

The Great Divide: Tim Keller

[00:00:00.520] - Speaker 1

Please turn with me to John 5, verse 24 to 30. In our study on John, we come there today and we read what Jesus says about himself. John 5, verses 24 through 30:

²⁴I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵I tell you the truth, the time is coming and now has come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted to the Son to have life in himself, ²⁷and he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹and come out. Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. ³⁰By myself, I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself, but him who sent me.

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This is God's word. When the movie *Field of Dreams* came out a couple of years ago, there was a review in the *New York Times* that said this, it said, the reason that this movie touched the vein was because there, quote, "is a deep need for 60s idealism in the cynical me first 80s and 90s, and a need to believe in reconciliation beyond the grave." That's a great statement. What it's saying is there's a very deep need that we have to believe in ideals and to believe that the justice of those ideals works itself out permanently and internally because life is incredibly unfair. When we see tyrants and villains who escape justice on earth and live out the rest of their lives and die in opulence and comfort and splendor on the basis of their ill-gotten gains, something inside says there's got to be a justice beyond the grave. Or when you hear stories or when you read accounts of men or women who during history stood up against the corrupt establishment, and as a result, they were crushed. They were crushed personally, or they were crushed economically, or sometimes they were crushed physically and were buried in unmarked graves.

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And when every account like that that comes down to us through history, we know that there's millions of others like that that we've never heard about. And we say there's got to be a justice beyond the grave. There needs to be vindication for those people. And you don't have to be so dramatic. I have to be dramatic because I'm a preacher, but you don't have to be that dramatic. You can begin to think about the... as you get older, as you age, you just begin to develop a little list of worthy people who have not made it and unworthy people who are making it. Here's a fine person dying of cancer in their 20s. Here's all the schnooks that are being promoted because of their manipulation and politics. Here's a guy dying of AIDS because of one moment of weakness several years ago. And here's somebody who, through unscrupulous approach, has done a leveraged buyout and is abusing the company and destroying careers left and right, and is going to walk out a mega millionaire. Deep down inside, we say there's got to

be vindication. There's got to be justice somewhere, somebody to square all the accounts, somebody to tie up all the loose ends.

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But at this point, we run into a problem. It's a very deep-seated feeling. But the desire for justice and for ideals and for justice beyond the grave, the desire for justice is far more pervasive than the belief that God in Christ is going to return at the end of history to judge the living and the dead. And you know why? Because we want justice, but we don't want a judge. That's a problem. We want the rule of righteousness, but we don't want a righteous ruler. And that creates a tremendous problem. Let me put it this way. We think Saddam Hussein needs a judge. But then that means that we'll have to meet the judge. And what if he doesn't grade on a curve? I mean, we know we're better than he is. But you see, if he's a righteous judge, he can't grade on a curve because a righteous judge wouldn't judge by statistics. A righteous judge who takes the top 10 % isn't righteous. He's not using righteousness as a judgment. And we start to say, "Well, what is the standard of righteousness?" And we look at very fair standards like, love your neighbor as yourself, and we begin to start to feel a sinking feeling.

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We want justice. We don't want a judge. We want the rule of righteousness, but we don't want a righteous ruler. And the problem that creates is a vast one. A lot of people in a lot of churches have bought in to a very different approach, what I call the evolutionary approach to history. I'm not talking about biological evolution. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the idea that history will go on forever. Basically, we are evolving into higher forms of civilization and into higher life forms. Bit by bit, this is what you get in Star Trek, the vision of Star Trek, is that we'll evolve out of racism and we'll evolve into a world of freedom and compassion and individual rights. And not only is there no evidence for that, but also what does it do to the tyrants who die in opulence and splendor? What does it do for vindication for all the people? The Christian understanding of history is utterly different. The Christian understanding is that history at some point will end suddenly. A violent ending from the outside, the curtain will come down right in the middle of an act, and a judge will appear, and no one will get away with anything, and all accounts will be squared.

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See, that's what the Bible teaches. It talks about this right here. Do you see? It says, I tell you the truth, the time is coming and now has come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. And those will come out, some who have done good will rise and those who have done evil rise to be condemned. By myself, I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear and my judgment, my judgment is just. So, we're stuck. Our society is stuck. We're stuck between idealism and cynicism. There is a concrete wall, a concrete wall between the real and the ideal because the only thing that can break through that concrete wall is a judge. But we've got a judge. As the Bible says, as we said, the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. We've got a judge, and what a judge. We have a judge, the Bible says here, who is not only the subject of

judgment, but the object of judgment. We have a judge who didn't just come to dispense judgment, but is worthy of dispensing judgment because he came also to absorb judgment.

[00:07:50.800] - Speaker 1

It's Jesus. It's Jesus. Now, the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. Look, this passage, and in order to come to the Lord's table, I just want to briefly point out, this passage tells us three things about the doctrine of judgment. How do you like that for a sermon title? I didn't have the guts to put it in the bulletin. The doctrine of judgment. The Bible tells us three things. There's a future, a past, and a present to the doctrine of judgment. The future goes like this. The future of judgment is judgment day. What's going to happen on judgment day? A lot. And there's just a few things we're told about here. First of all, we're told that on judgment day, the judgment will be just. The Bible says, in verse 30, it says the judgment will be just. The Bible says, on that day, every mouth will be stopped. And that means that on the day the judgment is meted out, no one will have any excuses because the reality and the truth of it will be evident to everyone. I've got this quote from C. S. Lewis in the beginning where he says, "We've all encountered judgements or verdicts on ourselves in this life."

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Every now and then, we discover what our fellow creatures really think of us. I don't mean what they tell us to our faces. You can always discount that. I mean, sometimes what we overhear by accident. And when we overhear by accident, what our neighbors or our employees or our subordinates unknowingly reveal in their actions, and those are the most terrible or most lovely judgments which we've ever experienced, the bitterest and the sweetest experience experiences that you know. Have you ever overheard? Have you ever accidentally gotten the wrong letter? Have you ever overheard a telephone conversation and you suddenly realize what people really think of you? And you begin to realize that is how you come across and your mouth is stopped. And what Lewis says is judgment day is going to be like that in spades. My judgment is just. Every mouth will be stopped. No one will have any complaints. There'll be no comebacks. There'll be no excuses. Another thing we learn about judgment day here is that it will be on the basis of deeds. You see what it says down here in verse 29 and 30? It says, "Those who have done good will arise to the resurrection of the righteous, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

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Now, that can puzzle some people. You say, Now, wait a minute. I thought the Bible said, I thought you said the Bible said, I thought you said every week that the Bible said, that nobody is good enough to get into heaven and that we are not saved or lost on the basis of what our deeds are, but on the basis of whether or not we believe in the Son of God. And of course, that's what Paul says. Is this a contradiction? It can't be. Because if you looked at the very first verse, and in fact, I even included the first verse in this scripture reading just to make sure you saw it. The first verse says, "Those who believe have everlasting life." It doesn't say deeds. Well, you say, What's the problem here? Is there a contradiction? Not a bit.

What Jesus is saying here is what the Bible says everywhere, that your deeds are an index to your heart. You see, when I look at the index, the index tells me what's in the book. Your deeds are an index to your heart. The fruit on a tree doesn't give the tree life, but the fruit on the tree reveals that the tree is alive.

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And then same way the Bible says in no uncertain terms, and here it is again, and I would like for about 20 seconds for you to feel the full weight of this, my dear Christian brothers and sisters. The Bible says the people who are saved on judgment day are not just those who say they believe, but those who actually believe. And if you actually believe, it changes your heart. There's real life change. The only sign of life is growth. And listen, your deeds, your character, this is how you know you believe. Love, joy and peace, generosity, courage, integrity, humility, self-control. I know we need some comic relief at this point because this is... Listen, are you really growing? Look at your deeds, the judge will. Are you more patient than you were last year? Are your ideas clearer? Is your heart softer? Is your laugh deeper? Is your mind tougher? Are your concerns broader? Look at your deeds, the judge will. You're not saved by your deeds. You're revealed by your deeds. Deeds make a difference in judgment. You know, every deed will count. Jonathan Edwards says that we have a strange world, a world which we just mentioned is very unjust.

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It seems like there's beautiful people with ugly hearts and there's ugly people with beautiful hearts and there's ugly hearts with gorgeous bodies and the good, they die young and nice guys finish last. But judgment changes all that because Jonathan Edwards says God's judgment is like the water piling up behind a dam. The longer the dam piles the water up and the longer that the water is not allowed to come, the harder the water will come down when it comes. Every drop that was supposed to come will descend. And in the same way, no one will get away with anything. All accounts will be squared. Jesus says, "Don't be amazed at what I tell you." But not only that, here's something else we learn about judgment day. On judgment day, the actual pain of judgment day will be separation. You know this word condemnation that keeps coming up in this passage? The word condemnation most literally means separation. There's a lot of very sensitive people that get very upset by the thought of Jesus Christ on the last day, throwing people into the Lake of Fire. They should get upset because the doctrine of judgment actually is a lot more sensible than that.

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For example, we're told in second Thessalonians what judgment day is going to be like. Second Thessalonians, great, reads this way, "They shall be punished with everlasting separation from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power." You see, the verse we looked at here says they have life in themselves. When you get separated from the one who is the source of life, you start to come apart. Death is going to pieces. Death is your body and your soul coming apart, and then your body coming apart. Everything goes to pieces. That's what death is. The Bible says the further you get from God, the less you cohere. Any doctor will tell you that if your heart gets into the grip of rage or in the grip

of worry or in the grip of guilt, your body literally falls apart. The Bible says, goes one step further. It says the further you get from God, the more you live for yourself, the more your soul falls apart. The pride, the self-centeredness, the self-pity. You've seen it happen to people. You can see people's souls splitting apart now the further they get from God.

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Paranoia, I am right and everybody else is wrong. It splits up relationships. It splits up your heart. The Bible says the ultimate punishment which is the fairest punishment is that God gives people what they want. They want to live their own lives. They want to be away from him. What God says is okay. Romans 1 says he gives them up. Second Thessalonians says he says, he finally says, "You want to be out on your own? You can go out on your own." When that happens, you lose the ability to love, you lose the ability to understand. You are totaled as a human being. You come apart forever. Therefore, the Bible says, "What fairer thing could be happening?" Have you ever seen this with little children? A little child wants to go run off someplace, and you know if the child runs off, they're going to slip and fall down and hurt themselves. And you grab them and the child says, "Let go, let go." And you don't let go. Because you see, if you gave them their way, you'd be hurting them. The Bible says that the more you say let go, the more you say let go, maybe someday God, finally, in his absolute justice and wisdom, will say, "You want me to let you go?"

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I'll let you go." In other words, unless at some point in your life you bow the knee to God in this life and say, "Thou will be done." Or else someday God will say, "All right, thy will be done." Please, my dear friends, don't ask for justice because eventually he may give it to you. Please don't say, "Let me go," because alas, eventually he will give it to you. That's the future of judgment. But the Bible also indicates here the past, and this is the oddity of the ages. The past of judgment goes like this. The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ was sent in verse 24, that we might not have any condemnation. What was Jesus sent to do? Here's the weird thing. Jesus Christ is worthy of being a judge because Jesus Christ came to take judgment. The Bible says that Jesus Christ was killed on a tree. He was crucified. Surely, you've heard that of all the kinds of deaths that you can go through, crucifixion was the most ignoble. It was the one reserved for the worst criminals. Galatians tells us that Jesus died on a tree because anyone who dies on a tree is a curse.

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Jesus took the curse. The judgment of God fell into his heart. He swallowed the firestorm. He took the Holocaust in. He's worthy of judgment because he came to take the judgment. And you see, we absolutely have got to have this. Christianity at this point diverges from every other philosophy or religion that tries to give us an answer to the big question. You know what the big question is? The big question is we need a judge, but we're afraid to meet a judge. We need justice in the world. Remember, we need the rule of righteousness, but we don't want a righteous ruler. Because if we get someone who will judge

Sodom Hussein, we're also going to get someone who will judge us for not loving our neighbor as ourselves. What do we do? Solzhenitsyn talks about what it's like to be oppressed in his book on the gulag. And at one point he says that when you're in a prison camp and when you're being tortured by guards and by oppressive people, he says, "One of the ways in which you keep your sanity is you sit around and fantasize what it would be like to get power over the ones who are tormenting you."

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And at one point in his book, it's fascinating. He says, "one day," he says, "I was fantasizing about what I would do if I got straight, if I got strong, if I got into power." And he says, "I began to fantasize picking these people up and throwing them in the pit." And he says, "the problem is as I stood before the pit, I suddenly was stricken down and I realized it's just the way things worked out that I'm the victim and they're the oppressor." And then he says, "The line dividing good from evil runs right through the middle of every human heart." What was he saying? He was saying, "My problem is when I see the judgment that I want to meet out on other people, I realize it's only an accident that I'm not an oppressor because I've got it in me to be an oppressor." And what he's saying is that every one of us has this problem is we need judgment and we need a judge, but we're afraid to meet the judge because we realize that we deserve judgment and only the gospel, only the gospel tells you that we have a judge who is infinitely worthy of judging us because we have a judge who took the judgment himself.

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We have a Lord of mercy who takes righteousness more seriously than anyone. Because what we have here is now a God who can be just and the justifier of those who believe in him. The minute you say, I am liable to judgment and unite with Jesus Christ by faith, the minute you agree with what Solzhenitsyn and said at that pit. The minute you agree that you deserve to be thrown into the pit, too, is the minute that you're saved from the pit. Because we have a God who says, if you realize that you're liable for judgment, if you stop drawing the line dividing good from evil over there with me being the good and them being the evil, if you draw the line right through the middle of your heart, if you say you are just to judge me and unite with Jesus Christ by faith, you're saved from that judgment. To paraphrase one writer, you asked for a God of love, you've got one. Not an old senile, benevolent spirit that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way. Not the cold philanthropy of a trust fund that just lets you draw on it.

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This is love itself. This is love of himself. And you know what love is like. This is the love that created the worlds. This is like the love of an artist for his or her work. This is like the love of lovers for each other, exacting and inexorable. This is the love of someone who says, I will make you holy because it's the only way you will ever have joy. You see, you can face the future of judgment day because you know the past of judgment day. He swallowed the firestorm. He was accursed. It was God's will to crush him and to make him a sin offering. But the results of his suffering, he shall see and he shall be satisfied. Now, what does this mean about the present, especially as we come to the table? Here's what it means. If you right

now practice the doctrine of judgment in your life, it will revolutionize your life. I'm not kidding. For example, if you take this seriously, it's the end of boredom. And I know, New Yorkers, you are bored. Listen, everybody wants to be missed, right? Everybody wants to think that what they're doing counts.

[00:22:29.820] - Speaker 1

The doctrine of judgment proves that right now counts forever. Every right now counts forever. Have you ever noticed... I know what I do is when I walk into one of these stores that has a camera up and you suddenly see a monitor and you realize that you're on the camera, what do you do all of a sudden? You stand up straight. You stop slouching. Let me ask you, if you knew that not only were you being seen on a monitor, but if you knew that you were being filmed tomorrow and it was being beamed around the world on CNN all day, would it make any difference in the way in which you lived? Why? Of course, it would. Because every word would count. Every bit of behavior would count. My dear friends, it's true. Right now counts forever. Jonny Erickson, sweet, wonderful woman who was paralyzed from the neck down, quadriplegic, tells about a woman she knew in a hospital who was a Christian. I don't even remember her name, but she was so paralyzed that not only couldn't she move, but she also couldn't speak. She had to communicate through blinking her eyes and things like that.

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And Johnny, who was wrestling and struggling, says that this woman was a Christian, and this woman worked so incredibly hard at being patient, at never complaining, at saying kind things to people, at being thankful for small things being done. And Johnny began to say, "Where in the world does she have the power to do that? Why isn't she as bitter as I feel? Why does she even care about making other people feel good?" Then she began to realize the doctrine of judgment. The angels are watching. The powers and principalities are watching. My sweet master judge in heaven is watching. You see, the doctrine of judgment imbues everything with a glory, with a significance. There's an urgency about everything that happens. C. S. Lewis says in this little quote that I have here in the beginning, he says, "Women, for example, very often will make themselves up in front of a makeup mirror. Why?" Well, because when you're in the room, you look at your face and it looks fine in room light. But when you're out in the sunlight, you realize that the sunlight, that great light is much more revealing. So, you get these makeup mirrors and you turn on this bright light to make yourself up in the dark room to be ready for the great light of day.

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And C. S. Lewis says, "The doctrine of judgment tells us that any minute that irresistible light of God's presence could come breaking through the roof." This could be the last act. Before the service is done, Jesus could be present to bless and to judge. And as someone who lives in the light of that is always dressing for the day, is always making yourself up and dressing and character and deeds and words and heart motives that will stand up to the irresistible light. You see, the doctrine of judgment means right now counts forever. Nobody's ever bored. Everything's on videotape. Everything is imbued with glory. Everything is significant. Luke 16 tells us that when we get to heaven, people are going to come

streaming out and are going to say, "The money you spent, the words you said, the things that you did to bring me to Jesus Christ, look at me." Friends will come up to you in heaven, maybe even people that you don't even know. "Look at me. I'm everything I ever dreamed of. I want to thank you for using your money and using your life in such a way as to help me come to Jesus."

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Everything right now counts forever. It's the end of boredom. I'll tell you what else it's the end of. It's the end of bitterness. A lot of you are carrying bitterness in your life. And you know what bitterness is? It's a desire to see somebody brought down. Don't you see now why God is so down on people judging others? My dear friends, if you keep in your heart this desire to continually will to see someone else brought down, don't you see how silly that is? No one will get away for anything with anything. No one will. And to carry about in your heart this desire to judge people is to take the job away from God. And it's a job that you cannot bear. It's like wearing armor that's so heavy that you can't even move in it and you fall to the earth and you can't get up from it. It's like trying to take on a role you cannot have. Your heart and your soul will burn out under it. Jesus says, God says, "Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord. The doctrine of judgment will free you from bitterness. The doctrine of judgment will free you from boredom.

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And one last thing, the doctrine of judgment will free you from judging yourself. Recently, I was reading an article on eating disorders, and I know a few folks that have had that problem. And the article was very helpful. It summarized that it says eating disorders come generally when a woman feels that the way in which she can control her life is by controlling her weight. She needs control. She gets a sense of power and control over her life by being thin. The trouble is it doesn't liberate, it enslaves. What ends up happening is that woman is driven by the picture in the mirror because no matter what she looks like, even if she's about to die from starvation, she looks in the mirror and she says, What? "I'm fat." Now, I want you to know that for some of us that seems like a very remote problem. It's not. Because whatever you use to try to keep control of your life, mastery of your life, instead of liberating, it will turn you into your own judge. It will drive you. How do you take control of your life? Maybe not through eating, not through weight, through professional competence.

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Well, you're always looking in the mirror and being haunted. I'm not good enough. The point, if you want to be your own king, you will end up being your own judge. And you will judge yourself into the ground and you will never be satisfied. And God says, "You see, I'm the only one qualified for this job. Make me your King and you will no longer be a slave. Make yourself your king and you will end up being a slave. You will end up being your own judge." Are you down on yourself? I remember a particular woman who got freedom from understanding the gospel of Jesus, who took the judgement, so he could be my judge. I remember a woman who was told to say every day into the mirror, "Look, I'm not thin. God did not give me a runway model figure. God gave me other things. He's in control of my life, not me. I'm going to serve

him with what I've got. I don't have to be in control of my life. I can let him be in control of my life." And the more she gave Him control, the less she judged herself.

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Because you see, he swallowed the judgment. He took it. He took the Holocaust. You're free. He accepts you. He loves you. My dear friends, are you ready to say, I'm liable for judgment and therefore, Jesus took my judgment. I will come to him and let him be my Lord. That's the end of boredom. You can be radiant. That's the end of bitterness. You can be forgiving and it's the end of self-judging. There can be a confidence, a boldness, a buoyancy. Christians are the of people that when the world seems most on top of them, they act as if they're on top of the world because they understand the doctrine of judgment. Friends, those of you who aren't really sure where you stand when it comes to Christianity, tell me something, what's the point of the world? Is this a world where nice guys finish last, where the good, they die young? Is this world a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, or is there a judge? Those are only two alternatives. If there's no judge, this world is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing with all of its inequities.

[00:30:42.290] - Speaker 1

Or if there's a judge, you see, if there's no judge, that's what the world is. But if there is a judge, you must deal with him. And how can you possibly deal with him knowing that you yourself deserve judgment? Standing like Solzhenitsyn at the pit, realizing the only way is to come to him. And if you don't come to him now, you will come to him later because he's the judge. My, golly, people came forward to Jesus and they said in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Are you the one?" And he said, "Yes, I am he." And they fell down before him and they, and if they could not stand before him when he was clothed in the rags of his mortality, how are we going to stand before him when we see him in his holiness and in his majesty with his face shining like 10,000 suns? Come to him now and he'll take you in under his wings. Come to the table and say, "Lord, I trust in you. You took my judgment. I can be buoyant. I can be forgiving. I can stop judging myself." Let's pray. Our Father, as we do come to the table now, we ask, as first we send around the bread and then as we send around the cup, we pray that you will help us to come to grips with the one who took our judgment.

[00:31:59.950] - Speaker 1

We pray, Father, that we can practice this doctrine of judgment in the present and revolutionize our lives because you took judgment in the past so that you can meet out judgment in the future. We pray that we might keep all this in our hearts and walk out of here transformed because of it. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.