

Before the Judgment Seat of God

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As we begin, I want to share the tale of the Chinese farmer and his horse.

Once upon a time, an old farmer lost his horse, and everybody in the town came over to comfort him, saying, “Oh, well, that’s terrible.” But he responded, “Um...maybe.” The next day, the horse came back with six other wild horses. They all exclaimed, “Oh, well, that’s great!” And he replied, “Well, maybe.” The following day, his young son was taking out one of the wild horses and broke his leg. The whole town gathered and said, “Oh, that’s terrible!” Yet, he simply said, “Maybe.” Then, conscription officers arrived to draft people into the military, but they passed by his son due to his broken leg. Once more, the town rejoiced, saying, “Oh, that’s great now, isn’t it?” Still, the farmer responded, “Maybe.”

The central message of this story is that we can never truly discern whether something is good or bad because we cannot predict how it will influence the course of our entire life. This story is highly renowned in Korea, and we condense it into the term *Sae-Ong-Ji-Ma*, which literally means “an old man’s horse,” carries a similar meaning to the saying “a blessing in disguise.”

Furthermore, we can glean from this story that people are often quick to pass judgment. Whenever something occurred in the farmer’s life, the townsfolk would approach him, offering their assessments of the situation, even though their evaluation proved incorrect each time. Frequently, we engage not only in gossip about others’ lives but also in self-judgment, evaluating ourselves based on our own standards rather than through the lens of God’s perspective.

In Romans 14, Paul addresses a situation within the early Christian community in Rome—a community grappling with differences in matters of conscience, diet, and special days of observance. The temptation to pass judgment on one another was palpable, and Paul’s words serve as a timeless guide to navigating these challenges. The passage not only reveals the conflicts within the Roman church but also offers profound insights into how we, as believers today, can approach the delicate issues of judgment, grace, and unity.

The concept of passing judgment on someone carries a strong and weighty meaning. One of the most liberating aspects of the gospel is that it’s built on grace and mercy, not on making harsh judgments and condemnations.

One of the most famous verses of the Bible tells us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). We can be saved and have eternal life because, in Christ, who accomplished God’s grace, we are free from judgment. It’s crucial to keep this in mind, even though some Christians may focus more on the latter while overlooking the former.

Of course, in life, we need to make wise choices and decisions in various areas like our spiritual path, personal life, and business dealings. But this shouldn’t be confused with unfairly judging other people and looking down on them with condemnation or rejection. The love of Christ urges us to show love to others, even those who may have negative feelings towards us.

The reason we must refrain from evaluating others’ lives is clear. In verse 10, Paul declares, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” He affirms that the right to judge rests with God, not with us. Sometimes, we hastily assess situations or grow impatient with people. However, just as God loves us, the Lord also encourages us to practice patience, as patience is an integral aspect of God’s love for us.

Our careless judgment might be seen as an arrogant attempt to confine God. The scriptures clearly state that God is actively involved in our lives. As evidenced in Exodus 14, in God’s time, the Lord even parted the sea to facilitate the passage of God’s people across the Red Sea. Also, Romans 8:28 affirms, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” God’s Spirit and transformative power are constantly at work in human existence.

When we judge others, we limit the space for God to work in our lives. People weren’t meant to be neatly categorized or restricted in any way because change is an inherent part of life. Forcing our biases or personal standards onto others is sinful and harms our relationships, both with them and with God. If we acknowledge that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, it’s clear that measuring others’ lives by our own standards is an act of human arrogance.

Furthermore, a judgmental heart can restrict our capacity to love. The path of following Christ’s teachings is all about showing others how to live right. It asks us to be kind and understanding, which is very different from being critical and judgmental. When we are loving and caring like this, we can love others as much as we love ourselves, even in a world that often has unfair opinions.

Our ability to guide others through divine means depends on how open we are to God's Spirit, which constantly works within us. However, we limit our ability to teach others by closing ourselves off to God's Spirit, which is at work in and through us. There's a story about a churchman who used to strongly criticize people with AIDS, speaking hatefully and using prejudiced words. But everything changed when his own adult son came home, suffering from AIDS. His son's illness opened his heart to change. His hate turned into care, and his rejecting words turned into words of understanding. He talked to the people in his church, asking them to see the humanity in those with the disease, beyond their sickness and way of life. This story shows us that the biased heart toward the illness and the people with the disease had hindered his role as the messenger of God's love to the world.

Paul, in his beautiful words, reminds us that we are all connected. He says, "For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (vs. 7-8). It emphasizes that we all are in the same boat. "We are the Lord's." Just like the Lord has lovingly accepted us into God's family, our Lord does the same for people who may seem very different from us in their opinions, appearances, or life paths. God's ways are beyond our understanding, and God's love, grace, and mercy go beyond what we think people deserve. We should remember this deep truth, especially when we're tempted to judge or condemn others.

In the vastness of existence, it's crucial to understand that Christ is the ultimate guide of our journey. Our Lord is in control. We don't have to try to control every aspect of our lives because that's beyond our human abilities. Life, with all its diversity, unexpected moments, and wonders, follows a rhythm that we can't fully control.

But there's great freedom in letting go of our need to control and instead trusting in Christ's guidance. This surrender liberates us from the burdens of human mistakes and allows our spirits to rise, free from our limitations, as we trust in the divine plan of the One who holds the universe.

The Hebrews' crossing of the Red Sea, as described in Exodus 14, was indeed a remarkable and pivotal moment in their history. It demonstrated God's extraordinary power and intervention on their behalf as they escaped slavery in Egypt. However, it's essential to recognize that this event was not the final destination of their journey, even though it was a significant miracle.

After their miraculous escape through the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites continued their wandering through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. Along the way, they experienced both highs and lows. They received divine guidance and provision from God, such as the manna from heaven and water from the rock, which sustained them. They also encountered moments of doubt and rebellion, like when they built a golden calf to worship in Moses' absence.

Some individuals among the Israelites failed to maintain their faith and obedience to God's commands during this journey. They succumbed to doubt, fear, and temptation, which led to consequences and hardships. Others, however, remained faithful and steadfast in their trust in God, following divine guidance even in the face of challenges.

Judging ourselves or others based on brief moments in life is unwise, for we cannot foresee how we'll stand before God's judgment seat. Life's journey is complex and filled with fluctuations. Instead, we should focus on faithfulness in our daily steps. Extend grace to others, recognizing their potential for growth, and refrain from harsh self-judgment. By steadfastly living our values and treating others kindly, we align with the concept of faithfulness, regardless of momentary setbacks. Ultimately, the judgment seat of God assesses our entire life journey, emphasizing the importance of consistently embodying our beliefs and values.

We don't know what the future holds as new situations arise in our lives. The world is unpredictable, and the malevolent enemy still seeks to undermine us. Our only hope and unshakable foundation are found in our Lord. Next Sunday, we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of our church. Some may be inspired by the long history of our faith community, while others might be disheartened by the comparatively weakened state compared to decades ago. However, our calling is to faithfully walk on God's path and extend grace to others as a beloved community of God.

In a world where judgments can be swift and unkind, let us always remember that God's love, grace, and mercy surpass what we believe people deserve. Trusting in Christ's guidance and relinquishing our need for control free us from human limitations as we journey through life with faithfulness and compassion. Then, when we stand before the judgment seat of God, our Lord will say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servants." Amen.