

Who Can Abide the Day of His Coming? Last Judgment as a Problem for Theology

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The prophet Malachi asks: “Who can abide the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi. . . . Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:2–5).¹

Such prophetic proclamations of the Day of the LORD form part of the background for the later concept of a final, eschatological judgment, an idea ubiquitous in the New Testament.² The New Testament picture of final judgment is fundamentally consistent, despite minor variations among various texts. In the judgment scene of Rev 20, all the dead will appear before the one who sits on the throne and they will be “judged, each one of them, according to what they had done” (20:12–13). Paul tells the Corinthians that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body,

¹ All biblical references are to the English Standard Version, Catholic Edition, unless otherwise indicated. I have here altered the ESV-CE to preserve the echo of Handel’s setting of this passage in *Messiah*. Note the similar passage in Isa 33:14–16.

² For recent scholarship on the concept of “the Day of the LORD,” see Greg Carey, *Death, the End of History, and Beyond: Eschatology in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 106–12.

whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:10). In Matt 25:31–46, the enthroned Son of Man separates those "gathered from all the nations" on the basis of their deeds of mercy to "the least of these my brethren." If our theme is divine and human righteousness and the relation between them, then last judgment should be particularly relevant. In that judgment, divine righteousness confronts human righteousness and unrighteousness in a decisive and uniquely revelatory fashion. The righteousness of God will then be blindingly manifest. As this judgment is a precondition for the righteous order of the eschatological Kingdom, the righteousness or justice of that Kingdom is uncovered. Who is and who is not truly righteous will be revealed to all. The last judgment is the ultimate test of human righteousness. If human righteousness cannot pass that test, what use is it?

In the Western theological tradition, at least since Augustine, human righteousness has often been discussed in terms of sin, grace, and forgiveness. Human righteousness is a gift of God's grace, but just what is that gift and how does it belong to the graced person? As far as I can see, the Western discussion of human justice or righteousness has rarely been pursued in the explicit context of final judgment.³

An exception occurred at a crucial moment in the debates about justification at the Council of Trent. A disagreement arose over the nature, the formal cause, of the justice by which the justified are just. In the midst of the debate, the papal legates asked the theologians at the Council to discuss the following question: On the last day, before the tribunal of Christ, will a justified person, one who has retained the inherent justice given in justification and has performed good works on the basis of divine grace, be judged worthy, meritorious, of eternal life, or must judgment include an application of the merits of Christ to that person to make up for the defects in righteousness found even in the justified?⁴ The subsequent debate cast into sharp profile the fundamental issues involved in how the righteousness granted by grace is to be understood. In this brief essay, I will attempt only to get a better grasp of the problem with which the Council wrestled: the interrelation of righteousness, grace, mercy, and forgiveness as they stand before divine judgment. The nature of an adequate solution to the problem

³ Two terminological clarifications: first, "last judgment" and "final judgment" will be used interchangeably; second, the Western discussion was carried out in Latin, whose single term *iustitia* is translated into English as both "justice" and "righteousness." I will use these two terms also interchangeably, as equivalents to the Latin *iustitia*.

⁴ For the precise wording of the question, see *Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum actorum epistularum tractatum*, ed. Görres Gesellschaft, vol. 2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1901–2001), 431 (lines 30–36).

will be tentatively suggested, but not developed. Questions about grace, forgiveness, and righteousness were at the center of the ecclesial debates of the Reformation era. My conviction is that last judgment illumines the issues involved with special clarity.

The Problem at Trent⁵

The debate on the nature of human righteousness and the judgment of God at Trent was dominated by two perspectives. A minority, led by the minister general of the Augustinians, Girolamo Seripando, expressed a penitential piety and theology shaped by biblical statements of universal sinfulness, especially as found in Paul: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23); “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom 7:19). The Psalms, chanted regularly as a central part of the daily office, abound in confessions of unworthiness and appeals to divine mercy. In the daily recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, one prays: “Forgive us our trespasses.” The touchstone for this outlook was the inevitable inadequacy of any righteousness that can be attributed to human agency, even of human agency aided by divine grace. The only refuge of the Christian before divine judgment is the mercy and merits of Christ, to which we must flee, especially on the last day. Advocates of this position did not deny that essential to Christian righteousness is an inherent grace active in good works (they thus insisted they were not agreeing with Luther), but such works are never sufficient.

The majority, however, no less committed to the centrality of grace, argued that the grace we are given in this life truly justifies. To say that one who has preserved that sanctifying grace through faith and good works will on the last day need an additional application of the merits of Christ implies that the grace given in this life is insufficient. It seems to imply that baptism, the sacrament of justification, does not truly remove sin. Joined to this argument was an appeal to an aspect of New Testament descriptions of judgment rarely noticed (at least in my reading). Never is forgiveness referred to in the New Testament in the context of the last judgment. In the New Testament, mercy is allotted a strictly limited role

⁵ I have discussed this debate at greater length in “Original Sin and Justification,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Trent*, ed. Nelson H. Minnich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 111–15, and “Hope, Grace, and Judgment: Aquinas and a Controversy of the Sixteenth Century,” in *Thomas Aquinas as Spiritual Teacher*, ed. Michael A. Dauphinais, Andrew Hofer, and Roger W. Nutt (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2023), 276–86.

on the last day. It functions as a criterion of judgment: works of mercy are rewarded by mercy, but as James states, “judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy” (2:13). As Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount in connection with judgment, “the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matt 7:2; RSV). If you judge without mercy in this life, you will receive no mercy from God.⁶ God is the just judge, as 2 Tim 4:8 (regularly cited in the conciliar discussions) states, and a just judge judges on the basis of truth. The object of judgment will be our works in this life. As noted, Paul states, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor 5:10). Here Paul agrees with Aristotle: to do justice is to give each what is her due—*suum cuique*, as the Aristotelian definition became expressed in Latin.

The problem faced at Trent was, put abstractly, the relation between God’s justice and his mercy. Just how justice and mercy are to be defined in this context is an important, perhaps decisive, question. In general, I would say that there is a general consensus, at least among the Scholastics, that justice, including divine justice, always, though not exclusively, involves granting a benefit or imposing a disbenefit in proportion to the worthiness of the recipient, while mercy involves bestowing some benefit beyond the measure of the recipient’s worthiness. The abstract question is how mercy goes beyond justice without contradicting or undermining justice. While this general conceptual question has played an important part in theological discussions, the Bible and the theological tradition have also posed the issue in more concrete terms of the economy of salvation. How do we understand the relation between God’s gracious intent to save sinners and the justice of God as portrayed in the New Testament picture of judgment and elsewhere? In this context, the question of mercy and justice becomes the question of the interrelation of God’s providential intent to bless and God’s commitment to justice.

⁶ An exception to this general limitation of mercy in final judgment might seem to be Paul’s prayer for Onesiphorus in 2 Tim 1:18: “May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on the last day.” Paul makes this prayer, however, immediately after saying: “May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for [ὅτι] he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.” As in the other passages, mercy is sought for Onesiphorus because he has shown mercy in this life.

Justice and Mercy as a Perennial Problem

This problem is perennial. Gary Anderson describes how the potential tension between mercy and justice is at the heart of both the story in Exod 32 of Moses appealing to God's commitment to Israel over against God's just wrath in the face of Israel's worship of the golden calf and the story of Jonah worrying that God's mercy on Nineveh might undermine divine justice.⁷

Since the disruptive challenges of the work of Ernst Käsemann and E. P. Sanders, how to relate Paul's argument for justification by grace through faith with his insistence on a judgment according to works has been one aspect of the debate over Paul's understanding of the Gospel he was called to proclaim. A wide variety of solutions to the problem have been proposed. Chris VanLandingham, taking a perhaps extreme position, argues that, for Paul, justification is an act of God that, so to speak, clears the deck, forgiving past guilt, removing the impurity of sin, and freeing from the inclination to sin. It makes the person capable of obedience. "The Last Judgment will then determine whether a person, as an act of the will, has followed through with these benefits of Christ's death."⁸ More typical and, I am tempted to say, expressing close to a consensus among recent interpretations, is the reading of Paul by John Barclay in his *Paul and the Gift*. Barclay does not compromise Paul's commitment to a final judgment. "The future judgment is a fixed part of [Paul's] mental furniture."⁹ Barclay summarizes his interpretation of Paul on grace and judgment in this way: "The foundation and frame of the patient good work that leads to eternal life is an act of divine power, an incongruous gift to sinful humanity whose transformative effects will be evident at the judgment."¹⁰ The last judgment is primarily a revelation of what God has graciously worked in our lives.

That the problem presented by Paul on grace and judgment is a form of the perennial problem of mercy and justice is made clear in the helpful recent study by Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Economy of Salvation*.¹¹ Even

⁷ Gary A. Anderson, "Moses and Jonah in Gethsemane: Representation and Impossibility in Their Old Testament Inflections," in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 215–31.

⁸ Chris VanLandingham, *Judgment & Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 335.

⁹ John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 467.

¹⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 473.

¹¹ Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Economy of Salvation: Reading from the Perspective of the Last Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

more than Barclay, Byrne insists on the importance of the final judgment for Paul: "Righteousness for Paul the apocalyptic thinker is always eschatological righteousness, the righteousness that will be required at the judgment."¹² Byrne describes the mercy–justice tension in Paul in relation to a twofold character of God's righteousness in the history of salvation:

God's righteousness in [Rom] 3:21–26 is righteousness in the fundamental sense of conformity to the "norm" of the divine being. This fundamental righteousness, however, finds expression in two ways that on one level appear to be in tension: on the one hand, a judicial righteousness that has dealt and continues to deal appropriately with human sin; on the other hand, a salvific righteousness whereby God is faithful to the divine promises to Israel, while also, as Creator of the entire world, extending that salvific faithfulness to the nations.¹³

Byrne's terms "judicial righteousness" and "salvific righteousness" get at the specifically theological issue in how we understand mercy and justice in the economy of salvation.

The same tension between God's salvific intent and his commitment to an order of justice reappears in a slightly different form a millennium later as the tension that drives Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* (CDH).¹⁴ Anselm's answer to "why did God become human?" focuses on the constraints imposed by two fundamental theological convictions. On the one hand, "human nature was created in order that hereafter the whole man, body and soul, should enjoy a blessed immortality" (CDH preface). On the other hand, humanity has sinned. God's justice demands that the disorder introduced by sin be remedied and order be reestablished. Otherwise, sin "is subject to no law" and "injustice is more free than justice, . . . making injustice resemble God, since injustice will be no more subject to anyone's law than God is" (CDH 1.12). Anselm's focus is not the individual before judgment, but the same tension between salvific intent and the order of justice remains decisive. I would note two important aspects of Anselm's solution. First, his solution is Christological, and inevitably so, given the

¹² Byrne, *Paul and Economy of Salvation*, 137.

¹³ Byrne, *Paul and Economy of Salvation*, 101–2.

¹⁴ Quotations of *Cur Deus homo* are taken from Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man*, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 100–183, which has been compared with the Latin in Anselm of Canterbury, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Francis Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1940–1961), 2:37–133.

question he has set himself to answer. In the particular context of the individual before judgment, a question easily passed over is the role of Christ. Christ is consistently portrayed as the judge on the last day, but is Christ in any sense still our advocate, as 1 John 2:1 says he now is, and if he is an advocate, in what way? How does his advocacy relate to his role as just judge? Second, a crucial aspect of the force of Anselm's argument is his demonstration that God's salvific intent, the inclusion of humanity in the heavenly Kingdom as God wills it to be, cannot be achieved unless the order of justice is satisfied. An unremedied defect in the order of justice would introduce a defect into the heavenly Kingdom (*CDH* 1.15). Anselm makes an important point: God's commitment to and vindication of an order of justice is an intrinsic part of his saving action. Without a righting of the order of justice, God's saving intent cannot be fulfilled.

Anselm takes up the same basic problem in a more abstract way in chapters 8–10 of his *Proslogion*.¹⁵ Why and how is God both merciful and just, especially in his redeeming some and condemning others (*Pros.* 8)? Placing the question in terms of divine attributes emphasizes the point assumed later in *Cur Deus homo*: mercy and justice, however we might see them in tension, must somehow be expressions of a single reality, since God is utterly one. (Anselm does not at this point in the *Proslogion* explicitly appeal to divine simplicity, but the appeal is implicit.) Anselm sees mercy and justice as both rooted in divine goodness (*bonitas*), but admits he does not quite see how they relate: "Although it is difficult to understand how your mercy is compatible with your justice, it is necessary to believe that mercy is not at all opposed to justice, because mercy flows forth from goodness [exundat ex bonitate], which does not exist without justice—indeed, goodness is truly concordant with justice" (*Pros.* 9).

The question of the relation between divine mercy and divine justice in judgment became standard for medieval theologians by its inclusion as distinction 46 in the final, eschatological section of book IV of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Any full commentary on the *Sentences* thus had to take up the question. More explicitly than Anselm, Lombard raises a difficulty posed when the problem is expressed in terms of the relation between divine attributes. Lombard notes: "It is easy to find in Scripture that some [divine] works are attributed to mercy, some to justice, some to goodness"

¹⁵ Quotations of the *Proslogion* are taken from *Anselm of Canterbury*, vol. 1, *Monologon, Proslogion, Debate with Gaunilo, and a Meditation on Human Redemption*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1974), compared with the Latin in *Opera Omnia*, 1:89–122.

(*Sent.* IV, d. 46, q. 4, a. 1).¹⁶ One thus might think that mercy and justice are both expressions of God's goodness, but expressed at different times in different acts. Lombard notes, however, the problems in such an assertion. On the one hand, there is a biblical problem. Psalm 145:17 states that "the Lord is just in all his ways," and Ps 24:10 (translating the Vulgate's Latin) states: "All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth." (Justice in the Scholastic discussions is regularly seen as a form of truth, a point to which I will return). The biblical God is thus always both just and merciful, not sometimes one and sometimes the other. On the other hand, if the divine attributes are not just compatible but, because of God's simplicity, identical (*Sent.* IV, d. 46, q. 3, a. 1), then it cannot be the case that God is sometimes just and sometimes merciful. In terms of their effect, different divine actions might seem to us sometimes more merciful and sometimes more just, but all divine actions must be in themselves both merciful and just (d. 46, q. 3, a. 5). The task of the theologian is to indicate, as best one can, how that is the case and, in particular how God's merciful remission of sin in the justified is just and his just condemnation of the lost is merciful.

Scholastic discussions of this question were complicated, not least because of varying opinions on how to define justice (Aristotle here may have been more of a hindrance than a help).¹⁷ I would note one feature that was common to many explanations: when the question is asked about how God's final judgment is both just and merciful to both the redeemed and the lost, a common answer is that God rewards more than is strictly merited (which does not violate justice) and punishes less than is strictly deserved (and so is merciful even while just).¹⁸ Note, however, that the

¹⁶ Lombard's *Sentences* will be cited from Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 4: On the Doctrine of Signs*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), compared with the Latin in *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae*, 3rd. ed. (Grottaferrata, Italy: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, 1981).

¹⁷ Two exemplary Scholastic discussions of divine mercy and justice are from Thomas Aquinas (early in his career in his *Sentences* commentary, at *Scriptum* IV, d. 46, and later *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 21) and from John Duns Scotus (*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46). A particularly illuminating, more recent discussion in broad continuity with the medieval tradition is in Matthias J. Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics, Book Two*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021), 332–76 (German original: Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik: Gotteslehre oder die Theologie im engeren Sinne*, ed. Michael Schmaus, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4 [Freiburg: Herder, 1948], 239–71).

¹⁸ See, for example, Aquinas, ST I, q. 21, a. 4, ad 1; Scotus, *Ord.* IV, d. 46, q. 1, no. 20; Joseph Pohle, *God: His Knowability, Essence, and Attributes: A Dogmatic Treatise* (St. Louis, MO: B Herder, 1911), 467.

universality of divine mercy and justice is here applied to the reward and punishment assessed, not to the actual verdict, so to speak, passed in the last judgment. That judgment, logically prior to the assignment of punishment or reward, seems to be a matter only of justice, of a verdict strictly based on a revelation of what is the case.

At Trent, the focus of the debate was not the reward and punishment to be meted out on the last day, but the eschatological divine verdict that will acknowledge some and not others as somehow fit for the Kingdom. What role, if any, does mercy play in the verdict? Space does not allow a discussion here of just how the two sides understood mercy and justice in this context or the closely related question of the nature of grace and its work in the Christian life, especially as the ground of merit. I would simply note the insistence in the Council's *Decree on Justification* that God's final judgment is just and true. The decree states that, just as in this life the justified "are not merely reputed" to be just but "are truly named and are just,"¹⁹ so similarly in the last judgment, when those who have preserved sanctifying grace face the "just judge," they will be "regarded [censeantur] to have truly merited eternal life."²⁰

The *Decree on Justification* was one of Trent's greatest achievements. Like any good doctrinal statement, it defines necessary parameters and sets perimeters within which further theological debate can proceed. It does not try to settle all the theological issues related to the topic. Over against what was understood, rightly or wrongly, as a Protestant understanding of the righteousness of the justified as a counterfactual, fictive treatment of sinners as if they were righteous, the Council held final judgment to be a truthful revelation and assessment of what is in fact the case. But was the role of mercy on the last day adequately clarified? I would argue that a solution is implicit in the understanding of grace as participation in Christ in chapter 16 of the decree, but that the solution is not spelled out in detail.²¹ One can read the text and conclude that mercy relates only to this life and gives way to strict justice in the final judgment. Such a way of thinking is not foreign to the tradition: at the very beginning of Lombard's discussion of the mercy–justice question in book IV of the *Sentences*, he cites Augustine: "mercy here, judgment in the future" (d. 46, q. 1, a. 2; citing *Ennaratio in Psalmos* 100, no. 1 [v. 1]). There is

¹⁹ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, chap. 7, in Denzinger-Hünemann [DH] (43rd ed., Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 1529.

²⁰ Trent, *Decree on Justification*, chap. 16 (DH no. 1546).

²¹ I have made a preliminary attempt to develop that solution in "Hope, Grace, and Judgment."

something spiritually disturbing about the “mercy ends at death” outlook one can find occasionally in Catholic writings, as the minority at Trent clearly felt, though they had trouble finding a way to couch their concern. However the relation between mercy and justice is understood, a significant burden of proof rests on any assertion that God’s mercy is at some point suspended—*all* God’s ways are mercy and truth. Trent still leaves theological work to be done on the interrelation between God’s justice and his intent to save a sinful creation.

“Last Judgment”: The Need for Analysis

As noted, this essay is attempt to state a problem, not to present a solution. Part of grasping the problem, however, is to understand its terms. While theologians have expended significant effort over the centuries in defining “mercy” and “justice,” I have found little careful work on the constituents of “last judgment.” In what sense is that judgment last? And what are the elements that constitute this sort of judgment? A full analysis cannot here be given, but some decisive aspects of these concepts should noted.

Medieval commentaries on the *Sentences* and later handbooks tended to treat final judgment as one of a series of events leading up to the truly eschatological reality of beatified life in the Kingdom (or non-beatified life in hell). But is the last judgment simply “last” in a series of temporally ordered events leading up to the End, or is it “last” in a more radical sense, a judgment that comes after the close of all history, the history of individuals and the history of the universe? In the latter case, the last judgment is then itself eschatological. It is not simply the last in a series of events, but relates to time and history in a different fashion, a supra-historical or post-historical fashion. Persons facing last judgment are not *in via*, even if they are not yet *in termino simpliciter*. They cannot perform new acts that can transform their futures.²² Their existence is in some way still temporal, since heaven or hell still awaits them, but it is not, so to speak, truly historical. Mercy as it functions in this life, in the form of grace which impacts and potentially alters the person’s future, no longer applies to them, not because mercy is cut short, but because they are temporally finite beings and their historical lives are limited by death. There is no longer a person with a historical future to be aided.²³ Whatever is the role

²² That conversion after death is impossible is binding Catholic dogma, embodied in the papal constitution *Benedictus Deus* of 1336 (DH nos. 1000, 1002).

²³ See here Karl Rahner’s argument for the significance for human freedom of death as the

of mercy in final judgment, it must be in significant ways different from its role in historical life.

The concept of judgment itself also needs closer examination. Within the theological tradition, little effort has been put into analyzing the nature and inner structure of judgment.²⁴ If one looks at, say, the extended descriptions of judgment in Matt 25 and Rev 20 (or if one thinks about secular judgment in courts), one can distinguish three conceptually distinct moments in judgment—exposure, discrimination, and rectification—presented in slightly different sequences in Matthew and Revelation.

First, there is exposure. In the last judgment, what has been done in the dark will be brought to light (Luke 12:3). The exposure is, in principle, comprehensive. And the exposure will be manifest: the nature of our lives and deeds will be revealed and understood. Central to the judgment narrative in Matt 25 is that each person will see and grasp when they have and have not come to the aid of Jesus in the form of the least of his brothers. As Barclay noted above, judgment is this sense in a form of revelation, both of what God has done in our lives and of what we have done on basis of God's actions. Here, it is hard to see where mercy or justice as recompense plays a role. What is exposed simply is what it is and forms the material to which justice and mercy are applied.

Second, judgment in the New Testament involves discrimination. One might think that a comprehensive exposure and understanding of our lives from the divine perspective would reveal an almost infinite gradation of types and degrees of righteousness and unrighteousness. And yet, the biblical picture of judgment is consistently and resolutely binary. There are the redeemed and the lost: the sheep on the right and the goats on the left, with never any hybrid goat-sheep left in the middle.

The binary character of this discrimination requires thought. Secular criminal judgment is also binary: guilty or not guilty—never “sort of guilty.” But secular judgment relates to a single act or incident: did person X in fact commit crime A at place B and time C? The last judgment is comprehensive.²⁵ On what basis is a binary discrimination made about a person and that person's life and not just an isolated act? What is the New Testament criterion that forms the basis of this discrimination?

end of further possibilities of alteration (“On Christian Dying,” trans. David Bourke in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7 [New York: Crossroad, 1977], 285–93).

²⁴ An exception is the recent work of Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), from which I have significantly profited.

²⁵ As Jesus says in Mat 12:36: “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.”

Here I can only quickly note that there seem to be two strands in the New Testament picture of the basis of this discrimination. Sometimes, it appears to be an almost moral weighing of our deeds. Paul can sound that way at times (especially if Rom 2–3 are taken as genuinely expressive of Paul’s view), and Matt 25 can be read along such lines. At other times, however, the criterion is Christological: has one believed in or confessed Jesus in this life? In Matthew, Jesus says: “Whoever confesses me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father; whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father” (10:32–33). In John, Jesus says of God’s Son: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned” (John 3:18). It is common for biblical discussions of judgment to interweave what can be called moral criteria of judgment with a Christological criterion. The passage from John 3 just quoted continues: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (3: 19). The Christological and moral criteria are joined together. The interrelation of moral and Christological criteria of judgment seems to me important for understanding mercy and justice in the final judgment and for understanding the interrelation of what have been referred to as “faith” and “works” in that judgment.²⁶

²⁶ The precise nature of the criterion by which works are judged is important for Protestant treatments of final judgment, which must square the New Testament emphasis on a judgment of works with the Reformation teaching on justification by faith. A relatively standard conceptual move is to assert that the criterion by which works will be judged is whether they are rooted in faith. For example, Heinrich Heppé, in his summary of Reformed scholastic theology, states: “The norm according to which Christ will pronounce judgment upon individuals is the gospel revealed by him, whereby Christ will consider man’s works as the fruits and proofs of his faith or unbelief in himself” (*Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 704). The Lutheran scholastic Johann Gerhard is similar: Christ will judge “according to works as the external and visible testimonies of faith, which lies hidden in the heart” (*On the Resurrection of the Dead, On the Last Judgment: Theological Commonplaces*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda [St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2020], 347 [Latin original: Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici cum pro abstruenda veritate tum pro destruenda quorumvis contradicentium falsitate per theses nervose solide et copiose explicati*, ed. Edward Preuss (Berlin: Gustav Schlawitz, 1863–1869), 9:53]). In one of the few probing and sophisticated recent Protestant discussions of final judgment, Eberhard Jüngel also makes faith—i.e., the acceptance of God’s act of justifying the sinner in Christ—the crucial criterion of final judgment (Eberhard Jüngel, “The Last Judgment as an Act of Grace,” *Louvain Studies* 15 [1990]: 403–4 [German original: “Das jüngste Gericht als Akt der Gnade,” in *Anfänger: Herkunft und Zukunft christlicher Existenz* (Stuttgart: Radius, 2003), 70–71]), although the rhetoric of the essay clouds the role of this criterion.

Third, descriptions of judgment involve some sort of rectification of the order of justice. This rectification is typically seen as occurring through reward and punishment. The unjust oppression of the saints is corrected by eternal glory, and the uncorrected evil of the wicked is corrected by punishment. As noted by Oliver O'Donovan (and also in the contemporary philosophical discussion of punishment), reward and punishment have not only a retrospective aspect, looking back at the deed done, but also a prospective aspect, looking forward to the establishment or restoration of a right order. O'Donovan defines judgment in the judicial and political sphere as "an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context."²⁷ The public context O'Donovan is concerned with is the political public order, of which one aspect is justice. In the context of final judgment, the public context is the eschatological Kingdom. On the one hand, rectification must look back to the deed or life rewarded or punished and treat it fairly.²⁸ On the other hand, as Anselm saw in *Cur Deus homo*, rectification has a forward reference to the fulfillment of God's saving intention, the establishment of a beatified City of angels and saints and a glorified universe, of which the restored, rectified order of justice is a part, but only a part.²⁹

I do not think the problem of the eschatological relation between mercy and justice can be adequately treated unless these three elements

²⁷ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 7. Recent philosophical discussions of retributive justice also point to the need for both past-oriented and future-oriented elements in an adequate understanding of punishment. See Alec Walen, "Retributive Justice," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/justice-retributive/. A similar conclusion is reached in relation to Aquinas's understanding of punishment in Elinor Gardner, "Punishment as Medicine in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Thomist* 87, no. 1 (2023): 1–42. These studies, from different perspectives, all support labeling this final element as "rectification," the establishment of right order.

²⁸ The requirement of fair treatment is often taken quite seriously. Duns Scotus, generally loathe to say what God cannot do, states that God "cannot damn the just" (*Ord.* IV, d. 16, q. 1, no. 23).

²⁹ An interesting reflection on whether judgment as traditionally conceived can itself fully effect the needed rectification of injustice is offered by Miroslav Volf, who wishes to include in final judgment a social moment of reconciliation of human perpetrators and victims with each other (Miroslav Volf, "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition," *Modern Theology* 16 [2000]: 91–113). Only after such reconciliation can both enter the final Kingdom. A Catholic might agree, but seek a place for such reconciliation in purgatory, an option Volf rejects. His argument is, however, a witness to the need for some kind of rectification of a disturbed social order as part of the realization of beatitude.

of judgment—exposure, discrimination, rectification—are distinguished and interrelated. The three elements play different roles in judgment, and mercy and justice play different roles in relation to each of the elements.

My hunch is that a clear understanding of the Christological character of grace, of the eschatological nature of the last judgment, and of the distinct elements involved in judgment can point to an understanding of final judgment and the Kingdom in which God's salvific righteousness and his judicial righteousness are perfectly one. Such an understanding should also provide greater clarity about important Christian convictions concerning grace, forgiveness, human righteousness, and divine righteousness. Here I have sought only to lay out the central features of the problem to be addressed. Working out the shape of a solution is a larger task. N.V