

Resurrection of Life vs. Resurrection of Judgment: John 5:25-29
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In the first week of this new year, maybe you've been giving some thought to the things you'd like to do in 2017. Maybe you've been planning and making goals for yourself. The start of a year can cause us to reflect on the previous year or years, and to anticipate the next 12 months. What do we hope will be different in 12 months? What do we hope will be the same?

I was praying this week, "Come, Lord, quickly!" Wouldn't it be an awesome thing if our Lord Jesus returned in 2017. That's something to anticipate. And this is why it's good for us to meet together regularly and look into God's Word together, because the default mode is to be consumed with the tyranny of the urgent, to live from moment to moment, from day to day, week to week, with our heads buried in the chore list of life.

We need to lift up our heads and gaze out into the distance, to events that happen at other times than our own. We need to look into the past and meditate on the great things God has done throughout history, most of all, the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. And we need to look into the future to that glorious day when Jesus will come back. These events don't show up on our weekly calendars. They're not part of our task list or event list for the month. But they impact everything about our daily lives.

Listen to me, friend, when that day comes, when Jesus returns, it's not going to matter to you any longer whether you got that new video game you wanted, or whether you were able to afford your dream car or dream house. You'll no longer be stressed by the amount of laundry to be done or the expectations put on you in your workplace. We need to regularly glimpse into that future reality so we can have perspective on the present.

So I encourage you this morning as we will be considering the future resurrection, the final judgment, to lift up your head, to rise above the anxieties and stressors of this coming week, and let's think together about eternity. I'm convinced this will have a huge impact on the way you'll then think about this coming week and this coming year.

There is a day coming, it may be this year, when Jesus will return and judge every individual according to their works. We need to know about this, what it means, and what all it entails.

First of all, by way of review, let's turn back a couple chapters and recall the contrasts in John 3:17-21. Verse 16 is that great Gospel proclamation, "For God so loved the world, that he

gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

And then it goes on, Read vv. 17-21

Salvation vs. Condemnation

Beginning in verse 17, the first contrast we see is between condemnation and salvation.

Belief vs. Unbelief

And then there’s the contrast between salvation for all who believe and condemnation for all who do not believe.¹ All those who believe are saved. But those who do not believe are condemned.

Light vs. Darkness

Verse 19, *the light* has come into the world, and people loved *the darkness* rather than *the light*. Verse 20, everyone who does wicked things hates *the light* and does not come to *the light* . . . Verse 21, whoever does what is true comes to *the light* . . .

Love vs. Hate

Verse 19, people *loved* the darkness rather than the light . . . Verse 20, everyone who does wicked things *hates* the light and does not come to the light . . . Verse 21, whoever does what is true *comes to* the light . . . There are these deep and intense desires within our souls that either repel us away from the light or propel us toward the light. There are these deep desires that move us, literally, in our actions and attitudes – love and hate, directed one way or the other in relation to light and darkness – this will determine the course of our lives both now and for eternity.

“True” works vs. “Wicked / Evil” Works

This will especially connect with the focus of our text for this morning. Verse 19, people loved the darkness rather than the light because their *works were evil*. Verse 20, For everyone who *does wicked things* hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his *works* should be exposed. Verse 21, But whoever *does what is true* comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his *works* have been carried out in God.

Our actions are an outworking of our desires. Those who remain in a state of loving darkness and hating the light will continue to produce wicked, evil actions. They stay in the darkness reveling in their dark deeds. But those who have been changed by the power of God, who have been born again to new life, our desires have been changed, resulting in different actions and attitudes. Loving the light we are drawn more and more into the light. And as our works are conformed more and more into

¹ Leon Morris, “These are the two sides to the one coin. Jesus came to bring salvation, but the very fact of salvation for all who believe implies judgment on all who do not.” (*John*, 205)

Christ-like deeds, it becomes clear that these actions are fruit of God's work. That's what the end of verse 21 is saying. Those who are doing what is true, our actions conform to God's truth and are an evidence of God's grace. Notice there that truth is not something one merely agrees to intellectually. Truth is something that shapes your everyday life. The truth that has gotten ahold of you and transformed you, it works itself out in your daily behavior. Whoever does what is true comes to the light. And those actions shaped by the truth are evidence that God is carrying out that work within you.

Now we come to our text in chapter 5, and we recall the context here, that Jesus has incited the anger of the Jewish religious leaders by healing a man on the Sabbath. They accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, which shows just how cold-hearted and legalistic they really were. Rather than rejoicing that a man had been miraculously healed, they pointed their fingers in disapproval. But the issue was even bigger than that.

They recognized that Jesus was claiming to have divine authority. They understood that He was claiming to be equal with God. And it was a very profound paragraph we studied together before Christmas, chapter 5:19-24. Jesus takes us inside the Trinity, as it were, to reveal some of the inter-relational dynamics between God the Father and God the Son.

The Father and the Son Are Equal

The Father Leads the Son

The Father Loves the Son

The Father and the Son Raising the Dead

Honoring the Father and the Son

Hearing the Son, Believing the Father, Having Eternal Life

Let me just review the point about raising the dead, because that's important for what we're going to see about the resurrection of life and the resurrection of judgment.

The Father and the Son Raising the Dead

Vs. 21, "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will." This is part of Jesus' bold claim of deity, of being equal with God, because raising the dead is obviously something only God can do. The Jews agreed on this point. The rabbis had a saying, "Three keys are in the hand of God and they are not given into the hand of any agent, namely that of the rain (Deuteronomy 28:12), that of the womb (Genesis 30:22), and that of the raising of the dead (Ezekiel 37:13)."² And there are Old Testament texts to back that up.

Anybody who knows anything about Yahweh knows that He alone can give life. He alone can raise the dead. And then we

² Cited in Leon Morris, John, page 278 footnote 67.

read Jesus' bold claim in John 5:21, that the Son also gives life to whom he will.

We get glimpses of this in Jesus healing those who are sick, which we've seen right here in John 4-5. He healed the official's son. Then He healed this man at the pool. Later in John we have the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been dead 4 days. He was really dead. And Jesus, with a word, called Lazarus out of the grave.

It reminds us of that amazing vision that Ezekiel had, which we studied several weeks ago in our Sunday School curriculum. The valley of dry bones, and the word of the Lord bringing forth new life.

And what all of this illustrates is the spiritual life which He gives, as we learned in what Jesus taught to Nicodemus about the new birth. The Son graciously and sovereignly brings spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead. He gives life to whom He will. This is part of the work that He is doing along with the Father, part of what indicates the Son's equality with the Father. As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.

I believe this is what Jesus is talking about in verse 25, as we proceed now into the paragraph that is our focus for today. Compare and contrast the statement in verse 25 and in verse 28. In verse 25 Jesus says, "an hour is coming, and is now here . . ." But in verse 28 He just says, "an hour is coming." What is described in verses 28-29 seems to be something future, and only future. Whereas verse 25 seems to be something that is both present and future. So I take the resurrection in verse 25 to be about spiritual birth, the spiritually dead being resurrected to new life by the voice of the Son of God. Those who hear the message of Jesus will live, spiritually and eternally.

Verses 26-27 reiterate things mentioned earlier. The Father and the Son being equal, and also the Father leading the Son, granting that the Son have life in Himself and giving Him authority to execute judgment. Verse 22 stated this as well, that the Father has given all judgment to the Son.

Now we come to the point I really want to unpack from this text, and from other passages as well, which is the teaching on resurrection. The resurrection of life versus the resurrection of judgment.

Realize what Jesus is talking about here. There is a day coming, a future day, when everyone will be raised—believers and unbelievers. Everyone who has ever lived, and died, will be raised and come out of the tombs. Everyone will hear Jesus' voice and will be summoned to this final judgment where there will be an evaluation of everyone's deeds. Those who have done good will

be raised to eternal life with Jesus in heaven. Those who have done evil will be sentenced to eternal death in hell.

And the question that immediately leaps into our minds is how this squares with the biblical teaching about salvation by faith alone apart from works. After all, didn't Jesus say in John 3:16 that "whoever *believes* in him should not perish but have eternal life"? It's not whoever produces enough good works. It's whoever believes.

And doesn't Paul, in Romans 1:16 say that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who *believes*? And Romans 3:28 says "one is justified by *faith* apart from works of the law"? And doesn't Paul write in Ephesians 2 that it's "by grace you have been saved through *faith*. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"?

Then what's going on here in John 5:28-29 where evidently we will all be judged according to our deeds? How can the Bible say in certain places that we're saved by faith and not by works, but then it also says we're going to be judged according to works? How do those two teachings fit together? Is the Bible contradicting itself?

Let me read you several passages that present this teaching about being judged according to works. We may be more familiar with the passages about salvation by faith, and of course those are incredibly important. But there's also the truth that good works are a necessary part of the Christian life. We're not saved by our works. But for those who are saved, good works will be an inevitable fruit of their lives.

For instance, in Ephesians 2, which I just read from, the passage goes on to say, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We're not saved *by* our good works, but we are saved *for* good works. The equation is not "faith plus works equals salvation." That's legalism. But neither is it "faith minus works equals salvation." That would be easy believism or libertinism—the idea that you can affirm certain things in your mind, but your life doesn't really have to change. The biblical equation is, "faith equals salvation plus works." True belief in the gospel, a real trust in Jesus, is what saves people from sin and also radically changes their lives.

We need to understand the Gospel, we need to understand the grace of God, as a powerful, life-changing force in our lives. Jesus living a perfect life for us, dying a sacrificial death on the cross in our place, rising from the dead on the third day—this is a reality that changes everything about us. It's not that God comes

in and forgives our sin in a way that we hardly notice, and life goes on unchanged.

Like if a librarian kindly waives your overdue fees or a police officer decides not to give you a ticket even though you were speeding. Those things would certainly be nice, but they're not going to change your life.

The grace of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is way more than just cancelling a debt. It is cancelling a debt—and a debt way more significant than any library fine or speeding ticket—the tremendous debt of our sinful offense against a holy God covered by the blood of Jesus. But it's still even more than that. We're now raised to walk in newness of life, and this transforms us day by day. The Spirit enters our lives and causes us to fight sin and pursue holiness. And this helps us to see the connection between salvation by faith alone and the necessity of good works in the Christian life. The fact that God's grace is so powerful reveals the impossibility of a person being a true believer, truly being regenerate (born again) and yet not producing any fruit in their life. That scenario will never happen. If God's grace has truly invaded your life, then your actions will be different. The Bible isn't telling us that we'll be perfect, not in this life. But we will be different.

Listen to some other passages that show the absolute necessity of good works in the life of the Christian. As I said, it's impossible that a person could be a Christian and not produce fruit. We aren't perfect, but every Christian will produce spiritual fruit. Even the person who is converted on their deathbed – there will be fruit of repentance and joy and peace and hope.

Consider Jesus' words in the parable of the sower. I'll read from Luke 8:5ff: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." And then Jesus explained the parable to His disciples in this way, beginning in verse 11, "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil they are

those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” It’s important to understand that only the good soil represents true believers. Some have tried to say that the rocky soil and the thorny soil also represent believers, but that misses the point of the parable. What we see here is that it’s possible to do some things that look like authentic Christianity but then to fall away and thus show that regeneration never occurred. The heart was not changed. There was some excitement maybe and some spiritual interest, but then it’s choked by the trials of this world and the pleasures of this world.

Do you see the implications of this? It’s possible to receive the word in some sense, and even to receive it with some sense of joy (v. 13), and to produce something that resembles fruit for a while, and yet not be saved. But what is the mark of the true believer? What is it that separates the good soil from the other soils? Verse 15, “they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” In other words, genuine believers will produce true and lasting fruit in their lives.

Jesus made a similarly shocking statement in Matthew 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, *but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Again, we see that it’s possible for individuals to do things that seem like authentic Christianity—even remarkable things that would seem to be unmistakable evidences of God’s work in their lives, like prophesying and casting out demons and doing mighty works. But who will enter the kingdom of heaven? The one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven!

In John 3:36 there’s an interesting connection between belief and obedience. It says, “Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not *obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” It’s so interesting that he uses the word “believe” in the first statement and the word “obey” in the second statement. We have to conclude that belief and obedience go hand-in-hand, and likewise unbelief and disobedience go hand-in-hand. The one who believes (and obeys) has eternal life. The one who does not obey, and therefore shows that he does not believe, will not see life.

Paul warns us in Galatians 5:19-24 that those who live in continued unrepentant sin will not inherit the kingdom of God. “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits

of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that *those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” And in Romans 8:13-14, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are Sons of God.”

Can you see the connection that all of these passages are making between faith and works, between salvation and obedience? And then negatively, there is the connection between unbelief and rebellion, between condemnation and disobedience. On the one hand is the person who truly trusts in Christ (although imperfectly), and their life is characterized by good works—it’s characterized by a fight against sin and a hunger for righteousness. And the fruit that is produced in that person’s life is the result and evidence of saving faith. On the other hand, there’s the person who remains in rebellion against God. And even if this person claims to have faith, the lack of fruit shows that it is not genuine faith, and therefore the person is in danger of going to hell.

James 2 is another passage that addresses this question squarely. James writes that faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. The message of those verses is that faith is active and living, and it will always work itself out in good deeds. If it’s real faith, it won’t just be empty words.

And 1 John 2:3-4 says, “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” John is teaching us the same thing. Those who know Him obey Him. And if you claim to know Him but don’t obey Him, you’re a liar.

There’s also Hebrews 12:14, which shows us the necessity of holiness in our lives. “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” That means if there is no holiness in your life, you will not see the Lord. You will not go to heaven.

The last passage I’ll mention is Romans 2:6-10, which is a very close parallel to what we see here in John 5:28-29. Listen to Paul’s words about a judgment according to works. “*He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human*

being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.” (Romans 2:6–10, ESV)

We’ve seen from several places now this emphasis on the necessity of works in the Christian life. A mere profession of faith will not save, because it’s not real faith. Real faith saves, and it also produces good works, obedience, holiness, fruit.

So when we look at the bigger picture of Scripture’s teaching on this subject, it shouldn’t be too difficult to understand the concept of judgment according to works. Salvation is by faith alone, not on the basis of works. I’m not saying anything to undermine that Gospel truth. Jesus and Paul aren’t saying anything to undermine that Gospel truth. You cannot work to earn your salvation. But we also have to understand that salvation then produces a changed life. The person who has faith is going to live differently than they did before. Their deeds will be different. Their desires will be different. And even though we will continue to struggle with sin, the point is that we *struggle* with sin. We are not at peace with sin, but by God’s grace and the power of the Spirit, we battle against those sinful desires because we want the greater joy of obeying God.

And then, on that day of judgment, Jesus will evaluate each person according to their works. He will look at the fruit of each person’s life, and their deeds will be an accurate representation of their heart. Their actions will make plain to all the condition of their heart.

Make no mistake. We’re talking about heaven and hell here. One group of people will go to heaven. Another group of people will go to hell. And Jesus is saying here in John 5:28-29 that on the last day He will determine who is going where by evaluating each person’s life—their deeds, their works.

Here’s how I hope this message will land on us. On the one hand, I know there are some true believers who will hear a message like this and question their own salvation. You have besetting sins in your life that just seem to have such a hold on you, that you feel like you must be in the category of one who is continuing to do evil. And therefore you look at this text and it’s hard for you to imagine that you could be in the category of one who has done good. I would just encourage you to see that the point of this is not perfection. The point is not that you have to be perfect in order to get into heaven. The point is, Is there repentance and faith in your life? Does your sin bother you? Does the Holy Spirit convict you of your sin, and do you desire to change? If you are fighting sin, if you sense within yourself a longing for the things of God, then you should thank God for those desires and keep pressing on in the fight of faith. Don’t despair.

Don't give up the fight. Instead, look to Jesus. Look to the One who has life in Himself and has the power to give life to whom He will.

There is another type of attitude that I hope this message will have an impact on. While on the one hand, I don't want this message to crush the spirit of those who have a very sensitive conscience, on the other hand, I do want this message to demolish the false confidence of those who claim to be Christians but are not living a changed life. That warning is implicit in this passage. You may say you have faith, and you may even be able to articulate the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But if your life is not different, if there is not fruit of righteousness in your life, then your actions contradict your words. And you may be one of those on judgment day who says, "Lord, Lord, didn't I go to church? Didn't I get baptized? Didn't I give money to the poor?" And yet your heart remained hard. You didn't repent of your pride and hypocrisy and jealousy and bitterness and gossip. And Jesus will say to you on that day, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

This is a time to examine ourselves. Are we merely professing faith, or do we really believe? Do you have spiritual life? Do you have eternal life? Remember verse 24, "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." Have you passed from death to life? And what evidence is there in your life that the miracle of regeneration has occurred?

At the start of 2017, reflecting on the year just ended, anticipating the year ahead, this message is an important one for each of us. For some, this needs to be a wake-up call. You can't assume you're OK with God just because you attend church and know some stuff about the Bible. You need to be born again, and being born again will bring about real spiritual fruit in your inner life. There will be deep repentance of sin and a desire for God's Word and a love for others, and you will treasure Jesus and want to talk to God in prayer. If Jesus comes back in 2017, will you be ready? Would you welcome that as the best thing that could happen? Or would you think of that more as an interruption to your plans? For some, this message about judgment, and judgment according to our works, needs to serve as a wake-up call.

For others, this message needs to be a rock-solid word of hope and encouragement. Maybe you're bogged down in the pressures of today and tomorrow. You're just trying to keep up with the task list at work or the pile of laundry at home. You need to lift up your head from what can seem like a rat-race some days, and remember that Jesus is coming back, hopefully soon, and you will experience life to the fullest with Him forever!