

God's Standard

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes God's standard for humanity, focusing on the importance of reflecting His likeness and fulfilling our divine vocation.

Scripture: Acts 17:31, Revelation 1:5

Topics: "God's Standard", "Divine Likeness"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes God's standard for humanity as revealed in Revelation, focusing on the significance of 'the Man whom He hath ordained'--Jesus Christ. He explains that God has appointed a day for judgment, where all will be evaluated based on the divine likeness embodied in Christ. The sermon outlines the conception, principle, vocation, testing, and destiny of man, highlighting that true glory and divine likeness are restored through Christ's faithfulness and sacrifice. Sparks encourages believers to recognize their role in manifesting God's likeness in a world that often opposes it, ultimately finding hope in the glory that awaits them. The message culminates in the assurance that everything lost in the fall is recovered in Christ.

Transcript

Reading: Revelation 1:1-18.

"...He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness in THE MAN WHOM HE HATH ORDAINED; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:31, marg.).

It will be with that little phrase, "he will judge the world... in the man whom he hath ordained", as our key, that we shall consider this wonderful revelation of the Lord Jesus which forms our preliminary reading. "The man whom he hath ordained." Let us look for a few minutes at one or two of those words.

Firstly, "He hath appointed a day": that is, He has fixed, or established, a day. Into that statement the whole book of the Revelation is gathered. When John said: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day", he said more explicitly: "I became in the Spirit", or, "I found myself in spirit, in the day of the Lord". God "hath set forth, or fixed, a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness".

And then, "in the man whom he hath ordained". That word "ordained" is a very interesting word. It is the Greek word from which we get our English word "horizon": it means, basically, to set bounds or limits, to

mark out a defined or determined realm. In this passage, the Man is the realm, the marked out limit, the defined sphere in which God will judge the world. It is suggestive that the phrase in the original Greek is, literally, "IN the man". (Compare 1 Cor. 6:2: "if the world shall be judged IN you".) Everything is to be brought for its judgment into the realm of what this Man is. Everything and everyone will be judged according to the significance of the Man whom He has ordained.

We shall come back to that presently, but it may be helpful just to have said that much as to these two words. There is a day, and a very crowded day, coming, as this book of the Revelation shows, and it is the day of a Man: that is, in which everything is to be tested by that Man, according to that Man -- the Man whom He hath ordained.

Now we come to this book of the Revelation, and to this first chapter in particular. I say no new thing when I say that the books of Genesis and Revelation bound the history of this present world. One is the book of the beginnings; the other is the book of the endings. The one is the first, the other is the last, and it is there that the Lord Jesus, the Man whom God has ordained, embraces that whole history, and says: "I am the first and the last", "the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end". "I am the Genesis and I am the Revelation. I am the beginning, the Alpha, and I am the end, the Omega". This whole history moves by phases, shorter and longer, and the first phase, which, so far as its record is concerned, is gathered into a very short portion of Scripture, the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, ends with a man and the tree, the tree of life. From that point another phase commences. At that point what is called "the fall" takes place, and an entirely new phase begins. The first phase brings us to the man and the tree; the last phase, in the book of the Revelation, brings us -- in the first chapter to the Man, in the end of the book to the tree. These two things are governing all history. What they signify embodies and embraces the whole of the history of this world. We shall confine our attention, at this time, to the man.

The Conception of Man

There are several things that we have to note about the man. First of all, there is God's CONCEPTION of man. What is that conception? In the words so familiar to us, it is: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness". So the conception of man is God-likeness. That is all-governing with God; that is all-governing in all God's dealings with man. It is that which comes out pre-eminently in the book of the Revelation as the consummation of God's dealings with man. That is the thing which lies behind all these movements of God in relation to man -- God-likeness. If we miss everything else, let us hold on to this: because in this is found, and out of this proceeds, everything else. God's concern with man is HIS LIKENESS.

God is not concerned in the first place, or in any very important way, with doctrine, with teaching, with Christian work, with our many-sided activities. These all may follow and have a place, but they are all very subordinate. They have a far smaller place with God than they have with us. With God they are only related things, they are side-issues. With Him, the one all-important and all-inclusive thing is His own likeness. What matters to Him about all our teaching, about all our gatherings, about all our works and activities, is the measure in which His likeness appears as the result. Nothing else counts. We do not gather together for teaching, doctrine, "conference meetings". Let this be established at the outset. We gather together, if we are in line with the divine desire, in order that there may be in us more likeness to God, as He judges everything in the Man whom He has ordained -- IN the Man, not by the Man; in the Man, in what that Man is.

That is the conception of God. Let us ask the Lord very much that He will lay strongly upon our hearts, and keep it ever before us, that the thing that matters, from A to Z, from Alpha to Omega, from beginning to end, is that God's conception and purpose, in giving us a being at all, is HIS LIKENESS -- an expression of Himself. This must be an adjusting factor in our mentality, in our conversation, in our teaching. We must not be taken up with efforts to get the church according to a certain technique and order and conception. Our message must not be the message of the Body of Christ as a truth, as a doctrine, as a procedure. All these things come within this encircling conception. What is the Body of Christ for, if it is not to express what Christ is like? What is the church for, if it is not to manifest the presence of Christ? This must adjust our thoughts, our ideas, our teaching and our talk. The thing about which we have to be concerned is -- not this and that aspect of truth -- but: How much is the Lord seen, recognised, understood, as to what He is like?

You know that that is the key to the Word of God. The whole Word of God is occupied with this: What is God like? On one side there is the constant implication, or at least inference: "God is NOT like that, God is NOT like that, God is NOT like that -- but God IS like this". In the days of the Lord Jesus, the whole idea of the most religious people -- the Jews themselves, and all the Jewish rulers -- was a false conception of God; and the Lord Jesus in their midst was, by His very presence, His very nature, as well as by His teaching and His activity, saying, "No, God is not like that; God is like this". "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). And see how He clashed with popular religious ideas as to what God was like. Yes: "Not technique, not truth, doctrine, but 'our likeness'", says the Lord.

The Principle of Man

The next thing is what I am going to call the PRINCIPLE of man. What is the principle we find when God has made man and set him forth? The principle is that the man is a standard man: he represents or sets forth a standard. He is not just a being, but he is a KIND of being. He is not just holding an office; he is a PERSON. God did not make a drawing of His thoughts or paint a picture of His conceptions; He made a man. He did not make a working machine to set forth the operation of certain laws; He made a man. And that is a standard to which God would work, which God would impress upon His creation, His universe: that what that man is should be found, as it were, emanating or issuing forth and pressing upon everything, and that everything should be conformed to that man. As you see the works of that man and the expressions of that man's being, you should know what kind of a man he is: just as, in every sphere of life, in a home, in a garden, in a business, if there is a man about -- not a feeble caricature, but a MAN! -- you find that that particular sphere, in which the man exercises his influence, bears the impress of that man. You can trace the man here -- see what kind of a man lives here, works here, moves here. You know the man by the impress of his hand. He is, in his sphere, the standard of things.

And that is a principle in man. There is a principle about man that he is a standard set forth by God: everything is to take the impress of that man, as a standard; is to come up to a certain level. That man must not let things down. That man must not allow things to lose character, to lose form, to become a shapeless mass. He must see to it that everything comes up to that express full thought that is found in the man God has made.

The Vocation of Man

"Let us make man... and let them have dominion" over this and that -- over all things. The VOCATION of man, according to God's intention, is dominion, government. And when you come, in the light of the whole

history of man, to look into this vocation, this governmental idea of God as to man, you find that it has three aspects.

It begins with himself. That is quite clear, as to Adam. It is quite clear all the way along that God holds man, in the first place, responsible for the government of himself. Everything else proceeds from that. All that the New Testament has to say about self-control -- a poor translation of the word -- is just that. It all begins with government of himself.

Then, in the second place, it extends to the world -- and, mark you, man's government of the world depends upon his government of himself. It extends to the government of the world. But do not get false mentalities about that. Government of the world is not temporal government, to begin with. It was with Adam, and it will be eventually, but this is a spiritual thought. We remember all that is said by John about "he that overcometh the world" (1 John 5:4,5). This Man whom God has ordained said: "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We will not take time just now to define and explain what is meant by "the world" in this connection, but perhaps it is not necessary. Do you find the world something to be overcome? Is there not a spirit -- is there not an order, a nature of things, a way, a mentality, a disposition -- that we speak of as "the world", "the way of the world"? Yes, and you know what a great force that is to be overcome. It is a spiritual thing, dominion over the world; and there will be no government of the world in any more literal sense, later, if there is no government of the world in a spiritual sense now.

Then, in the third place, this government reaches to the heavens. It is found to affect, to be related to, spiritual forces beyond man -- outside of man and outside of the world. It is in that realm that this government finds its ultimate and supreme expression.

There is no need for me at this point to take you into the New Testament with those three connections: government as to our own souls, as to the spirit of the world around us, and as to the forces of evil, of darkness, working through both. That will probably come out more fully as we go on.

The Testing of Man

The fourth thing is the TESTING of man. Here we have to repeat that man was not just an official, but a morally responsible person, and the whole issue of his moral responsibility was the question of FAITHFULNESS: faithfulness to God, faithfulness to the divine conception, faithfulness to the standard God had set up as to Himself. There are many aspects of self which are forbidden, but there are some aspects of self which are right, and self-respect is one of them -- that right kind of self-respect which marked Nehemiah: "Should such a man as I flee?" (Nehemiah 6:11). That is moral dignity, and man was tested as to his faithfulness to God -- faithfulness to himself in the highest sense, to the dignity of his own being in God's thought, from heaven's standpoint. It was not self-importance -- you know what I mean -- but faithfulness to his vocation to govern for God. Faithfulness was the ground of testing.

And with a view to that testing, you can see the play of spiritual forces: the permission of those forces of evil, of Satan, the tempter, the adversary, the deceiver, to come and play upon this man to test him as to his faithfulness. Note that it is the play of SPIRITUAL forces, through the WORLD, upon the SOUL, regarding the VOCATION, involving the destiny. I want you to get those phases. The play of spiritual forces: in the testing of man unto his approving, unto his establishing. The play of spiritual forces through the world: it is through the world, in the first place, that you and I will find our testing. That world is a very comprehensive world. Upon our souls: our reasoning, our desiring and our deciding. Through the world, upon our souls, regarding our vocation: to rob us of our divinely-appointed governmental function, to rob

God of His intention to make man His ruler in the creation and in the spiritual world.

Yes, it is that vocation that God has in view. Do not forget it. Do not let the point be missed through my imperfect way of expressing it. I have to put it in this way, but do not look at that -- do not just hear it as words, as things said. Do you not see what the enemy is after, as he plays with his evil forces upon your souls through this world? If God did not have this meaning always in view, He would shut you up in convents and monasteries, He would keep you in conferences all the days of your life; He would set up hostels and say, "Live there! Never go out of doors; look at the world from behind a grill!" -- but He does not. He puts you in the world, and you are all the time wanting to get out of it into "spiritual work", into "spiritual service", to have a Bible everlastingly under your arm or on your desk. But He drives you into the world, and there you are, under testing by the forces of evil -- by His permission -- in relation to spiritual government: of yourself first, then of the world spiritually, and then of the spiritual forces behind the world. That is what God is doing.

The Destiny of Man

The fifth and last thing here is the DESTINY of man. Our destiny is all involved -- and what a destiny it is! What is it? The destiny is GLORY. Perhaps that does not help you very much. It sounds abstract. What is glory? First of all, in its essence, it is the shining forth of the divine nature: it is what the Bible calls immortality or incorruption. Christ "brought life and incorruption to light" (2 Timothy 1:10): that is glory -- where there is nothing left that is corrupt or can be corrupted. That is the destiny of man.

And when it is like that, when there is the shining forth of the divine nature, it is a most potent thing. You and I have not grasped the tremendous significance of some of the statements about the appearing of our Lord. Saul of Tarsus went down, smitten blind, as one paralysed or dead, when this "Man whom He had ordained" appeared before him on the way to Damascus. John "fell at his feet as one dead" (Rev. 1:17), and the Scripture declares that by the manifestation of His coming or presence He will bring to nought the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:8). This is not just light, a blaze of light. This is a nature -- terrible, unendurable: to wickedness, to sin, to evil, destructive; but, for the man after His heart, incorruption, glory. We shall be glorified together with Him (Romans 8:17). Even our bodies will be bodies of glory, because no corruption is found in that resurrection body. "Conformed unto the body of his glory" (Phil. 3:21).

The destiny is the thing that is involved in God's permission to the enemy to put us through severe testing. It is that that is bound up with our being put by the Lord where we are in this world -- not only as to location, but as to atmosphere, in a condition of things so inimical to God, so unlike God, where Satan has his power.

Everything Recovered in Christ

Now all this -- the conception, the principle, the vocation, the testing, and the destiny -- is what we have in the first chapter of the book of the Revelation. You notice the one designation given to Christ in that chapter is "son of man". "I turned to see... I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man" (vv. 12,13). Here we have THE Man, the perfect Man, presented, embodying all that of which we have just been speaking. He embodies God's conception of divine likeness in a Man. He embodies the principle of man, as a standard -- God will judge the world in that Man. In virtue of what He is He will bring everything to judgment. It is all being judged, not only by Him but in Him, by what He is. Here He is presented as the standard.

Again, here is the Man in full possession and exercise of His vocation of government. Further, He has been tested and approved. Tested in obedience unto death, yea, the death of the cross -- "I became dead"; approved -- "Behold, I am alive for evermore". Let us recall Acts 17:31 again: "He will judge the world in righteousness in the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead". He was subjected to the test of ultimate faithfulness, an obedience unto death; He was approved after utter testing -- God raised Him from the dead. Here is "the Man". And, lastly, the Man is in the glory. He has reached His destiny -- glory. This is what we have in this chapter: a Man -- THE Man -- answering to God's thought, of God's appointment.

In the fall it was all this that was lost. The conception -- divine likeness -- was lost. The principle -- the divine standard -- was lost. The vocation -- government -- was lost. The approving through trial was lost. The glory was lost. But in the Man it is all won back, it is all recovered. And I close here by just putting my finger upon the glorious significance of some of John's words in this chapter. "Jesus Christ... the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom, priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever" (vv. 5,6). Remember, John wrote that prelude, that introduction to his wonderful book, after he had received the whole revelation. He says, in effect: "I am going to write down all He has shown me: but oh, in the light of all He has shown me -- 'unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and... made us to be a kingdom, priests unto his God and Father...!'"

What is the significance? All that was lost is recovered for us by that love and by that blood. He "loveth us". He by His blood has "loosed us" from all that came in by the fall. In Himself He has recovered it all, secured it all. Now He is the representative One, the Son of Man, and

"In Him the tribes of Adam boast More blessings than their father lost"

That is why John was so exultant. He might have put this at the end, but he puts it at the beginning. Terrible things are going to be revealed, but he begins with a shout of exultation. It is a terrible thing that has happened, but it is a glorious thing that has followed: therefore "unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom,... priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever".

"In the man whom he hath ordained." You see how Christ compasses everything, dominates everything, determines everything, becomes that realisation of God's original conception and purpose in man, and the standard to which God by His Spirit is working -- yes, actually working in us, and using the very forces of evil through this world to do it. There is no God-likeness to be attained unto except in the midst of a hostile world. The greatest victory of all is to walk in the midst of Sodom and Gomorrah in white raiment.

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