

April 19, 2026 – 1 Peter 1:17-25

Our Epistle lesson for today begins with a statement that might have you a bit confused. Because St Peter writes, *“If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds...”* And, for the average Lutheran, that statement sounds like a contradiction. God judges according to deeds. That's what Peter says.

But we confess that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from works. Luther writes in the Small Catechism that everything God the Father gives us, he gives “only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.”

And we confess that because of the mountain of scripture that St Paul gives to us, telling us that we are saved apart from works. That our good deeds are nothing but filthy rags in God's eyes. That relying on our deeds, in fact, puts us under a curse.

So which is it? Does the Father judge us according to our deeds? Or does he give us every good thing apart from our merit or worthiness? Are we saved by works? Or are we saved by grace?

Like I said, it sounds like a contradiction. It can't be both. And that tension isn't accidental. Peter is not confused, nor is he in disagreement with St Paul. They're both being guided by the same Spirit. And the Holy Spirit isn't careless with His Word. But the tension here is real.

But before we can unpack it, we need to understand what Peter means by some of the things he says in this passage. Let's start off with that opening statement that's giving us so much trouble. Because, when Peter says that God *“judges impartially according to each one’s deeds,”* he's not trying to deny God's grace. He's trying to help us understand God's holiness.

God is not like a flawed human judge who can be bribed, swayed, or manipulated. He doesn't overlook sin because of sentiment. He doesn't ever grade on a curve. He judges impartially. According to the truth. According to what has actually been done.

And that is bad news for sinners. Because our deeds, examined honestly, cannot justify us. They can only condemn us. The Law speaks and the Law accuses. It reveals our thoughts, words, and actions. And it tells both us and God that we have fallen short.

So each one of us stands before God on the basis of our deeds and God judges us impartially on the basis of those deeds. God is completely and total just in everything He does. And in that justice, He condemns us all. Peter doesn't soften that.

In fact, he sharpens it. *“Conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.”* He says in no uncertain terms: live in fear of the judge. But here's another element of this passage that we need to unpack. Because fear can take a lot of different forms. We can feel fear for a lot of different reasons.

In the Old Testament, the fear of the Lord often looked like this: obey or be punished. The Israelites knew God as holy and righteous and just. And when they disobeyed, He disciplined them. Sometimes severely.

Plagues that would ravage the people. Defeat at the hands of their enemies. Even exile into Babylon. God's judgment was real and visible and immediate. So they conducted themselves with fear, because God would punish their disobedience. That wasn't wrong. It was true. It was necessary. The Law must do its work.

But now Christ has come. And with Him, the fear of the Lord is transformed. Peter doesn't say, “Stop fearing.” He says, *“Conduct yourselves with fear.”* But the reason has changed.

*“Knowing that you were ransomed... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.”* We don't fear because God might punish us for our sins. We fear because He already punished Christ for them. That's a deeper fear. A more profound reverence.

The judgment according to deeds hasn't been set aside. It's been carried out. But not on you. It's been carried out on Christ. God didn't relax His standard. He fulfilled it. He didn't ignore sin. He punished it. Fully, completely, and justly. But He punished it in His Son.

The cross is where 1 Peter 1:17 is answered. There, God judges according to deeds. There, every sin is accounted for. There, every transgression is weighed. And there, the full sentence is executed.

Christ is not a symbolic sacrifice. *"You were ransomed,"* Peter says. That means you were bought back. Freed from slavery. Delivered from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers. Not by silver or gold. Not by your effort or your obedience. But by His blood.

So the contradiction dissolves. God judges according to deeds and your deeds have already been judged in Christ. Your sin has already been punished. Your debt has already been paid. Therefore, you are saved by grace. Not because the judgment disappears, but because it's been fulfilled.

Every time you look at the cross, you see what your sin deserves. That's how serious it is. Not a slap on the wrist. Not a warning. Your sin deserves death. Wrath. Forsakenness.

God did not spare His own Son. If that's what your sin required, then it's not small. It's not trivial. It's not something to simply be excused.

So you do live in fear. Not the fear of uncertainty: "Will God punish me?" No you live in the fear of clarity: "This is what my sin cost."

And yet, we don't look at that punishment in horror. We look at the cross and see the fullest revelation of God's grace. Because the One who was punished was given for you.

*"Christ... was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you,"* Peter says. *"Who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God."*

The resurrection is God's declaration that the ransom is complete. The payment is accepted. The judgment is finished. If Christ had remained captive in the grave, you would still be in your sins. The judgment would still stand against you. But He is risen.

And, as we read from Peter last week, that means your faith is rooted in a living hope. It's not wishful thinking. It's anchored in what God has done. Both in the death and in the resurrection of Jesus.

So now fear and faith go together. You fear because you know the cost of your salvation. You believe because you know that cost has been paid.

And that produces a new life. Peter goes on: *"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart."*

This is where those deeds return, but now in their proper place. Because your deeds don't save you. They never could. But they do follow from your salvation.

You have been purified. Not by your works, but by the truth. By the Gospel. And that purification shows itself in love. Real, active, sacrificial love for others. Not as a way to earn God's favor. But as the fruit of having received it.

You have been born again, Peter says, *"not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God."* That Word is what created your faith. That Word is what sustains it. That Word is what defines your life now.

*"All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever."* Your works, by themselves, are grass. They fade. They cannot endure God's judgment.

But the Word that saved you – the Word that proclaimed Christ crucified and risen for you – that Word endures. And because you are born of that Word, your life is now rooted in something imperishable.

So you live differently. You live in fear, not as slaves trembling before a master, but as children who know the cost of their redemption. You live in faith, trusting not in your deeds, but in Christ's finished work. You live in love, because you have been loved with a love that did not spare God's own Son.

*"Conduct yourselves with fear."* Not the fear of condemnation. But the fear that knows exactly what sin deserves and exactly what grace has given. The fear that clings to Christ. And in Him, that fear becomes faith. Amen.