

## 3-3-19 Last Judgment Sunday © T. Hardenbrook



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

There's an interesting liturgical transition that we made this week, that we're making in the week to come. Getting ready for this season of greater dedication to God. We have, in many ways, rested, and now it's time to run a marathon out of love for God, out of zeal for God. Finding a way to improve our spiritual life in everyway. By doing that by picking very, very specific and simple ways to advance our commitment to Christ, to advance our diligence, our personal asceticism in our own spiritual life. Seeking out our own salvation with the help of Christ. And to do better even this year in Lent, than we have in the past. We are a people who work, we are active like our God is active. We are called to transfiguration, being changed, the metamorphosis, spiritually, that takes us from being the fallen human being we are to like God, like his saints, like his Holy Mother, and we have to have our mind set on that goal. We have to be a goal orientated people, we cannot be a passive people.

Passivity is very popular these days, but we cannot accept it, we must reject it and become a very goal orientated people. You know that we speak often of the themes of working, of pushing, and then resting, of fasting and then feasting. And alternating back and forth through those liturgical seasons like spiritual athletes. We rest and then we struggle and grow and then we rest and recover and then we struggle and grow, and that is the spiritual life. Some people like to refer to it, it's very common in the church to refer to it as the struggle, but I don't wanna see it as the struggle. I want to see it as the athleticism that I am called to. I wanna see it as the exercise routine that I am called to that will make me stronger. I want to see it as the adventure of life, where I am able to transcend the norms of this world. To be a better person, to rise above the petty things that so many people are captivated with. To be a person who is dispassionate and loving, who can face adversity with a smile on my face, who can trust God so much that I am able to abandon myself to his providence. That whatever comes to me throughout every day is exactly what I need in order to be saved. There's such incredible peace in that.

We want to be transformed, we want to know who we are, as bad of news as that might be, and then we want to start working. We want to be like an athlete who chooses a new sport and maybe they have a lot of talents in one area, but in the new one they don't know anything at all. And why do they commit themselves to doing? They commit themselves to taking the advice of a coach and they commit themselves to going to practice. That's all you have to do, and you will become adept, if not excellent, at that new atheism. And in the same way as individuals, all of us, you and me. We have to make sure that we have a coach in our life, who is our spiritual coach? Do we have one, if we don't have one, you must go and make a commitment to one. And the ones that are most available are the ones that we often look over, and that is our parish priests.

It's a lack of faith for us to go to our parish priests and think that because of their lack of formation or their lack of education or their lack of how long they've been ordained or something that God is incapable of working through them. When we limit the clergy around us, we limit God. When we don't believe that we can be served by those people who God has put providentially into our life, we actually, theologically, believe in a God who is so weak, he can't work through these weak men. Don't do that.

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I'm off topic now.

So in this transition that's taking place this week, if you've been reading the scriptures assigned, like you have the Orthodox Study Bible and you're reading along in the lectionary and you read the scripture readings this week leading up to today, the Sunday of the last judgment, also popularly referred to as Meatfare Sunday, because it's the last day that we fare on meat. But is the Sunday of the last judgment in all of the scripture readings this week, daily in our prayer rule that we have read has taken us, again, through Christ's journey from Palm Sunday all the way to the Crucifixion. The church has assigned this week that we have fresh in our minds this morning, Christ's journey from Palm Sunday, being received as the messiah, all the way to his Crucifixion. That we would recall when we come to this theme of the Last Judgment, that ultimate judgment that is going to have us going to Heaven or going to Hell.

We remember, it's fresh in our minds, what Christ has done for us. It makes it more obvious what our response should be, he came, humbly, submitting to the will of his Father. Despised by many, recognized by some. Beaten, humiliated, crucified, killed, for our salvation. He has died for you and me, how are we going to respond to that? Are we going to recommit our life? Are we going to contemplate the end that is coming and be motivated by that? To want to be found as the scripture reading this morning tells us to be on the side of the sheep, not of the goat, and as Christ has told us in this gospel reading, if we find ourselves on the side of the sheep, we're going to be surprised. The sheep say when did we do all these good things? And Christ says, "When you did them to the people around you, when you served even the least of those around you, you were serving me."

The Orthodox Study Bible tells us on this verse that that true faith, think about this, think about our own lives, our own faith, our own neighbors, that true faith in Christ always results in righteous works. True faith always results in righteous works, and so when the sheep and the goats are standing before Christ at the Judgment Seat, their faith in him, the abundance of it or the lack of it, has determined whether or not they have done this variety of righteous acts. Helping the poor, visiting those who are imprisoned or sick, supplying the essential needs to people when they need them, water and food. Having our mind on our neighbor, not on ourself. The goats are also surprised when they find themselves where they are, among the accursed. Because they thought maybe that they knew Christ, they thought maybe that they had enough faith to make it to Heaven, but when they stand before God they find themselves having pursued themselves, a proper translation is not Christ saying, you who are cursed, because then that gets confused that He cursing them. A good translation is you have been cursed, you who have cursed yourselves. You whose state of cursedness, I'm recognizing officially now because I am the judge, but it's a state that you brought yourself into.

We cannot be surprised when we end up a sheep or a goat. It is actually the plan that we made and the plan that fulfilled. It is the choices or the result of the choices that we have made. We have to remember this day that the second coming is coming. There is judgment that is arriving for each of us, each of us are going to face two judgments. The first one that is most common and that we can bank on for sure is our own death. It's amazing how being creatures created to be immortal, we have a beginning, but we are not intended to have an end, it is inside of us deeply that we should live forever, look around at the world and the movies and the comic

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books. The desire to be like God and to be immortal. It's inherent to us because we were created to be immortal, and yet we all know that we are going to die. We know that intellectually, but so often it's as if we're the only ones that are going to live forever somehow.

We all know that we are going to die, but it's always a surprise. I tell people, when we find out who died, who is ill, when it actually happens and enters our life through a neighbor who is sick or someone who is diagnosed with something fatal, or a sudden death, it's a shock to us, and it shouldn't be, we know that it's going to happen, and we know most likely it's going to happen for the majority of the human race it will happen, our personal death before the second coming. So we have to be prepared for it, and we prepare not in fear of going to Hell, but in fear of losing Heaven. Think about that.

When we're immature, we're afraid to go to Hell, when we mature a little bit even, we realize that as Saint John Chrysostom says, losing Heaven is so horrible, there's nothing that could happen in Hell to make it worse. He makes that observation. When we are immature spiritually we don't want to get in trouble, we don't want to go to Hell. We don't want to be punished, we want to escape that punishment, and that is the beginning of our maturing, but in the end, we have to be terrified, absolutely terrified of losing Heaven, of not seeing God, of not being there with Him, of not being with all our brothers and sisters and our mothers and fathers in the faith who have gone on before us to be reunited with not only all of our loved ones who we have lost over the years, but also our patron saints and those we love, those who wanted to meet. Being with our patron saint, with our favorite saints, with the Mother of God, with Christ. That is terrifying to think of not being there.

Saint John says if we don't end up there, what's fire and torture for a million years? It's less than the sadness of that loss of paradise. And so we want to set our mind on personal judgment coming at our death, and we want to set our mind on achieving paradise, by the mercy and grace of God and the prayers of the saints. We have to be a goal-oriented people and paradise, paradise is our goal. We are reminded that in our waiting we are to keep an eye on the signs of the times, because the coming of Christ in glory is going to be sudden and obvious, and all of the nations will mourn for their ignorance or their having rejected him. We will see that the Orthodox Gospel, the true gospel has been spread to every nation, we will see that love of God is growing cold everywhere around us in the world. That mankind has truly become lovers of themselves, not any longer loving God, not any longer loving their neighbor, but simply loving themselves. We will see the world turning to the love of pleasure or returning to the love of pleasure more than the love of spiritual enlightenment, of relationship with God.

We will see people achieving forms of godliness, little g, spiritual, but not religious, right? Prayer, meditation, transcendent living, fasting, all for the ego, not for a relationship with God, or for the destruction of sin or the harnessing of the passions. We will see the attempts, and there have been in history already, the church teaches us, the rise of specific persons who are serving or have the potential to be the anti-Christ, and we will see the appearance of two witnesses, specifically who will be killed and rejected as Christ himself was, and then the second coming will happen dramatically.

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And Christ who came in humility and servitude the first time will come in glory and might and victory to judge everyone on the Earth. From revelations we have, and remember the book of revelations is Christ and the angel of God talking specifically to Saint John on the island of Patmos and his vision there, much of what is said is specific to the churches of the time, but then we find also that revelations is a revelation of the future of what we can anticipate.

In one particular part, when it speaks about the great white throne of judgment it says these words, "The Devil, who had deceived all, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet had already been put, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne of Him who sat on it, from whose face the Earth and the Heavens had fled away, and there was found not place for the evil with Him, and I saw the dead, small and great standing before God and books were open and another book was open, which is the Book of Life and the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books, and the sea gave up its dead who had died there and Death and Hades delivered up the dead that they had held captive throughout the ages, and all were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire and anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast also into the lake of fire.

Now our understanding is even deeper than that, that is a lot of allegory there. Saint Maximus, the Confessor, says, "We're all going to experience the same thing at judgment." He even goes as far as saying this will surprise some of you. Everyone is going to go through the process of vivification. Think about that for a minute. Everyone, saint and sinner. Everyone will go through the process of deification. That some with grace and some without grace. To go through deification with grace is to be deified, and be like Christ. To be his adopted brother and sister to the Father in paradise forever with him. To be deified without grace is hell. I tell people at times that being deified without grace is like being stretched infinitely, but not having the proper property of elasticity. Think about that for a minute. You're stretched infinitely, but you don't have what it takes to be stretched in the first place. You are coming close to God, but you have nothing [inaudible 00:18:11] that is able to be attached to him, received by him, bonded to him, excepted by him. We will all be there some day.

Most often we do not talk like this in our homilies in the Orthodox Church. We have to be encouraged most of the time, so be encouraged. We have to be a people of good cheer, so be of good cheer. Christ is victorious. We will see in the end that he conquers all, but we have to do the work to get onto his side of the army that are at war with each other. We have to be of him, of Christ, fighting alongside of him, working out our own salvation with his help, being his people, conquering death as he conquered it. But once and a while, as the church teaches us, though we keep our eyes on Christ and Heaven once in a while we glance back at the Devil and Hell. To make sure we're on the right course, we're going the right direction, and remembering why we don't want to be identified with them. And so as we celebrate this day and we prepare ourselves for forgiveness and repentance, let us remember that our coming is coming sooner than we think, and that we will both be there after our own death and at the end of the world to be judged, to be a sheep or a goat, to be with Christ, or rejected by him. So let our hearts turn towards repentance and hope. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.