place for his bride, he has to cleanse the earth from the presence of Sin. Christ paid the penalty for all Sin on Calvary, and Christ also overcomes the power of Sin in us through the water of the Holy Spirit cleansing our lives. And Christ will finally eliminate the presence of Sin on this planet through the purification by fire—what we find in Revelation 20.

There will be a new heaven and a new earth. But there will be no more hell, *hades*, wicked, underworld, Satan, or death.

I’d like for all the females to please stand at this time. For just a few moments I’m asking you to imagine that I represent your spouse, your significant other, your one true love. And, like, Christ, I have gone to prepare a place for you. It’s here in California, in the foothills. It includes some acreage, a fixer-upper that I got at a good price. So I’ve been fixing it up, just for you! One of the ways I was able to afford this great spot is because the house is completely infested with rattlesnakes—each room has 15-20 of them. Yes, they are poisonous! But because I love you, I have gotten rid of half of the rattlesnakes—there are only about 10 per room now. Don’t worry, you won’t always see all of them.

So now I have a question for you ladies. If you’re willing to come with me to this special place that I have prepared for you, the one that is all fixed up now and has only half of the rattlesnakes that it used to have, please sit down and I’ll know that this is adequate for you. If you’re a millennial, just replace rattlesnakes with being someplace without cell phone reception or internet access.

I can see that many of you are not okay with a place prepared just for you when it’s also occupied by lots of rattlesnakes. What if I’m able to get rid of all of the rattlesnakes except for just one—the one that is the biggest, sneakiest, and deadliest of them all? Ladies, if you’re willing to move in with just this one deadly rattlesnake, would you please sit down now.

You’re rather picky, aren’t you? Okay, bride of Christ, if you want the place prepared for you to be free of every single rattlesnake so there is no serpent, viper, or Satan present, I invite you to sit down now.

That is Jesus and Judgment. Here’s how Revelation describes what Jesus does for you with the judgment for all levels—heaven, earth, and under the earth: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” (Revelation 21:1).