

Series: 7 Bowls with 7 Plagues (a study in Revelation 15-16)

Sermon Text: 17:1-2; 18:1-4 Judgment in Revelation (Use **app** to get lesson/slides, ask questions)

Believe it or not, Revelation was written to *bless* believers. It encourages us to overcome obstacles to faith by addressing our affections with vivid and poetic imagery. The question is: *“If this is a book of blessing, then why all the judgment language?”* As we’ve said, the judgments are for the dragon, the beast, and Babylon. However, they also inspire us to persevere in faith by revealing what lies ahead for those who worship (idolize) such philosophies. That will become clearer as we unpack this...

BIG IDEA: Judgment in Revelation reveals the influence of what we love.

Let’s start by summarizing what judgment in Revelation reveals (Warren, 124-128; Gorman 140-150).

1. It reveals Christ as the Lion who reigns as the Lamb. This controlling vision in *chapters 4-5* tells us that Revelation is about God ruling and reigning through the Lamb. Recall how the risen Christ unsealed and executed God’s judgments. That’s jarring news if you believe Jesus is too gentle to judge, but in John 5:22 He said: *“For the Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son.”* In Acts 10:42 Peter said, *“He commanded us...to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.”* In Romans 2:16 NLT Paul also said, *“...the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone’s secret life.”* (cf. John 5:30; Acts 17:31; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 6:1-2).
2. It reveals God’s power as Lamb power. Whatever you may think of divine judgment, Revelation forces us to realize God carries it out through Jesus. If that’s not true, then Jesus can’t be God’s faithful witness as proposed in 1:5 nor is He worthy of divine worship as John claimed. Also, by choosing to suffer at the hands of human empire, Christ revealed God’s nonviolent, counter-Roman means of overcoming evil. His final victory in **Revelation 19** is not depicted as militaristic but as *“revealing, persuading, and judging”*

words from one who did not kill but died for others. Lamb followers, therefore, must similarly overthrow empire with nonviolent faithful living.

3. It reveals how empire brings about its own demise. Suffering is the natural result of rejecting our creator and inventing our own gods which also causes disordered desires, destruction, and death. God's judgments, then, bring about justice by surgically restoring Heaven and earth. They clear the way for humanity to be gradually realigned with who we were before sin entered the world--a people designed to flourish the closer we are to our Creator.
4. It reveals reasons to live godly. Christ's startling word to the 7 churches in **chapters 2-3** was that judgment images are for believers! Professor Michael Gorman (p. 140-141) thinks "*Their primary purpose...is not to instill fear but to provide a wake-up call for those who are sleeping, not merely through life, but through empire.*" God's judgments help us realize that "*Babylon is doomed, and nothing is more certain.*" Lest we forget, Babylon (a.k.a. empire) is a timeless image for power-abusing systems that act as Satan's puppet by multiplying personal sin and selfishness.

Babylon's destiny is seen by reading ahead in **Revelation 17:1-2**, *Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk."* Let's also read **18:1-4** where John said: *After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living."* Then I heard another voice

from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues.

Sexual immorality is a strong term, isn't it? It paints a picture of how entangled we are with the ways of this world. Scripture employs other explicit words like [idolatry and spiritual adultery](#) to illustrate how we turn people, places, things, and ideas into objects of worship or controlling influences. Psalm 115:8 states the danger of embracing/making up idols, *"Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them."* Salvation aims to uncouple us from Babylon's sins, so we don't participate in her penalty. The high-def apocalyptic images in Revelation are presented in surround sound. They hit us in the feels (affections) like movies and poetry and shake us awake to how whatever we love becomes an influence. One example is the oft-misquoted 1 Timothy 6:10, *"For the LOVE OF money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."* I wonder, *"Can you think of how loving money or whatever has had more sway over you than God?"* Or perhaps, *"Can you think of anyone/anything you began caring about simply because of someone you loved?"* Scripture says to guard our hearts because giving away love invites influence.

It's common to see life in siloes or categories (e.g., family, friends, work, school, religion), but Jesus repeatedly said all aspects of life are interconnected with faith. A startling example is **Revelation 22:12**: *"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense (reward) with me, to repay each one for what he has done."* This raises the age-old question: *"If we're saved by grace through faith and not works, then in what sense does Jesus repay us for what we've done?"* The short answer is: We inevitably become like what we love or find what we've been seeking. If we love Babylon, we become like her and receive her reward. To fall in love with Jesus, though, is to become like Him and share in His reward earned on the cross. Salvation, then, is more than a one-time prayer and agreeing with ideas like God's existence. James 2:19-20 NLT says, *"You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?"* (cf. Mark 1:24).

Passages like Hebrews 11 have examples of how saving faith ignites a love for God that sparks supernatural activity. Jesus also told us how to spot false professions of faith in Matthew 7: *“You will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*

Scholar Robert Mulholland (p. 541) put it like this: *“Salvation is not merely a (judicial) transaction that removes a person from the list of those condemned and guarantees their being ‘harvested’ into heaven when they die. Salvation is rather a process of maturation in one’s relationship with God and others through which one is increasingly re-formed in the image of God and whose life progressively manifests Christlikeness in one’s actions.”* In other words, Salvation is a life-long journey of spiritual formation--we adopt Christ’s character by relating with Him or Babylon’s traits as we relate with her. This leads scholars like Mulholland to say that *“In both salvation and judgment, the outcome is simply the final acknowledgment of the result of a long journey in a constant direction.”* Hopefully, it’s clear now why Revelation depicts Babylon as a harlot who lures us to love her ways more than God’s ways. It helps us realize that spiritual warfare is more about relationships than information. While facts can be persuasive and necessary, nothing causes us to care more than whatever we love most! In closing, here are 2 bonus questions to kick around this week: 1) *“What is the direction of my life saying about the condition of my heart?”*, and 2) *“How are the people and things I care about most helping or hurting my relationship with God and others?”* Ponder all this with God’s people, and remember, next steps need not be taken alone--let Christ’s church be your supportive family!

Sunday to Monday Connection: Earlier we said, “Spiritual warfare is more about relationships than information. While facts can be persuasive, nothing can stir us to care more than the people and things we care about most!”

- **Question:** Who are the people that influence your decisions and what are the things that you take into consideration as you navigate your life?
- **Next Step:** Talk through this question with your people, your small group... *“How are the people and things I care about most helping or hurting my relationship with God and others?”*

- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. Allowing anything else to rule our hearts (e.g., people, places, things, ideas) is referred to as idolatry. Can you think of anything that's become an idol to you? Are there appropriate ways to enjoy or appreciate something or someone without idolizing them?
2. What have you allowed to direct your life or set your priorities more than God? Share an example of how godly priorities or relationships have been a good thing in your life.
3. Hebrews 4:12 where it says: "*The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*" How has God's Word been doing these things in you lately, and how is it changing you? Share examples with others so they can benefit from your experience.
4. The Bible teaches that people are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and yet will be judged according to their works. What do our works or fruits reveal about us, and what role does faith play? What sorts of fruits are your faith and God's Spirit producing right now?

Quotes related to this passage:

- **God the rightful Judge of all:** "That God is the rightful 'Judge of all the earth' (Gen. 18:25) has been a stalwart of the biblical story from the beginning (e.g., 16:5; 31:53). 'God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed' (Eccl. 3:17). No one will be exempt; 'the LORD will judge the ends of the earth' (1 Sam. 2:10; cf. Gen. 18:25; 1 Chron. 16:33) according to people's works (e.g., Job 34:10–11; Ps. 62:11–12; Prov. 24:12; Isa. 59:18; Jer. 17:10; 32:18–19; Ezek. 24:14; Hos. 12:2), bringing 'every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil' (Eccl. 12:14). 'Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Gen. 18:25). Yes, he will. He will judge with justice and equity (Pss. 9:8; 72:2; 75:2; 96:10), which means 'the wicked will not stand in the judgment' (Ps. 1:5) and the righteous will 'sing before the LORD' (98:9). As for when this will happen, God has chosen 'the appointed time' (75:2); 'that day belongs to the Lord' (Jer. 46:10). But God will save his people. 'For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us' (Isa. 33:22). Since Israel will sing on 'that day,' they could sing in 'their day' (Ps. 75)." (Stanley, 9-10)
- **Revelation reframes salvation and judgment:** "In John's vision of a harvest with two results, we see not a vindictive, punitive retribution by God against the citizens of fallen Babylon, nor a patronizing favoritism toward the citizens of New Jerusalem. In both instances, John's vision of the ripeness of the grain and the grapes suggests that the nature of the harvest is simply the natural

consequence at the end of a process of maturation. This puts our understanding of both salvation and judgment in a new frame of reference. Salvation is not merely a juridical transaction that removes a person from the list of those condemned and guarantees their being ‘harvested’ into heaven when they die. Salvation is rather a process of maturation in one’s relationship with God and others through which one is increasingly re-formed in the image of God and whose life progressively manifests Christlikeness in one’s actions. Conversely, judgment is not merely a judicial fiat arbitrarily condemning one to punishment. Judgment is the consequence of a process of maturation in one’s relationship with God and others through which one is increasingly self-centered, ever more fully usurping the role of God in his or her life, and whose self-centered actions progressively treat others as objects to be used or abused for the fulfillment of one’s own purposes. In both salvation and judgment, the outcome is simply the final acknowledgment of the result of a long journey in a constant direction.” (Mulholland, 541)

- **Relationships define our identity:** “Christians are defined by their relationship to Jesus Christ, a relationship that they are in by faith on account of God’s grace and Christ’s finished work on the cross. The devil therefore doesn’t try to prevent works, he tries to prevent belief: ‘The devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved’ (Luke 8:12). Those who believe ‘become children of God’ (John 1:12) and are ‘not condemned’ (John 3:18). They ‘will not be judged’ for they have ‘crossed over from death to life’ (5:24). One translation captures John 5:24 this way: ‘They will never be condemned for their sins’ (NLT). Hence, ‘there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1). Faith in Jesus Christ, no condemnation; what Christian doesn’t know these fundamental truths? And then, of course, there is John 3:16, evidently the most popular verse in the Bible.” (Stanley, 11-12)
- **Sincere rewards:** “The IVP Bible Dictionaries that came out in the last decade of the twentieth century—and have as their subtitle, ‘A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship’—confirm this point. In the 1992 and 1993 volumes Stephen Travis argued that at the final judgment works provide evidence as to whether ‘the basic direction of one’s life’ has been toward God or away from him. But according to Mark Seifrid, in the 1997 volume, works cannot be reduced to mere evidence. Rather just recompense best describes a judgment that is in accordance with each person’s works. This does not deny justification by grace since believers must not presume upon grace, for ‘where saving realities are present they manifest themselves in persevering faith and obedience, which secure the believer in the final judgment... The point, again, is that by the Spirit those who are already justified by faith have their lives transformed, and the final verdict will be in accordance with that transformation, imperfect though it remains.” (Stanley, 18-19, 23)
- **How we triumph:** “Believers triumph over or overcome the devil (nikaō; see the sidebar in 2:1–7) in two ways. First, they rely on the finished work of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who shed his blood on the cross for the sins of the world (cf. Rev. 1:5; 5:6, 9; 7:14; 19:13). Second, they appropriate Christ’s

work by ‘the word of their testimony,’ that is, by their faithful witness to Christ even unto death (1:9; 6:9; 11:3–7; 12:17; 20:4). The witness is holistic, meaning it includes both lifestyle and speech (cf. Jesus’s demands of discipleship in Mark 8:34–35 and elsewhere). This especially significant verse sums up much of the book of Revelation in its focus on Christ’s work and the resulting call to faithfulness. Bauckham rightly observes that ‘it is not a literal prediction that every faithful Christian will in fact be put to death. But it does require that every faithful Christian must be prepared to die.’” (Duvall, 168)

- **Being restored to our original design:** “Because of our union with Christ (Rom. 6:1–11), the presence of the Spirit (2:25–29) and God’s work in us, we are now able to live a new life (6:6–11), obey the law (8:4), put to death the misdeeds of the flesh (8:13), and live eternally (8:13). Hence, humans become genuinely human, genuinely free, when the spirit is at work within them so that they choose to act ... in ways which reflect God’s image, which give him pleasure, which bring glory to his name, which do what the law had in mind all along. That is the life that leads to the final verdict, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’ This is not to do away with faith for if God justifies people in the present, ahead of the final judgment, faith must be the characteristic of those thus justified.” (Stanley, 21)

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project
- [How Revelation mimics ancient Olympic games](#) by Marty Solomon

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