

God's Standard of Judgment

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord's standard for the church is His full thought, and He will not accept anything less, calling His people to spiritual growth and dominion in the spiritual realm.

Scripture: Genesis 1:26, Revelation 2:3

Topics: "God's Judgment", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes God's unyielding standard of judgment for the church, highlighting that He will not accept anything less than His full intention for His people. The sermon explores the significance of the seven churches in Revelation as a representation of the church's completeness and the necessity for believers to embody Christ's likeness, exercise spiritual dominion, and be a blessing to others. Sparks challenges the notion of complacency within the church, urging Christians to strive for spiritual maturity and reproduction in their faith. He asserts that God's judgment is based on how well the church reflects His character and fulfills its purpose in the world. Ultimately, the message calls for a deep self-examination of one's spiritual life and impact on others.

Transcript

Reading: Revelation 2:3

Seven is the governing number of this whole book of the Revelation. We have the seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, seven angels, seven spirits of God, and so on. We know that seven is the number which speaks of completeness and fullness. God ended His works and rested from all His labours on the seventh day. The seventh is the sign of completeness: the works were complete. So that when we come to seven churches, we at once find ourselves in the presence of something which is being judged as a whole, in completeness -- the completeness of the church in itself and the completeness of the church in all time. I am not staying with those details of biblical exposition which are familiar to everybody. This is not an exposition of the book of the Revelation, and so we are not touching on any of the theories which have been propounded, such as whether these seven churches represent seven stages in the dispensation, and so on. That does not concern me at all just now, and I do not think it should concern us so much as it has done, because theories as to times are quite unnecessary here. At any given time you will find conditions such as marked all these churches. You may find them all simultaneously in different parts of the church. In the church scattered over the earth today, different parts may be marked by all these things which are found here in the sevenfold message. So we can dismiss

those technicalities and say that what is really being brought into view is that the church as a whole, in itself and for all time, is being interrogated by this Man, and by the standard which He represents as the Man according to God's heart, whom God has made the horizon of all judgment.

The Lord's Unalterable Standard

The next thing with which we find ourselves confronted is this. As we come to the sevenfold message to the church, we are brought right to the very heart of God's purpose. We are compelled to take account of one thing, and that one thing is that the Lord will not accept a lesser standard than His full thought for the church. However we may cringe, however much we may dislike that, however much we may try to get round it, here it is. The Lord will not accept anything less than His full thought concerning His church, and He is going to have it. We shall see, as we go on, that He may not have it, in the first instance or at the beginning, in the whole church, but He will have it somewhere. That is the heart of things.

Many difficulties and questions may arise in this connection. When there is a presentation of God's full thought concerning His church -- when we come to these wonderful revelations of the eternal counsels and purposes as we have them in some of the later letters of Paul, and when they are presented, expounded, explained to us, and the Lord throws light upon them and shows how great, how perfectly astounding and marvellous are His conceptions concerning His church, and what that involves and necessitates -- our immediate reaction, and in a sense a very natural one, is, "But only one in a thousand sees it, one in a thousand has any apprehension of it! And as for entering in, going on, coming to expression of it -- well, look at the church! Where do you find it?" And because that is true, alternatives have been sought and back-doors have been fled to.

Now, the fact is this -- and I bid you to confirm or, if you can do otherwise, repudiate this by the Word. The fact is that, in the Word of God, God has never made provision for anything less. You say, "Well, what is going to happen to all the other people who have not seen it, or who have had it presented and just do not accept it and will not go on? What is going to happen?" The Lord does not give a provisional revelation, that, if they do not -- well, it is all right, He will be comparatively satisfied, He will accept the situation simply because He cannot do otherwise, He will make the best of a bad job. There is nothing like that at all. There is plenty to indicate that failure to go on to the fullness involves in very serious loss, very serious consequences; if not in the loss of salvation, at least the loss of the great purpose of salvation. There is plenty there, but nowhere will you find the Lord saying, "Well, we will put this lot of people into a second category, and be quite satisfied with them where they are." The Lord always keeps His full standard in view, and says, "That is what I am after, and I will never be satisfied unless I have it. Satisfaction for Me is found only in fullness, in completeness."

That is the real upshot of these messages. While there is so much that is good in the churches, so much commendable, the Lord does not settle down and say, "Well, that is very good, very nice; I will be content with that, I will be satisfied with that." Men very often have to do that, but God never. There is no provision for a lower standard and no reprieve given to a lesser measure. He holds us to the fullness of His original intention. So He presents the church, not with a second-level challenge but with a first-level challenge. He is judging here -- not in a second man of an inferior type: He is still judging in the Man who is complete and perfect before God. That is God's horizon.

The next thing -- perhaps, in the light of some people's ideas, this needs to be said -- is that these churches are composed of Christians. There has been a theory put forth that these are only professing

Christians and not real Christians; that these are professing churches, not real churches. Well, I am not accepting that. These are churches with a history, a spiritual history, and the challenge is on the ground of that from which they have fallen, that which they have lost, and that which they have let in. They are Christians. "Thou didst leave thy first love. Remember... whence thou art fallen". "Thou sufferest the woman Jezebel". (2:4,5,20). They have a history, a spiritual history. They are not merely professors. It is what they have allowed to happen to them and amongst them. So this is not just an attempt to get people saved. It is an effort to get Christians where they ought to be. That of course is very simple. I am quite sure it hardly needs to be emphasized, but we take it on the way to the objective in view.

Distinctions Made by God Among Christians

And here we come to something which is of course the ground of much controversy, but about which we have to be very bold and take the consequences. This book of the Revelation reveals clearly and unmistakably, distinctions and divisions made by God amongst Christians. God makes distinctions and God makes divisions, and the whole book is full of that fact. These divisions are not the schisms in the church, the divisions in the church, with which we are so unhappily familiar, but God's divisions, God's distinctions -- yes, God's separations. There are distinctive companies here, indicated by various titles and designations.

There are "overcomers" and they are distinct from the rest. There is a "firstfruits" company, and you will find that they are distinct from the rest. The very word and title itself would have no meaning if there were not a "second-fruits" -- if there were not others. There is the "hundred and forty-four thousand", a distinctly marked out company, different from the rest. There is the "bride", and language does not mean anything if that which is meant by the bride comprises all. There are those who are "bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb". They are not the bride. I could follow that very closely. If the Lord wills, we shall devote our next study to this matter of the bride. But my point at the moment is this, that here in this book there are distinctive companies, there are divisions made by God between His own people -- believers -- and they are marked out in the main by spiritual measure. Spiritual measure determines their distinctiveness.

Distinction According to Spiritual Measure

What is the meaning of firstfruits, if it does not mean that they are ripened before the harvest, before the rest? You have only to go to the Old Testament for that. The sheaf of the firstfruits was that which ripened before all the rest and was brought in as a token of what was to follow. Ripeness indicates spiritual measure. It does not say that the others will not come to that -- do not misunderstand me. It does not mean that others will not follow on and come. But it does mean that here are those who are earlier satisfying God's standards, who have matured more quickly, who have responded more readily, who are spiritually leading the way. They are not an "elect of the elect", they are not people who are exclusive. They are representative: yet they are at the same time distinctive, because they have more readily and more quickly come to that place of satisfying God's heart, and that of course has involved them in particular and peculiar difficulties, adversities, sufferings and conflicts.

But again to our point: there are these, and there are the rest. THESE are not ALL. They are something distinct in themselves. I do not think we can get away from that, if we honestly face this book in a spiritual way. We cannot escape this fact, that God marks out people as distinct according to their spiritual measure, according to how far they satisfy His fullest revealed mind. And those people will come to a particular position, will be invested with a greater measure of glory, will be entrusted with administration.

These are all things which follow. That is what the Lord is set upon, and that is what this book clearly reveals. So that these distinctive companies in the first place represent an approximation to the characteristics of the full revelation in the Man in chapter 1: they are like Him, they partake of those characteristics which we have studied; and, secondly, they enter on to the vocation of the Man in the glory: spiritual administration now, and both spiritual and literal administration later.

God's Concept in Creating Man

So we are brought to this, that the dealings and judgments of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit in the church must be viewed in the light of the full conception and purpose which has been presented. These dealings must be considered in the light of the revealed purpose in fullness. Now inasmuch as it is the new-creation Man who is governing everything personally, and the concept of the new-creation man corporately that is governing all these judgments, we find much light thrown upon things from the first creation, which was a material, temporal, earthly representation of heavenly principles. We mentioned this earlier.

a) God-likeness

What was the concept that governed God in creating man? What is man intended to mean, to BE in his very being? "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness". He is intended to set forth what God is like in His own Being and Person. That is the governing concept of man. The first man failed of it; the last Adam achieves it, reveals it, manifests it. This Man is tested, tried and proved to the very last degree; tested as to obedience, love, faithfulness unto death, even the death of the cross; and He comes up as the Man who wholly satisfies God, in showing what God is like. So that, when you look at this Man, you can say, "Now, that is what God is like." When you hear this Man speaking, you say, "That is what God is like." You hear Him giving some of His illustrations and parables, such as that of the Good Samaritan. The priest passed by on the other side, and so did the Levite, and the Lord Jesus is saying, in effect, "God is not like that -- that is exactly what God is NOT like!" But then comes the Good Samaritan, as he is called, and he crosses the road and takes in the need and distress of this poor fellow, and delivers him, brings him home and pays for his needs. The Lord Jesus is saying, in effect, "That is what God is like."

Or take the prodigal, with the elder brother representing the Jewish conception of God. The implication is: that is not what God is like. God is so different. This poor fellow who is worthless, who has no claims whatever, who has forfeited every right -- a wastrel -- the Father does not just pity him, and say, "Come home, you rascal, I will give you a bed and a corner"; no, he lavishes everything upon him and goes as far as he can possibly go, as though to one who had not failed him, but had completely satisfied him. And the Lord Jesus is saying, in effect, "That is what God is like." So you look at Him in His Person, in His manner of life, in His teaching, and you have this contrast -- what God is like and what God is not like. That is what is making people so miserable, so unhappy, so enraged -- they feel what a poor picture they are in the presence of this Man and what He says. They make right deductions when they conclude that He has said this about them, against them. They are right.

Here, then, in the Revelation, He is brought out in all the completeness of the Man made in the image and likeness of God; and that is governing -- the whole corporate new man. I want to press this as a very real part of this message, for if we take what is said merely as teaching, interpretation, and so on, it will all be of no profit. We have got to be motivated by this primary consideration: that in the new-creation man, which we are in Christ, the thing that God is looking for, is His own likeness. What matters most is not how much teaching we possess, how much Bible knowledge we have, how much work we do. What matters is:

How much is the Lord manifested? It should really engage us continually. This should be the basis of our self-judgment, of a right kind. "That was not Christ, that was not like the Lord, this is not like the Lord."

"Ministry" is the cause of so much trouble. "My ministry", getting a place for our ministry, being able to fulfill our ministry. Oh, let it drop. The Lord will test us on this matter. Are we going to hold on to our ministry, our place, what we believe to be our divine calling -- hold to it in the strength and tenacity of our own will, our own fleshly conviction that that is what God has called us to? Oh, no! If God has called us to anything, He will hold us into it, and we must let go to Him if there arises a situation in which that is necessary. The Lord will see that the ministry is fulfilled and the position occupied that He wants for us. The thing that is far more than the ministry, and out of which the ministry must come, is that I should be a Christlike man, and that you should be a Christlike man; and we can show Christlikeness in just letting others get into our place in ministry, being very meek about it, not fighting to keep our position. The Lord will look after the rest. "The meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). That is God's word. The image of the Lord is the all-governing matter.

b) Spiritual government

Then -- "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion." Now, dominion issues from likeness. We are not talking about offices and appointments. We are talking about spiritual matters: for dominion now is a spiritual matter. That is obvious, of course. Dominion with us is not at present temporal. But dominion is none the less a very pertinent matter. This word in Genesis -- "Let them have dominion" -- is the earthly, material, temporal representation of the spiritual reality, and the spiritual reality of which it is only a representation is found in Ephesians 6: "principalities and powers", "world rulers of this darkness", "hosts of wicked spirits". And the church is seated together with Christ in the heavenlies, "far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named" (Eph. 2:6; 1:20,21). There is a proposition for you and for me! It is a question of dominion in the spiritual realm, the church's dominion in the spiritual realm. This man, this new-creation man, is to have it, and we are brought into it in a spiritual way in Christ.

Now, you see, it is just here that our education is so much at stake, so much involved. There are numerous situations which the enemy projects. Why did the Lord let Satan come into that garden? The Lord knew all that was involved. Why did He let him get in there? Just for the very purpose of giving the man the chance to exercise his dominion, because the Lord knows quite well that back of the material is the spiritual, back of the world and flesh is always the devil. You have not conquered when you have only mastered material things. You are only at the beginning of conquest then. It is the spiritual forces behind. Men are -- to some limited extent -- mastering the material today, but God only knows how they are being defeated by the spiritual lying behind the material.

I am saying that the Lord allows the enemy to precipitate and project all kinds of situations and conditions and difficulties -- situations in the home, situations in the business, situations in the church, situations in our personal, private and secret experience. They are devil-projected, satanic in origin, though not always seen to be so. But you calculate what they will do if they triumph, and you will see that there is something sinister about them. And the Lord allows them! What are we going to do about it? Begin to pray and plead with the Lord to take this difficulty away, change this situation? Nothing happens. We try to fight and get on top of it by being optimistic, being hopeful, being cheerful. We do not get very far. We may indeed just get worn out, and still nothing happens. What is the meaning of this? It means that we are in the school of rulers, in training to be made rulers. The whole destiny and vocation of the new man is at stake in these

situations. We had better settle it quite soon that we are in this very matter of having dominion, and that this situation is something that has to be dealt with on a spiritual level, from a heavenly position.

But the great effort of the enemy is to get us so involved morally that we have no fighting power left, because he has the right to the position. He is trying to destroy our testimony, destroy our vocation, destroy this very calling to have dominion, by getting us involved in a situation where the Lord cannot come to our rescue. He says: "You have got to get out of that, repudiate that, put that back, before anything will happen. You have become caught in something wrong, and until you break clear of that, you are defeated; I cannot do anything for you." Some of you may be thinking, "This is a Christianity that is very complex, very difficult!" Need it be stressed that we are not now speaking of our salvation? We are moving in a realm altogether beyond "simple salvation" -- although salvation is never a simple thing. This is not a matter of our being saved from hell, having eternal life and going to heaven. This is the great eternal purpose of God, centred in His Son personal and corporate. This is the central conception and idea of God in making man to have dominion. So that in future let us as quickly as we can face whatever situation may be exercising or perplexing us, and say, "Is this something in which I am to exercise my position in Christ, as above this, as over this -- to bring this thing under my feet, in Christ as the exalted Man?" For we inherit with Him the dominion that He has taken since God has "made us to sit with him in the heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6).

The judgments, then, and dealings of the Lord with His people are in the light, firstly, of the likeness, and secondly of the dominion. The question for these churches in the Revelation is not whether they are Christians and are going to Heaven. It is the question of how they are reigning in life, how they are exercising spiritual dominion in the spiritual world.

c) Fruitfulness

The next thing about the new-creation man is this: "In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; male and female created he them... and called THEIR name Man" (Gen. 5:1,2). He said to them: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (1:28). So the new-creation man is related to Christ, or is the functioning of Christ, in reproduction after his own kind. This is a test. The idea of stagnation has no place in the things of God. Anything that draws a circle, that is limited to a smaller sphere than that of continuous development, continuous growth, continuous expansion, continuous reproduction, is contrary to the thought of God. Reproduction is a law of the creation, and in the new creation it is that. In the book of the Acts, you see this thing at work. The new-creation man has come in truly -- and look at the multiplication and the reproduction after his own kind! This is the calling, and this is the ground of testing and judgment: Are there those, and more of them, in this world, who are in existence as the result of our spiritual travail, as the result of our spiritual life passed on? Or are we just alone, just individuals, trying to be Christians on our own? That is not God's thought. Reproduction cannot be in that way. The word at the beginning was: "replenish the earth"; and God knows it needs replenishing with children of God after this kind -- the kind of this Man.

d) God-blessed and a blessing

Finally, for the present: "And God blessed them" (Gen. 1:28). They were not only to be blessed but to be a blessing. Very simple in terms, but how wonderful. This world does not know what a blessing the church is to it in its midst. It will be a sorry day for the world when the church has gone. Just as truly as Joseph was a blessing in the house of Pharaoh, so the church is a blessing in this world, if the world only knew it. But it

must not only be so in that unrecognised way. God forgive us that we are not the blessing in the world and to the world that we ought to be; that is, that the world has a good deal of reason to feel that the church is not worth very much. But we will leave that. It must also be that our presence here is a blessing to others. This is a real test. Are we a blessing? Is the blessing of the Lord resting upon us so that we are made a blessing? I think it is one of the loveliest things that we come across in our Christian fellowship, when we are able to hear someone say, "So-and-so is a blessing to me." That is how it ought to be: we ought to be a blessing to people. Very often we are a bother to one another! Yes, "God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply": that is to say, reproduce a blessed people, be a blessing unto multiplication.

God's Standard of Judgment

These are the things which are governing the judgment of the church at all times right on to the end -- likeness to the Lord, spiritual government, reproduction in Christ, growth and a blessing, and you can apply that to these seven churches. "Now then, with all that you have and all you are doing and all your profession, what is the measure of your revelation of what God is like? What is the measure of your absolute dominion over evil forces?" We collapse in so many instances before the evil forces which have got inside. "What is the measure of your increase, your spiritual reproduction?" May that not touch the very point of first love with Ephesus? What a centre Ephesus was as a church at the beginning, radiating blessing to all in Asia! What increase came through Ephesus! May it not be perhaps that Ephesus had become something in itself, turned in upon itself -- occupied with itself, its own works, its own profession and reputation? And how is it with you in being a real blessing where you are, to all near and far -- a real blessing? It is that to which the Lord is really challenging and with which He is concerned.

So this Man, who is the image, who has the dominion, who shall see His seed, who has brought so many children to birth, who has been such a blessing in this world, says, "I want that it shall be like that with the corporate new man -- just like that. That is what you are called unto. That is the meaning of your existence." Now you do recognise that that is not just Bible exposition. It is a real spiritual challenge to us, it really is. You are going to meet this -- we are all going to come up against this. "Was that like the Lord? Was that Christlike?" Very simple; but you see it is an ultimate thing. "Has the enemy got the upper hand there, or have you stood and withstood and kept him from his objective, reigned in life, kept on top, maintained your position?" We are found out. "How much result is there of our spiritual life in reproduction?" It is a challenge. "How much a blessing are we?" Oh, if only we measured up to that last point alone, if every one of us were a blessing in the church where we are, a blessing on this earth, what a difference it would make!

May the Lord truly conform to the image of His Son.

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