

“THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST” **(2 Corinthians 5:9-10)**

When I was in college, I took part in a 2 ½ month study tour of Europe and Turkey, visiting several biblical and historical sites – including the city of Corinth, as well as a place two hours north of Corinth named Delphi. Delphi was a sacred site in ancient Greece that featured a temple of Apollo, a large amphitheater, and an Olympic stadium that could hold 6500 people. Just like today, every four years athletes from southern Greece would come to Delphi to compete in running, wrestling, boxing, and other events.

Since we were there, our tour guide said we should take in the experience of running in an Olympic stadium, so we lined up on the same stones that were used 2500 years ago, had somebody say “Ready, set, go,” and we took off, running about 100 yards to the end of the stadium and 100 yards back. When we crossed the finish line we had a medal ceremony, just like they do in the Olympics. I got the bronze medal – not too bad, expect that only three of us raced.

In ancient Olympics, instead of standing on different leveled podiums, athletes would stand before a judge seated on an elevated platform called the bema seat – or the judge’s seat. The judge would evaluate how each runner ran the race and disqualify anyone who broke the rules. Instead of medals, judges placed olive wreaths on the heads of the winners. The olive wreath was cut from a sacred tree and symbolized the approval of the Greek gods. With that approval came a lifetime of glory and honor, and a legendary status in Greece.

Today as we continue our study of 2 Corinthians, we’re going to look at just two verses that draw on this same picture of believers one day standing before a judge – the ultimate judge – and being evaluated and rewarded for how we have run the Christian race.

In the first eight verses of chapter five the Apostle Paul explains why he had such boldness and confidence in serving Christ. “No matter what happens to me in this life,” he said, “I know that I will be with the Lord in the next life. Our bodies are like temporary tents that eventually wear out and are dismantled – but one day God will raise our mortal bodies and give us brand-new immortal bodies, free from sin and suffering.” Now in verses 9-10 he goes on to show how anticipating our future life in heaven can and should have a radical effect on how we live presently on earth.

He writes... “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

These verses highlight something many Christians are not aware of, or maybe have forgotten – and that is that there will be a day of reckoning and we will be held accountable for how we have lived our lives on earth. Using the analogy of running a race, Paul emphasizes three main things in these verses: Number one, our goal – what should be our aim, our purpose – what are we running for? Number two, our judgment – after our Christian race is over, how will Christ evaluate us – how will He assess what we’ve done with the years he’s given us on earth? And number three, our reward – after our lives are evaluated and we have run the race well, what will we receive, and is there anything we could lose?

Let’s begin with our goal, verse 9... “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” All of us have someone we want to please, whether it’s a boss, a teacher, a coach, a husband, a wife, a parent – we all have people we want to make happy and want approval from. But our ultimate aim, the person we should want to please the most, is the Lord – for the simple reason that we owe our life to him.

The idea of pleasing God is mentioned several times in the New Testament. In almost every context, the exhortation to please God is preceded by a description of our salvation... “This is what you were before God intervened and saved you by His grace – and now that you are saved, you belong to Him – so make it your aim to please Him.” In Ephesians 5:10 we’re told to “find out what pleases the Lord.” What is it He wants me to do, to be, and to say? 1 Thessalonians 4:1 we are urged to live a life that pleases God and excel in it more and more. 2 Timothy 2:4 says that our aim should be to please the Lord just as a soldiers’ aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

When our aim is to please the Lord, pleasing other people becomes less and less important. Of all the people watching our lives, the only one that really matters is the Lord – we play for an audience of one. The natural pull, however, is to please people and seek their approval. People pleasing, with some, is an addiction – they crave the attention and affirmation and applause of others. The problem with people pleasing is that people are fickle – they love you one day, and cast you aside the next day. They put you up on a pedestal and then they tear you down. Aiming to please others is exhausting and leaves you continually disappointed when you don’t get from them what you want.

But the longer you walk with the Lord and the more you mature in your faith, you come to realize that the only person’s opinion that matters is God’s. 1 Thessalonians 2:4b says, “Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts” (NLT). Only God can see the real you, only He can see your motives, and only He can give you the approval you seek. When you make your aim to please Him, you are set free from what others think. It doesn’t mean that you don’t listen to advice or heed constructive criticism from people who love you, but the ultimate person you are trying to please is the Lord.

In verse 10 Paul states the reason we strive to please God, and that is because one day we will be held accountable for how we’ve lived our lives... “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” When some read the word “judgment” they assume it’s talking about God’s judgment of unbelievers, not of believers. This is because verses like Romans 8:1 say, “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” If you have trusted Christ as your Savior from sin, you are eternally set free from the penalty of sin and are declared righteous before God. This is true, but it doesn’t mean that believers won’t be judged – their judgment will be different.

The Bible speaks of two judgments – a judgment of unbelievers and a judgment for believers. The judgment of unbelievers is described in Revelation 20, where God is seated on a great white throne, and all those who have died not believing in Christ are standing before Him. Then books will be opened – books recording all that they’ve done in this life – showing that God’s judgment is fair and based on facts.

Then the book of life is opened – the divine registry of the names of those who have trusted Christ – and if anyone’s name is not found in the book of life they are cast eternally into the lake of fire. The great white throne judgment is final – there are no appeals or pleas – the time to decide what you will do with Christ is now before it’s too late.

The other judgment, found here in verse 10, is the judgment of believers, and is often referred to as the bema seat judgment. The huge difference, of course, between the bema seat judgment and the great white throne judgment is that everyone at the bema seat judgment will be saved and have their names recorded in the book of life. It is not a judgment to determine whether or not you are saved, it is a judgment to determine what you have done with your life after you were saved.

Notice three characteristics of the judgment seat of Christ. First of all, **we will be judged fairly**. The one judging us is Christ – the one who died to redeem us, and the one who loves us – and of course He would like for us to do well. And like the great white throne judgment, the bema seat judgment is completely based on facts – and no fact will be overlooked – if you were brought up in an abusive home and it affected the way you lived, all of these things will be taken into account – and when your judgment is over, no one is going to dispute it because we’ll know that that judgment was absolutely fair and just.

And you’ll be judged on the basis of your second birth, not your first birth. Some of you may have come to Christ later in life, and there is a long list of things God could judge you for – but they are all forgiven by the cross. What God will hold you accountable for is what you done, and how you have lived, after you are saved.

Not only will we be judged fairly, but secondly, **we will be judged individually**... “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one of us may receive what is due us.” How many of you have ever sung in a choir? The great thing about a choir – especially if it’s a large choir, is that you don’t have to be a particularly good singer because the rest of the choir can mask your bad notes or mistakes. But when you stand before Jesus it’s not going to be with a choir – it’s just you and Jesus. Well, you say, I certainly hope it’s going to be private. Maybe so, but Jesus told some parables that indicate that it will be public. But even so, the only thing that will matter is the look on the face of Jesus. We will be judged individually.

Third, **we’ll be judged thoroughly**. Verse 10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, *whether good or bad*.” The word “appear” means to make manifest. All our works will be brought out into the light to be revealed for what it is. On the positive side, all the good we have done will be brought to light and rewarded. The book of Malachi talks about believers who had grown weary of serving God. “What good does it do to obey God and serve Him? Look at all the evildoers who defy God and yet they prosper and seem to enjoy a good life.” Malachi 3:16 says, “Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.” God watches everything we do and keeps a record of our faithfulness and good deeds.

On the negative side, all the bad will be revealed as well. The Greek word for “bad” here basically means “worthless.” It speaks of all the wasted time, all the wasted opportunities, and the wasted priorities that were squandered. Both good and bad will be brought to light. It will be a thorough judgment.

So, Paul says, number one, our goal is to please the Lord. Number two, the reason we are to live lives pleasing to God is because we will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ to be judged fairly, individually, and thoroughly. This brings us to point number three: our reward... “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us *may receive what is due us* for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

One of the fun parts about watching the Olympics is hearing the backstories of athletes we’ve never heard of, but who have spent the last four years in obscurity preparing for their big day. Every day they get up early and put their bodies through grueling training, they push through pain and obstacles and put the rest of their life on hold – and the reason they’re willing to make such sacrifices is receive a medal and be rewarded for all their efforts. In the same way we should strive to please the Lord, and if we do, He will richly reward us when we stand before Him.

Some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of being rewarded. Why does Jesus need to reward us? Won't just being in heaven with Him be enough? Rewards are God's idea – He is the one who put their drive and desire within us to seek them. He uses rewards to motivate us to godly living and service, just like parents and teachers and coaches and bosses use rewards as incentive. As His children, God delights in rewarding us and sharing His glory with us. Romans 8:17 puts it this way, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”

When we stand before Christ, we will receive what is due us. The parable of the talents illustrates what this means. Jesus talks about a man going on a long journey, and he entrusts a certain amount of money to each of his servants, according to their abilities. To one servant he gives five bags of gold, to another two bags, and another one bag. When he gets back from his journey the master settles accounts with his servants. The first two servants put their master's money to work and each doubled what they were given, but the last servant squandered the one bag entrusted to him and had nothing to present his master.

The master commended the first two servants, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!” But the lazy servant was rebuked and cast outside his master's presence.

Through this parable Jesus stresses the importance of taking advantage of the opportunity to serve God now because the day will come – at any moment – when there is no more opportunity and we will stand before Him and give account for what we've done with what we've been given. The parable also teaches us that God wants to reward us – He wants to say, “Well done,” and He delights in sharing His glory with us.

When we stand before Christ, we will have something to gain and something to lose. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 3 where our life is pictured as a building, built on the foundation of Christ. In verses 12-15 he says... “If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.”

On judgment day – and this is the judgment of believers – our lives will be tested. What is it that God looking for? What will He inspect? I believe God is going to be looking at three things – what we built, how we built, and why we built. Let's start with what we build. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul talks about how each believer plays a part in building up the church. God expects that every believer will fully participate in the life of a local church and use the spiritual gifts they've been given to build up the lives of others.

In the American church we've kind of latched onto the thinking that faith is something private and individual and going to church is optional. But the New Testament teaches that faith is communal – we belong to a spiritual family of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and together we use our gifts to build each other up and together work to proclaim the gospel of Christ to our community. God will hold us accountable for our participation in church life and what we've done to help build it.

But it's not just what we build, but Paul says, “Be careful how we build. Are we building through our own human energy and ability – by the flesh – or are we building by the power of the Spirit?” A.W. Tozer once said, “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference.” Wow – is that really true? I don't know, but it's something to think about. It's easy to serve God without recognizing that we're serving Him through the flesh.

I remember reading about Bob Pierce, who founded the relief agency *World Vision*. Few men were as passionate and dedicated to ministry as Bob Pierce. Outwardly, people saw a man driven to serve the needs of people and working endless hours on behalf of the less fortunate. But inwardly he was a mess. He was an angry man who treated people poorly and was eventually fired by the board of the ministry he started. He neglected his family – often being gone ten months out of the year. He divorced his wife and alienated all his children. One of his daughters committed suicide, and he died a bitter man.

From a human standpoint, Bob Pierce built a highly successful, world-wide ministry, yet how much of it was driven by the flesh and not the Spirit? Only God can judge that, but his life is a cautionary tale to stop and evaluate how we're serving God – is it by my power and my drive and my efforts, or is it generated by the Spirit? As we'll see, any service driven by the flesh amounts to wood, hay, and straw. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing – nothing that lasts for eternity."

Third, we must be careful to ask **why we build** – why do we serve the Lord? Did you know that's not an easy answer? Proverbs says the motivations of the heart are deep waters. I know how easy it is to do very great, meaningful things for the Lord and yet do them for the wrong reasons – and they usually revolve around getting praise and recognition, like the Pharisee in the temple who gave a large offering to the Lord, but he made a big show of it so that everyone could see. The poor widow, on the other hand, quietly gave a small offering of all she had. Two completely different motives. At the bema seat only service rendered to God from a pure heart, with sincere motives, will be rewarded. All else is wood, hay, and straw.

One way you can evaluate if your motives are pure is when you do something and no one praises you, or even more telling is when you do something and someone else gets the praise. If we're honest, most of what we do is done with mixed motives, and there are impure motives lurking beneath the surface we're not even aware of. That's why it's good to stop and evaluate ourselves to make sure our motives are pure.

All our work – what we build and how we build and why we do it – all will be judged at the bema seat. Paul says in verse 13 that our work will be "revealed by fire." When gold, silver, and costly stones are put into the crucible of fire – because of their solid substance, endures. The fire is proof positive of their value and quality and purity. When wood, hay, and straw are thrown in the fire – poof! It's burned up and comes to nothing. God's judgment will reveal what we've done or not done – the opportunities we've seized or not seized – it will reveal if what we've done was driven by the flesh or by the Spirit – and it will expose the true motives of our hearts. Only God truly knows these things and the fire of His judgment will reveal them all.

The bema seat judgment will result in two outcomes. The first is that faithful workers will be rewarded. Verse 14, "**If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.**" All the good things we've done the right way and with the right motives, will survive the crucible of fire and God will reward us. What is our reward?

In the parable of the talents we see that Jesus first rewards his faithful servants with praise... "**Well done thou good and faithful servant.**" Think of the person you'd most like to hear these words from on earth, then imagine hearing them from the Lord. What a reward that will be! But then Jesus goes on to tell His servants, "**You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!**" Once in heaven Jesus is going to reward faithful servants with positions of rulership in His eternal kingdom. How we rule and in what capacity we rule depends on what we do now.

You might say, “I’m okay with not being given a lot of responsibility. I’ll be happy in heaven just to enjoy it without the labor or ruling.” But this entirely misses the meaning of what ruling and serving in heaven is all about. I like what Bruce Wilkinson says, “The words and example of Jesus convince me that in heaven we will desperately crave to serve. When we see our Savior, we will be swept up in a consuming, eternity-long desire to respond in love to Jesus. Words won’t be enough. Worship and praise won’t be enough. We will want to do something for Him. In heaven, more opportunity to serve God will be our highest reward.” In Luke 19 Jesus said that some servants will be in charge of five cities, some of ten cities. In doing so we will be sharing in our master’s happiness. Life may not always be happy here on earth, but keep faithfully serving the Lord and you’ll have all the happiness you can imagine in eternity!

What about those who built with wood, hay, and straw? Verse 15 talks about the careless worker, who after their works are tested by fire and have nothing left to show, will suffer loss. Verse 15 says, “If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.”

Paul paints a vivid image of a Christian barely escaping a fire – they make it to heaven, barely escaping the flames of hell. They get into God’s kingdom by the skin of their teeth. This describes the Christian who does not pay attention to his or her spiritual growth. Their primary focus is on the here and now. They nod their head to spiritual matters – they come to church, but it is not a priority or a habit. They show some evidence of spiritual fruit, but they squander most of their spiritual opportunities here on earth. Instead of laying up treasures in heaven, their treasures are piled up here on earth. At the judgment all their squandered opportunities will be piled as wood, hay, and stubble and burned.

The good news is that they’re in heaven. But Paul says they will “suffer loss.” Unlike the faithful worker, the careless builder will not be rewarded. There is no “Well done thou good and faithful servant.” 1 John 2 talks about not being ashamed when Jesus comes. The careless worker will feel a sense of shame and regret. And at the moment of judgment they will realize they had but one opportunity, one life, to lay up treasures in heaven. Because of their careless work they will eternally forfeit greater areas of responsibility in heaven. It’s a sober reminder not to sink too much time and energy into the 80-90 years of earthly life and forfeit eternal billions of opportunities in heaven. It makes sense to build with gold, silver, and costly stones and reap eternal dividends in glory.

As we come to the Lord’s Table today, it’s an opportunity for us to examine our hearts and reflect on how we are running our race. Today’s message may provoke a couple of different feelings. One is encouragement – your soul is stirred to know that your life has meaning and purpose – and you’re inspired to live a life pleasing to God and hear Him one day say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

The other feeling you may have, that probably most of us have to some degree, is guilt and regret... I have a lot of wood, hay, and stubble right now in my life, and if Jesus were to come back today, I would have a lot to hang my head about. Today can be a new beginning for you. God is eager and willing to forgive you for the time and energy you may have squandered, and is rooting for you to run the Christian race well. You can do something about that right now.

Communion is not for perfect people, it is for those who have humbled themselves and received God’s grace by trusting in Christ. The bread and cup serve as reminders of the price of our salvation and the tremendous love, grace, and mercy displayed on the cross so that we could be forgiven. God invites everyone who has placed their faith in Christ to partake of communion, but to do so with a clean heart. Take this time to confess your sin and thank God for His love and grace.