

Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.³ So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.⁶ God "will give to each person according to what he has done."⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.¹¹ For God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:2-11)

What Are You Storing Up?

What have you got in your attic? What about your basement or your garage? I've moved twice in that last year and a half, so I've had the opportunity to examine how much we've collected over the years. The longer you live in one place, the more stuff you pick up. But some people really have it bad. I served a man once who lived alone in a good sized house with a garage and a car port. And a barn and at least two sheds behind the house. And every space was full of junk. When he died, his son spent weeks sorting through it all. Be careful before you smile too much at that man's affliction, and not because it's more common than you think. Be careful even if you're one of those disciplined people who throws things out, because you still have to consider your spiritual life. What are you storing up in heaven? Judgment Day is coming. Once it gets here, it will be too late to clean out our spiritual attic and throw away any wrath that we've accumulated. My friends, **what are you storing up?**

I.

Well, how would you know? You can't go up into heaven and look into your spiritual storage bin. How do we know what we've got stored up there? Clearly, we have to understand God's Word. But then we have to apply it to ourselves. That doesn't begin with what we're doing or how we're living. We have to begin with our hearts. **What are you storing up? Examine your hearts and see.**

As Christians, we assume that God's judgments are right. When he says that people who live in sin without repenting are going to hell, we accept his judgment. But St. Paul says, "**So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?**" Do you see what he's driving at? It's easy to point the finger at other people's sins. It's easy to accuse people of being rude or unkind, of hurting our feelings and doing real damage to us and to other people. But one of the great ironies of life is that sometimes, the people who complain most about how difficult other people are commit the exact same sins themselves. My favorite example is the person who tells everyone what a terrible gossip someone else is. They make sure that little piece of news gets around! A man in the midst of an ugly divorce once showed me pictures of how messy his house was to demonstrate just how terrible a wife he had. But what I noticed about the pictures was that they were worn from being handled so much. Was his wife a terrible spouse? Yes. But was this man who was wearing out photos of her housekeeping being a better spouse when he passed them to everyone he knew? No. He was just as guilty of damaging their marriage.

Think about the things that bother you most in your spouse, in your co-workers or the people you go to school with. Think about the rudeness or the offense that makes you most angry and ask yourself, is it possible that I'm also guilty of that offense? Do I resent that arrogant person at the office who always talks over me or who always goes behind my back and undermines me or who always puts me down? Do I do the same things to other people when I can get away with it? Are there people who resent me just as much? Do you think God will let you get away with that hypocrisy?

It's natural for our sinful hearts to believe that we're right and everyone else is wrong – and to avoid looking too closely at ourselves. But God hates hypocrisy. Paul says, "**Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his**

righteous judgment will be revealed.” Each and every one of us was born a sinner. That sinner inside us does not want to believe that I could really be guilty of anything so bad that God would send me to hell. Maybe he does that for child molesters. Maybe he does that to drug dealers. But I’m a pretty good guy. I’m faithful to my wife. I take care of my kids. I go to work every day and people depend on me. God shouldn’t be worked up about my little sins when so many people are guilty of so much more than I am.

When that sinner in our hearts is in control, we fill our spiritual attic with hell. God weighs our hearts in the balance. If they’re not perfect, he finds us guilty. That’s true even if our sins stay in our hearts. Even if I never physically cheat on my wife, if I lust after the beautiful women on TV or in magazines or on the internet, I’m committing adultery in my heart and I am guilty before God. Even if I never steal or break anything, if I look at the things the people around me have and I resent the fact that God didn’t give those things to me, in God’s eyes, I have stolen those things. In God’s eyes, I deserve hell.

Does that scare you? It should. The natural solution of our hearts is to do better. We have to control our internal monologue so that we don’t keep reciting the wrongs we’ve experienced or fantasizing about our sinful desires. We have to practice self-discipline to avoid the sins we condemn in others. We have to work harder. But, to quote Dr. Phil, how’s that working for you? It does not work – we do not overcome those sins by that effort and we do not erase our guilt by that effort because nothing we can do, no discipline we can exercise can possibly free us from God’s punishment. On Judgment Day, we need a different solution.

God’s solution is Christ. Jesus came down to this earth because our corrupt hearts don’t even see the hypocrisy we’re guilty of. God the Son made himself a real human being so that there would be at least one perfect human heart on this earth. Jesus was perfect in his mind and his heart, so he was also perfect in his words and his actions. Jesus was never a hypocrite. But Jesus didn’t live like that to show us that it can be done and then to leave us in the hopeless position of trying to follow his example. No, Jesus did that for us. He was righteous in his heart and his mind, in his words and his actions, in our place. Because Jesus was God as well as man, his one perfect life erases all the sinful lives of everyone who has ever lived. He erases our sinful lives. Jesus’ perfect heart and mind count for our sinful hearts and minds. Jesus’ perfect life is now my life. It’s now your life. It opens the door to heaven.

The end of Jesus’ perfect life was his perfect payment for our sins. For every moment of our hypocrisy, Jesus suffered on the cross. Jesus suffered hell itself there for every time we refused to admit our sin. Jesus died and he paid for that sinner that still lives and rebels in our hearts. A flood of Jesus’ blood has rushed through our storage shed in heaven and swept away every moment of our sin, every ounce of our rebellion, every instance of our hypocrisy. So when God pokes his head into our shed to see what we’ve stored up for ourselves, all he sees is Jesus. He declares us holy and righteous in his sight. On Judgment Day, that verdict will be revealed. Then we will go to live with Jesus forever.

II.

There is nothing worse than a spiritual basement full of God’s wrath. None of us want that. Even we Christians need to remember the spiritual danger that lies in our hearts – and the effect it has on our lives, because how we live does matter. **What are you storing up? Examine your life and see.**

Most of us probably fall into the category of “good people.” Most of our sins are relatively private. You don’t read about them in the newspaper. Few of us get sent to prison. Since most of our sin is really in our hearts or in our private lives, it may not seem to be that severe. But Paul says, **“To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”** By God’s definition, “being good” isn’t just being better than the criminals we read about in the paper. It isn’t just keeping our sins private or even just in our hearts. “Being good” by God’s definition is persistence in doing good. It’s lifelong without a break. We spend all our days doing what God commands us to do with a heart that seeks immortality, that is, a heart that wants to serve God and be with him forever. In contrast, Paul says, **“But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.”**

What standard is God going to apply to us on Judgment Day? Very simply, he’ll ask, “Who is your god?” Are you your own god? Have you made an idol out of what you want and what you think and what you feel? Or have you put the Lord first? Selfishness is the heart of human sin. It is the opposite of the attitude and the life God is looking for from us.

Even if your works appear to be good, God examines your motives. There’s the old saying, “To have a friend, you have to be a friend.” That can be understood as a simple principle of life. But it also demonstrates

the self-serving nature of much of our kindness. I want people to be nice to me, so I'll be a nice person. That's not the same as persisting in doing good. True dedication to serving God comes from faith in God. No action, no matter how selfless, is righteous in God's sight unless the heart behind that action is in perfect harmony with God. You can spend your whole life trying to be a decent person, making sacrifice after sacrifice for the good of others, but if your heart is not lined up with God's – if you don't trust in him as your Savior – then your works are not good enough. That helps us to understand the works Jesus talks about in our gospel lesson for today – the works that demonstrate a living faith.

Paul points out that no one has an advantage. God doesn't give Jewish people extra credit because they were his Old Testament people. Those who are full of faith will live that faith. Those who have no faith will demonstrate that in their lives and they will go to hell. Just as Jews have no advantage over Gentiles, Lutherans have no advantage over Catholics or Baptists or anyone else. Being confirmed here is not what gives you eternal life. Faith in Christ does. Good works don't save us. But good works do indicate whether our faith is real. If you have faith, it will change your life. It won't make your life perfect here. But real faith always works. Does faith rule in our hearts? Or does our heart go through the motions of faith – does it come to church and make an offering and send our kids to catechism class and Lutheran elementary school, thinking that doing these things earn us something? On Judgment Day, what will God's verdict on us be?

By the grace of God, his verdict will be that we are forgiven. He will call us holy. Does that sound right to you? You know you haven't been perfect. But Jesus was perfect for you. Jesus washed all your sin away. Judgment Day is the day when Christ returns and gives us what we've been waiting for all our lives. That promise gives us peace today, as we examine our lives and our hearts and recognize that sin is still a problem we're fighting against. God has come to us in baptism, as he did for that child we baptized this morning, and he washed our sin away. God has come to us in the gospel and he has given us faith that trusts in Jesus. God continues to come to us in the announcement that our sins are forgiven in sermons and in the liturgy and in the Lord's Supper. He renews our faith in him. God has come and emptied all the trash in our spiritual attic.

We need to daily clean out our spiritual attics. We need to repent of today's sins of heart and mind and word and deed. As long as we live in this world, we will need to recognize our sin and go back to Jesus on the cross over and over again. But there we see that our attic is empty. There we see that God has washed all the filth away. God has made our attic clean. God has declared us to be his holy and righteous children. So today, knowing the love and the promise of God, we dedicate our lives to him. We persist in doing good and in serving our Lord. When Jesus comes back, we will live with him forever. Not because of our effort. But because our effort revealed the faith he gave us. Amen.