**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE KING’S JUDGMENT**

**Luke 17:20-37**

**INTRODUCTION**

Being judged is a scary thing. I’m not talking about being judged in the minds of your peers or your neighbours. I’m talking about being judged by a judge.

Over the years, I’ve had to conduct a number of criminal trials, and every single one was full of all sorts of drama. I’ve had manipulative clients. I’ve encountered lying police officers. I’ve had cases where evidence went missing. There’s drama everywhere when it comes to trials, but in every single trial, the climax of the trial was always the same: it was judgment day.

Judgment day is a day that every person dreads. The suspense of not knowing whether the judge will pronounce you guilty or not guilty can be overwhelming, because the judgment you receive will direct the rest of your life. If you’re not guilty, you can go on with your life and try to rebuild your reputation piece by piece. But if you’re guilty, you will be punished for your crimes and labelled as a criminal – a label that is almost impossible to shed.

As stressful as this may be, the criminally accused have the luxury of preparing themselves for judgment day ahead of time. They’re given the luxury of time. On the day they’re charged, they’re given notice that judgment is coming, and if the case goes to trial, they’ll typically have at least a year before the case is finished. Until then, they have time to prepare themselves for the day when the judge, sitting on the judgment seat in the courtroom, pronounces them guilty or not guilty. Judgment is still a scary thing, but time helps.

Now imagine yourself being judged. Now you’re the one under scrutiny, and a judge is going to pronounce you guilty or innocent just like a person accused of a crime, except you don’t have the luxury of time. You don’t have time to prepare. Instead, you’re carrying on with life as usual – going to work, paying the bills, spending time with family and friends – when a judge shows up at your door with no notice and judges you right then and there. And the judgment he pronounces isn’t just for one act, or one moment of misjudgment, or one foolish mistake. The judge has come to judge your entire life, and the consequence of that judgment will last for eternity.

Judgment is the topic of our text today. More specifically, our topic is the Day of Judgment, when judgment comes for everyone. It will be swift, unexpected, and unavoidable. And the one who will bring this judgment to us is Jesus himself. We know that Jesus is the Saviour of the world, but one day he will come as the Judge of the world and pronounce every single person who has ever lived guilty or not guilty. For those who are found not guilty, he will take them to spend an eternity with him. But for those who are found guilty, he will abandon them to suffer an eternity of judgment.

The title of this message is **The King’s Judgment.** My aim today is to show you that **Judgment Day Is Meant to Change How We Live Today.**

We will have three points today:

1. The Judge
2. The Judgment
3. The Judged

(1) **THE JUDGE**

Our text today begins with a question from the Pharisees in verse 20 about when the Kingdom of God would come. The Kingdom of God has been one of the most prominent themes in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus has spoken about the Kingdom over and over again. In fact, he said his mission was to preach the good news of “the **Kingdom** of God” (Luke 4:43). He talked about how to get into the **Kingdom** (Luke 9:62). He told his disciples to pray that the **Kingdom** would come. (Luke 11:2). He promised that God would give the **Kingdom** to those who trusted him. (Luke 12:31-32). And he foretold that one day, people from east and west, north and south, would enjoy a great feast, the great feast to end all feasts, as they reclined at God’s table in God’s **Kingdom** (Luke 13:29).

The concept of the Kingdom wasn’t foreign to the Pharisees. They were aware of the Old Testament prophecies about the great, unending Kingdom of God. It was their great hope, because when the Kingdom came, they believed that their people – the Nation of Israel – would finally be restored to its true glory.

And so, as they followed Jesus around and listened to him speak about the Kingdom, they naturally asked the question, “When? When is the Kingdom coming, Jesus?” It’s unclear whether the question was sincere or not. Some Pharisees only asked Jesus questions to try to gather evidence to prosecute him, but others had a genuine interest in what he had to say.

We don’t know if they had the wrong motivation, but we do know from what Jesus says next that it was the wrong question to ask. Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.’”

Jesus is saying, “Do you want to know when it’s coming? Let me tell you: it’s already here! The Kingdom of God is *right here, in the midst of you.*” The Pharisees didn’t know this, because they were looking for some unmistakable signs, something they could look at and say, “Aha! There’s the Kingdom!” It could have been a cosmological sign from heaven, or the descent of a physical Kingdom from the sky. Whatever it was, they were looking for some glorious manifestation of the Kingdom that absolutely no one would miss.

But Jesus reveals that the Kingdom’s coming is more subtle than that. It wouldn’t come with grand signs in the sky or loud announcements and fanfare. Instead, as Jesus said earlier in Luke 13, it would be like a man who sowed a grain of mustard seed in his garden. It starts off as the smallest of seeds, but it would one day grow into the biggest plant in the garden.

Of course, the man who plants the seed of is Jesus himself. He’s the one who plants the seed of the Kingdom, because the Kingdom belongs to him. The King has come, and he has brought his Kingdom with him. The Pharisees were asking about the “When”, but they should have been asking about the “Who”. The right question wasn’t, “When is the Kingdom coming?” but “Who will bring the Kingdom?” If they had asked that question, then they would have seen that there were more than enough signs to indicate that God’s Kingdom had already arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in Luke 11:20,

“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

The Kingdom of God is in the midst of us, but as we saw earlier in Luke’s gospel, there’s more to it than that. It’s here, but it’s still on its way. It’s been planted, but it’s still growing, and when it’s done growing, Jesus tells us that the unmistakable signs that the Pharisees were looking for will finally arrive. That’s the subject matter of the rest of our text from verses 22-37.

Verse 22 tells us that, after Jesus addressed the Pharisees, he turns to his disciples and says, “The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.” Jesus is talking about a time when he would be taken away from his disciples and would no longer be with them. They would long for his presence, but he wouldn’t be there.

But here’s the thing: he’s coming back. Jesus already implied this earlier in Luke 12 when he talked about the master leaving the house for a time and then returning to find either faithful servants or unfaithful servants, but now he says it clearly. “I’m coming back! I came, and I’m coming again, but this time it won’t be in a quiet, humble little town called Bethlehem where only a few wise men and a handful of shepherds were present. This time the whole world will see it.”

That’s what Jesus says in verses 23-24. No one’s going to have to draw your attention to his return by saying, “Look, there!” or “Look, here!” because his return will be like the lightning that flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, and *everyone*’s going to see it. *Everyone* will know that Jesus the King has returned.

But when is he coming back, and why? For the question “when”, Jesus only says in verse 25 that it will be after he has suffered many things and been rejected by this generation. His return will be sometime after his crucifixion. And to answer the question “why” – why is Jesus returning? – Jesus references two Old Testament events from verses 26-30 that tell us why.

The first event is the flood, which is described in Genesis 6-8. Jesus tells us in verse 27 that the flood destroyed all humanity except Noah and his family. The second event takes place in the days of Lot, Abraham’s nephew, which is described in Genesis 18-19. Lot escaped the city of Sodom before it was completely destroyed, along with its inhabitants, by fire and sulfur, as Jesus mentions in verse 29.

Two events that share a common theme: judgment. Humanity was judged when it was destroyed by a flood in the days of Noah, and the residents of Sodom were judged when they were destroyed by fire and sulfur in the days of Lot.

Jesus says that’s what’s going to happen when he returns. When he comes, judgment will come with him. Look at verse 26: “Just as it was in the days of Noah, *so will it be in the days of the Son of Man*”. Verse 29: “but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained into heaven and destroyed them all – *so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed*.” The King is coming back, but this time he’s not coming as a Saviour. He’s coming as a Judge.

There are many passages in Scripture that are meant to make us feel close to Jesus. They invite us to come to him. To know his love. To be comforted by him. I’m thankful for those passages, and I cling to them by faith. *But this is not one of those passages*. This passage isn’t meant to make us feel comforted by Jesus. This passage is meant to make us fear him.

Jesus came once in meekness, but he is coming again in glory like the lightning in the sky, and when he does, the whole world will tremble at his presence.

Some of you may struggle with this image of Jesus. You like to think of the floods of his mercy, but you don’t like to think about the floods of his judgment. You want a Jesus who is meek and mild – and he is, thank God that he is! – but you don’t want a Jesus who will judge the world with a terrible swiftness and finality. But that’s who he is. The same Bible that teaches us that Jesus loves us – that he came to serve us, that he came to satisfy us, that he came with tears in his eyes to call the lost to himself – that same Bible tells us that Jesus is also just, and his justice will not spare anyone who fails to turn to him in faith and repentance. If we’re going to believe that Jesus is loving and merciful, then we must also believe that he is just, and that he will execute justice against all who have failed to find refuge in him.

Jesus is our Judge. Those aren’t my words. They’re his. He tells us himself that he is coming like a flood and like a consuming flame, to wipe away sinful humanity and usher in the fullness of his kingdom. If we’re going to say that we believe in Jesus, that we follow Jesus, that we *love* Jesus, then we must take him as he is. In fact, we need to go further. We must *celebrate* who he is, in all his mercy, and in all his justice.

The test for us is, when we read verses like these, do we respond with worship? Do we say to Jesus, “Lord, I praise you for your justice, and when you come to judge the world, I know that it will be fair. It will be right. It will be just. I praise you.” Or do we read verses like these and say, “Lord, I wish these verses weren’t in the Bible”? If we say we worship Jesus, we must worship him as he is revealed to us in Scripture. Otherwise, we’re worshipping a fake Jesus created not by Scripture, but by our own imaginations.

(2) **THE JUDGMENT**

That’s the judge. What about the judgment? What kind of judgment is Jesus the judge bringing? Jesus doesn’t tell us everything about the judgment in this text, but he does tell us a few important things. This leads to our second point: the Judgment.

In both Old Testament events – the days of Noah, and the days of Lot – Jesus says that, before judgment arrived, life was carrying on for everyone as usual. Verse 27 says that humanity was “eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.” Similarly, verse 28 says that in the days of Lot, “they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all”.

Jesus’ point is simple but terrifying: when judgment comes, humanity will be completely unprepared for it. We don’t know when it will come. It could come today, it could come in 20 years, it could come in another 2000 years. We don’t know. All we know is that when it comes, the world won’t be ready.

That was the case in the days of Noah, and that was the case in the days of Lot. People weren’t building boats to survive the flood. People weren’t evacuating the city to survive the fire. Instead, they were going about life as usual, completely oblivious to the destruction that was coming. They were going on with life as if it would be long and prosperous. They were getting married, thinking that they would raise families. They were planting crops, hoping to grow in prosperity. They were building houses, expecting that they would live in them for a long time. But then suddenly, all of it, and all of them, were washed away and burned to the ground as God poured out his judgment. They were completely unprepared.

What about you? Are you prepared? Perhaps you read verses like these with skepticism. You think, “That will never happen. It sounds more like science fiction than the actual future.” You may have a genuine desire to believe it, but you just find it difficult. Why is it so hard to believe? It’s so hard because we encounter images like this all the time in our entertainment. We’ve seen the big blockbusters where giant cataclysmic events take place, whether it be aliens dropping into our planet or vast swaths of humanity being wiped out by disease or war, and we’ve trained ourselves to think, “That’s not real. That’s fake. Something like that would never happen.” We’re watching things that are extremely disturbing, and yet we’ve learned to watch them, enjoy them, and then go home and sleep like babies.

Our senses have been so bombarded by the thrills of entertainment that we’ve been spiritually lulled to sleep. And now when we read about Jesus’ actual return and the actual Day of Judgment, it’s so easy to just shrug our shoulders and say “That’s not real. That will never happen”, and we carry on eating and drinking, building and planting.

Our world looks just like it did in the days of Noah and Lot. It’s completely oblivious to the coming judgment, which means that it’s ripe for judgment. We don’t know when judgment is coming, but we know it will come at a time like this when we don’t expect it at all.

Jesus also says that judgment will be divisive. Verse 34: “I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left.” Verse 35: “There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”

Jesus is saying that, on Judgment Day, all of humanity will be divided into two groups: those who are taken, and those who are left behind. In some cases, that division will split through a family, where one is taken and the other is not. In other cases, the division will split through socio-economic relationships, like the two women grinding side by side at the mill. The point is that, whatever life looks like now, it will look much different when Judgment comes, because Jesus will take those who belong to him for salvation and leave behind those who do not to face the day of judgment.

This reminds us that there is no salvation by association. You don’t belong to Jesus just because your spouse does, or your parents do, or your friends do. No one belongs to Jesus just because everyone around them belongs to Jesus. The only way someone comes to belong to Jesus is through personal faith, a faith that says, “I believe that I’m a sinner in need of forgiveness, and I believe that God has forgiven me of my sin by sending Jesus to die for my sins.” Only then, when Jesus Christ is *your* Saviour and *your* Lord, will you have the peace of knowing that Jesus will take you and save you, along with the rest of his people, when he comes to bring his judgment.

The last thing about the judgment that Jesus tells us in our text is found in verse 37. The disciples ask Jesus where the judgment is going to take place, and Jesus’ reply is striking. He says, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.” In other words, we don’t need to know where the judgment will take place right now, because when it comes, we will know exactly where it is.

It’s like you’re in a desert, looking for a lost travelling companion. You’re calling out for him, crying out, “Where are you?” but you can’t find him. But then you see the vultures in the sky, swirling slowly around in their descent, until they finally land, and at that point, you will know not only where your lost companion is, but what has happened to him as well.

Jesus uses this image to illustrate how horrific judgment will be. Everyone will recognize it when it comes, and everyone will be filled with pity for those who were lost.

(3) **THE JUDGED**

Jesus has told us some sobering truths. He’s told us that he’s the judge, and he’s told us a little about the judgment that he will bring. But what are we, those who will be judged, supposed to do with these truths? How are we to respond? Is there something we can do now to avoid this judgment that will come later? Yes, there is, and Jesus tells us what that is in our text, leading to our third point: the Judged.

Notice that when Jesus talks about the flood and the destruction of Sodom, he doesn’t just focus on the judgment. He also focuses on escape from judgment. In verse 27 he says that “Noah entered the ark” before the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, in verse 29 Jesus says that Lot went out from Sodom before fire and sulfur destroyed the city. Jesus reminds us of these Old Testament narratives not only because of what they teach us about judgment, but because of what they teach us about escaping from that judgment.

We see those lessons in verses 31-32, where he says “On that day (the Day of Judgment), let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife.” What about Lot’s wife? Well, Genesis 19:26 says that, while Lot and his family were escaping Sodom, his wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. The fire and sulfur that destroyed the city destroyed her as well.

Why did she look back? Because she didn’t want to leave her home in Sodom! Whether it was her jewellery, or her furniture, or her friends, there was something left behind in Sodom that she didn’t want to leave behind. Her heart was still there.

Jesus is saying that, when judgment comes, we’re not going to escape if our hearts are still in this world. When judgment comes, the only way to escape is to leave everything behind and flee! We need to get in the ark, we need to run as fast and as far away as we can from the city, and the only way we will be able to do that is if our hearts aren’t there. But if they are, we’ll turn back. We’ll turn back to get our stuff, or we’ll turn back for one last farewell, and it will be too late to escape.

This leads to Jesus’ word of application to us in verse 33: “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.”

This is the only thing that separates judged people like you and me into two groups. If you lay down your life for Jesus now, then when the Day of Judgment comes around then Jesus will save you and take you to be with him. But if you hold back your life from Jesus now, then you’ll be left behind for the vultures on the Day of Judgment.

You see, these warnings about future judgment aren’t just for us to store up as interesting information for the future. They’re meant to change the way we live now. If our hearts are in this world, if we love things or status or wealth more than we love God, then we’re not going to escape the judgment. We’ll turn back to the world rather than flee when Jesus returns in his glory. But if we lay down our lives, if we put Jesus before everything else, before our jobs, our families, even our own lives, then we can find comfort in knowing that we will escape when judgment comes.

There’s only one thing that makes this possible. One thing that will lead us to love God more than we love everything else. It’s the gospel. It’s only when we grasp the love that God has shown to us in Christ that we will love him in return. On the cross, God satisfied the flood of his justice against us by pouring it out on his own Son. On the cross, God quenched the fires of his wrath against us by sending Jesus to die as our substitute. And on the cross, God displayed the infinite depths of his love for undeserving sinners like you and me, so that we could love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

**CONCLUSION**

There’s no easy application from a text like this. No action steps we can take. The only thing we’re left with is a series of very important question: where is your heart today? Is it in heaven, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God? Or is it here in this world? What do you feel when you think about leaving this world behind? Do you think more about what you’ll lose than what you’ll gain? Do you think about how much you’ll miss your things, or miss the people in your life who aren’t believers? Or do you think about how much better life will be in Christ?

Better yet, ask yourself this question: if heaven contained nothing except God – not your parents, not your children, not your spouse, not your friends – if there was nothing there except the Triune God who saved you, would you still want to be there? If not, then that reveals that our hearts are still in this world.

These are the kinds of questions that help us diagnose our hearts. The reality is that all of us have wayward hearts. You may love God most of all now, but that may change in a few years. Perhaps it may change in a few months. Life is a constant struggle between loving God most and loving things that aren’t God more. That’s why it’s so important to turn to the gospel again and again. We need to come to Jesus again and again with a deep awareness of our sin, because that’s the only way we will come to grasp the depth of the love that he showed us on the cross. And the more we know his love, the more we will love him in return.

Let me conclude with these words from Jesus in John 5 that powerfully remind us that though he is the Judge of all, he is also the Saviour of all who trust him.

“The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. 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.” (John 5:22-24)