

Faith Matters: I Believe He Will Come Again to Judge the Quick and the Dead

sermonaudio.com

Wednesday @ First

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 5:6-21
Preached on: Wednesday, October 31, 2007

First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Well, good afternoon. We are continuing our series in the Apostles' Creed and today we come to the clause in the creed, "I believe he will come again to judge the quick and the dead," and we're going to read from 2 Corinthians 5 and you'll find the reading is already printed on the bulletin. I'm not sure what color this is, it's not white, it's kind of what I would call buff, I suppose, but it makes the reading stand out. And you'll notice if you've got both pages open, that this would be a good time to turn off your cellphone. I had the slightly embarrassing experience of preaching on Sunday night in Augusta to a gathering of churches for Reformation Sunday evening, and my cellphone went off just before I was going to speak.

2 Corinthians 5:6, this is Paul writing in a section in 2 Corinthians 3 that goes right through to 2 Corinthians 6 in which he is discussing the character of his work as an apostle and as a gospel minister. There are seasons in minister's lives when most of them go through periods of criticism and that's not a novel tradition in the English speaking world, that's a tradition that goes right back to the days of the prophets, right back to the ministry of Jesus and certainly the Apostle Paul, and there were people in the church in Corinth who were seeking to dislocate him from the place of affection that he had in the hearts of the Corinthians. They were belittling him, they were saying that he wasn't eloquent, that he wasn't good-looking, that he wasn't a great communicator, and that by implication they were, first of all, better looking, that they were better communicators but they didn't really love the people and Paul is speaking here in his defense about how he loved the Corinthians by bringing the gospel to them. So he says,

6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. 11 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 12 We are

not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. 13 For if we are beside ourselves [and obviously there were people saying that Paul was a little out of his mind] if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind [as Paul certainly believed he was], it is for you. 14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 16 From now on, therefore [now that we've come to faith Paul is saying], from now on we regard no one according to the flesh.

He means by that that we no longer think about people by merely human standards. When we see people as Christians, we're not just thinking about where they are in the hierarchy of society. We've a much bigger perspective. We're really most deeply concerned about where they are in relationship to the Lord. So he says,

from now on we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Well, I hope you're finding as I'm certainly finding, that there is much of interest in this 100 Latin word summary of the Christian faith. And we've had some pleasure and indeed some amusement at the thought that somebody somewhere managed to condense a statement about the great basics of the Christian faith to 100 Latin words. It was originally written in Latin and actually to not many more words when it's written down in English. And when people think about the Apostles' Creed, there's usually one phrase or statement that particularly stands out to them, at least in my experience. Whenever you mention the Apostles' Creed, there will be somebody who will say, "I've always wondered about that statement," and one of those statements, of course, that we've looked at is that Christ descended into hell, what does that mean? And another statement is going to come, what does it mean when we speak about believing in the church? But here we've come to a statement that, I think, intrigues our children most of all if we're still using this classic version of the Apostles' Creed. We're so used to it that it never dawns on us to a child to say, "I believe he will come again to judge the quick and the dead," is a very strange thing to say.

The quick, who are the quick? Well, of course, the quick are the people who get across the road fastest, aren't they? Those are the quick people. It's one of the delights of not being American that being in an American city when the traffic lights change, a sign comes up that says, "Don't walk. Don't walk." Now where I was brought up, the words "don't walk" were treated, for those of you who are interested in grammar, as what's called litotes where you say something strongly positive by putting it in a very negative way. And so Scottish children seeing that sign, "Don't walk," would all gird up their loins and chase across the road and a few of them would arrive alive on the other side because they weren't quick enough. But that's not what the word "quick" means in this context, is it? I mean, we're all so familiar with this, it doesn't strike us how curious this must sound to our children and our grandchildren.

He'll come to judge the quick and the dead. Why doesn't he come to judge the slow and the dead? And the answer, of course, is that this is just an old English word for those who are still alive. So here's the question for you today: are you quick today? And the fact that you're eating, that you're talking, that you're breathing, and most of you certainly look alive this afternoon, you are among the quick. And what the Creed is saying is that when the Lord Jesus Christ returns, he will come to judge both the living and the dead.

Now later on in our series of studies in the Apostles' Creed, we'll return to this idea, excuse the pun, we'll return to this idea of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's what he's returning to do that I want to think about just for a few minutes with you this afternoon, but just before we do that, let's remind ourselves that actually over the peace in the New Testament there are probably more references to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ than there are to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just a very interesting thing because in our Christian year in most of our churches, we'll celebrate his nativity and we'll celebrate his resurrection but we don't often celebrate what a special day the fact that Jesus Christ is going to return. But there are many, there are multitudinous references in the gospels and in the letters and also in the Acts of the Apostles and in the book of Revelation, I think that covers everything in the New Testament, multitudinous references to the fact that he will come again.

Now why is that tremendous emphasis on the Lord Jesus' second coming? Is it so that we can all be turned into kind of armchair sleuths trying to work out when he will come? No, not at all. It's because of what is emphasized here in the Creed, that what we have done in response to his first coming will be made manifest at his second coming. What we have done in response to his first coming is what is going to be, as it were, brought fully and finally to light in his second coming. And the New Testament teaches us that his second coming will be a personal coming. Remember how the angel said to the disciples when he ascended into heaven and they said, "What are you doing staring into heaven? He's not going to come back today from heaven but," they said, "this same Jesus will return in like manner to the way in which you have seen him go." So it's the same Jesus who was raised and ascended who will come again in majesty and glory, as the New Testament scriptures say, in the clouds of heaven and the glory cloud of God's marvelous presence and with his holy angels. And as he comes personally, we're told he'll come visibly, and we're also forewarned that he will come unexpectedly. Unexpectedly. That is to say, you'll not be

able to work out in your calendar the date when the Lord Jesus will return and that's quite deliberate on God's part because God wants us to be ready really every day of our lives for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I love that story about the great English evangelist in the 18th century, John Wesley, brother of the hymnwriter, and John Wesley, of course, wrote some great hymns himself. And as he rode around England preaching the gospel and going around on horseback, I think that must have been pretty cool incidentally, you know, to be able to ride around on horseback instead of, you know, no traffic lights, no dangerous driving, time to meditate. And somebody encountered him on the road. He was extremely famous. "Mr. Wesley," he said, and Wesley stopped and the man said to him, "You preach so often about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ and when I've heard you preach, Mr. Wesley, it's always been a question I've wanted to ask you." Must have been a visitor from the United States, you know? "I have a question for you." It took me about 10 years over the emotional shock of being approached, "I have a question for you." Let's hope it's one I can answer. "I've a question for you, Mr. Wesley. If you knew for a fact that the Lord Jesus was going to return at this time next week, what would you do between now and then?" Do you know what Wesley did? Got down off his horse, opened his saddlebag and he pulled out his calendar and he flipped through it. He said, "This afternoon, I would preach in such and such a place. Tomorrow, I see I'm supposed to be preaching in another place." And he just went through the events that were on his calendar, and then when he had read that out, he said to the man who had stopped him, "And that's exactly what I would do if I knew the Lord Jesus was going to return at this time next week."

What a way to live, isn't it? That really is the way to live, and as I sometimes says, you know, we need to learn to live our lives as Christians backwards as well as forwards, to live a day at a time in the consciousness that this may be the day, the day that the Lord gives to us. And when we think about that, it's not a morbid thing to do, "Teach me to number my days," says the psalmist. It's not a morbid thing to do. It's actually a highly efficient way to live. Now that's not to say that you do what Wesley did, he divided each hour, I think, into 20 minute segments. He was a 20 minute manager. But to live conscious that you're actually living towards a destiny, that we're not caught up in a kind of tumble dryer of life that's just an endless cycle going nowhere, but we are destined to go somewhere and therefore thinking about that destination is one of the most life-transforming things we can do as Christians.

Now here's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 about that destination and I want you to notice his words in verse 10. He says, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." He's speaking about God's final assessment of our lives and you'll notice he includes all of us in it. He includes the Corinthians in it. He includes himself in it. By implication, he includes all of us in it. And there are two things to notice. First of all, what he has to say about the character of God's judgment. In scope, it's clearly universal and that's characteristic of the Bible teaching right from the beginning, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" That's characteristic of the teaching of Jesus as we're beginning to see in the parables that we are now reading towards the end of

Matthew's gospel on Thursdays, how towards the end of his ministry a kind of focus develops in Jesus' parables because of the urgency of the situation and he's urging people to see that decisions that we make now determine destinies that we will have in the future.

Then another thing that we might just skip over but it's actually obvious also in what Paul says, not just that the scope of this judgment is universal but that this judgment will be marked by perfect equity. It will be true judgment. It will be accurate judgment. You know, we all in different ways judge one another. I don't mean that we are judgmental in spirit but that we make assessments of people, and most of us discover at some point in our lives how foolish our assessment has been, that we haven't really known the truth about that person's life. We wonder why they are so slow and then we find out something about them that makes us amazed that they're as quick as they are. Or we wonder why they always seem to react to something in the way they do, and we discover something about their background and we realize how false our judgments have been because we've not been able to take a kind of whole-person scan and then examine that scan, and we don't have the ability really to assess people very well. In fact, Paul says actually to the Corinthians, "You know, I don't really know how to assess myself," which is a good word for some Christians. Some Christians spend all their time assessing themselves. Paul says, "You need to learn to forget about yourself because you're not capable of making a really final assessment of yourself." But God is. God is.

You know, you can't help wondering what will that final assessment look like if we are, you know, when God puts us all into the final sieve of his judgment and we come out, as it were, on the other end, how different will that look from the assessments that have been made in this world, and even the assessments that we make of others. I sometimes think that's one of the beautiful things about being a Christian, that you can see what Christ has done in somebody else's life and not feel jealous of the fact that you think when you get to glory, they're going to be a lot further on than I am, that because of what I see God has done in their lives, I'm glad of that, I rejoice in that. It's such a wonderful thing to be a Christian believer when you look forward to the absolute equity, the fairness, the discrimination, the perfection of the judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here's an important thing the New Testament teaches us: the Father has put all judgment into the hands of the Lord Jesus. Now why has he done that? It's so that we can be absolutely sure that we will be judged by somebody who is our peer, who has felt our temptations more deeply than we have, experienced our griefs more profoundly than we have, died a death more awful than any death any of us could ever die. So that we are never able to say to God about his judgment of our lives, "You used the wrong measuring stick to judge me." No, rather in the presence of the Lord Jesus, as Paul says in Romans 3, our mouths will be zipped shut and we'll know his judgment, his assessment is absolutely perfect which is why one of the things that we've been discovering in these Thursday parables is that we need to be prepared for suffering reversals to take place because God judges absolutely, perfectly.

Now the great question is what's the basis of this judgment, and Paul also explains that. He says, "We will be judged according to God's true standard. We will receive what is due." Due for what? Due for what we have done in the body. That is to say, what will be assessed is who we have really been. What will be assessed is who we have really been. Now, of course, we can think about that but we'll come to somewhat differing conclusions about what that means depending on the grading system we imagine God will employ. I don't know if you know, but because education is now so international, deans of colleges and universities have manuals piled high telling them what a grade at one university in one country means when it's transferred to another university in another country because grading systems are not all the same. Actually, I'm constitutionally different, a very different grading system from the American grading system. The difference between being British and being American is summed up in the grading systems that are used in Scottish universities and American universities. How does the grading system work in an American university? You start with 100 and then they begin to chip down. How does the grading system start in a British university? You start with 0 and you've got to work your way up. No wonder Americans are so optimistic. You get 85% in a British exam and you are flying like an angel. You get 85 in an American exam, at least in the institutions I've taught in, and you're heading for the exit door.

So the grading system makes a great deal of difference, doesn't it? So how does God grade? Is God British? Is he a British God? Or is he an American God? I'll judge you all according to your own standards. Well, no, his standard is absolute perfection. His standard is Jesus and anything less than Jesus is a failing grade ultimately. That's the shattering truth of the gospel because it so overturns every other grading system we've ever used, that we are better than average like I think I've maybe told you before, apparently 80-90% of the population believe they are better than average drivers but even with my mathematics, I can see that can't be possible. But we all think that way and the one person with whom we never compare ourselves from the point of view of God's assessment of us is that Jesus is the only one who has received a passing grade.

So Paul is saying the situation is very serious and that's why he says in this context, you'll notice in verse 11 he immediately says, having spoken about the character of this judgment, he immediately goes on to say something about the effects of this judgment, "knowing the fear of the Lord," he says. Now he's speaking here as a Christian whose discovered something else about God's judgment, and we'll come to that in a moment, but he's looking out on the world as a Christian and he's saying because we realize what a perilous situation humanity is in, our great desire as we think about them appearing before the judgment seat of the Lord is, he says in verse 11, to seek to persuade them about the one way in which at the judgment seat of God they may receive not condemnation but justification. And it's so obvious, isn't it, from what he says that if we stand before the judgment seat of God in and of ourselves, no matter what we bring with us.

I love the story of one of the great 20th century theologians whose works would have reached, I think, almost to the ceiling of Jackson Hall, and he tells the story of trying to get into heaven as he carries the pile of books and St. Peter says to him, "You can't bring

any of that stuff in here." So not even mammoth religious accomplishments are adequate there, but Paul is saying because he's really a beggar who's found bread and he realizes his responsibility is to tell other beggars where they may find bread, the rest of this chapter is taken up with him explaining to us how those of us who understand that before the judgment seat of the Lord we stand condemned, can know that we may one day stand before that judgment seat as though we were perfectly righteous.

Now I can imagine that some people reading this passage might think that Paul gives us a little clue further on down the passage when he says that we really believe this, that God has not counted our trespasses against them. Look at those words in the middle of verse 19. Here's Paul's gospel message, God was "not counting their trespasses against them." And I've met so many people who read words like that in the Bible and they say, "Well, that's the God I've always believed in. I've believed in a God who doesn't count our trespasses, who doesn't count our sins. So there's really no need to be anxious about the judgment seat of Christ, is there?" But that's not what Paul is saying. What Paul is saying is that those who come to faith in Jesus Christ discover that this wonderful truth is the very heart and soul and power of the Christian gospel. It's not that God didn't count men's sins, it's that instead of counting our sins against us, he has counted our sins against somebody else.

He doesn't count their sins against them ought to make us ask the question, "Well, then, against whom does he count their sins?" And the answer is in the very last verse of the passage, isn't it? He made Christ who was sinless, who knew no sin, to become sin. He who was righteous bore our sin on the cross in order that those of us who are unrighteous but who are holding on to him in faith and trusting in him as our perfect Savior in order that we might be counted before God as perfectly righteous because, and how I love this, this has meant so much to me personally, to think I can stand before the judgment seat of God on the last day and be counted as righteous as Jesus himself because the only righteousness I have is Jesus' righteousness and he said to me, "Give me your sin and take my righteousness and stand in that righteousness before my heavenly Father and all will be well."

Now here's what I think is the most interesting thing. Paul himself was not gloomy about the judgment seat of Christ for himself. He was burdened for others to discover what he had discovered through faith in Christ. Elsewhere when Paul speaks about the judgment seat, for example, in almost the last words he ever wrote or dictated to his young friend Timothy, he says, "Now I'm finishing my life and I've got this great confidence that when I appear before the judgment seat of the Lord, I will receive," what he calls, "the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give not just to me but to all those who are looking forward to his coming again in glory." And he's really, he's stretching forward to it, looking forward to it. How could he possibly do that? Well, the answer lies in that little expression he uses, "The Lord is going to give me the crown of righteousness." You see, he already believes in Jesus Christ, his sins have already been forgiven, he's already cloaked in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and so he's looking forward to the judgment day just as somebody might look forward to their coronation day if they were a king or a queen, because on that day instead of being turned away from the presence of God, Paul

says it will be as though God will place a crown of righteousness. He's given me his righteousness now in the Lord Jesus but it's as though he'll place the crown, there will be outward expressions of that righteousness on that great day.

Here's a trick question to end with. I'm sorry, it's a very British question but it is a trick question. When did Elizabeth become queen? Answer: not the day she was crowned, not the day of her coronation, she became queen the previous year. Her coronation was simply the outward expression of what had already been true, that she was queen, she did reign. And so for the Christian believer, the final judgment of the last day has been kind of pushed forward into the present day. We know how we stand before that judgment seat and that's why we can look forward to it with anticipation because then it's all, I think the best way to put it is this: it's almost as though the Lord will say, "Now, since that day when you were justified through faith in my Son, in your life I've been molding this precious crown to fit your head perfectly, and on it there are designs that give expression to all that I've done in your life and it will be different from the crown on every other Christian believer's head. You're all justified in my sight but I'm giving you an individual crown so that everybody sees you."

You know, sometimes when you meet people, I know it's bad manners but you look them in the face and then you look at something else, maybe look at their clothes or their spectacles. I often look at people's spectacles, their ties. Often people's ties will tell me whether they're American or British so, you know, you don't stare at them but you pick up these things and, you know, when people say, "Will we recognize one another in glory if we're Christian believers?" The answer is, yes, partly because you'll say, "Weren't we in First Presbyterian Church together?" I met a lady on Sunday in Augusta and I just knew almost from the moment I began speaking to her that this must be the daughter of a couple from Alexandria, Egypt I had met only one time in 1979 but there was just something there that kind of reminded me. "I remember you. I remember you." And then you glance up at the crown and you say, "But I didn't know that's who you really were." You might even say, if you're allowed to say this in glory, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't really recognize you." And you see, when we begin to think about that future now, it not only makes us want to say to those who aren't Christians there is forgiveness and justification in Jesus Christ, but it makes us want to live with those who are Christians with a certain kind of sensitivity to the fact that we don't want to be either too short or too embarrassed when we find out who they really were. You know, some people have entertained angels unawares and not known they were angels, and sometimes the people we pass by and we don't give very much time of the day to, we'll be jolly surprised when we see their crowns.

What a great thing the Christian faith is, isn't it? Don't you think it's the most extraordinary thing in the world? Here we are sophisticated 21st century people, all our scientific gadgets, and here we are in a room where the thing that really matters to us all is that we live our lives into the future as though as to have settled our destiny then through coming to faith in Jesus Christ. I hope you've done that. It sure changes everything. It really does.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your presence with us, thank you that your word is so relevant and applicable to us, so living and so real, and in faith it becomes so enjoyable to us even when we think about sobering things, we realize that as Christians on the last day when you place that crown of righteousness on the heads of your children, we want to gasp to you, "Lord, Lord, if we knew, if we had known you were as kind and gracious as this, we would have wanted to have loved you more and served you better." So as we get glimpses of the future, help us to live for the glory of your Son better in the present. We ask it for his sake. Amen.