

## Good Judgment

<sup>NRS</sup> Luk 12:49 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup> Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup> From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup> they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." <sup>54</sup> He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. <sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. <sup>56</sup> You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Judgment! Judgment! We love this theme, don't we? Yeah, there aren't a whole lot of Presbyterian sermons on judgment these days. The whole theme of judgment makes us a little nervous, a little on edge. When we come across a text like this one with Jesus breathing fire and talking about splitting up families- it's easier for us to either tune it out, or even to snicker under our breath thinking we're *so beyond* texts like this.

Stephen King said one of his favorite Far Side cartoons pokes fun of texts like this. The cartoon features a weird little bug, a flea, walking through what looks like a forest of smooth tree trunks that you quickly realize is dog hair. And hanging around the flea's neck is a sandwich board declaring: "The end of the dog is near!"

Now you know some of this is right, it is. It's right for us to be nervous about folks quick to point their fingers at us on a kind of witch hunt for sinners. One of my best friends and neighbors in seminary, John Semmes, once went to a church with a guy holding his floppy Bible running around up there with sweating pouring off him like drippings off a roast, and he had his arm swinging over his head like a helicopter shouting, "There's a sinner here!" "There's a sinner here!" The only part of the story I don't believe is that when the arm came down it wasn't pointing at John.

We're right to be nervous about this kind of religion- religion that's more about law than Gospel. We're right to be nervous about anybody, whether a sweaty pastor or anyone else, who starts thinking God needs help sorting out the good, the bad, and the ugly.

But. But. We make a terrible mistake in our tradition, a terrible mistake, if we neglect the theme of judgment entirely. We make an enormous mistake to just ignore this hard, tough side of Jesus, saying this is for other churches- not ours.

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I just got back this week from some great time off- two Thursday ago now we packed up the car and headed off to the Wallowas near the border of Oregon and Idaho. At the heart of the Wallowas lies Eagle Cap. At just over 9,500 hundred feet it isn't quite the highest peak in the Wallowas, but it's one of the prettiest and has the best views. So, after getting in on Thursday, my plan was to wake up crazy early on Friday morning, to drive to Lostine trailhead, walk into the lake basin area, climb Eagle Cap, and then head out on another trail to be picked up in the afternoon so I could be back to help out with the kids at night. It was an ambitious plan, but I figured I'm young- what could go wrong?

So, at 3 AM Friday morning I reluctantly crawled out of bed, squeezed a packet of GU into my mouth, GU is this nasty glucose thing odd people eat who want energy but not the cramping you get from food in your stomach. So after gagging that down, I put my head lamp on and took off into an absolutely dark sky- with barely a sliver of a moon that hadn't even risen yet. When I made it to Two Pan where I would find the Lostine trail, I could barely see thing- certainly not the trailhead. But anxious to get started, I just

walked into the woods around the welcome sign thinking I'd stumble onto the trail for sure. Well...it took a few trips in crawling over downed logs and through nettles until I finally saw a sign saying "Lostine Trail this way". Finally! So then I was off. And it was great. There's nothing like walking in a new place, mountains on both sides, and dawn's rosy fingers slowly making the entire valley look like it's catching fire.

And things were going great- until, I hit the meadows and caught my first view of Eagle Cap way off in the distance. With the morning sun just beginning to light up its face it was a perfect picture. So, I set my pack down and was feeling around in my pockets to make sure I had everything. GU in my pockets- check. Knife- check. My GPS- check. My keys- not check. Where were my car keys? I was wearing a new pair of pants that day- they just had pockets with a couple of Velcro pieces. My old pants have a zipper. I knew I had put my keys in that pocket. Correction- MELISSA'S keys in there. We had driven out in Melissa's car, and we only have one key for it- my anxiety was a little high. I tore through my backpack. Nothing. I checked my pockets again. Nothing. With growing fear I thought about where they could be. About two miles back I had laid down to take a picture of a waterfall- I used the rocks to steady the camera while I opened up the aperture to get that nice gauzy effect for the water. A couple of things had fallen out of my pocket- maybe the keys were there.

So, I stashed my pack off the trail away and ran back to where the waterfall was. It seemed farther back than I remember, but I finally made it. I searched all around, under the rocks, everything. No luck. And so I sat there for a minute not sure what to do. They had to be somewhere between where I started and where I stashed my pack. I could just go back to the trailhead and look- but if I did that, I'd never make it to where Melis

and her mom were picking me up later that day. Dah! So, I figured there was nothing to do but to go back to my pack and to stick to my original plan and just hope I'd find them at the trailhead.

I was pretty upset for the next few miles- then, exhaustion began to set in and I only had enough energy to focus on the hike itself. And I also ran into some folks who made me feel better, too. Three women all in their mid to late sixties were trekking out after a week in the mountains. I told them of my plight. And they assured me they would be my trail angels- they would look for my keys and one of them said, "Now *when* we find them, I'll put it right behind your right front tire. Don't worry- we'll find them!" And she was so convincing, I was sure things were going to be OK. And they were- at least for the rest of the day. I had a great hike- made it all the way up Eagle Cap, and all the way out and met Melis and her mom at Hurricane Creek trailhead.

"How was the trip?" Melis wanted to know. "Oh, fantastic!" I said. "Did you make it up Eagle Cap?" "Yep- it was great!" Now, not wanting to spoil the entire ride, I waited until we were a bit closer to the trailhead to say that I did lose something fairly important. "What's the worst thing I could lose," I asked playing the Sphinx. "Oh no," Melis said. "Not your GPS." "No, worse than that." A puzzled look on her face- like what could be worse to me than losing my precious GPS. And I helped her out. "Yeah, well, my keys kind of slipped out- but it was early when it happened, and I bet they're at the trailhead." Still high on endorphins I was pretty optimistic. Melis and her mom were slightly less so. A couple weeks before we left Melis picked out a card for me. It's this kind of dumb looking guy starting into an open refrigerator completely full of sticks of butter. There's nothing but butter and they're everywhere- in the door, on the shelves-

everywhere. The caption reads: “Honey! Where’s the butter?” Yeah, I’m not the best finder in the whole wide world.

So, we finally make it back to the start of the now cruelly named LOSTine trail. Now again, the endorphins were whispering to me about my trail angels- those women had surely found them. They’d be under that tire for sure- no problem. And well, you can probably guess they weren’t under the tire. And so we searched the area where I had gone into the woods when I was bushwacking for the trail in the dark. I was sure they had fallen out when I was going over a log or something. And we looked. And we looked. Nothing.

Melis asked me if I was prepared to sleep there that night. I was. And so after very sweetly giving me an extra blanket instead of the kick in the head she probably felt like giving me, she and her mom took off to take care of the kids, while I headed back out onto the trail back to the waterfall to look. Having no luck, and now having walked about 34 miles, I got back, filtered some water, ate some truly horrible stew in a bag, and slept the sleep of the dead.

And that night, as I tossed and turned on the hard rocks beneath me, and the endorphins began to ebb out of my system- it began to dawn on me that I might not find the keys. It began to dawn on me that the keys might just not magically appear after all- and that there might be some fairly serious consequences.

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It’s so vital that we read what scholars call the judgment texts- stories like this one with Jesus talking about judgment and division. Not because we want to make ourselves feel bad- most folks I know are hard enough to themselves, far harder than

they are on others. No, it's important to read these texts because of what judgment actually means in the Bible. First off, it does not mean the hand of God coming down and smashing people. God is not some kind of cosmic child in an arcade gallery playing whack-a-mole with us as the unfortunate moles poking our heads up only to get smashed down. Do you know what the word judge is in Greek? It's *krino*. *Krino*. And *krino* doesn't mean to whack or destroy- it simply means to choose. To choose. Judgment in the Bible means making a choice- and in this sense it's actually a neutral term, neither positive or negative. Our choices, our judgments can be good or bad. What is absolute, though, is that we choose, though. And further, that our choices matter, that our choices have consequences. *Krino*, or judgment, means that what you and I do, say, and think matters and will effect us and those around us- and that God isn't going to send trail angels to magically fix everything for us all the time.

This is why Jesus says such strange things this morning- that when he comes there isn't always peace, but there's division. See, because when he comes- each of us is presented with a choice. To follow him, or not. To love one another, or not. To give ourselves over to goodness and mercy, or not. Families may even find themselves split he says, some going one way, others choosing a different path.

And how you and I decide to walk, whether we're going to walk in the light, whether we're going to be honest, whether we're going to be the people we know we're meant to be, not just be the people we can get away with being- well, this is what *krino*, or judgment, or choice is all about. And the toughest part of all this is that this judgment is up to us- God leaves it up to us how we're gonna roll.

You know it feels like the summer has just flown by, hasn't it. But, and you can almost feel it in the air this morning- Fall is nearly here. And with the smell of freshly sharpened pencils just weeks away- now is the time to think about the kind of people we want to be. Now is the time to wake up and recommit ourselves, to rededicate ourselves to the things in our life we hold most dear. Now is the time for us to make good judgments, to make good choices- today.



Well, that night on those rocks, I would have given anything to start that day over and make some different choices, to have worn my other pants, to put those keys in my bag for instance- anywhere but in that stupid pocket! I would have given anything to just pray and have God magically make it all OK. But, that isn't how it works. God gives us freedom- even the freedom to do stupid things.

And had I known everything that Melissa learned about our situation, I would have wished for magic even more. When I was still at the trailhead continuing the search, Melis got on the horn and found out things were really pretty awful. It turns out the kind of car she has, a Volkswagon, has those fancy keys with a microchip- so the car can't be hotwired or anything like that. It turns out, after a few dozen calls, each of which ending with a person telling her, "You just have him keep looking", that the only solution would have been for us to tow the car from the Wallowas to Kennewick, the nearest dealership, and she and the kids would have had to rent a car and drive home without me. Talk about your consequences.

No, the only thing to do was to wake up the next morning, struggle to my stash of Ibuprofen and gobble down as many as I safely could, and get up and start looking. I

searched for three hours, going back and forth like I was on CSI. Nothing. Finally, ready to give in to all my aches and pains and just cry ‘Uncle’ already, I decided to go back one more time. This time, I just kind of followed my intuition- I went in further than I had gone before, through more nettles, over a few more trees. And there they were. Lying right underneath this fallen tree were the keys. They were just staring up at me like they were the most obvious thing in the world. I couldn’t believe it. But I grabbed them anyway, and went back to the car as fast as I could.

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When we are in the presence of Christ we are faced with *krino*, with a choice, a judgment- to follow him or not. To love one another or not. To be the people we are called to be- or not. And the tough news is, this judgment, this path we choose is up to us. Magic trail angels can’t help us.

But the good news. The good news of the Gospel is that we’re not the only ones making a choice here. Christ also chooses. Christ also judges. And he is no ordinary judge- certainly not a cruel judge sitting high above us just waiting to smash us with his gavel. No, he is the judge who has come down from upon high, and taken off his robes to be judged in our place. He is our brother, who has chosen us before the foundation of the world. He is the Father of the prodigal standing at the edge of the field scanning the horizon for us to welcome us home even before we’ve come to our senses.

Christ has made his choice and he calls you this day to newness of life. Today is a brand new day- what will you choose? **Amen.**