

# JUDGMENT AND THE LESSON OF THE FIG TREE

CISTERCIAN ABBEY

NOVEMBER 17, 2024

33<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

[DN 12:1-3](#) | [Ps 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11](#) | [HEB 10:11-14, 18](#) | [MK 13:24-32](#)

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## JUDGMENT

**Jesus's revelation of judgment can scare us**, because we know we have sinned, and that our fate depends upon God's mercy. Judgment forces us to **face that we do not have full control or authority** over our lives. God will demand an account of our lives from us, and he has the right to do so; for we belong to him and we owe him our obedience and vitality; **he has every right to expect fruit from us, to harvest where he did not plant** and gather where he did not scatter (cf. Mt 25:26). If we are afraid of death and judgment, let us remember that God is merciful, and so the right way to approach him is 1) **always, and so it is never too late** to repent; and 2) **humbly, aware that the essential thing is to give ourselves to him now in the present**, no matter what good or bad we've done in the past, and to let him manifest his goodness by forgiving us and by obediently submitting to the healing penance he requires, in this life or the next. **But I think we can also learn to love judgment. Let me give three reasons.**

1. **God's judgment reveals that we matter; our lives have eternal meaning.** The union of God's mercy and justice makes sense. **Imagine a mercy that is indifferent to justice**, that makes no demand upon us – asks us nothing, expects nothing. In the end, this is **not mercy but indifference**. Real mercy wants to see us healed, fully alive and bearing fruit. **Real mercy will not leave us alone but rather faithfully commit to calling us upward.** Our lives have meaning because the Creator wants something from each of us; he is not indifferent to whether we rise to fulfill our vocations. **Deep down, we want this, for we want our lives to have eternal meaning.** We want to be commissioned and sent on mission, to matter to the Author of the universe. [**Imagine a coach** who summons a basketball team during a timeout before the big play. As all the players wait expectantly to hear their role, he assigns a role to each, except for one. After the huddle, that player asks the coach, "What about me? What should I do?" Imagine if the coach said, "It doesn't matter. I don't care." How devastating. Praise God that this is not a true analogy. To the contrary, God has a vocation and cares deeply about every human life.]
2. **God's judgment reveals that we are so satisfyingly known and loved.** The knowledge of individual judgment on the final day checks the loneliness of life. I imagine **we all know the feeling of alienation**, the frustration of not knowing others, and of knowing others do not know us, and even of realizing that we don't know ourselves. **Jesus tells his "friends"**

**to fear God<sup>1</sup> as the final judge who can cast into Gehenna;** but a moment later he **also tells them NOT to fear because we are known to him – even the hairs on our head are counted – and we are still worth more to him “than many sparrows” (Lk 12:2-9).** It is an unimaginably great consolation to know that we are known and precious to him. He has the right to judge because *he knows us* perfectly. The more we know this, and the more we see ourselves as he sees us, **the less lonely we are – the more we discover an ever-present friend in our hearts, encouraging, correcting and sharing every movement and thought.**

- 3. God’s judgment brings the justice we long for.** The final day promises a definitive judgment – finally, all will be revealed (apocalypse) and the clarity and order we all long for will be granted. The ambiguities and shadows of the world will be illuminated; **what is unfair and out of place will be realigned with God’s will.** And there will be clarity about ourselves, too! **Our own internal disorder will be understood and rectified.** And with such justice, truly satisfying relationships will be possible at last. **Justice will flow like a river through all society** (cf. Amos 5:24), through every corner of civilization and through all our hearts: there is “nothing secret that will not be known and come to light” (Lk 8:17). All will be healed. There will be no more loneliness or alienation, for **all will be known and properly related.**

#### LESSON OF THE FIG TREE

**So, let us prepare for judgment and even look forward to it.** Let us bless God for being so mercifully exacting, for accomplishing his desire in creation. Let us learn the lesson from the fig tree: the Son of Man is coming like **a pressure pushing us to bear fruit.** All the trials of history are meant to push us to greater unity and devotion, to greater perfection, to greater sharing in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ – to be ready to greet him when he comes in judgment. Just like we know summer is near when the **branches become tender and sprout leaves – as energy is building within it to bear fruit – so too we should know that, as all the tribulations of nature and civilization take place, spiritual energy is pushing to bear fruit in our hearts.** Let us learn the lesson of the fig tree and cooperate with that energy. In another passage, shortly before his Passion, Jesus goes to “a fig tree in leaf” because he was hungry. **But when he saw it had not borne fruit, he cursed it** (Mk 11:12-14). He expects to harvest where he did not plant. We must bear fruit. Let us make the most of the time!

**As for what this looks like more concretely,** I was struck recently by a psalm we chanted during the feast day of St. Martin of Tours. There was **an antiphon** in which we praised St. Martin of Tours for, like St. Paul (cf. Philippians 1:20-26), being willing to offer his life, and therefore **not being afraid to die** (*qui nec mori timuit*) **but also being willing to go on living** and working for the Gospel (*nec vivere recusavit*). St. Martin didn’t refuse to live, if God wanted to draw more out of his life. Singing that antiphon made me read **the attending psalm** in a new way, especially

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:4-5: “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but after that can do no more. I shall show you whom to fear. Be afraid of the one who after killing has the power to cast into Gehenna; yes, I tell you, be afraid of that one.”

the lines: “*LORD WHO SHALL BE ADMITTED TO YOUR TENT AND DWELL ON YOUR HOLY MOUNTAIN? [...] HE WHO KEEPS HIS PLEDGE COME WHAT MAY | WHO TAKES NO INTEREST ON A LOAN | AND ACCEPTS NO BRIBES AGAINST THE INNOCENT. SUCH A MAN WILL STAND FIRM FOREVER*” (Ps 15:1, 4-5).

- 1. Those who understand judgment keep their pledge come what may.** They persevere in their intention no matter the trials. Their hearts are where their treasure is, and so they can endure any poverty and suffering in this life. **They do not sulk or feel sorry for themselves, because they have their treasure.** They have a marvelous endurance and detachment that allows them to be faithful to their call. They enjoy the “*CONSTANT GLADNESS OF BEING DEVOTED*” to God; they know that it is “*FULL AND LASTING HAPPINESS TO SERVE WITH CONSTANCY THE AUTHOR OF ALL THAT IS GOOD*” – as we prayed today in the opening prayer. **They are true friends of God.**
- 2. Those who understand judgment take no interest on loans;** that is, they do not use their sufferings – the debts others have incurred against them – in order to make draw false profit or consolation. I think we can become **guilty of usury when we try to capitalize on the guilt of others to derive false consolation.** We play the victim, draw constant attention to the ways we have been wronged, **exaggerate or refuse to let go the offenses of others because it gives us a sense of power over them or we want to have an excuse for our failures** (we prefer to be a victim of circumstance, than to acknowledge the awesome responsibility of our freedom). We are choosing to be unhappy, choosing against life, because we want to be able to remind others of what we think we are owed. **And if we allow ourselves to be happy, then we communicate to others that all is essentially well;** but if we are unhappy, then people wonder what is wrong – and we are only so eager to tell them, to increase the interest on the debts others have incurred against us. **People who are constant in their devotion choose happiness; even when they are slighted, they choose to release debts rather than try to profit from them.**
- 3. Finally, those who understand judgment refuse to take bribes against the innocent:** they refuse to steal time, talent, resources, and therefore spend them on behalf of those for whom God has destined them. If we understand that we have all been given a mission, that **our lives are not our own**, and that our time, talent and resources are not our own, then we understand that they ***belong to God and to those to whom he sends us***. If we refuse to give our lives away for the Kingdom, and instead use our gifts to serve ourselves, we are stealing, we are denying justice or taking bribes against the innocent.

**So, let us learn the lesson of the fig tree:** to be aware and **look forward to the coming of Jesus** and his judgment. Let us learn to bear fruit, and to **accept all our trials as blessed opportunities to be pruned** and to channel our energies toward fruit. Let us practice the constant devotion of **wanting nothing other than dwelling in friendship with Jesus**, of going and doing whatever he asks, **so that our lives find their eternal meaning**, and so that we can withstand the final judgment, **and enjoy the happiness of union with him.**

