

Future Perfect

Based on Mark 13:1-8 and Daniel 12:1-3

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I won't ask for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of us really believe, as the prophet Daniel and the author of the Gospel of Mark did, that the world is about to come to an end. For that matter, do we really believe that God sees our every thought and action and that God will judge us accordingly, punish us and reward us for what we did and who we were. Both of our scripture readings this morning tell us that such a day is coming—the final judgment.

But for both the prophet and the gospel, the final judgment is not about when—it's not about reading the signs correctly to know when the end of the world is at hand. It's more about acting as though the end of the world is at hand, all the time. It's about how important is what we do.

Both of these writers looked around them with the illumination of the holy spirit and said, In this society, in this lifetime, people who do good are not necessarily rewarded. People who do bad things, terrible things, are not necessarily punished. Both Daniel and the gospel writer lived under rulers who practiced torture without giving it a second thought, who tortured Jews, slaves, and the poor more readily than they did wealthy pagans, who felt free to execute even their own family members when they got in the way. And at the same time those rulers lived lives of great luxury—eating delicacies, sleeping on featherbeds, enjoying life's pleasures in abundance. While the peasants, most of them simple, decent people, tried to make a living and often starved. Why, the psalmist asks, do the wicked prosper? Why doesn't God punish the wicked for their wickedness? Why doesn't God reward the good?

You all know that I hate Walmart. For so many reasons. They have a history of underpaying and harassing their employees, of not promoting women, of going out of their way to squash locally owned businesses, and of buying from sweatshops overseas. And has the Walton family been punished for these crimes? Hardly. On the contrary they've been amply rewarded—Sam Walton got the presidential medal of freedom and died one of the richest men in the world. I have no doubt Sam Walton worked hard all his life, but he also worked ruthlessly, without regard for basic human needs. And not only is the Walton family rewarded, but if you or I refuse to buy from Walmart, we are effectively punished. Since Walmart buys cheap from those sweatshops and underpays its employees, they have lower prices. And since they have lower prices, they've driven out the smaller stores where we might have gone. So if you don't buy there, you don't get those prices, and you have to drive further to get what you want. The wicked are not punished in this lifetime and the righteous are not rewarded.

After all, Jesus, who as far as we know never did anything wrong, was tortured to death. Righteousness does not necessarily lead to a happy, cushy life. And wickedness and

cruelty do not necessarily lead to destruction and suffering. Certainly, they don't necessarily lead to poverty.

Once we see that this is true, once we understand that whatever Joel Olsteen may try to sell us, the righteous are not rewarded in this lifetime, we can react in one of two ways. One is, we can lose our faith entirely. The psalmist writes, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" The fool says, see, the righteous are not rewarded! See the wicked are not punished! Therefore, there must be no God at all! There is no judge, there is no justice! So the best thing to do is to do whatever I please. That's one way to go, and many people do choose that way, although it eventually turns very empty and depressing.

For people who insist on believing in God, and for people who want some meaning in their lives, the fool's approach doesn't work. For us, there is a God and God is good and powerful. Therefore, if the righteous are not rewarded and the wicked are not punished now, then you can be sure that it will happen somehow some time, somewhere. There are different ideas, even in the Bible, about how and when. We tend to think of each person, when they die, being sent to heaven or to hell, based on what they did during their lives. But the Bible is more interested in the society than we usually are. The Bible sees people being judged, not so much at the end of each life, but at the end of time. We get little glimpses of afterlife, of heaven and hell, in the Bible. But most of the Bible believes, as Mark and Daniel do, that there will be an end to history, a judgment day, and on that day human history will be over and it will be evaluated. My Lord, what a morning. The slaves dreamed about it often—that great gettin' up morning, that day in which God would show his hand. God will reveal who is really in God's favor and who has only seemed to have God's favor all this time; who is really cursed and condemned, and who has only seemed to be cursed and condemned. Every person who has ever lived will be judged and they will get exactly what they deserve—good or bad, exactly according to what they did with their lives.

It's a satisfying thought. It satisfies our need for revenge, without creating more evil in the world, which revenge tends to do. Over the centuries, that dream of a final judgment kept suffering people hanging on through very hard times, times when to other people it simply seemed that there was no God, or that God had forgotten them. We too can dream of the wicked among us getting their just deserts in the end. God is good, after all, and the wicked who do not repent just can't get off scot free. But what judgment means for us is not just about other people. It's not just, for me, about Sam Walton finally seeing the real results of his sins. It's also, for me, about me. It's about realizing that what I do has ultimate importance. If there's a judgment day, then where am I going to stand on that day—with the sheep or the goats? If I conveniently forget to give my monthly tithe (and I could do that), it matters. If I yell at my kids or kick the dog or decide not to volunteer when and where I could—it matters. God knows and God cares what we do. When we spend more time shopping for Christmas presents than we do in prayer, God knows. When we look at our mission budget without really remembering that mission is what we're here to do, God knows and God cares. And when we feed, when we visit, when we knit and cook and build and repair and give to one another—God knows and God cares. It matters what we do, down to the last detail. We may have trouble deciding

what is right, and God understands our confusion and our ignorance. God does not condemn people who accidentally do wrong even while they are trying to do right. But we must never get so confused as to say that because nice guys finish last, we are allowed to stop being nice.

In the last fifty years or so, Christianity in this country has come to focus on God as love. We turned away from the judging, all-seeing, judgmental God of our past, and emphasized the love of God, the mercy of God, the warm and tender fuzziness of God. All of which is true. God is love and God loves us. But it's also true that God is good. Bad has no place with God. God loves us because God created us good. But God does not love the bad we do. God is not the all-forgiving parent who doesn't even see the crimes his children commit. God sees and God condemns. For now, we have a chance to do the right thing, we have the chance to repent, to see the importance of our own actions, to open our hearts to one another's needs. For now we have a chance to change and begin to love our neighbor as ourself. But there will come a time, the Bible tells us, when our time runs out. When we will be asked, is that your final answer? And our fate depends on that final answer. There will come a time, and we need to live aware of that coming time. We will be judged—maybe when we die, maybe tomorrow, maybe later this afternoon. Just because we don't know when, we need to always be asking ourselves—are we ready? Are we ready to get what we deserve?