

SAINTS TRIUMPHANT

John 5:24-29

The Son Gives Life

Jesus is the Perfect Judge. A scary thought. *“Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”* Jesus the Perfect Judge, sees your deeds, knows your thoughts, and hears your words. How many before us haven't trembled at the thought of His judgment. How could this perfect Judge love them when they had slapped His face so often with their sins? And, having crowned our Savior with our own thorny transgressions as well, how can we not stand with our fathers and tremble before our perfect Judge, as we well should when we've treated sin as anything less than a death sentence or as something somehow congruent with or acceptable in the Christian life.

“But I have done both good and evil, so maybe I am all right,” you might think. But that's the wrong approach. Have you done evil? If the answer is yes, then you know which resurrection you deserve, that is, the resurrection of judgment. So have you done evil? St. John writes in his first epistle, *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us.”* Why add calling God a liar to your rap sheet? You have done evil. Has it bothered you? Does it bother you? It should, because Christ's words are clear. *“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”*

So what do we do? We can read the whole text. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”* No one can stand before God in the Judgment and be acquitted on his or her own. All have done evil. But the believer does not stand in the Judgment alone. In fact, the believer does not come into judgment. The believer, by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection and through faith, has already passed from death to life. For the believer who has confessed his sin and received forgiveness as forgiveness and not as an “its okay,” the judgment has already taken place, and he has been acquitted. With our evil forgiven, there are only the fruits of our faith to define us.

Think of Cain and Abel. *“Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.’ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.”*

What was the difference between the offering of Cain and Abel? It wasn't the offerings so much as the men, the New Testament says. The writer to the Hebrews writes of Abel, *"By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks."* St. John writes of Cain, *"We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous."*

Abel's offering was righteous because it was offered through faith in the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. Cain's offering was evil because it was offered through unbelief, the work of the Evil One. Their relationship to God defined the character of their deeds. Abel, righteous in Christ, did righteousness. Cain, evil in the Evil One, did evil. Abel, by very nature as a believer, bore fruits of faith. Cain, by very nature as an unbeliever, could not bear such fruits, no matter how much he offered or how hard he tried.

What is your relationship to the Righteous One? Your works provide a glimpse. If we've done evil, we ought to be concerned about our relationship, because a good tree should bear good fruit. Good works are not an option for the Christian. Good works are a necessity, not for salvation, because God has commanded them, because faith overflows in them. But a glimpse is not a whole picture. Seeing a problem with a relationship cannot establish or repair a relationship. Only the one we've wronged can do that. So, we must listen to the One we've wronged, to see where our relationship stands, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."*

Yes, we with so many others, seeing our evil and hearing what awaits those who do evil should properly ask how this perfect Judge could love us when we've slapped His face so often with our sins? We too at times must stand with our fathers and tremble before our perfect Judge, having treated sin as anything less than a death sentence or as something that is in any way congruent with or acceptable in the Christian life. But at such times, when the law and our conscience have worked sorrow and a desire for change, we must stop and look at our perfect Judge again.

The Son is the expression of the Father's love for you, through whom the Father takes you from death to life. See your perfect Judge through faith and hear the hammer that sunk the nails into His hands become the gavel that heralds your undeserved verdict of innocence. Your Judge stood trial for you, so that eternal life and not judgment awaits. *"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it,"* and His Baptism, His Absolution, His Body and His Blood promise that He is pleased to give it to you.

Your Judge is your Savior and your Savior is your Judge. How can He deny those for whom His hands, feet, and side still testify? Leave your sins on His cross and take His promise with you, that you might do what He has declared you to be as His new creation: good. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."*
Amen.