

God's Eternal Plan #17
The Judgment Seat of Christ
2 Corinthians 5:1-10

2 Corinthians Chapter 11 contains the record of suffering almost unparalleled in the annals of the history of the Church. In that passage Paul recounts the suffering he had endured to fulfill his ministry, to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. It seems as though every conceivable form of suffering that could be devised against a saint of God had been experienced against the apostle Paul. And yet, if you were to ask Paul, "Paul why were you willing to endure so much suffering over so long a period of time?" I believe we would find his answer in 2 Corinthians 5:9, where he says, "Therefore we make it our aim (ambition), whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him." **Even in the face of suffering and possible death, Paul's great consuming ambition was to be found pleasing to the Lord in every area, and in every moment, and in every activity of his life.** And the reason for this *ambition* is given for us in verse 10, "For (for is a conjunctive word that ties verse 10 to verse 9) we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

I realize that for many of you the doctrine of the Judgment Seat of Christ is something that you are very familiar with. I also realize that many of you have heard messages on this subject frequently, and that you could explain these passages in great detail. But I also realize there are some here that are not familiar with this great teaching. Therefore, I am faced with the responsibility of taking familiar truths and making them alive for some of you, and taking an unfamiliar truth and making it alive for others of you.

I do not know of any doctrine of the Word of God any more sobering, or any more serious for the child of God to consider than this subject of the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Paul reminds us in verse 5 he is speaking to believers, "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." The "guarantee" that he speaks of here is the same language used in Ephesians 1:12-14, "That we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory." Therefore, it is clear that Paul is *not* addressing his statements to the unbeliever, the unsaved person.

Notice also the wording in verse 10, "For we must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ..." **When Paul uses the word "all" he is emphasizing**

the universality of this experience. Every child of God, without exception, must stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Now when we hear the word “judgment” we immediately think of guilt and/or punishment. We think of a bar of justice where those who are accused of some crime will stand. Because of such thinking (and wrong preaching) we have the idea that God is going to call us before Him to punish us for all the sins we have committed since we have been saved. **But nothing could be further from the truth!** That, my friend, is “fear tactic” preaching and has absolutely no biblical foundation.

On the other hand, the bible teaches that when we receive Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, our sins are removed forever. Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” God not only dismisses our *past* sins, Romans 4:7-8 reminds us He has taken care of our *future* sins, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.” The Greek word translated “impute” means, “to attribute or to charge to another.” Romans 8:31-34 says, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.” To bring the believer into judgment concerning the sin question, whether sins before the new birth, sins since the new birth, or even sins unconfessed, is to deny the efficiency of the death of Christ and nullify the promise of God that says in Hebrews 10:17, “...their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.”

That does not mean that we *can’t* sin, for certainly we know that we *do*, and when we do it affects our relationship with God. Although sin affects our *relationship* with God, it does not affect our *standing* with God. Sin breaks our *fellowship* but does not break our *sonship*.

What, then, is meant when we are told that “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” **If this is not a judgment to punish us for sins, then what is it?** The word translated “judgment seat” is a little four letter Greek word “bema.” If you were to walk in the ruins of ancient Corinth, the city to which Paul was writing, you would find in the center of that ancient city square a platform about seven or eight feet high, perhaps fifty feet long, twenty-five to thirty feet wide. That platform bears the name “bema.” **The people of ancient Corinth would assemble around this giant platform to hear speeches by the great orators of that day.** It is also where the

Judges sat if they were to hold a court of law. It was also the platform where the president or umpire of the Grecian games in Athens sat as he rewarded all the winning contestants. It was never used as a judicial bench.

Thus, associated with this word “bema” are the ideas of prominence, dignity, authority, honor, and reward rather than the idea of justice and judgment. In other words, the “**judgment seat of Christ**” will be the time when the Christians will stand before Christ to be rewarded for his/her faithfulness and stewardship towards the ministry of Christ in his/her life. It is never the idea of *guilt* and *punishment*!

You may be thinking, “But what about those words ‘whether it be good or bad?’” These words carry with them the idea of what is “usable” and “unusable.”

Let me try to explain the meaning by this little illustration. Suppose I want to hang a picture on the wall and needed to drive a nail. Now out in that little room in the Carport is a hammer that was designed for that very purpose. But I am too lazy to go out and get the hammer, so I pick up a pair of pliers because they were closer. So I take those pliers and drive the nail into the wall. Do you know what I now have to hope? I have to hope the picture is large enough to cover the marks and dents on the wall. Was it because the pliers were no good? Of course not. The problem is that I was using something simply to get me by, when I should have put forth the effort to use that which was best.

Therefore, the Judgment Seat of Christ is not to determine what is ethically good or evil, but rather to see what works we have done that are acceptable or unacceptable. It is not the Lord’s purpose here to chasten His child for his/her sins, but to reward them for their services done for the glory of *God*, and not for the glory of *self*.

Let me give you another example: those that perform (sing, teach, etc.) for the glory of *self* have to always be in the “spot light.” And when they feel they are *not* in the “spot light” they usually get mad and quit.

In light of what we have already said, the Judgment Seat of Christ will determine what reward each child of God will receive. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” It is evident from the

Scriptures that some will receive a *full* reward, some will receive a *partial* reward, and some will *suffer loss* of reward.

That which determines whether one receives or loses a reward is the trial by fire. Paul says in verse 13, “Each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.” **From that statement it is evident, first of all, that it is the realm of the believer’s works that is undergoing examination.** Further, it is obvious the examination is not an *external* judgment, based on *outward* observation, but rather on a test that determines the *inner* character and motivation of the individual. 1 Samuel 16:7 reminds us, “For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” The entire purpose of the *trial by fire* is to determine that which is *destructible* and that which is *indestructible*.

In this passage of Scripture Paul has affirmed there are two classes of building materials the believer may use when building on the foundation of Christ. The gold, silver, and precious stones are *indestructible*. These are the work of God, which men only appropriate and use. **On the other hand, the wood, hay, and stubble are destructible materials.** These are the work of men, which man has purchased by their own efforts. Therefore, the Judgment Seat of Christ is to determine that which was done by God through the individual and that which the individual did in his own strength; that which was done for the glory of God and that which was done for the glory of the flesh. **This judgment cannot be done by outward observation, but must be done as God looks at the attitude of one’s heart.**

In other words, those “works” that we have done in our own strength, and only half-heartedly simply to get us by, or for the glory of our own selves, simply will not stand the test of God at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Only those “works” that have been done by the power of the Holy Spirit, and only for the glory of God and not man is going to be rewarded.

Remember, it is not so much what you have done in your Christian service, as it is the motive behind what you did that is going to be revealed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. We will not be judged so much on how many souls you won, but on *why* you won them in the first place. Do you teach because you like to teach, or do you teach to bring honor and glory to the Lord? Do you sing simply because you like to sing, or do you sing to bring honor and glory to God? Do you preach because you like to preach, or do you preach to bring honor and glory to God? These are questions that each of us must come to “grips” with in our own personal lives. And these are the things that you and I will have revealed to us that the Judgment Seat of Christ.

If after the testing, our works are burned, we have this promise in 1 Corinthians 3:15, “If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” **The child of God will not be lost, but his reward will be lost.** I must confess that I have no idea what it will be like to be in heaven without a reward, but Revelation 4:10 seems to indicate that a vital part of our worship is when we are able to cast our crowns at the feet of Jesus as a sign of adoration and thanksgiving. How sad it would be to stand empty-handed in His presence.

As you and I take a personal inventory of our service, can we expect to hear those words of Jesus, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”