

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the old west, there was horse that was spooked. He bolted away with a wagon, and in the wagon was a little boy. Seeing the boy in danger, a young man took off on his horse to stop the runaway wagon. He saved the boy's life. When the boy grew up, he turned to a life of crime. He became a robber... and one day committed murder. He was caught and stood trial. The man, handcuffed, felt a wave of relief when he entered the courtroom, because lo and behold, the judge was the very man who had saved him years earlier when he was on that runaway wagon. He pled for mercy from the judge... reminding him of how he had once saved him. But the judge silenced the man by saying to him, "Young man, many years ago I was your savior. Today, I am your judge, and in the name of justice, I sentence you to be hanged."

There's a thought that makes us pause and think, isn't it? Years ago Jesus saved us. Now Jesus is coming back as our judge. What will his verdict be? Are you ready to stand before Jesus in judgment?

We have entered into the very last part of the church year... a season we call "End Times." We remember that Jesus is coming again in judgment. Now is the time to prepare for his return. The text before us today in John chapter 5 beginning at the 19th verse does just that: it teaches us how we can be prepared for Jesus' judgment. Let's study it.

Let's start out with this thought question: Agree or disagree? "If you are sufficiently religious, you will be saved on the day of Judgment." That's one of those statements that a part of us wants to agree with. If a person is devoted enough to God and has a strong enough faith in God and strives to live a life of obedience to God, they will be saved, won't they? We just need to be more religious.

Or let's put it another way: Faith in God can be generic, but must be sincere. Faith in God *can* be generic, but it must be sincere. And then you'll be saved. Is this true? I think most of us recognize it as false, but let's look at this more closely, as well as its implications. And let's also recognize that this is the world view of most of the people around us today.

If sincerity and religiosity saved a person, then the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day were most certainly saved. You would be hard pressed to day to find people more sincere and devout in their beliefs. But were they on the right track? How would they fare on Judgment Day?

In the verses just before our reading, Jesus had just healed a man who had been lame for 38 years. Oh... and it also happened to be a Sabbath day... a day when the Jewish people were to rest from all work. The Jewish leaders heard of this miracle, and instead of praising God, they persecuted Jesus because he had done this "work" on the Sabbath day. Jesus defended himself, pointing out that the heavenly Father was always at work, and therefore Jesus was too. This is when the Jews became furious. They noticed that Jesus was hinting at his equality with God the Father. And that was a teaching they could not tolerate.

Note that they were very sincere and devout in their religion. They were sure Jesus had broken one of God's laws. He did work on the Sabbath, and that was forbidden! Yes, he healed a man... but he **WORKED!**

And note a second important thing: They rejected Jesus as the Son of God and one who was sent by God to save them from their sins. They were devout in their faith in God... yet they didn't honor or worship the true God because they did not recognize or honor Jesus as God's Son.

This kind of religious devotion is very common place in America today. In modern day America, it is okay to believe in God yet. It's certainly not that way everywhere in the world. In Europe especially, God-belief is considered foolish and anti-scientific. Things seem to be moving in that direction here as well. But for the most part, it's okay here in America if you believe in God. But that doesn't mean all is well! The kind of God belief that is okay is generic God belief. As long as you don't specify who God is, all is well.

It's okay to have a prayer at the president's inauguration, and maybe even at the beginning of a public sporting event in the team locker room. But you'd best keep Jesus and his salvation out of the picture.

A football player can bow his head in the end zone, and even "thank God" in a post-game interview. But it is a most definite no-no to mention Jesus Christ, or your belief in him as the only Savior from sin. Those kind of remarks will be censored just as fast as the four letters words.

At the work place, it's still typically politically correct to let a co-worker know you're praying for her when she tells you about a trial she's facing. But it's a definite no-no to say that Jesus Christ is answer to our problems and guilt. You dare not mention his death on the cross for your salvation.

Religious devotion is okay. But don't get so specific as to mention Jesus. Is this a religious devotion that saves? Jesus makes it clear: NO! A true faith in God must include a true faith in his Son Jesus.

Jesus taught the Jewish religious leaders... and us today... that he is the only Son of God from eternity, and it is vitally important that he be honored as such. Jesus taught them that he is one in essence with the Father. He told them how the Father and the Son share the same work, they have the same purposes, they are one in action, and they are worthy of the same honor. If a person is to be saved, he must know and believe Jesus. But Jews of his day did not. Most today do not!

Based on what Jesus says, I fear most people today are not prepared for Judgment Day. And a more immediate question: Are you prepared for Judgment Day? Have you fallen into the American way of honoring a general and generic God? When religion comes up in conversation, do you keep things very vague and general so that Muslims, Jews and even Buddhists don't feel uncomfortable? Or maybe you avoid the topic of religion entirely? Are there sins we need to confess today as we start to sweat a bit about the coming Judgment? Are *we* ready?

Jesus makes it perfectly clear how to be ready for his return: **"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."** That's John 5:24. If you have a list of Bible passages that you'd like to memorize, this one should definitely be on the list.

The way of salvation is simply this: 1) Hear the Word of Jesus. Jesus comes from the Father. Is sent by the Father. Has the word of the Father. Shares the God's plan of redemption with us. If we will be saved, we must hear the messenger of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other way. 2) Believe that Word. It's not enough to be exposed to it, to hear it and think it sticks to us and so protects us. We must believe it. That means accepting it as truth and fully relying up on that Word in our day to day life. That Word must be the foundation of our life upon which all else is built. Hear the word, believe it. And 3) note that it is vitally important *what* is believed. Believe "him who sent me." The object of our faith is vitally important. It's not faith itself that saves, but faith in Jesus and the Father's plan of salvation through him that saves!

Now look what Jesus says: **Whoever hears his word and believes in the Fathers plan of salvation in Christ *has* eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life.**

There are two important things the Father has entrusted to his Son Jesus. 1) Judgment. The Father in his wisdom has entrusted judgment to his Son, Jesus. And 2) the second thing he has entrusted to him is life: the right to give it to whomever he chooses. Now note another thing: The judgment and life take place and are given 1) already now... and 2) they are also in the future. Judgment and life are

now... in the spiritual sense. And Jesus' judgment and life are in the future... in the physical sense. Believe in Jesus and you *are* not condemned. A person who is not condemned has already stood in judgment and been declared not guilty. Because Jesus suffered and died on the cross, your sin and guilt have been removed! Your guilt is gone. God has given you spiritual life where once you were spiritually dead. You have stood in God's judgment and been declared not guilty for Jesus' sake. You have risen from the dead and are now alive in Christ Jesus!

Yet Jesus also says, "A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." What is now a spiritual and hidden reality will become a visible, evident and physical reality when Jesus returns. We are already judged and declared innocent. Yet there is still a future physical judgment coming... where in Christ we will be publicly, visibly declared innocent. We have already been given spiritual life, yet at the judgment, God will raise our bodies and give us new, glorified bodies with new and perfect life in them. We are judged and will be judged. We have life yet will be given life. This is the mystery Jesus reveals.

And both now and in the future, we stand secure and at peace... not because we are sufficiently religious and devout... but because we have heard the words of Jesus. We believe him. And we trust God's plan of salvation was fully carried out through his one and only Son. That is the specific and only message of salvation that saves.

Many years ago, the pioneers were making their way across one of the central states. They were traveling with covered wagons pulled a slow team of oxen. Off in the distance they see smoke. Soon they see it covering the whole horizon. A blazing wildfire, and it's heading straight for them! There was a river they crossed a day earlier, but there's no way they could make it in time. Panic set in. Then one man knew what would save them. He gave the command to set the grass on fire that near them. When a large patch had burned and cooled a bit, the group moved onto the burned area. As the flames rapidly closed in on them, a little girl cried out, "Are you sure we won't be burned by the fire?" The leader replied, "My child, the flames cannot reach us here, for we are standing where the fire has already been!" And that's exactly what happened – the flames roared all around them, but they were safe on the land where the fire had already been.

Friends, Judgment Day approaches, and God's wrath is like a raging fire consuming all sinners. But know this: Christ Jesus has taken your sins upon himself. And he endured the full rage of God's wrath when he died on the cross. Your sin was completely burned up in that fire. In Christ we stand in the charred remains. Even if the fires of Judgment rage around us, we stand safe and secure in Christ Jesus. We have eternal life. We are not condemned. Thanks be to God!

Are you ready for Judgment Day? The answer is a most certain, "Yes." God has made you ready through Jesus! You believe in God's own Son. You know and believe that he paid your debt of sin in full. God's wrath was exhausted on him, and you stand before God holy and pure. When Jesus comes again, we don't cringe in fear, we welcome him who redeemed us and we rejoice. You are ready for the Judgment! And so am I. And so we pray: "Come quickly Lord Jesus! Come quickly!" Amen.