Sunday, March 17, 1974
GOD JUDGES (No. 3 in a Series: The Statement of Faith)
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Romans 1:16-19

"He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles."

To a large extent the activity of God as judge is one that is not emphasized very much in our time. Perhaps this is because many people do not think of themselves as being accountable to any higher authority. We hear people say all the time, "What I do is my own business and I'll do what I please." The name is true of nations. They too, tend to think of themselves as not being accountable to anyone.

Faith in God is a handy thing to have. We like to say that God helps those who help themselves — but we rarely think of God as judging those who help themselves. People mostly like to think of God as the friendly neighbor who is certainly on their side. And this is particularly true of a nation like ours — we don't ordinarily think of God as judging nations, especially the United States.

Yet the Bible speaks of God who judges both people as individuals and as judging groups of people and nations. Thus, our Statement of Faith speaks of a God who is always creating, of a God who seeks in holy love to save us and of a God who judges both us and nations. This is another way of saying that we and all of creation are ultimately responsible to God. To say that God judges is to say that God is to be taken very seriously, that God will not be mocked.

Why in our time have we had difficulty with God as one who judges? Part of the problem is that when God has been pictured as judge, he has been described in a kind of cosmic courtroom and wJJ,4ltought of him in terms of an earthly judge. In the attempt to put an eternal truth in picture form, the concept of God judging was too limited.

Also, many times the idea of God judging was thought of only in terms of a final judgment day at the end of time rather than his continually judging us day by day.

The Statement of Faith, however, puts God's judgment in the eternal present, as does the Bible. God is always judging, and his judgment is inescapable; it is part of his seeking to save us from aimlessness and sin. He judges people and nations — all of us, Christians and non-Christians, Russians and Americans, all systems of government and eco-nomics stand continually under the scrutiny and judgment of God. •

But now let's go into this matter of God as judge more deeply. What does it mean to say that God judges us by his righteous will?

1. It means first of all that God being a purposeful and loving God, has a will, an intention, a purpose for us and for all nations and for creation as a whole. He has made all the cosmos and us in a certain way and if we are to live meaningfully, we need to live in cooperation with his righteous will.

But how do we know what this righteous will is? The Statement of Faith reminds us that God has declared it to us in at least two ways — through the prophets and apostles.

By prophets, we mean here primarily those spokesmen for God in the Old Testament and the church since that time as it has sought to make the Old Testament message of the prophets applicable to every age and culture. The prophets took God's basic law including the ten commandments for granted and based their message on that.

Furthermore, it is the function of the prophet to take God's will and apply it and declare it in the present. It is the function of the prophet to remind the people of God's covenant with them and to help individuals and nations see the error of their way and to call them back to God. The prophet is the mouthpiece of God.

Thus, God said to Jeremiah, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Thus, the prophet in declaring the righteous will of God has a negative task and a positive one.

In the negative sense, the prophets are to bring to rulers and nations and people the truth of God that is not always welcome, truth that may be deeply resented. This is also true of the prophetic side of the present-day church. God's truth is to be spoken, even if it brings suffering prison and death to the spokesman. The prophet speaks for God who judges everything human, the ideals and achievements of every society, especially all that is proud and lofty. The prophet speaks for God who is concerned for the victims of pride and greed. God is always on the side of the victim and that in itself is judgement.

Jesus Christ continued this theme of the Old Testament prophets. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who are perse-cuted for righteousness'sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Thus, God's will and intention is declared, and we are always being judged by that standard.

The prophet's message is also positive in that its purpose is to build and to plant. There is also the message of hope and redemption. Thus, Isaiah declared — "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." And Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.

The prophet Micah stated God's will when he said, "He has showed you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.

God's righteous will as declared through the prophets is a continuing standard by which we are judged. Thus, Amos reminds all church people chat God despises our worship services and church festivals if we do not at the same time treat all people with justice, mercy, and love.

The New Testament through the apostles and the early church continues to remind us of God's standards of judgment.

It is God's righteous will that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. We are judged all the time according to that standard.

It is God's righteous will that he has so made us and all this world so that no person can live only for himself.

We need each other. The producer needs the consumer and the consumer the producer. Management needs labor and labor needs management. We could go on and on with examples. We have been made to live in community with one another and what we do always has its effect on someone else.

All the commandments of God are given as aids and guides to help us live more harmoniously together. One of the ten commandments states — Do not steal. If people steal, it breaks community. Do not covet. When one. or more persons are covetous, it too begins to destroy community.

God's judges us by his righteous will. But what form does God's judgment take? If we choose not to go along with God's intention, if we in our freedom go out of bounds, then the consequences are built in. This is· true of much of life.

If I have a weak heart and thus the doctor tells me that if I exercise in the wrong way. my heart will be further damaged and may fail completely, I can choose to take this advice, follow the rules, or not. But if I choose not to follow the rules, the judgment or the consequences are built in.

Or if I tell my child — do not touch that hot stove — if she chooses not to follow that rule, I don't have to punisher, the consequences are built in.

Now of course, it's not always nearly that simple, but the principle is the same. God has put us into a world where we need one another, where we were made to live harmoniously as neighbors. Now if we choose to go against God's in-tention and live on another basis, on the basis that what we do is our own business — we not only cause trouble for ourselves, but also to others and the consequences spread, and the innocent are also hurt. God's judgment is built in.

It is God's righteous will that we give our ultimate devotion to God alone. If we however choose to worship our own power or make our own gods, or worship anything less than God himself, inevitable consequences follow. We are soon caught in the net of our own sin and disobedience. God is not mocked, whatsoever a person sows, that shall he also reap.

To put it another way, God's judgments are often passive. That is, sometimes it seems to us as if God is silent and does nothing. The evil seems to prosper and injustice to triumph, but again God is not mocked. That the evil may prosper for a time may first of all be a judgment on our own lack of courage, our unwillingness to take a stand and be counted. For example, we may get the kind of government we deserve.

But also, one of the striking things about God in history is the way in which evil systems and evil causes begin suddenly to wither and crumble just when they seem to be at their very zenith of power and worldly strength and pomp. The "Watergate event" is an example.

An old saying goes, "The wheels of the Gods grind slowly but they grind exceedingly fine." Nothing contrary to God's ultimate will can ever win out ultimately. And God's judgment itself may in fact be taking place in his silence and passivity; indeed, his silence and passivity may

be the judgment. In a sense, God withdraws his arm and leaves us to ourselves, abandons us to the consequences of our own disobedience and thus delivers us to our own judgment.

Because many years ago, our ancestors chose to make money by the slave trade; chose to go against God's intention and treat some people as less than human beings, all sorts. of havoc and consequences have followed — the Civil War, brother against brother, and the consequences are still going on — the many race problems today and many more yet to come. The evil that we do lives on after us. God is not mocked, whatsoever we sow that shall we also reap.

And God's judgment comes to us in another way. The Gospel of John puts it this way: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." The light that has come into the world is Jesus Christ, and we are being continually judged by his life, death, and resurrection.

Here's how! When light comes anywhere it shows things up. When we are physically soiled or disheveled, we like to stick to the shadows if we can. Beautiful light may be, but it is also a discriminating test. It is always a judge. It makes us see ourselves as we really are. What got by in the dark, now· th.at the light has come, can get by no longer. Jesus said, People of evil, love the darkness.

In Christ, we see God's righteous will in a person — a person who says love your enemies, a person who actually loves — his enemies. Does that not judge us? How many times shall I forgive a person1 a disciple asked Jesus, as many as seven times? Jesus replied, seventy times seven, in other words, an endless number of times. Does that not judge us? He who would be great in the kingdom of Heaven must become the servant of all. Does that not judge us?

Judgment is not so much being sentenced to punishment, although punishment may be a natural consequence. But judgment is being shown up in the light, being found out, dis-. covered in all our sin. When we see ourselves in the light of the righteous will of God as shown in Christ, then we know judgment.

Think of it this way! If there is someone you respect enormously, and whose good opinion you value highly, what is it that makes you act well in this person's presence? It is the fear that otherwise he or she might withdraw his favor from you, might lose his good opinion of you.

There is nothing wrong with this kind of fear; it is perfectly logical and legitimate. All love relationships are controlled by an element of fear — that of acting, or becoming, unworthy of the loved one's approbation.

The same is true of our fear of God. Too often we equate all "fear" with fear of punishment. This, indeed, would be the worst reason for doing honor to God — that we are afraid of being eternally punished. But not all fear is of this punitive kind, which is a childish conception of God's power and love. Fear of losing respect, of the loved one's withdrawal, of the severing of the bond, all moral authority is based on this legitimate form of fear, not on power of punishment or retaliation.

God has no need to "do anything" to us; we are our own punishers, we create our own Hell, we either become what we were meant to be by God or go to our death without ever having known what it was to live.

It is in these ways and more that God judges all people by his righteous will declared through prophets and Apostles. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you personally think of God's judgment?

2. Does the concept of a final judgment day have meaning for you?

3. How do you see God's judgment working out in the present?

4. Discuss the Biblical concept of God judging nations as well as individuals.

5. How would you describe God's intention for human beings and for creation?