

You are, “not guilty,” in God’s eyes because of Jesus. Amen.

“If hell exists, I think it’s empty.” If hell exists, I think it’s empty. Would you believe those words were spoken by a pastor, and a pastor with a position of leadership for an entire church body? Not our church body. But I’ve heard lots of people reflect that same idea. If, if there is a hell, I think, I think, it’s empty. God is loving. He wouldn’t send anyone to hell. God doesn’t really judge people. People are basically good. Is there a hell? God says a big, clear, emphatic, “Yes!” in this part of the Bible. Does it matter what I think? Not really. It matters what God says. Does a popular opinion that hell is empty suddenly make hell empty? God didn’t call me here to tell you what I think. God called me here to tell you what God says. Sermons are not about popular opinions or my opinions. Sermons are about God’s unchanging, loving word. There is a hell. Real people go there. But best of all, there is a heaven. God takes real people there, to enjoy eternal blessings. Yes, God judges. But his judgment for all who believe in Jesus as their Savior is, “Not guilty!” Not guilty!

Let’s look at what God says about his judgment. For one thing, God’s judgment is certain. *When* the Son of Man comes. That’s talking about Jesus. He *will* sit on his throne. All the nations *will* be gathered. He *will* separate them one from another. Notice, when not if. Will, not might. Clear separation.

The separation pictures the last judgment, using a picture common then, but maybe not so common to us. Like a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. Sheep good. Goats bad. They were different animals. Sheep more docile and obedient. Goats more stubborn and defiant. They were often separated at night so the goats didn’t harm the sheep. And sheep were usually white and goats were usually black. Please don’t for a nanosecond read anything racial into that. The color white, not the race, stands for holiness. The color black, not the race, stands for sin.

There’s little words that point out the separation in God’s judgment. Did you catch them? He will put the sheep on *his* right and the goats on *the* left. His right. God has a relationship with the sheep. Goats are on the left. No relationship. Look at verse 37. The righteous will answer. One translation of the Bible uses this whole sentence, “Those people whom God has declared perfectly holy in his sight.” That’s a lot of words for one word, but that’s what God has declared. Those with faith in Jesus, the righteous, are perfectly holy in his sight. But the goats, the unbelievers, are simply called, “They,” in verse 44. And the same contrast of small words is repeated in verse 46. They, the unbelievers, will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous, those whom God has declared perfectly holy in his sight, will go into eternal life. Yes, God will really judge. He will really make a clear separation.

The clear separation is there in the small details, it’s there in the big contrasts as well. The way Jesus, the Son of Man, addresses sheep and goats, believers and unbelievers is totally opposite at each point. Let’s break down his words to believers first. And isn’t there something, that he addresses believers first? He says, “Come!” This is the best part of heaven, to be with Jesus. “You who are blessed by my Father.” Blessed is a passive word. The sheep didn’t bless themselves. They didn’t do something to earn the blessing. The Father gave the blessing. And so these sheep stand in a state of blessing.

Inherit. Inherit. There’s a whole sermon in that word. I trust you’ll see the connections to the inheritance God has given us, the inheritance that we inherit. Don’t think of inheritance as something you work for. Like you stayed on the farm and worked so you got to inherit the farm. No! This

inheritance is an inheritance of grace. This inheritance is given. This inheritance was earned by the work of another, and then given to someone who didn't work for it. The parents worked hard and saved and then give it away. Jesus worked hard his entire life to be perfect and then he gave his perfection away. To us! When? At death! It's after death the inheritance is given. At Jesus' death, God passed along the inheritance of forgiveness Jesus worked hard to win for us. There's something else about inheritance. It's decided by the giver. His Word stands. He writes the will and that's how it goes. What was Jesus' last will and testament? This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you. That will and testament, that inheritance can't be changed.

This inheritance God gives at the last judgment is a kingdom, prepared for you! Again, prepared is the action of another. You didn't prepare the kingdom. God prepared it. And the picture of this preparation is the preparation for a king coming. When we invite ordinary people over, the vacuum is dusted off and the fancy glasses come out. How much more would you prepare for a king? Jesus says the best of meats and finest of wines. All without cost. A mansion. What's that like? Your own kingdom! Prepared. For you! For you! This kingdom in heaven was prepared for you! And God has been planning this since the foundation of the world. A foundation is something certain. Who wouldn't like more certainty right now? What's going to happen the next four years? I don't know. But I do know I've got a kingdom God prepared for me. And the foundation has been there since the creation of the world. Foundation is something immovable. Who wouldn't like that right now? And foundation conveys this idea, "This foundation was laid long before you existed. You didn't do something to earn this kingdom. It was given to you. It was prepared long in advance of you."

Does that help you see the contrast with the words of God to those on the left, the goats, the unbelievers? It's the exact opposite, on every point! Depart from me! Ouch! Depart from me! Depart from God, from his love, his mercy, his kindness, his goodness? That sounds like hell! That's exactly what hell is, being away from God. That's the worst part of hell, being away from God. Let that sink in. Before the cursing and the fire and the devil, comes the departure. From God. That's the worst part of hell. No blessing. Cursed. Again, done by God. God really will judge. He really will curse. That's the status of those who don't believe in Jesus: cursed.

Into eternal fire. Wow! Ever burned yourself? Imagine having no ice to cool it. It's fire, for eternity. A fire prepared for the devil and his angels. There's actually a sliver of good news in this contrast. Notice the fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. Not for people. God doesn't want people to go to hell. God would be delighted if hell were empty. God would have been happier if he never had to make hell in the first place. And God didn't make hell in the first place. Hell wasn't prepared from the foundation of the world, from the creation. God only prepared this eternal fire after the devil and the devil's angels rebelled against God. God wants hell, the eternal fire, to be empty. But sadly it isn't. Hell is filled with people who rejected Jesus as their Savior. That might be the saddest part about hell, knowing you don't have to be there, knowing that Jesus was the way to avoid this agony away from God, but you rejected Jesus. You refused to believe in him.

And that's the clearest division of all: God's judgment is based on faith, not works. Let me say that again. God's judgment is based on faith, not works. For all that Jesus says about works as evidence of faith, it's still the work of God that comes first, work in separating, work in placing sheep on his right, work in blessing, work in preparing a kingdom for you. Yes, Jesus points to the evidence of faith. And he elevates the ordinary, the everyday, things that everyone can do. What about the sins of the sheep? They are

buried in forgiving silence. Buried in forgiving silence. The sheep weren't counting. There's a first, sheep weren't counting. But the sheep weren't counting their good works. They weren't keeping track or score or expecting some reward. They were doing these works because that's what believers do. And the unbelievers aren't sent away from God for the big, bad sins of commission, like murder and rape and racism. It was ordinary sins of omission, they omitted to help, even the least, who needed it the most. God's separation couldn't be more clear. Sheep on his right. Goats on the left. Righteous and sinners. Blessed and cursed. Inheritance and fire. Kingdom and hell. Both eternal.

Where does that leave me? Where will I stand? Where will Jesus put me, his right or the left? If hell exists and it isn't empty, will I be there? People call our church wanting money for gas or rent and I think, "The church is about getting you to heaven, not getting you gas." And then when I do help out by getting them gas, I think, "Man, I'm so much better than they are. Big man upstairs, mark one up for the big guy down here." Hey, I've got faith. That's all that matters right? Faith alone! Would there be enough evidence to convince a jury you had faith in Jesus? Will there be enough evidence to convince God not to convict you as guilty? My guilt says, "I'm a goat. And not the greatest of all time kind of goat, unless there's a greatest sinner of all time." I can't be on his right. I'm not good enough! What about my sins?

Buried in forgiving silence. Buried in forgiving silence. Can you hear the Son of Man mention the sins of his sheep? Listen! You can't hear it. No mention of sin. Buried in forgiving silence. Buried in an empty tomb. Buried in the bosom of the one who wants nothing more than you hold you close in that bosom, for eternity. Buried with the one who blessed you. Buried in forgiving silence, never to rise again. What does rise from that tomb with Christ is a new person, a person made alive by love, love counting not the cost of good works, love not keeping score of rights I do and wrongs others do. Love from a heart so full of love and so free to love that heart can't do enough and expects nothing in return.

Yes, God really judges. But his judgment for believers is, "Not guilty!" Not because some so called pastor thinks hell is empty, but because God says, "You are not guilty. You are blessed. You, come. You inherit the kingdom." Not guilty! Not guilty! Not guilty! God really does judge and his eternal, unchangeable, immovable judgment, for all who believe in him is, "Not. Guilty!" Amen.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead. Amen.