The Judgment Seat of Christ for Believers
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5
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For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (5:10)

Driving Paul's noble ambition was the knowledge that there would be a penetrating uncovering of the depths of his heart by the Lord Himself. That will take place in the future when believers **must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**. The strong terms must and all stress the inevitability and comprehensiveness of this event. That knowledge produced in Paul strong motivation to please God in this life.

Phanero (**appear**) means, "to make manifest," "to make clear," "to make visible," or "to reveal." Commenting on the meaning of *phanero*, Philip E. Hughes writes, "To be made manifest means not just to appear, but to be laid bare, stripped of every outward façade of respectability, and openly revealed in the full and true reality of one's character" (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 180). Some have argued that believers' secret motives and heart attitudes will be made manifest to the holy angels; there is, however, no biblical support for such speculation. Others hold that the disclosure of which Paul writes will be to other believers, a view also without biblical support. Believers will be too preoccupied with the unveiling of their own deeds to pay attention to the revealing of others'. Nor do believers' hearts need to be made manifest to the omniscient God, who already knows every detail of their lives.

In that day, the full truth about their lives, character, and deeds will be made clear to each believer. Each will discover the real verdict on his or her ministry, service, and motives. All hypocrisy and pretense will be stripped away; all temporal matters with no eternal significance will vanish like wood, hay, and stubble, and only what is to be rewarded as eternally valuable will be left. First Samuel 16:7 declares that "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." "There is no creature hidden from His sight," the writer of Hebrews adds, "but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). The true assessment of the work God has done in and through believers will be disclosed on that day.

Believers will not be judged for sin at the judgment seat of Christ. Every sin of every believer was judged at the Cross, when God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). At the cross “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). As our substitute, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24); “He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12; cf. Eph. 1:7; 4:32; 1 John 2:1–2). Because of His atoning sacrifice on our behalf, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.… Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:1, 34). But though salvation is not by works, works are the inevitable result of true salvation. Philip Hughes comments,

It is worth remembering that a passage like this shows that, so far from there being discord, there is an essential agreement between the teaching of Paul and that of James on the subject of faith and works. The justification of the sinner, it is true, is by faith in Christ and not by works of his own; but the hidden root of faith must bring forth the visible fruit of good works. This fruit is expected by Christ, for it brings glory to the Father and is evidence to the world of the dynamic reality of divine grace. And it is especially in the bearing of much fruit that the Father is glorified (Jn. 15:8). (The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 183. Italics in original.)

Judgment seat translates *bma*, which, in its simplest definition, describes a place reached by steps, or a platform. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses it that way in Nehemiah 8:4. In Greek culture bma referred to the elevated platform on which victorious athletes received their crowns, much like the medal stand in the modern Olympic games. In the New Testament it was used of the judgment seats of Pilate (Matt. 27:19; John 19:13), Herod (Acts 12:21), and Festus (Acts 25:6, 10, 17). There was also a *bma* at Corinth, where unbelieving Jews unsuccessfully accused Paul before the Roman proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12, 16, 17). A person was brought before a *bma* to have his or her deeds examined, in a judicial sense for indictment or exoneration, or for the purpose of recognizing and rewarding some achievement. Writing to the Romans of this same event, Paul described it as “the judgment seat [*bma*] of God” (Rom. 14:10). God the Father is the ultimate Judge, but He has “given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). Paul Barnett notes,

A parallel passage—“we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10)—implies an identity of function of Christ and God; God judges and Christ judges. The NT often refers to Christ as God’s appointed judge, appropriate to his role as Son of Man, as in Dan. 7:13, 14, 26–27 (e.g., John 5:22, 27; 9:39; Matt. 25:31–32; Acts 10:42; 17:31; cf. Rev. 20:11–15). (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 275 n. 45)

The phrase **each one** stresses the personal nature of believers' judgment; it is an individual, not a collective, judgment. Its purpose, as noted above, is not judicial; it is that every believer **may be recompensed for his deeds in the body. Recompensed** translates a form of the verb *komiz*, which means, "to receive back what is due"—whether punishment for a criminal, or reward for one to be honored. When believers stand before the Lord Jesus Christ they will **be recompensed for** the **deeds** they have done **in the body** (cf. Rev. 22:12). Therefore, they cannot disregard their bodies, or treat them with contempt in some antinomian or dualistic fashion. Instead, they are to "present [their] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is [their] spiritual service of worship" (Rom. 12:1). Things done in the body do have potential eternal value (cf. Matt. 6:19–21).

The use of the word **bad** does not indicate that believers' judgment is a judgment on sin, since all their sin has already been judged in Christ. The contrast between **good** and **bad** is not one between moral good and moral evil. **Bad** does not translate *kakos* or *ponros*, the words for moral evil, but *phaulos*, which means "worthless," or "useless." Richard C. Trench writes that *phaulos* "contemplates evil under another aspect, not so much that either of active or passive malignity, but that rather of its good-for-nothingness, the impossibility of any true gain coming forth from it" (*Synonyms of the New Testament* [Reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 317). *Phaulos* describes those mundane things that inherently are neither of eternal value nor sinful, such as taking a walk, going shopping, taking a drive in the country, pursuing an advanced degree, moving up the corporate ladder, painting pictures, or writing poetry. Those morally neutral things will be judged when believers stand before the judgment seat of Christ. If they were done with a motive to glorify God, they will be considered **good**. If they were pursued for selfish interests, they will be considered **bad.**

The clearest definition of the difference between **good** and **bad** (worthless) things is in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15:

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The only foundation of the Christian life is the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Peter 2:6–8), but believers must build on that foundation, as Peter exhorted:

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to

knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble. (2 Peter 1:5–10 NKJV)

Believers build for eternity not with “wood, hay, or straw,” but with “gold, silver, [and] precious stones.” The latter are valuable, permanent, and indestructible and will survive the fire of judgment; the former, though not evil, are worthless and combustible. They illustrate things with no lasting, eternal value. The fire, symbolizing judgment, will consume them in that day when “each man’s work will become evident.” Believers will only be rewarded for deeds with motives that please and glorify the Lord. Paul’s longing for heaven did not cause him to act irresponsibly or unfaithfully here on earth; it did just the opposite.

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