

## Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

### **The Noblest Ambition**

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:9-10

Code: 47-33

It's our joy as we bring this service to a real culminating point to hear the Lord speak to us through His Word and we have been studying 2 Corinthians. I would invite you, if you would, to turn in your Bible to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. As we continue to go verse by verse through this tremendous letter our lives are being cumulatively enriched. What a blessing it has been for us to get into the heart of the apostle Paul and feel the pulse that beat there with that great man.

This morning we're going to be taking the next brief section in this epistle, chapter 5 verses 9 and 10...2 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 and 10. Let me read these two verses to you. "Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done whether good or bad."

Here we get involved with Paul's ambition. In fact, that very term is used in verse 9. I should say at the outset that for the most part ambition has a bad reputation and it has had a bad reputation for a long time. Going back, for example, and reading Thomas Brooks, one of the Puritans, this is what you read about ambition. "Ambition...he writes...is a gilded misery. Ambition is a secret poison. Ambition is a hidden plague. Ambition is the engineer of deceit, the mother of hypocrisy, the parent of envy. Ambition is the original vice of angels and men. Ambition is the destroyer of virtue, the blinder of hearts. It is ambition that turns medicine into maladies and remedies into diseases."

Pretty strong words describing ambition. Blind ambition certainly has caused many to sell their souls. Ambition may finally gain a crown that is stuffed with thorns, we would agree with that. High seats are never but uneasy ones. Blind ambition has caused people to compromise their convictions, violate their supposed beliefs and sacrifice their character. And ambition sort of finds its way into a category of words like unscrupulous, self-centered, proud, driven, insensitive, careless, and other negative modifiers which refer to the carnage of family friends and principles left in the wake of the on-rushing ambition.

Now the actual English word "ambition" derives itself from the Latin ambo ambire(??) and that basically means to go both ways. It's interesting how the word came to mean what it does today, a drive to succeed, a drive to achieve, a drive to be great because what it really meant originally was not to go in one direction but to go in both directions. And that is to say to do whatever you need to do to gain a desired end, facing both ways at one time. It really was used to apply to the person who

had no convictions, would do absolutely anything for his own selfish achievement. The word found its most common use for politicians in the Roman world who were so eager to gain power and so eager to gain prestige and prominence that they would attempt to satisfy both sides of every issue to garner the most votes. Not an unfamiliar thing to us by any means.

Ambition literally came to mean campaigning for promotion at any cost. Ambition led people to want money and power and social visibility and popular approval and peer recognition and authority to the sacrificing of principles and character. In fact, even the English word had for many, many years a very bad connotation. And when you said that someone was ambitious, you, in effect, were commenting on them in a very decidedly negative way. Missionary leader Bishop Stephen Neal(?) said, "I am inclined to think that ambition in any ordinary sense of the term is nearly always sinful in ordinary men. I am certain...he said...that in the Christian it is always sinful and that it is most inexcusable of all in the ordained minister." So what he was basically saying was that everybody is perhaps sinful when they're ambitious, certainly all Christians who are ambitious are sinful, and most of all anybody who is in spiritual leadership.

In fact, we might even conclude that ambition may well have been the dominating sin for which Jesus came into the world to die because we, children of Adam, want to become great, He became small, because we will not stoop, He humbled Himself, because we want to rule, He came to serve. And, in fact, the Bible even condemns sinful ambition. It says in Jeremiah 45:5, "But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them."

Now in spite of all that bad press, Paul says we have as our ambition. And what that tells me is that maybe society's verdict on ambition is not right...at least it's not complete. Maybe there is some room, some justification for a kind of ambition that is legitimate. And it is so because what Paul says in verse 9 is, "We have as our ambition to be pleasing to Him." What Jeremiah 45:5 was forbidding was not an ambition that sought to be pleasing to the Lord, but an ambition that sought great things for oneself. What Jeremiah was forbidding was selfish ambition. The prophet was not condemning all ambition as sinful, but showing that selfishness corrupts ambition.

And, in fact, the Greeks could see ambition as a noble thing. So when Paul is using the word here it is not loaded with negative connotations, quite the contrary. The Greek term, philotimeomai, literally means to love honor, or to love what is honorable. And it could refer to someone who, frankly, was consumed by the passion toward that which was most honorable, most exalted, most noble, somebody who was striving for the noblest of all goals, the love of what was truly honorable, truly elevated, truly excellent.

Paul spoke of that kind of noble ambition. He said right here that he had ambition and it was indeed the noblest ambition because he desired to be pleasing to the Lord. Paul spoke of the noble ambition of one who sought spiritual leadership. In 1 Timothy 3:1 he said, "If any man aspires to the office of

an overseer or a pastor, it is a noble work he desires to do." The New English Bible translates that same verse, "To aspire to leadership is an honorable ambition."

All of that to say there's a place for noble ambition. There's a place for a passion for what is excellent, what is lofty, what is elevated, what is good, what is best. Paul had that. We can safely say Paul was an ambitious man. He was a passionately ambitious man. He had the kind of ambition that should characterize every preacher, that should characterize every believer. He says there in verse 9, "We have as our ambition..." He was, we could say, a driven man. His ambition shows up in Romans chapter 15 and verse 20 where it says, "And thus I aspire to preach the gospel." He had the ambition to preach the gospel because he knew it was pleasing to God to do that. And there, by the way, in Romans 15:20 is the very same verb used as is used here.

So, Paul had an ambition and it wasn't a dishonorable one, but an honorable ambition. And it was an ambition that should characterize every believer, every preacher and every Christian. Let me divide it into three simple components and help you to understand what the noblest ambition is like.

First, he had ambition for the highest goal...he had ambition for the highest goal. Verse 9 says, "We have as our ambition to be pleasing to Him." There is the noblest end. There is the highest goal, to be pleasing to Him. Euarestos, that same term is used in Titus 2:9 to speak of slaves whose passion was to satisfy their masters. You see, this is a very important goal for anybody who is a Christian, particularly anybody who is a minister. I would beg to differ with Bishop Neal and say a minister should be marked by ambition. It's not a sin in his life unless it's selfish. He should be marked by an ambition to please the Lord. And that was true of Paul, he lived to please the Lord.

He was like a violinist who really didn't care that much for the applause of the audience, but he did care deeply for the smile of the master who taught him how to play. He was alike an athlete who wasn't really moved by the roar of the crowd, but he was moved by the commendation of the coach. He's like a soldier who fought not for the thrill of victory, but the affirmation of his general who put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Well done, soldier." The apostle Paul had an ambition and it had to do with pleasing the Lord.

Nowhere is the focus of that ambition more clearly articulated than back in 1 Corinthians chapter 4. If you'll turn back to 1 Corinthians 4 you can see there how clear this focus was in Paul's mind, how singular it was.

Now keep in mind that in the Corinthian church with the myriad of problems that they had there, one of the leading issues that Paul had to address was this matter of judging other people. They...they were judging others unrighteously and they were divided, you remember, to the degree that some would say, "I'm of Paul," some would say, "I'm of Apollos," some would say, "I'm of Cephas, or I'm of Christ," and they had fragmented themselves. They were even divided over human philosophies

which they adhered to or rejected. Their divisiveness had caused the apostle Paul to have to say to them, "I can't write unto you as unto spiritual but as unto carnal because you are so fragmented, there is so much jealousy and so much strife," as he says in chapter 3.

So, the Apostle knew very well the depth and the pervasive character of this problem of judging each other in an unrighteous fashion. And, of course, they also were sitting in judgment on Paul. As I've told you all along in this series, there was merciless criticism against the Apostle. They not only had assaulted his technique in ministry, they had assaulted his credentials and they had assaulted his character. They even had attacked his gospel. And so this matter of assaulting the Apostle, of judging him, of judging others was part and parcel of their conduct.

In response to that Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 3, "But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you or by any human court." Stop at that point. He says, "You know, I really don't care what you think." You see, it was not his ambition to be pleasing to men, it was his ambition to be pleasing to God. And if you go back to verses 1 and 2 in that fourth chapter, he identifies himself as a servant of Christ, as a steward of the mysteries of God of which stewardship he is to be found trustworthy, trustworthy before God. He is Christ's servant. He is God's steward. And he reminds Timothy of this very issue when writing his last epistle he says, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing in His Kingdom, preach the word." Do your duty in view of God and Christ.

Paul says...To me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you or by any human court, whether this is some kind of an official tribunal or whether it is an unofficial opinion, it is of little consequence to me. I don't do my service for you. I'm God's steward. I'm Christ's servant. I am not concerned with earthly, biased, preliminary evaluations by people as to my value and faithfulness.

And listen, he's not saying this in a negative sense, he's saying it in a negative or a positive sense. Whether you evaluate me negatively or positively, it is of small consequence to me, whether you are hostile toward me or whether you are friendly toward me, it is of little consequence to me. Whether you have deemed me to be noble, or whether you have deemed to be ignoble is of little consequence to me. Human courts don't render the ultimate verdict.

He goes even beyond that. In fact, he says, "I don't even examine myself." Why? Because I tend to be biased in my own favor and lack objectivity. I'm not a good one to sit in judgment on myself and neither are you. You can see what I do on the outside, of course, but you don't know my heart. I know my heart better than you do, but even I don't know my heart. The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, and who can...what?...who can know it? I don't even judge myself. I don't even examine myself.

Notice how the verse begins, "But to me," it puts the "to me" in the emphatic position and he's saying, "To me it's not important what any human court says." Now let me just say as kind of a caveat to that, that can be a very unhealthy attitude if that's the only perspective. If that means "I don't care what anybody thinks I'll do exactly what I want to do," then that's very, very seriously wicked. That's an open display of indifference to what is right. That's not what he's saying. What he is saying is...You and even me are not a proper court because you don't know enough and neither do I about the reality of my character.

Verse 4 he follows it up, "I am conscious of nothing against myself," and he affirms that. In 2 Corinthians 1:12 he says essentially the same thing. You remember, "Our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you." I have a clear conscience, he said, I don't owe anything against myself. "Yet I am not by this justified, I'm not by this acquitted, I'm not by this exonerated because the one who examines me is...whom?...is the Lord." He's not saying I will not allow anyone to judge me, he's not saying that. This is not a brash rebellious attitude that does not want anybody to bring him under any kind of scrutiny or judgment. What he is saying is you're just too low a court and so am I. I have accountability that's way above you and it is that accountability that concerns me, not your opinion. Your verdict on my life is not the verdict that's going to settle in eternity. There is a higher law, there is a higher judge who sits in a higher court and it is to Him and to that court and to that law that I answer.

And he says again in verse 4, I'm not dealing with a sin issue here, understand that, because you do have a right to judge me as to a sin in my life. Is that not true? If your brother is taken in a sin, what do you do? You go to him. He says that in the very next chapter, chapter 5. You've got a sinning person, go to him, deal with him, put him out of the church. That's why he adds in verse 4, I am not talking about a sin issue, it's not something that I have consciousness of against myself, some iniquity in my life that you can't confront. Certainly Peter said judgment must begin at the house of God when it comes to sin.

But what he is saying is you cannot render the verdict on what you can't see. And my life, frankly, may look really good to you, but not to God. So Paul will not settle for the opinions of men whether they are favorable or unfavorable. There was nothing in his heart condemning him, but he also is the same Apostle who later said to them in chapter 10 verse 12, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." Then he says, "The one who examines me is the Lord." My life stands or falls before Him.

You see, that's why his ambition was so focused. I mean, he knew exactly who it was he had to please. To the Galatians he writes in the first chapter, verse 10, "Am I now seeking the favor of men or of God? Am I striving to please men? If I were still striving or trying to please men I would not be a bond-servant of Christ, I can't do both." The focus is to please Him.

The conclusion of the matter is in verse 5, 1 Corinthians 4:5, we're still in that 1 Corinthians 4 text. "Therefore...he says...on the basis of what I've just told you," literally the Greek says, "stop passing judgment. Stop rendering the final verdict on me before the time." What time? "The time when the Lord comes and will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts." You don't know that, you don't know what's in the darkness of my heart. You don't know my motives. And only the time when the Lord comes will reveal that. Then...he says at the end of verse 5...each man's praise will come to him from God.

And, you know, he's talking here, I think, most particularly to the Paul group. It isn't that he's hammering on the people who are giving him an unfavorable assessment, I really believe he's directing his words to those who are giving him a favorable one and saying basically...Don't think that you can evaluate me, you don't know my heart, you don't know the deepest motives of my life...God does, and when the praise comes, what I care about is that it come from Him. You understand that, don't you? That's the basis of the Christian life. And that's what every Christian should seek. Now that is not to say that we don't want to be gracious and commending and kind and thoughtful and thankful to those around us, but the ultimate verdict on anybody's life and ministry is in the hands of the Lord. And if you understand that then you're not seeking to get the verdict from men but to get it from God. It becomes the driving, compelling issue. It's like 2 Timothy 2 where in verses 3 and 4 Paul says that the ministry, he says to Timothy, is like a soldier. And it says in verse 3 that the soldier has to suffer hardship and then in verse 4 it says the soldier has to disconnect himself from all the earthly entanglements in order that he might please the one who chose him to be a soldier. It's the only one you want to please.

This is the basic principle of all Christian living, you do whatever you do to please the Lord. That's it. You present your body a living sacrifice, you come to a renewed mind because that is well-pleasing, Romans 12:2 says. Some Bibles translate it "acceptable," it means well-pleasing.

In Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 8 and skipping to 10, "You were formerly darkness now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord." That's it. Trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. At the beginning of the service this morning I read you these words, "For this reason also," Colossians 1:9, "since the day we heard of it we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord to please Him in all respects."

I mean, that's it? That's not news to us. We do need to be reminded of it. First Thessalonians 4:1, "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us instructions as how you ought to walk and please God that you may excel still more." You have learned how to please God, do it even more. I mean, that is the sum and substance of Christian

living. We are to offer to God, Hebrews 12:28 says, a pleasing service with reverence and awe, pleasing Him.

So, Paul was ambitious for the highest goal. Second point, he was ambitious with the widest devotion...with the widest devotion. And by this I'm simply trying to point out that this had such far-reaching implications that it was a transcendent devotion to this highest goal. Look at 2 Corinthians 5 verse 9 again, there's one little phrase in there that triggers this thought. "Therefore also we have as our ambition...here it is...whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him."

This little phrase "whether at home or absent" calls us to return to the prior passage, doesn't it? So does the word "therefore" also, or the two words "therefore also" at the beginning of the verse. But go back with me and remember what we saw last week in verses 1 to 8? Paul obviously was under tremendous stress. Back in chapter 4 verse 8, afflicted, perplexed; verse 9, persecuted, struck down; verse 10, carrying about in his body the dying of Jesus; verse 11, constantly being delivered to death; verse 12, death working in us. I mean, it was just incessant, just incessant.

Over in chapter 6 verse 9 he talks about his always dying, his being punished, his being sorrowful, his being poor. And he was living on the brink of death every single day. But he had no fear, as we learned last week. Why? Verse 1, 5:1, "Because we know that if this earthly tent which is our house is torn down or dismantled, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." And what he's saying there is...Look, I'd rather leave anyway and get my resurrection body. Whatever may happen to this body is inconsequential because there's one waiting for us eternal in the heavens, not a part of this creation, a building from God. And we are in this house groaning because we'd like to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven. We'd much rather have that.

So, if you think that all of this fear of death somehow is tearing up my heart and my life and creating the kind of stress that means I can't minister effectively, you're wrong because frankly, I'd rather...I'd rather leave here. And we discussed that, didn't we? We discussed that his number one priority would be to be raptured and transformed, right? He'd just like to be here when Jesus comes, get changed and go to glory because then he'd get his resurrection body.

And, you know, there were times in his writings when it seemed as though he...his longing was a real belief and he writes as if he's going to live to the Second Coming of Christ. We who are alive and remain...you know...1 Thessalonians 4 indicates that he might be one of the "we" there when Jesus comes. So he had that hope. And we determined that that was his first priority. If he had his choice, he'd live till the Rapture. We can identify with that, can't we? But if he couldn't live till the Rapture, he'd rather die, that was his second choice. Even if he had to go into a disembodied state until the resurrection, if he had to just be a spirit in glory, even if he had to be naked for a little while, which is the term that he uses there in verse 3, he really didn't want to be unclothed or naked as he mentions in verse 4, but he did want to get into eternity as fast as possible. His third option was to stay here

which was fine also, they were all three good options. If he needed to stay here to do what God wanted him to do, he was more than happy to stay here and to fulfill the ministry that the Lord had given him to fulfill. But if he had his choice he'd be transformed instantaneously at the coming of Christ. If that couldn't happen, he'd rather die here cause he was sick of battling sin in his flesh, and sick of the difficulty of life and he just as soon be in a disembodied state with the Lord waiting for his resurrection body and if he had to stay, he would stay, but that was his third choice.

So really he is saying if I have to stay here, I'll stay. If I have to die, I'm willing to die. But in either case, it's not going to change my ambition. Verse 9, "Whether at home or absent." Now he's already used those words, just to help you kind of with what's in the text, go back to verse 6. He says, "At home in the body we are absent from the Lord," verse 8 he says, "We prefer to be absent from the body and to be home with the Lord." So if you crisscross those, in verse 6 he says, "at home in the body," in verse 8, "at home with the Lord." In verse 6, "absent from the Lord," in verse 8, "absent from the body." So he's got several absences and several at homes. So the question for the interpreter is...which of these does he have in mind in verse 9 when he says at home or absent?

Now without getting bogged down too much here, I think all he's meaning here is at home in the body as in verse 6, which is absent from the Lord, or absent from the body as in verse 8, which is at home with the Lord. So what he's saying is whether I am living here in this life in my physical body, at home, in my body, or whether I die and am absent from the body but present with the Lord, in either case my ambition is not altered. This is not something that is reserved for the future. This is now. Because you know somebody is going to say to him...Look, Paul, if this body is this wretched man and that you want to be delivered from and if this body is so frail and if you're going through all of this bodily stuff and you just long to be delivered, and you long to go to heaven, doesn't this make you disinterested, doesn't it make you indiffident...indifferent, rather, or diffident toward your body? Can't it mean that you don't really take any care about how you live because after all, it's an old sinful body and it could kind of lead you into an antinomianism? Particularly with Greek dualism which said that the body was evil in and of itself.

He says just the opposite. He says if I have to be at home in this body, or if the Lord wants me to be in a disembodied state, waiting for my resurrection body in His presence in heaven, in either case my ambition is the same. He's quick to respond and to anybody who might think that such longings to be delivered from this sinful world and from this transient, temporary, weak, limited, embattled, earthly body somehow caused him to disregard how he lived in this life, not at all...he says. In fact, he knew that the present body was a vehicle by which he could do things and serve God in such a way that would bear an eternal reward. His longings for what was to come in heavenly glory didn't make him indifferent to this life, in fact it made him all the more careful about how he lived this life. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 9;27 he says, "I buffet my body, I beat it into subjection because I don't want to be a castaway." I don't want to be tested and found lacking. I present my body a living sacrifice.



Boy, he took every care that he could possibly take with this fallen, frail, human body because it was the current means by which he could please God. So his immediate desire to be with the Lord led to another desire, and that was not to disregard this body, not to disregard this life just because he wanted another one, but to make every effort to use it to please the Lord. And the idea that he would have to face the Lord some day elevated his sense of devotion to duty, didn't diminish it. So he says the wideness, the breath of his devotion is demonstrated whether at home or absent, he's going to be pleasing to the Lord. He's saying I don't care if I'm in time or eternity, I don't care if I'm in this world or the world to come, I don't care if I'm on earth or in heaven, my passion is the same.

His devotion then, his ambition transcended life, it transcended time. He was a man passionately consumed with pleasing his Lord no matter where he might be. In either case that was his driving ambition.

He says this in other places, Romans 14:8, "For if we live, we live for the Lord. If we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore whether we live or die, we're the Lord's." It really didn't matter to him. Philippians chapter 1 verse 20, he says, "Christ is going to be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain, if I'm to live on in the flesh, it means fruitful labor for me. I don't know which to choose, I'm hard-pressed from both directions having the desire to depart and be with Christ. That's very much better. Yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake." It didn't matter. This life, the life to come. His desire to please Christ was unaffected by life or death, whether he was alive or dead in body and waiting for a resurrection body. In the air, in the resurrection, his ambition never changed.

And that all leads us to a third point which is the key to this text, it's in verse 10. And I've kind of hurried through those first two because I really want to get to this third one. He had the highest goal, expressed the widest devotion, and was driven by the deepest motive. Thirdly, the deepest motive...what really moved Paul was this tremendous accountability that he had. Remember back in 1 Corinthians 4 I pointed out that he said what you think about me is of small consequence, what I think about myself is not important. I am not really concerned about any judgment of man or any human court. Here is what he was concerned about, verse 10, the reason that we have as our ambition whether we are at home in this body here or in a disembodied state, the reason that we want to be pleasing to Him is because...that's what "for" means..."Because we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ."

His ambition was driven by the reality that there is going to be an accounting for what he has done in his body. He says at that time each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body according to what he's done. You can't disregard this body. You can't just discard it in some antinomian or dualistic fashion and say it doesn't really matter what you do. He faces a monumental event. And not only him, but everybody. Look at it in verse 10, "We must all appear." That shows the

comprehensiveness and the inevitability of this event. We're all going to be there. We must all appear, phaneroo, to be made manifest, to be revealed, to be made clear.

Well, who we going to appear to? Some people say we're going to...we're going to appear to all the angels, they're all going to be watching. And all the angels are going to be watching as our life is made manifest.

The Bible doesn't say that. That's pure speculation. If you choose to believe that, you can't support it. Somebody else says, "Well, all the other Christians are going to be there watching." The Bible doesn't say that anyplace. You say, "Well why is this manifestation going to take place if it's not for those angels and it's not for the rest of the believers?" Well it wouldn't be for the benefit of the rest of the believers because they're going to have enough to do with just finding out about their stuff to be occupied without worrying about yours or mine.

You say, "Well it is going to be made manifest to God?" No, He already knows it. He knows every detail about our lives. The manifestation is to us. I'm going to find out the real verdict on my life...the real verdict on my ministry, the real verdict on my service. This is not a judgment for sin, sin was judged...where?...at the cross. And if sin became an issue at that judgment, then somehow the cross was incomplete. This is not a judgment on sin. And none of the texts that deal with this judgment seat of Christ or as Romans 14 calls it, the judgment seat of God, none of them deal with sin as such. Sin has already been dealt with. But this is going to be the manifestation of our secret motives, secret attitudes so that we can see the reality of what we are. And you know what that's going to show us? That's going to show us the amazing work that God has done in us. I think we'll all be surprised. Not at what's burned up, but at what's left. That's what I think. I think we're all going to be able to praise God and praise God and praise God for the fact that through all the junk there was that gold, silver and precious stones there. It's at that moment that all the hypocrisies, all the concealments, all the secrets, all the facades, all the wasted, worthless, useless stuff is all stripped away and the God, who according to 1 Samuel 16:7, looks on the heart, shows us what He sees.

Here you are, John MacArthur, just exactly the way I see you. That's what's going to be revealed, and not to you but to me. You to you, me to me, that's why he says there in verse 10, "That each one may be recompensed for his deeds, according to what he has done, each one what he has done."

Now what is this term "the judgment seat of Christ"? Well, the judgment seat there is bemain the Greek. And it just really means, literally means, I guess a simplest definition, a place reached by steps. In fact, that's what it's used to refer to in the Septuagint translation of Nehemiah 8:4, a place reached by steps. In ancient Greek culture it referred to the elevated platform where athletes who won events were taken to receive their crowns. They would march up like they do in the Olympics, right, on a platform to receive their crowns, award their wreath.

It also is used in the new Testament to refer to a place where judgment takes place. It is the term used to refer to Pilate's judgment seat, John 19:13, Matthew 27:19, it definitely has the idea of judging there. With regard to athletes it has the idea of rewards. Any elevated place. This is the elevated place where Christ sits, as is very clear, because it's called the judgment seat of Christ. It's where the Lord is going to sit and He's going to render the evaluation of our life for the purpose of rewards. I see it much more in the mode of the athletic than I do in the mode of the judicial. It's a time of rewards. It's the place of evaluation. It's the place where our life and our works will be tested. Not our sins, but all the rest of the stuff in our life. And I'll say more about that in a moment.

So we're all going to be there and everything is going to be made manifest. Our sin doesn't need to be made manifest, that would literally be blasphemous, wouldn't it? Because Jesus Christ has done the perfect work to deal with our sins. Our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west, buried in the depths of the deepest sea, remembered no more. But there's going to be an evaluation.

Now there was in Corinth, by the way, a Bema, I've been there several times and it's a wonderful experience to sit right at the Bema there. It's right in the main street going through the city of Corinth. It's where these kinds of events would occur, any kind of ceremony where an official would climb to the top and award some citizen something for what he had achieved. Or in the time of the Corinthian games it may well have acted as a place where the athletes were rewarded. It certainly acted as a place where justice was meted out because in the eighteenth chapter of the book of Acts, Paul was called before the Bema in this very city of Corinth. So they knew what a Bema was.

Acts 18, you remember, Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, the Jews got Paul and they dragged Paul up before the Bema right there on the street in Corinth and they wanted Gallio to put some sentence on him because they felt that he was attacking their law. And Gallio...Gallio, rather, says, "What do I have to do with your law? What do I care about your law? You take care of your law yourself," and dismissed the case.

So the Corinthians, as well as Paul knew what a Bema was. There the deeds of the person were presented. If in a judicial way for indictment or exoneration, if in some fashion of honor for the purpose of reward and crowning or giving some recognition, Paul is saying we're all going to stand before Jesus Christ, He's going to climb the stairs and He's going to sit in judgment on our efforts.

In Romans 14 where I mentioned earlier the phrase "the judgment seat of God" is used, and, of course, it's the same event. God is ultimately the judge, but as you remember in John 5:22 and 27 He's committed all judgment to Christ to act as judge in His behalf. But in Romans chapter 14 and verse 10, just to point out something for you there, "Why do you judge your brother...verse 10...or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. As it is written, as I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue

shall give praise to God...notice verse 12...so then each one of us shall give account of himself to God." And again you're back to that each one. That little phrase "each one" and I think that speaks of the personal nature, the individual character of this accounting. It's not a collective thing where everybody is going to see everything about everybody. That isn't the point.

"Each one...now go back to 2 Corinthians 5...each one may be recompensed," literally means to receive back, "given back a fitting gift, recompensed for the things done in the body, for the deeds, he says, in the body according to what he has done." Recompensed, it just means that...to give back what is due. It could be a punishment for a criminal, it could be a reward for one to be honored.

But notice what Paul says, "When that day comes and we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, and He's above us and looks down on us, and it is time for us to receive the reward, we are going to receive that reward based upon what deeds we have done in the...what?...in the body." He's saying you can't disregard this human body. You may long for your resurrection body, you may long for a perfect life, for the next world, and all of that, but you cannot treat this body with contempt. Back to Romans 12, you have to present it to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto Him which is your well-pleasing service. What you do in this body is going to be the issue in that judgment. This earthly body then has an impact for eternity. It is the vehicle through which deeds can be done of eternal value.

And when the Lord Jesus comes and He comes with His reward, it says in Revelation 22:12, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me to render to every man." And what's He going to render? "According to what he has done in his body."

Now again I say, it's not an involvement for sin here, this is not a judgment on sin. Sin is not the issue. Sin has been taken care of. But what have you done with your body that has eternal value? Not everything you do with your body has eternal value. Not everything you do with your body is sinful. There's some stuff in the middle, like playing golf, taking a walk, going to the mall, painting your house, fixing your car, taking a drive in the country, pursuing a degree in education, moving up the ladder in your corporation, working here, working there, painting pictures, writing a poem, bouncing a baby. I mean, life is filled with those things. Those are the kind of things that I think are the issue here, not sin. Now follow now verse 10, "We're going to be recompensed for the deeds in the body according to what he has done whether good or bad." And that "bad" is unfortunately misleading. It's the Greek word phaulos, it is not poneros, moral evil, it is not kakos, evil, iniquity. It is phaulos, it means worthless. It just means worthless, useless.

And life is like that. I mean, if you spend a day in the study of the Word of God, that is good. If you spend the same day in the mall, that may be worthless with an eternal perspective. You understand that? Now if you're skipping through the mall singing hymns, that takes on a different character. I mean that, is that not fair to say that? Or if you stopped in the mall to share Christ with someone, it

takes on a different character. Of if you're buying something for someone in need and you take it to them and you give it to them to show the love of Christ, that takes on a different character. But life is full of all of that.

You say, "Could you please get back to golf? I want to know about golf." Or tennis, or swimming or whatever other recreation you like. If included in that is Christian fellowship, included in that is the joy of the beauty of God's creation and the wonder of gratitude out of your heart for the goodness of His gifts in this world, it takes on a different character. But that's the kind of stuff that's going to be sorted out in this period of time that we call the judgment seat of Christ, or period of timelessness. It's the time when God is going to take a look at our stuff and say is it good or worthless.

You say, "Well how...what's the difference between good and worthless?" The best answer to that is 1 Corinthians chapter 3, and we'll close with this text. Let's go to 1 Corinthians chapter 3.

Now again I want to remind you, we're not talking about sin here. First Corinthians chapter 3 and you get the context set in verse 8, the discussion here is about Paul and Apollos and all these different people that they're lining up behind. And Paul is saying, "Who is Paul? And who is Apollos?" You know, we're just servants. "And I planted...verse 6...and Apollos watered, and God gives the growth." He's just talking about those who serve Him. And they're not important, he says, it's God who does it all. The one who plants isn't important, the one who waters isn't important, verse 7, God gives the growth.

Then verse 8, "Now he who plants, he who waters are one, but each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor." What's he talking about here? Christians being rewarded for their life effort, right? That's what he's talking about. Verse 8, that's the context. He's talking about rewards for your labor. And then in verse 9 he says, "You're...You're with us, we're all God's fellow workers, and you're God's field and God's building," and we're just talking about Christian service here, not sin.

And then he says in verse 11, "All right, you lay the foundation of Christ, we're all in Christ. And then you start to build your life. And you build your life and you've got six different kinds of things you can build with. You can build with gold, silver, precious stones, or you can build with wood, hay and straw. It's your choice."

Now gold, silver and precious stones, I think, fit the example given here because they are indestructible. They...they're valuable. They're priceless comparatively. And they're indestructible.

On the other hand, wood, hay, straw is relatively worthless and destructible. It's not that it's evil. I mean, hey, we do lots of nice things with wood, here is some of it right here, this pulpit. And hay isn't all bad. You feed the animals with it. And you can even take straw and make bricks. It's not that it's evil, it's just that it has no lasting value. It illustrates what doesn't last. And our lives are full of a lot of

that stuff, aren't they? It just doesn't have any eternal consequence at all.

And let me tell you right away, it doesn't mean that it's bad. Will you listen to that? It doesn't mean you shouldn't do it, it just means you have to realize that it doesn't have eternal consequence. And that's okay. The Lord has filled our lives with all kinds of wonderful things to enjoy that may not have implicit eternal consequence. You can pick up a beautiful bouquet of flowers and look at those and looking at those and admiring those and the beauty of those and enjoying the fragrance of those may not have eternal consequences, it doesn't make them any less lovelier, it doesn't say anything about the fact that we should reject such appreciation of beauty. No, of course not, that's all part of life. It just doesn't have a lasting eternal consequence. So the point would be that while we do want to enjoy the things that don't have lasting eternal value, we want to make sure we fill our life mostly with the things that do, right? And take the things that don't and somehow put into them glory to God.

All right, let's keep reading here in 1 Corinthians 3. So you've got your choice. You can build with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. And then here we come again in verse 13, notice the same phrase, "Each man's work, each one." Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 5, 1 Corinthians 3, that little term "each man," it again points up the individuality of this judgment. "Each man's work will become evident. For the day will show it." What day? The day of the judgment seat of Christ, the day when the Lord returns will show it. The very day he talked about in chapter 4 verse 5 when the Lord comes He will bring to light the things that are hidden in the darkness. The day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. And that's exactly what the judgment will be like. It's like if you came walking up there and you had your whole basket full of gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw, and it was all put in the fire, and what would come out? Gold, silver, precious stones, not wood, hay and straw, it would be gone. That's just the imagery, the illustration he's using.

The fire is going to test the quality of each man's work. We're talking about quality here, we're not talking about moral good or evil. "If any man's work that he has built upon remains, he'll receive a reward." Whatever had lasting eternal value, you'll be rewarded for. "And if any man's work is burned up, you'll suffer loss, yes, but you will still be saved." You see it there? "So as by fire." The issue is of rewards, not salvation. That's why it says at the end of verse 5 in chapter 4 that every man will receive praise from God.

So, the point is simply this, Paul says what motivates me is there's coming a day when I'm going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and He's going to take all the stuff of my life, all the activities of my life, and He's going to just burn away the stuff that had no eternal value and what remains, the gold, the silver and precious stones, according to verse 14, is the substance of my eternal reward. And what is that reward? I believe it is an eternal capacity to glorify and serve God. I believe our eternal capacity to glorify and serve God will be the expression of the earthly...the reward for the earthly service. So whatever...whatever I can do in my body in this world has direct implications to

the capacity I'll have to serve and glorify God forever and ever and ever and ever. Paul says I seek the highest goal, my ambition is to be pleasing to Him. I seek it at the widest possible level of devotion, whether I'm alive or dead, whether I'm in this body, or out of this body, and I am motivated by the deepest motive and that is that I want to be able throughout all eternity to serve the Lord God and glorify Him and honor Him to the fullest capacity possible. And that means I must take this body and use it to serve Him.

That's the point. So Paul says I'm ambitious. And I think his ambition is admirable, don't you? And it ought to be ours. Yes, I'm longing for heaven, yes I would like the presence of Jesus Christ, but that doesn't make me irresponsible while on earth. That rather motivates me because...listen now...my heaven is going to be determined in great measure by how I live my life right here. And so he says I choose the highest goal to please Christ, the widest devotion, whether I'm alive or dead, the deepest motive, the anticipation of eternal reward. That is the noblest ambition. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we acknowledge that we are unworthy of any reward because whatever is produced in us is produced by Your Holy Spirit. And yet mystery of mysteries, somehow we can cooperate. We must. We must submit so that You can use us. May we have the noblest ambition. May we like the Apostle Paul be so focused that it is of little concern to us what people think, it's of little concern to us what we think, it's of major concern to us what You think because You really know. May we live in the light of that awareness. And may we be deeply motivated to the widest level of devotion, the highest goal of pleasing you in everything, for the glory of Christ now and forever. Amen.

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