

DATE: August 2nd, 2026
SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 3:9-15
THEME: God is not about condemnation, but about loving invitation.
SUBJECT: Judgment
TITLE: Setting Things Right

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What is God's judgment all about?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

You may be familiar with a book by Brian McLaren called We Make the Road by Walking. It's actually a 52-chapter guide designed to provide spiritual formation for progressive Christians who want to move beyond rigid dogmas and it covers a lot of theological ground - forgiveness, justice, love, grace - all topics that you might expect me to preach on. So, which chapter did I decide to talk about today? I chose to walk the road less travelled by - judgment - and we'll see if it makes all the difference.

God's judgment. Say those two words together in a crowded room anywhere in the Pacific Northwest and you'll probably clear it faster than if you yell, "Fire!" For most of human history, people have understood God's judgment to be real and were quite afraid to question how God could be so harsh at times. God plagued the Egyptians with boils, swarms of locusts, fire and hail, and death, according to the book of Genesis. The Egyptians (and the Israelites) didn't seem to think to question God about it, even if it took Pharaoh a while to get the message and release the Hebrew slaves. The book of Genesis also recounts that the earth was flooded because humanity had gone sour, and in no place does scripture record that anyone questioned God's judgment not just on all of humanity, but on all of creation! People just understood God's judgment - a

natural disaster, defeat in war, disease, blindness - to be the result of something they had done. And during the time in which the Gospels were written, it was commonly understood that sickness and disease was caused by human sin, that human action or moral deficiency led to God's judgment. One notable scriptural exception to the long history of accepting God's judgment without question appears to be in the book of Job. Job, of course, suffers many pains from having his property taken away, to losing his family, to losing his health to within an inch of his life. His friends tempt him to curse God for sending such an unjust train of abuses upon him, and at the point when Job was about to curse God's INjustice, God speaks and squashes that idea. Still, the fact that the book of Job exists at all is proof that some ancients did dare to question the judgment of God.

Here in the Northwest, there are all kinds of people who question God's judgment, or who once accepted it and have since given up the belief that God's judgment is unquestionable ... or given up on believing in God at all. What people once accepted as part of life—that God judges us and punishes us (sometimes harshly) as a result of our wrongdoing—no longer holds true for many people in modern times. This questioning of God's judgment, I think, started to take hold in the 14th century - the beginning of a period called The Enlightenment - and specifically, perhaps, during the Bubonic Plague when people died by the tens of millions in Europe in just a few short years. After praying to God and carrying out many acts of penitence, they continued to die in overwhelming numbers; and not only common people, but also church officials who presumably were under God's special protection. Many writings from the period around the time of the Bubonic Plague and afterward - into the Renaissance where

Humanism began to grow - reveal doubts that God and the church are infallible and, by extension, that God's judgment is always just and right.

That idea found further voice in philosophers like Descartes, Hume, and Voltaire—and later Nietzsche and Sartre—who all cast great doubt upon the unerring judgment of God and even upon the existence of God. While many people today have walked in their footsteps, there are still many who hold to the belief that the things we suffer are a direct result of God's judgment on our sinful actions. I remember the summer of 1993, when I was doing chaplaincy at Summit Medical Center in Oakland. I came into the room of a woman who was dealing with cancer and who believed that her condition was the result of a sin that she committed. Still in seminary, my head was full of theological arguments, and so I decided to question this woman's assumptions about God's judgment. That didn't get very far, though. She quickly became frustrated and told me to leave. Reflecting on this interaction afterward, I realized that I was touching upon not just her belief but also with her identity and worldview. Perhaps a better pastoral approach would have been to simply ask, "What sin did you commit?" and see if that might have led to a place where we could talk about God's healing love beyond any kind of judgment.

But I've often wondered why people make the connection between sin and suffering. In the 1980s and 90s, some claimed that AIDS was God's judgment on gay people. And there are always voices that blame human sin for natural disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes. Interestingly, I haven't heard much about Climate Change being the result of God's judgment on the "sin" of burning too much fossil fuel. Still, we do things that clearly have consequences. As it turns out, smoking isn't a healthy habit. Is emphysema God's judgment on smokers? What some call judgment is what others

call “natural result”. But the term “judgment” conveys anger, so when we say “God is judging us” we’re really saying that God is angry at us, presumably for doing something wrong. Is Climate Change proof that God is angry with us because we are doing something wrong? If I get cancer, should I assume that God is angry at me? If that’s true, then God was angry at both my parents. My mother and father smoked, but I don’t, so maybe I’ll escape God’s anger. However, some people (and all animals, to my knowledge) who don’t smoke can get cancer, and yet smoking has been linked to cancer. A few weeks ago, the smoke in the Upper Midwest from wildfires was so thick that being outside for the day was the equivalent of smoking a half pack of cigarettes (“*Wildfire smoke is like smoking ‘half a pack a day’*”, NPR, July 17, 2026). If smoking is sinful, was it sinful to walk outside one’s house in Detroit in mid-July?

Now we’re getting into the weeds, but I’m just trying to follow the logical thought stream here, and I’m really struggling to find it. Clearly, some actions have negative consequences, but why do people sometimes connect those consequences to God’s judgment, God’s anger? At the very least, it seems problematic to me to call something a sin because WE associate it with a particular negative consequence. Adding God’s anger to that is just adding insult to injury.

Brian McLaren makes the point that in biblical times, “judgment” did include condemnation for wrongdoing, but it meant more than that. He says that ancient Hebrew judges, from which they formed the basis of an understanding of God’s judgment, worked to **set things right**, to restore balance, harmony and well-being. Whenever possible, the job of a judge was to reconcile and convert—to set things right again—not to kill and destroy out of anger. The ultimate goal of the ancient judge was, ideally, to bring about what Jews mean today by “shalom” (peace, well-being, harmony,

balance). Judgment, then, was best done not out of anger, but out of compassion and hope for restoration. We hope the same is true for human judges today; we'd even say that's the ideal, and yet the belief in God's angry judgment persists.

Then there's judgment that has eternal consequences. It's important to point out here, however, that there's no mention of an eternal "hell" in all of Hebrew scripture, so perhaps we can say that the ancient Jews did not perceive God as a judge who condemned people out of anger to eternal punishment. THAT was a Christian invention. We find, of course, a few places in the Greek New Testament where God is framed as a judge who metes out eternal consequences, allowing some to enter into God's blessed kingdom forever and condemning others to eternal punishment (c.f. the sheep and the goats in Mt. 25 and Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16). And so there IS a biblical basis for believing that God judges harshly and permanently. There's also a passage in Revelation 20 (vs 11-15) that talks about judgment upon the dead, but I see no eternal sense to it except what people read into it. On the whole, I don't think the Bible weighs in very heavily on eternal judgment. And I don't believe God's judgment - much less God's anger - is a main take-away in scripture.

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians 3 seems to speak of a kind of "Love and Logic" set-up where God has put certain parameters in place - call them "guardrails" that keep us from going too far astray - and we logically get burned if we get too close to the edge. Getting back to McLaren, he points to Hebrews 9.27: "... it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment." He writes, "We are not saying, 'after this, the condemnation.' We are saying, 'after this, the setting right' " and he uses 1 Corinthians 3 as the proof. In this passage, Paul says that fire will reveal the quality of our work. Many hellfire and brimstone preachers wrongly assume that fire will be the

instrument of eternal torture. But, says McLaren, fire is better understood as an instrument of purification. Paul says, “If anyone builds on the foundation [that is Jesus Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, this work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.” The gold, silver and costly stones that Paul mentions aren’t people. They’re qualities. This whole passage is saying that all that is good will survive the purification—the judgment of God, if you will—and all that is hypocritical, evil and sinful will be “burned away.” Essential goodness will survive, while evil will be destroyed—perhaps eternally. That’s the “setting right.” I think that judgment is not about some people being sent to eternal punishment while others are sent to eternal bliss. Rather, judgment is about setting things right so that what is built with quality will be saved and what is built of inferior quality will be lost.

Today is a communion Sunday. This Table is not about judgment; it’s about an invitation. And it’s open to all who wish to accept God’s love more deeply into their lives. “Worthiness” has no meaning here. If you feel broken, you belong at the Table. If you feel like an outsider, you belong at the Table. If you feel some sin is holding you back in your life, you belong at the Table. God in Jesus Christ invites you. If you feel condemned, who is there to condemn? Only Jesus, and he died and rose to new life and is interceding for us (Romans 8:34) and no one and nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ. At the Table, judgment is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is your relationship with God and God’s unconditional and eternal love for you. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)