

## The Last Judgment

Fr. Steven C. Kostoff

Knowing the commandments of the Lord,  
let this be our way of life:  
Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink,  
Let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers,  
Let us visit those in prison and the sick.

Then the Judge of all the earth will say even to us:

"Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you."

Vespers for the Sunday of the Last Judgment

Every Orthodox Christian knows deep down that he will come before the "dread judgment seat of Christ our God." Every liturgy we pray for a "good defense" before that judgment seat. The works of love enumerated by Christ in the parable the Last Judgment are the good defense (Gr. apologia) that express our response to others of the love we receive from God.

The Lord who judges, is the God who first and foremost forgives our sins with a love that we cannot fully grasp, not a celestial terrorist. Judgment is not a rigorous assessment before a suspicious and implacable diety, but the revelation of our inner being and the depths of our hearts. Judgment reveals with total clarity our "true selves." Thus, judgment as condemnation is self-imposed. In the judgment we will answer such probing questions as: What did God mean in my life? What was the concrete effect of our declaration "I believe in God?" Did I serve the neighbor or just myself The heart flush with love and mercy expands with good works. The cold heart shrinks with acts of selfishness. Fr. Sergius Bulgakov wrote:

A merciful and charitable heart — that is what God wants from us: Be merciful like your Father in heaven. If in a human being's heart there is no love, then all that he has is dead and of no value.

The judgment of the Lord is the light of God searching for love in the depths of our heart. Our glorified Lord will discover it in the enlarged heart, but not in the shriveled one. The presence of such love — for both God and neighbor — means that we spent our lives in actual-service, and not lip-service, to God and neighbor. Applying this specifically to our faith in Christ, Fr. Bulgakov added this:

Love for one's neighbor is also love for Christ and contains the latter in itself. The sole Neighbor to whom all our works of love and all our love refer and can refer is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself...In the Divine Incarnation, the Lord became the new Adam, true Man, living in the human race like a vine in its vineyard, and thus establishing true humanity in every man. Christ lives in every man; to the eyes of love, every man is the image of God, the image of Christ. To the eyes of love, every man is Christ Himself living in him.

The Christian life cannot be reduced to charitable deeds alone. The "Social Gospel" is not the Gospel of Christ. Again we turn to Fr. Bulgakov for a balanced response: Is Christian life reducible to charity alone? Does this mean that right faith, Christian hope, the fulfillment of Church decrees, adherence to doctrine, and prayer have no significance for salvation? Does this mean that heresies, schisms, and absence of faith do not matter if one's works are good?

No, all these things are required of the Christian and will be taken into account by the Just Judge: but separated from love, these things are the empty virtue of the arrogant Pharisee or of the older son in the parable of the prodigal son.

The judgment of Christ should not be conceived in negative terms. Nor should the prospect of judgment cast a frightening shadow or stir up anxiety over every deed, word or thought. No one is keeping score. Instead, remember that judgment before the Lord means that our lives have significance. Our deeds, words and thoughts are not empty gestures, meaningless sounds, or fleeting impressions destined for oblivion, but the accumulated evidence of a life that was brought into existence and destined to be lived according to the will of our Creator. A "cup of cold water" given "to one of these little ones" has eternal resonance.

The Fathers tell us that we have the gift of "self-determination" (Gr. *autexousia*). This means that we are forming ourselves in the way we shall be for all of eternity — a sheep "at his right hand" or a goat "at the left."

Source: <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles-2009/Kostoff-The-Last-Judgment.php>