

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Having served as a missionary in Russia for 12 years, I can tell you there are some huge differences between Russian and American culture. Obviously, the languages are different. And I'll tell you that Russian is a very challenging language to learn. But that aside, the differences are still too numerous to list. There different expressions, different gestures, different body language, different norms. For example, Americans smile all the time. Russians don't smile so much... even for pictures. In fact, they may be suspicious of someone who smiles all the time. Another example: In America, when we ask "How are you?" it is cultural appropriate to answer "fine"... even if your house just burned down yesterday. However, in Russia, people answer honestly, telling you exactly what's going on in their lives and how they really feel about it. Don't ask if you don't want to know.

In America, if people, especially strangers, tell you your kids aren't dressed warmly enough, or you aren't doing something correctly, you might take offense. In Russia, this is done frequently. It is how they show care and concern.

These are just a few examples of how different and difficult communication can be between different cultures. But there is one thing that does not change between cultures. It doesn't matter if you're American, Russian, Ukrainian, African, Vietnamese, or any other nationality. And for that matter, it doesn't matter if you're filthy rich, or stinking poor, an employer or an employee, or a man or a woman. In matters of essential and eternal importance, there is absolutely no difference: "The Lord is Coming to Judge."

Do you want to be able to stand confident before God on Judgment Day? Do you want to lead others to be confident before God on Judgment Day? Today's sermon text tells us how.

Many have scoffed at the idea of a Judgment Day when all people will stand before God. But here's how Jesus himself says it will unfold: "*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*" Jesus will return. When? Only God knows. We will not know the day or the hour. Could it come before the end of this sermon? Absolutely? Maybe later this week? It could. Not for another couple hundred years? That's also possible. We don't know. But we do know that every single human being, living and dead, will stand before him in judgment. It doesn't matter where you live or when, all will stand before God Almighty and give an accounting.

Think about that for a moment. Does the thought scare you? Was there ever a time in your life when you got called in before an authority figure for something you did wrong? Maybe you stood before your dad, knowing you had screwed up. You knew you deserved punishment. Or maybe it was the principal. Or a police officer. Or a judge. That horrible feeling knowing you did wrong and you were being held accountable. Now imagine standing before God almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Understand that he knows everything you've ever done. He knows your innermost thoughts. He's heard every word you've ever spoken in anger. Every course joke to escape your lips. Are you scared yet? You should be. It's a terrifying prospect to stand before the holy, perfect and righteous God and have to give an accounting for our whole life.

Do you feel like dropping your arms in despair? How could I, a poor miserable *goat*, have any hope, peace or confidence when standing before God almighty? Don't we all justly deserve to hear from God, "Depart from me!"

Perhaps a little part of us thinks we might have something to say in our defense. "But Lord, I tried! I really did put some effort into right living!" And God says, "Good for you. However, you're not on trial here today for the good you did, but for the wrong. I demand holiness, yet I've got a list a mile long (literally) where all your failures are spelled out in detail." And we speak up again, "But Lord, whenever I did something bad, I always tried to make up for it with something good. You know, like the show, 'My Name is Earl.' He did lots of bad things in his life. Then he had a change of heart. He made a list of all those bad things and tried to make amends for all of them. I sort of do the same thing in my life." And God says, "You can't undo the bad things you've done. Just like you can't un-murder someone you've killed, you also can't undo any sin you commit. Any good you do to compensate was just good you were supposed to have been doing anyway. You still stand guilty of the bad you did." You speak up once more, "But Lord, when I compare my life to my neighbor's... or my sister who is the black sheep of our family... I'm *way* better!" And the Lord answers, "I can assure you that your neighbor and your sister are also being judged by me. But we're here talking about you and your mile-long list of sins and offenses." God would be completely just and right to say to us, "Depart from me." And what chilling, dreadful words those would be. Imagine if you had to depart from the One who is the source of all that is good. Eternally separated from the one who is love, warmth, kindness, joy, peace and life. There could be nothing worse.

But I've got some very good news for each and every one of you. Our text says that to some, God is going to say this on Judgment Day: "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*" Instead of "depart" to some he says, "Come!" These ones come because... why? Because they are better than others? Tried harder than others? No! They are told to "come" because they are blessed by the Father.

Now this is so important, so please pay careful attention. Why is it that some can be with God in eternity? How is it that these have come to be blessed by the Father? Is God capricious? Whimsical? Does he play favorites? Is he arbitrary? "No" to all those questions. God is holy, righteous and fair. That means God doesn't simply turn a blind eye to your sin and guilt. He can't do that. Then he'd be no better than an unrighteous judge who knows the criminal is guilty of a terrible crime and sets him free anyway. That's not right or just. Instead he found a way to remove your sin and forgive your guilt forever.

God's solution for sin is his Son, Christ Jesus.

You are not holy. God demands holiness. So he sent his Son to be holy for you to live in your place. Jesus provides what you lack. Thoughts, words and actions... all of them in line with the Father's will. His holiness God considers your holiness through faith in his Son. See how you are blessed by the Father?

And what of our sins and guilt? All covered by the blood of the King. Jesus went to the cross carrying your sins and mine. He was mocked, beaten, flogged and crucified because of our sin and guilt. He died for our sin and guilt. The punishment of a righteous judge was taken out on him... instead of us. And we know it was sufficient because Jesus rose on the third day. You are holy... with Jesus' holiness. You are sinless, for he took the penalty. You are innocent. You are blessed by the Father. And he says to you, "Come into my kingdom!"

There are only two ways a person will stand before God on Judgment Day... they will stand to give an accounting of their own life... or they will stand and give an accounting for Jesus' life. By faith in Jesus' righteousness, God will judge you based on his life, not yours! This is the good news God speaks to us in his holy Word. Yes, all people will stand before God in judgment. But when Jesus died it was also

on behalf of all people. Jesus lived and died for Americans, for Russians, for the rich and the poor, for men, women and children. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's son, cleanses all of us of our sin!

Does this mean we can go and live a life of sin? Absolutely not. The believer who knows what Jesus did and trusts it is true for him will proceed to live a life which gives evidence to the faith in his heart. Knowing what Jesus did for you and the blessings that are yours as a result completely changes your life. Where you once lived for self and gauged your life by the world's norms and standards. You now live your life to God's glory out of thankfulness to Jesus. When someone gives us an incredible gift, we say thank you, and no gift could be greater than the life and salvation won for us by our Savior. So the good we do as believers is evidence of the faith within us.

And that's what God points to on the last day as we stand before him *and all people* in the final judgment. *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."*

When you know God's love, you can't help but serve him. In fact, it comes so naturally, believers will be in shock at this list of good works they did. *'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'* *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"*

When the believer thankfully and joyfully serves God by serving others, God sees that as service to him. God knows you're doing these things in response to his love, and as a necessary reflection of his love to others. You can't help it, can you? He knows you're doing these things because you are a loved, accepted child of God and heir of his kingdom. He knows these good works are evidence that you trust your eternal future to his Son, Jesus.

In contrast, unbelievers are shocked when God says they weren't doing these things. They've been keeping a tally. They know they've done some good things. They feel they deserve some recognition! But God sees the heart. He knows their motivation. They weren't doing these things in thankfulness for God's love. They weren't doing these things to reflect God's love to others. Their motivation was entirely different... and wrong. So no credit given. **Their failure to serve others in Jesus' name means all their service was a failure.** Man looks at the action... the externals... the results. God looks at the heart... the motivation... the intent.

We started the sermon today by recalling how incredibly different American culture is from Russian culture. And Japan is just as different. So is the culture of tribes in Peru. But there is something that unites us all. The Lord is coming to judge. He is impartial. We're all in the same boat. We're all sinners. We've all fallen short. And there's something else that unites us all. God desires to bless us. And so he sent his Son Jesus, who lived for me, and you, and Russians and Peruvians the same. And he suffered and died for the sins of the world as well... for all just the same. The wicked deeds of all are covered in the blood of Jesus. It is this good news of God's love and kindness in Christ that can create faith in the heart of any person. And so the good news about Jesus also does not change as it is taken to every nation, tribe, people and language.

Friends, because of what Jesus has done for you, every one of you can say with confidence, "I am absolutely prepared for Judgment Day." Can all your friends, relatives and neighbors say that also with confidence? Or is it possible that good news hasn't yet settled in their hearts? In our own circles, and in far reaching places throughout the world, the Good News about Jesus must be shared! The Lord is coming to judge. Time is short! Let's rededicate ourselves to sharing the Gospel here and everywhere! Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understand will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.