

The Rider, the Lamb & the Bride

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Last week we looked at *when* Jesus will return, and this week we are looking a *why* he returns. We won't provide a complete answer but Revelation 19 gives us great insight into the matter by depicting Jesus' return as a rider, a lamb, and a groom. When reading Revelation, it's important we understand what we are dealing with—apocalyptic or visionary literature. You don't read it the same way you read the letters of Paul. Visionary literature uses images and symbols *to attack and rework our deeply ingrained patterns of thinking*. Here are three images that are intended to subvert what we think about God, the church, and the world. We'll gather our thoughts around these three images: 1) the Rider on the White Horse, 2) the Lamb, and 3) the Bride.

The Rider on a White Horse

Today, the whole notion of judgment has fallen on hard times. "Who am I to judge?" we say. Yet when we feel mistreated, we often turn to friends, inviting their judgment on others in order to feel vindicated. There's a problem with our understanding of judgment. At first blush, Revelation 19 rubs us wrong. It opens with the all the saints, a great multitude, rejoicing over God's judgment of Babylon, the archetypal city of sin in the previous chapter. It is called the great prostitute because it has corrupted the earth with its *immorality*. The saints are rejoicing over its destruction. They sing double Hallelujahs as smoke curls up from its ruins. How could they?! When in the prior chapter, people of the city cry out in lament? This seems so insensitive, so judgmental. I read a liberal, creative lit journal published in Manhattan called *n+1*. It recently ran a piece describing a church in the city that hosts wild parties, and good looking pastors club with "sinners", bumping and grinding on the dancefloor. The piece suggested this was inappropriate for pastors, but why? If we aren't supposed to judge, why can the city be immoral but the church not be? Who's to judge what's moral? The judgment intensifies. In verse 11, we meet the rider on the white horse—a common military image—think of David's *Napoleon crossing the Alps* or Gandalf the White charging at Helms Deep. The rider is called "**Faithful and True**," a name given to Jesus at the beginning of the book (3:7). His express purpose is to "**judge and make war**." Descending with the armies of heaven he strikes down the nations and delivers the wrath of God on the small and great, all who have rejected him. The passage ends with the armies of heaven slaying the immoral and birds devouring their carcasses in the Great Supper of God's wrath. It is a horrifying scene, especially to modern people, insulated from war. But more than disturbing (we expose ourselves to this gore in films), many Austinites would find the Rider's slaying downright offensive. Bill Maher has called God a "psychotic mass murderer." The Bible does not fit our sense of justice. But where does our sense of justice come from? If God is psychotic, who determines what's sane? If the White Rider is unjust, then what constitutes justice? It would seem that our culture is confused. Who determines what is moral? For centuries the cultural view of marriage was between a man and a woman, but now a Mozilla executive can be forced to resign because of his pro-marriage position. A hard moral line was drawn against a him *that had absolutely nothing to do with his job*. Who's to judge, Mozilla, the media, is filled with moral bias. They've constructed a new ethic and are awfully judgmental about. What is the measuring stick of this morality?

Feeling, personal choice? That's awfully subjective, and it seems that, as a country we cant make up our mind. We promote freedom of speech and religion, but disallow a TV show because the producers have a conservative view on sexuality (which has nothing to do with their effectiveness at flipping houses). Do they not have the right to hold their views? This appears awfully judgmental. I'm not making case, at this point, but simply noting that it is *Americans* who are acting psychotic, flip-flopping our ethics with massive consequence. *Popular justice is configured around humanity, our choice, and as a result it changes with the times. It is an inconsistent, relative sense of what is just.* Is Jesus' judgment any better? Retuning to verse 11, John sees the heavens open to deliver the white rider. This phrase "heavens open" signals a unique perspective that none of us have. It connotes divine revelation, a perspective from the unchanging vantage point of God. Its claim is to furnish humanity with divine, consistent, and infallible judgment on the matters of faith and life. *The justice of God is configured around divinity not humanity. It is consistent not culturally relative.* The OT prohibits immorality and Jesus judges the immoral. Present with God, the saints cry out Hallelujah, not over the suffering of the wicked, but "[because his judgments are true and just](#)" (2) because he judges with holy impartiality. This is the divine perspective, and when we pull out the divine from our reasoning, society collapses. The moral fabric unravels. Non-Christian urbanists and ordinary people recognize this. In his work on historic, global cities, Joel Kotkin notes that all great cities that flourished held in common *a sense of the sacred*, this sense provides a moral ethos for the city. It prevents crime and promotes flourishing. When we pull God out of the center and put humanity in, the ethos evaporates. Interestingly, Gareth Edwards, the director of *Godzilla* even gets this. He comments: "[Well, there's a reason his name begins with 'God,' I think. He is a god, really. He's at the top of the food chain and probably King of the World, in a sense...for all of time man has always found that there's something out there for us to worship or fear, and it's gone away for a while but in our film it returns.](#)" Without something to worship or fear, our world breaks down. Edwards goes on to describe the "god" as nature rebuking man, but nature is impersonal and possesses no moral faculties. It too is whimsical. What we need is a God who is "Faithful and True." What does that mean? *He is consistent and always right.* He is just. This is precisely why the saints cry out, "Hallelujah," which means praise YHWH (the God who was, who is, and is to come)=consistent, eternal, and does not change. They praise YHWH "[for his judgments are true and just](#)" (2). They are rejoicing in the presence of the Rider, Faithful and True, who restores moral order and goodness for all creation. This is the God who cares about what immorality does to the earth. Jesus avenges the blood of the martyrs who stand with him, who are themselves a reflection of him, faithful and true through their sufferings. The word "avenges" is actually the same word for justice, better translated he "enacts justice." **God does not avenge, transgressing the law for revenge; he enacts justice, upholding his universal moral law for his world.** In response, 24 elders and winged creatures fall down and worship God, who is seated on a throne. The 24 elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel & the 12 apostles, which combine to represent the whole people of God—the church—on flat out before God. The creatures represent creation, which intuitively knows its Creator is faithful, true, and just. Here we have the whole world in adoration, engaging in the ultimate moral act—**worship**—as they cry aloud with the voice from heaven, "Praise our God." Why? Because of this God-centered vision of justice.

The Lamb

The image changes. Beginning with verse 6, instead of a warrior, we encounter a beautiful being. The one with a roar like many waters harkens back to 1:15, where Jesus is depicted in stunning beauty, eyes burning with fire, white wool hair, bronze feet, and now the kingdoms of this world have been handed over to him as the kingdom of our God (11:15). This image quickly morphs into a Lamb, a white, docile, compliant creature. This pleasant interruption reminds us that Jesus returns not only mighty to judge but also merciful to save. By God's standards, all are immoral, no one is righteous not even one. We have all failed in worship, in judgment, in life. How, then, can he save us, dine with us, and more scandalous, how can the Lamb marry us, a sullen Bride? **"for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"** (7-8). Have you ever attended a wedding and thought, "Why is *he* marrying *her*?" That's what we should be thinking, but then we discover the Bride has adorned herself with white linen fine and pure. These are righteous deeds of the saints. Your personal holiness *matters*. It is your adornment for Christ. What bride would neglect her appearance on her wedding day, showing up dirty, hair undone? Is she trying to earn his love?. Some marriages work like this, but not the marriage of the Lamb. She adorns herself in holiness in response to the electing love of her Groom. Looking at her he says, "You're the *one*." Jesus is saying to you, "You're the love of my life, quite literally." For the price of his love was the cost of his life. He set his affection on us, and his commitment is the cross, where the spotless Lamb is slain for our sins. This is where justice and mercy press their lips together, out of the undying love of the Lamb. It would never occur to the Bride that her deeds buy off his love. Why? Because she knows it "was granted to her" to clothe herself in linen. She knows Jesus has set his affection on her, and when she forgets, she looks to the cross. **Her holiness, righteousness, morality is a response of love to the undying affection and sacrifice of her Groom.** This, my friends, is the mercy-shaped justice of the Faithful and the True. The White Rider become the Slain Lamb, the Warrior turned Groom. In the midst of this vision, an angel tells John, **"Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."** At these words, John falls down in worship but the angel corrects him, saying **"I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!"** (10). Why this response? Justice tells us we don't belong at the table, but mercy meets justice so that we can belong. Humanity can recover, not only a moral center but everlasting love, when we receive Christ. But we must do so now, before the Lamb turns Rider. How? Through the testimony of Jesus. The word is witness of Jesus unique, exclusive, redeeming love that no other god or philosophy can offer—not nature, not moral relativism, not a full bank account, or a little love from a man or a woman. Christ, alone, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and grants us pure linen.

The Bride

How to respond? Non-Christian, seeker, skeptic, or drifting Christian until the White Rider comes you can respond to his generous mercy and sacrificial love by turning away from self-made morality and receiving "what is granted to you" in Christ—forgiveness and



righteousness. Meet the Lamb before you meet the Warrior. Christians, how can we respond with ordinary living? Should we not make it our aim, every day, to “Worship God”? To live a life flat out for God? Will you allow these images to subvert your life goals, for this visionary literature to have its intended result, to expose deeply ingrained patterns of sin and selfishness? Will you not become zealous to clothe yourself in linen bright and pure? To adorn yourself with holiness in response to the great love of your Groom? To evaluate what you watch and what you think, how you work and how you witness? Will you approach church in individual utility—asking “What can I get?” (community, sermons, counsel, friends, leadership). Or will we respond as a worshipping community asking: “How can *we* worship? May we labor out of love to adorn ourselves as a distinct community, whose morality and worship change the fabric of the city, putting God back in the center. May we, too, continually choose Christ, responding in double Hallelujahs: “*Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just*” (19:1-2).