

# Dying to Live, Living to Die: Part 2

2 Corinthians 5:6–10

## Introduction

We return again this morning to our study in Paul’s Second Letter Corinthians. And this morning we find ourselves picking back up where we left off last Sunday—in the middle of the exposition of 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 6 through 10.

I began last week’s message by asking you what you think of when you think of eschatology—the doctrine of the last things. Some think of the sensationalist false teachers who try to decode hidden messages concerning the precise date of Christ’s return. Some think of the newspaper exegetes who are constantly trying to discover prophetic significance to this week’s current events. And so some of us can see those excesses—that kind of almost-obsession with eschatology—and be frustrated with the whole idea.

What that does is cause a swing of the pendulum. As an overreaction to an unhealthy obsession with eschatology, we can view the entire doctrine with suspicion. We hear of the debates concerning the timing of all these future events—the rapture, the judgment seat of Christ, the tribulation, the marriage supper of the Lamb, the Second Coming, the judgment of the sheep and the goats, the millennial reign of Christ, the Battle of Armageddon, the Great White Throne Judgment, and the eternal state—and with all of those events, and all the different views on these issues by able thinkers who are sound men of faith, we can be tempted to think of eschatology as just a series of arcane, impractical speculations on things that Scripture really isn’t all that clear about, and that don’t seem to affect our daily lives as Christians one way or another. And while it might tickle our intellectual fancy to consider someone’s interpretation of what the Bible says the future is going to be like, if we’re honest, we’d have to admit that we seldom think of eschatology as an area of biblical doctrine that has a practical impact on our day-to-day walk with Christ.

But as we’ve studied Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we’ve been confronted with serious challenges to that concept. Especially beginning in chapter 4 verse 7 through to the beginning of chapter 5, we are discovering that it is precisely the Apostle Paul’s doctrine of eschatology that strengthens him, and that drives him to persevere through the difficulties and the opposition that he faces in his ministry.

He can say, in chapter 4 verses 8 and 9, that he is in all things afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. He can say in chapter 4 verse 10 that he is “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus”—that when you look at him his life looks like the suffering and death of

Jesus—that, as he says in Galatians 6:17, he bears on his body the brand-marks of Jesus. Paul’s saying, “When you look at me, you can see the vestiges of Christ’s sufferings.” And then, back in 2 Corinthians 4:11, he says “We who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake.” In chapter 6 verses 4 and 5, he speaks of his “afflictions, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments,” and more. In chapter 11 verses 23 to 29 he chronicles his experiences of stonings, shipwrecks, robbers, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and exposure.

And yet! He says in chapter 4 verse 1: “We do not lose heart”! And in chapter 4 verse 16, “Therefore we do not lose heart”! And as we saw last week, in chapter 5 verse 6, “Therefore, being always of good courage”! In the face of all the debilitating discouragements of ministry, Paul has found a source of strength! Paul has discovered the secret of pressing on in joyful, enduring ministry even in the midst of affliction! And it is—at least partly—his *eschatology*! In chapter 4 verse 13, he says, “We go on boldly preaching the Gospel even in the face of hostility and even physical opposition,” verse 14, “*knowing*,” or “*because we know* that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.” Verse 16: “We do not lose heart,” why? Chapter 5 verse 1: “*For we know* that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

The certain hope of life on the new earth in his resurrection body frees the minister of the Gospel to lay down his life in service to Christ and His Church. The strength to persevere in difficult, life-sacrificing ministry is derived from our *theology* of the last things! In the model of the Apostle Paul, Scripture is teaching us that as we seek to be faithful ministers of the Gospel, we must bring our theology to bear on our lives and our ministries. The foundation of our life lived for Christ and of our ministry to His people is the certain truth of biblical revelation, understood and distilled into sound doctrine. And that’s true of all biblical doctrine, but it’s especially true of our doctrine of the last things—of our eschatology. What we so often think to be the most impractical doctrine is presented in Scripture as immensely practical—the fountain of comfort from which we draw strength to carry out the ministry God has entrusted to us.

And so this morning, we—as ministers of the New Covenant, those whom the Lord Jesus has called into the ministry of His Gospel—we continue our study of eschatology, our reflection on what awaits us as we pass from this life into the next, and how that bears on how we fulfill our ministry in the present. So let’s read, once again, 2 Corinthians 5, verses 6 to 10. “Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—<sup>7</sup>for we walk by faith, not by sight—<sup>8</sup>we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup>Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. <sup>10</sup>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.”

And we said last week that this text provides insight into **three elements** of the Christian minister's view of life and death—and particularly, how the minister's proper view of *death* affects his present *life*. As we understand what Scripture teaches concerning our eschatology, like Paul we will be fueled and strengthened to lay down our lives in sacrificial ministry.

And we spent our time together last week looking at the **first two** of those **elements** of the Christian minister's view of life and death—the minister's settled preference and the minister's supreme ambition. And so the focus of our message this morning will be on the **third element**: the **minister's sobering evaluation**. But before we jump right back in, I'd like to review those first two points, just so that we capture the flow of Paul's thought.

### **I. Review: The Minister's Settled Preference (vv.6–8)**

**First**, we considered **the minister's settled preference**, which we drew from verses 6 through 8. Paul begins by looking back to the truths he celebrated in verses 1 to 5, and declares on the basis of the promises of God that he is always of good courage—even amidst constant opposition, conflict, and persecution. Even if these conflicts eventually claim his life, he was absolutely certain that God would raise him from the dead in a glorified body. And the consequence of that is “good courage”—bold and courageous confidence. The Father's pledge of the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee of our certain glorification—the resurrection of our bodies— is cause for fearless sacrificial ministry.

But he goes on. Bold confidence for ministry even in the face of death comes not only from the pledge of the Holy Spirit, but also from the promise of increased fellowship with Christ in death. He says, “We're of good courage, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord . . . and [verse 8] prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” In these verses, Paul clearly teaches that when a believer in Jesus dies, he immediately goes into the presence of Christ in heaven. If we're at home in the body, we're absent from the Lord. And if we're absent from the body, we're at home with the Lord. There's no in-between state when you're absent *both* from the body *and* from the Lord. For the true believer in Christ, to be absent from the body in death is to be present with the Lord Jesus in heaven.

And so what Paul is saying is: “I can be fearless and courageous—even in the face of life-threatening opposition to my ministry—because as long as I'm alive in this body, I'm away from the Lord Jesus. As long as I'm in this body, I won't be in Christ's immediate presence in heaven, worshiping Him face-to-face. But the thing is: I much prefer to be there with Him than here in my body! My **settled preference** is heaven with Jesus over and against life on earth!” You see, GraceLife, the very worst they can do to you is take your life. But if you can say with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,”—if Christ is more satisfying to you than all that life can offer and all that death can take—then the threat of losing your life, whether in death or

whether in giving your life away in sacrificial service, is simply the threat to chase you up to heaven. The minister of the New Covenant who loses his or her life for the sake of Gospel ministry doesn't miss out on a thing; you're simply fast-tracked into the possession of the greatest joy of your heart: unhindered, sin-free, face-to-face communion with your Savior!

And just as much as the sun outshines the brilliance of the moon and the stars, one sight of Christ in His glory in heaven will outshine all the lesser luminaries of this world. And so it is our responsibility as ministers of the Gospel to cultivate a **settled preference** for Christ and the glory of heaven over and against even the joys of this present life—to believe, as Edwards said, that “To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here” (*WJE*, 17:437)—and therefore to engage in difficult, sacrificial, and even dangerous ministry, without losing heart! Because **the minister's settled preference** is to fully enjoy Christ in heaven over against the most pleasant accommodations here, you can be fearless, and free to loosen your grip on your life and lay it down in the service of Christ and the Church.

## II. Review: The Minister's Supreme Ambition (v. 9)

And if the open-faced enjoyment of Christ's glory is the great hope of your life in the *future*, then that means your **supreme ambition** will be to be pleasing to Him in the *present*. In other words, the minister's settled preference issues in **the minister's supreme ambition**. That was the **second element** of the Christian minister's view of life and death in this text. We see it in verse 9. Paul writes, “*Therefore*”—that is, because it is my settled preference to be absent from this body and be present with the Lord—“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.”

And we spoke about how the desire to be pleasing to Christ is the sum and substance of the Christian life. It is the faithful minister's all-consuming passion—the driving force behind all he does. The true servant of Christ labors and strives to please Christ the way that sinfully ambitious men and women labor and strive to lay hold of their own fame and glory. Genuine believers are consumed with sanctification, because they are consumed with Christ, and desire nothing more than to bring a smile to His face and joy to His heart. And so the Christian plans, strategizes, and shapes his entire life around bringing glory to Christ and enjoying His favor. We keep watch over hearts; we pray so that we do not enter into temptation; we battle against temptation with the sword of the Spirit; and the sin we *do* discover in ourselves we put to death by the power of the Spirit, and put on in their place the fruit of the Spirit—the fruit of righteousness that brings glory to God (cf. John 15:8).

That is the consistent experience of the man or woman who loves Christ's glory more than anything else. That's where this text confronts us all. It calls us to self-examination. We who would celebrate Paul's statement in verse 8 with loud “Amen’s”—we who would enthusiastically

declare that we prefer to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord because we treasure the sight of His glory above all things—we have to ask ourselves whether that settled preference has issued in the **supreme ambition** to be pleasing to Christ—whether our “talking the talk” of loving Christ’s glory has *actually* resulted in our “walking the walk” of ordering our lives to be pleasing to Him now.

The Apostle John said in 1 John 3:2, “We know that when He appears we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” What a glorious promise! To see Christ just as He is! We hear that and we long for the fulfillment of that promise! And yet the Apostle continues: “And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him *purifies* himself, just as He is pure.” You see, the one who longs to behold Christ’s glory *by sight* in heaven does everything he can to fix his eyes on that glory *by faith* here and now. And as we behold Christ’s glory with the eyes of faith, 2 Corinthians 3:18 says we are transformed. So if we’re not transformed, we’re not beholding Christ’s glory. And if we’re not beholding Christ’s glory by faith *now*, we will not behold Christ’s glory by sight *then*. You see, the **minister’s supreme ambition** is to be pleasing to Christ—to be transformed into the image of Christ’s own glory through progressive sanctification, and then to reflect Christ’s own glory—His own beauty and loveliness—right back *to* Him. The true Christian’s all-consuming desire is to delight the heart of Christ by being a mirror of His own glory.

### III. The Minister’s Sobering Evaluation (v. 10)

And so we have seen, first, that the minister’s settled preference is to prefer the next life to this one—to happily renounce all that this life has to offer for the gain of seeing Christ face-to-face in heaven. And we’ve seen, secondly, that the minister’s supreme ambition is to be pleasing to Christ in all we do. That brings us to the **third element** of the Christian’s view of life and death that we see in this text. And that is, **number three, the minister’s sobering evaluation**. And we see that in verse 10: “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.”

Our all-consuming desire to please Christ is motivated by a love for Him that longs to be with Him and longs to bring a smile to His face. But here we learn that we are also to be motivated by the desire to obtain a favorable evaluation from the Lord when we stand before Him in judgment. “We also have as our ambition . . . to be pleasing to Him. *For* we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.”

Now, the judgment seat of Christ has been a major source of discussion and debate in systematic theology. From an eschatological perspective, there is disagreement over the timing of this judgment. Amillennialists tend to view the various judgments mentioned in the Bible—like the

judgment seat of Christ, the sheep and the goats judgment of Matthew 25, and the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20—all as one event at the end of the age. Some premillennialists see those judgments as three separate events, with the judgment seat of Christ happening after the rapture, the judgment of the sheep and the goats after the tribulation and before the millennial reign of Christ, and the Great White Throne judgment at the end of the millennium just before the inauguration of the eternal state. And so from an eschatological perspective, there is debate about whether this scene of the judgment seat of Christ is a distinct judgment, or just another description of a single judgment.

Then, from a soteriological perspective, it also raises the question of who will be judged and what kind of judgment this is. The text plainly speaks about the role that works have as the basis of this judgment, and yet we know, according to verses like Ephesians 2:8–9, that we have been saved by grace through faith alone, as a gift of God that does not come as a result of works. And further still, Romans 8:1 teaches that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and yet Paul says that *we all* must appear before this judgment seat.

So there are numerous questions that the doctrine of the judgment seat of Christ raises, and since this is one of the principal texts that speak about it, we ought to slow down and do our best to understand what this judgment is, and, ultimately, how it should motivate us to always be pleasing to Christ, because that’s why Paul brings it up at this point in his argument.

And I want to begin by reading the other two main passages in the New Testament that speak of the judgment seat of Christ, just so we get the full picture of the event that Paul is speaking about here in 2 Corinthians 5. So turn with me over to Romans, chapter 14. Paul is speaking about Christian liberty in this chapter, and because certain Christians were passing judgment on other Christians with respect to things that were not clearly forbidden in Scripture or by apostolic instruction, Paul is urging the believers in Rome to be charitable with one another—not to judge one another, but to leave all judgment of disputable matters to the time of the judgment seat of Christ. Let’s look at Romans 14, verses 10 to 12: “But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.” And so you see the clear reference to “the judgment seat of God,” and that we will give an account of ourselves to God.

Now, turn over to 1 Corinthians, chapter 3. Here Paul is speaking about unity in the body of Christ, chastising the Corinthians for splitting up into factions based upon their favorite preachers. As he downplays the importance of the minister, he says in 1 Corinthians 3:8, “Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.” In other words, don’t unnecessarily exalt or judge Peter over Paul, or Paul over

Apollos, because each of these servants will be judged by God for their ministries, and will be rewarded accordingly. And this comment on receiving one's own reward causes him to launch into the believer's future judgment. Look with me at verses 10 to 15: "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 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." And then look down at chapter 4 verse 5, where he exhorts us once again to leave all judgment to the proper judge: "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

So this is the scene of the judgment seat of Christ. Now let's go back to 2 Corinthians 5:10 and handle that verse word by word and phrase by phrase, so that we can grasp the benefit of what Paul is teaching us about this extraordinary and essential event in the life of believers. And as we do that we're going to see **nine aspects** of this judgment.

## 1. The Place

First, let's consider the significance of the **place** of this judgment. In our text, Paul calls it "the *judgment seat* of Christ." In Romans 14:10 he says, "We will all stand before the *judgment seat* of God." And this word that get translated "judgment seat" is the Greek word *bēma*. Now, the word *bēma* originally referred to any step of the foot, and it's used that way in Acts 7:5. Later, the word came to denote a raised platform that one would ascend by steps. And so in Acts 12:21 it refers to the rostrum from which Herod gave his royal address. In secular Greek culture, especially in connection with the Olympic Games in Athens and the Isthmian Games in Corinth, the *bēma* was the raised platform on which victorious athletes stood to receive their crowns—very much like the way contemporary Olympians stand on those raised platforms to receive their medals.

Eventually, the *bēma* came to refer to the seat or tribunal of a magistrate or ruler who would render judgment on a matter. In Matthew 27:19, we learn that Pilate adjudicated the trial of Jesus from his *bēma*—from his judgment seat. We may very well hear from the parallel account in John 19:13 this morning from Pastor John, where the Apostle John records, "Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the *judgment seat*." When Festus had Paul's case brought before him, Acts 25:6 says that he took his seat on the *bēma*, on the

tribunal, and ordered Paul to be brought to him. And for Paul to speak of appearing before the *bēma* of Christ would have been particularly evocative for the Corinthians, who only about four years ago stood alongside Paul as he was dragged before the judgment seat of the proconsul Gallio, as outlined in Acts 18:12. And so Paul is making this clear. He's telling the Corinthians, "Just as you all witnessed the Jews dragging me before the judgment seat of Gallio to be judged for the charge of breaking Roman law, so also must we all appear before the judgment seat of *Christ* on that great day to give an account of our deeds."

## 2. The Judge

And that brings us to the **second** aspect of this judgment: the **Judge**. This is "the judgment seat of *Christ*" before which we must all appear. Now, the fact that Romans 14:10 calls this "the judgment seat of *God*" and 2 Corinthians 5:10 calls it "the judgment seat of *Christ*" only serves to emphasize the deity of Christ. This Jesus who was judged at the judgment seat of Pilate is Himself *God*, and will, with divine sovereignty, execute judgment from His own judgment seat. Jesus explains this in John 5:21–23. He says, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. For not even the Father judges anyone, *but He has given all judgment to the Son*, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father." Romans 2:16 says that "God will judge the secrets of men *through* Christ Jesus." In Acts 17:31 Paul says that God has "fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." In Acts 10:42, Peter recounts his apostolic marching orders. He says, "And [Jesus] ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead."

No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what you believe, no matter what religion you profess to follow—when you stand before God to give an account for your life, you will stand before God the Son, and give an account to Jesus of Nazareth, for God has appointed Him to be the Judge of *all* the earth! Almighty God—the only God who exists—has committed all judgment to His Son Jesus, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. What a testimony to the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ! And to the exclusivity of salvation through Him! In our day, petulant fools cry out in rebellion, "Only God can judge me!" And they conceive of God as some replica of themselves, having fashioned him in their own image. But these people and all others must put it in mind that God *will* judge you, and He will judge you through the Man Jesus whom He has appointed as Judge of all things! Jesus Christ *is* the bar of judgment before which all men must stand and give an account of their lives. If you would hope to fare well on that great day, you must order your life to please this exalted Judge.

## 3. The Judged



And so we have the place: the judgment seat, the tribunal; and the Judge: the Lord Jesus Christ. **Third**, notice the **judged**. Paul says, “For *we all* must appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” And the question is: Who is Paul referring to when he says, “we all”? And I believe the answer to that question is: only believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ. (And that’s one of the reasons that I believe that the judgment seat of Christ is not just one aspect of a single judgment, but a separate judgment that is to be distinguished from the sheep-and-the-goats judgment and the Great White Throne judgment.)

Now, everyone who has ever lived will appear before Christ for judgment, as the verses we just read show plainly. But when we’re talking specifically about the judgment seat of Christ, the context of this passage—as well as the others that treat the subject—indicates clearly that *only believers* are in view. Even if we constrain ourselves to just the immediate context in chapter 5, it’s plain that the “we” refers to believers. Verse 1: Only the believer has a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, which he is to put on as his resurrection body. Verse 4: Only the believer could experience his mortal body being swallowed up by the life of his resurrection body. Verse 5: Only believers are the objects of God’s saving purpose, and only to believers is the Holy Spirit given as a pledge of future inheritance. Verse 7: Only believers can say, “We walk by *faith*, not by sight.” Verse 8: Only believers could have the confident expectation that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord in heaven. And verse 9: Only believers have it as their supreme ambition to be pleasing to Christ.

Romans 14 has this same contextual emphasis. It’s in the discussion of Christian liberties between believers that Paul brings up the judgment seat. He specifically exhorts brothers not to judge their brothers, but to leave it till the judgment seat. And 1 Corinthians 3:11 speaks about building on the foundation of Christ Himself, which can only be properly said of believers. And then in verse 15, Paul says that a man’s work may be burned up in the fires of judgment, “but he himself will be saved.” And so it’s very clear that the subjects of the judgment that takes place at the judgment seat of Christ are believers in Christ.

#### 4. The Universality

And, briefly, note the **universality** of this judgment. Paul does not just say, “For *we* must appear,” but “We *all* must appear.” This is not a judgment for a subset of Christians. It is not only ordained, vocational pastors who appear before the judgment seat of Christ, but all believers. Every minister of the New Covenant will appear before Christ to give an account of his or her ministry.

#### 5. The Inevitability

And again, briefly, note the **inevitability** of this judgment. Not merely, “We all *shall* appear,” but “We all *must* appear.” And the Greek word for “must” is a word that’s often used in the New Testament to emphasize that these are events and actions that are decreed by God. It appears in Mark 8:31, where it says “Jesus began to show His disciples that He *must* go to Jerusalem” to suffer, die, and be raised on the third day. At Jesus’ arrest, when Peter sliced off the ear of Malchus the slave of the high priest, Jesus rebukes him and says, “Don’t you think I could get out of this if I wanted? But,” Matthew 26:54, “how then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it *must* happen this way?” In the same way that Jesus *had* to go to Jerusalem to suffer, and in the same way that the Scriptures *had* to be fulfilled, so also we all *must* appear before the judgment seat of Christ. There is no way around it. There is no loophole we might jump through, no technicality we might get off on. Friend, if you’re hiding out in the hopes that somehow your name won’t be called, you are mistaken. We all *must* appear before tribunal of the Judge and King of all the earth!

## 6. The Manner

**Sixth**, notice the **manner** of this judgment. Paul says, “We all must *appear* before the judgment seat of Christ.” And this word for “appear” does not just mean that we will be there—not just that we’re going to show up. It’s the Greek word *phaneroō*, and has the sense of being made manifest, being revealed, being exposed. Here on earth, we’re able to hide the inner state of our heart inside of us. We’re able to put on the Sunday smile, and, if we’ve learned the right things to say and when to say them, we can hide dead men’s bones in whitewashed tombs. We can hide a carnal heart under outward politeness and religious activity. And we can be judged by men and women to be great, respectable, spiritually mature Christians.

But there will be no hiding before the judgment seat of Christ. Hebrews 4:13 says, “There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.” We have to do with Him at the time of judgment! And 1 Corinthians 4:5 puts it like this: When the Lord comes, He “will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts.” And so the commentator Philip Edgcumbe Hughes explains it like this. He says, “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. All our hypocrisies and concealments, all our secret . . . thought[s] and deed[s], will be open to the scrutiny of Christ” (180).

## 7. The Particularity

And note further, the **particularity** or the **individuality** of this judgment. Paul says, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that *each one* may be recompensed.” Paul says in Romans 14:12 that “*each one of us* will give an account of himself to God,” and in 1

Corinthians 3:13 that “*each man’s* work will become evident . . . and the fire itself will test the quality of *each man’s* work.” This judgment, friends, will not be the grading of a group project. Did you ever have those in school? Where you worked on a project with a partner or group of partners? And if one of the group members was lazy, he could slack off and count on the work of the diligent ones in the group, and still get the same grade as the rest of the group? This judgment will not be that, friends. You will not be able to hide behind, or take credit for, the work of your brothers and sisters. You will be open and laid bare before the eyes of the Judge Himself, and will be judged individually, according to your own life and work.

## 8. The Basis

And that brings us to the **basis** of this judgment. The basis of this examination is the works we have done in this life. Paul says, “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.” Paul’s consuming ambition to please Christ in the present was driven by the reality that there is going to be a reckoning where he must give account for what he has done in his body. There is no question that Paul prefers the building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. There isn’t even a question that Paul prefers to be *absent* from the body if it means being present with Christ. But those realities in no way cause him to view the earthly tent which is his body with the kind of contempt or apathy that simply decides, “Well, the body just isn’t important. It doesn’t really matter what you do in the body, because God has redeemed the soul.” No! God means to redeem the body as well! And so we always have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Christ, because we must all appear before his judgment seat to be recompensed according to what we have done in the body.

Now, if you’ve been experiencing a bit of uneasiness as I walk through this text concerning Christ’s judgment of believers, that’s good. You should be. Because, as we mentioned earlier, this concept of believers being judged—especially according to their works—seems to contradict the truth of Romans 8:1, that there is *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus—that because of what Christ has accomplished on the cross, because *He* was judged in our place—we have been clothed in *His* righteousness—a righteousness which we receive *by faith alone* apart from works. That is a key reason why we should understand this text not to refer to the judgment of salvation—whether a person will go to heaven or hell. In the case of believers, that judgment has already been settled at the cross! With respect to salvation, the verdict of our final judgment has broken into the present time in the justification that Christ has accomplished for all who trust in Him alone for righteousness. And so Jesus says in John 5:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, *and does not come into judgment*, but has passed out of death into life.” The kind of judgment that Jesus is speaking about there is the judgment of eternal damnation for sin. *That* is the judgment the believer does

not come into. Therefore, we are right to conclude that the judgment seat of Christ doesn't concern, as one writer said, eternal *destiny*, but eternal *reward* (Storms, 141).

## 9. The Purpose

And that is the **purpose** of this judgment: “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.” The word “recompense” means literally to receive back what is due. The very deeds that we do in the body, these we receive back from Christ in the form of heavenly reward, or loss of reward. And 1 Corinthians 3 really sheds more light on this, so turn back to that text. Paul explains that every Christian minister—under which designation I include all of you, since, as we've been saying, if you've been called to salvation you've been called to ministry—every Christian minister is building a life of ministry on the foundation of the work of Christ. And he says in 1 Corinthians 3:12, “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.” So there it is: the fire of judgment 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.”

So the concern of the judgment seat of Christ is to evaluate the work of the Christian minister—to **reward** him for the work he has done in Christ that has eternal significance and value. Salvation is not in question. The text actually says: the one whose work is burned up *will* himself be saved. But he will suffer loss; he will lose the reward he *could* have had if he built his life of ministry with the precious stones that last—that survive the judgment—instead of the worthless things that have no eternal value.

You see, there *are* such things that we may do and with which we may occupy our time that are not sinful, but that simply have no eternal value. It's not sinful to go to the movies, or enjoy a baseball game, or spend a day at the beach. You may sin when you're doing those things, but none of those is sinful in themselves. Yet neither are they of any eternal and lasting significance—unless you're evangelizing the people at the beach, or enjoying the game because of the wisdom and kindness of God displayed in the skill of the athletes, or some such thing. If you're actively worshiping Him and enjoying His glory reflected in common grace, then you transform the mundane into worship. But unless that's happening, there are things in this life that aren't sinful, and yet aren't of eternal value. And in fact, Paul's word choice in 2 Corinthians 5:10 indicates that we're on the right track here. He says each one will be recompensed for what he does in the body, “whether good or bad.” And the word that gets translated “bad” there isn't the normal word you'd expect. It's not *kakos* or *ponēros*, which are the words used to denote moral evil. It's the word *phaulos*, which means *worthless*, or *useless*. One scholar calls it “good-

for-nothingness, the impossibility of any true gain ever coming forth from it” (Trench, 296). It’s the wood, hay, and stubble that have no lasting value—no eternal significance—but that burn up in the presence of Christ at his judgment seat.

And so Paul’s point is: “One day I’m going to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is going to see the true value of all the work I have done as I’ve labored for Him in ministry. The true, inner motives for all my service are going to be exposed. And my life of ministry will be presented before Him as a building upon the foundation that He Himself laid on the cross. And everything in my life that was worthless, that was useless—and even those outwardly good things that were done with impure and hypocritical motives—all of that is going to burn up, like wood, hay, and stubble. And the reward I could have had by spending that time on something of eternal and lasting significance, I will lose.

“But everything in my life that was honoring to God—those things I did with motives to glorify and honor God, to spread His Gospel and to magnify His name; the time that I spent laboring in difficult conversations with my friends and family (and even strangers) patiently proclaiming the Gospel to them, pleading with them to repent and believe; the energy I expended pouring myself into real, substantive, God-centered relationships with my brothers and sisters in Christ, the time I spent praying for them and their sanctification; the time I spent studying the Word of God and communing with Christ in prayer, and worshiping Him in the gathered assembly as the Church of God, and using my gifts to serve the brethren—all of that which I accomplished only by the grace of God will be as gold, silver, and precious stones that survive the refining fire of judgment, and will be the occasion of my receiving great **reward** from Christ!”

It will be that imperishable wreath of 1 Corinthians 9:25 that is awarded to the man who has mastered his own body! It will be that crown of exultation of 1 Thessalonians 2:19, given to those who have labored for the salvation of the lost and the sanctification of the saints! It will be that crown of life, James 1:12, laid on the head of the one who perseveres under trial! It will be that unfading crown of glory, 1 Peter 5:4, that the Chief Shepherd awards to the shepherds who have cared well for the flock! Paul is saying, “I want those crowns! I want those rewards! I don’t want my work to be burned up! So I *must* order my entire life to be pleasing to Christ!” And so must we, friends! We must order every aspect of our lives so that when we come to the end of our lives, we can say what Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:7–8: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.”

And lest we think Paul was simply a self-glory-hound—that he just wanted all these crowns so he could be the most eminent Christian in heaven!—Revelation 4 tells us what these crowns are for. The Apostle John describes the heavenly throne room, Revelation 4:4, “Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white

garments, and golden crowns on their heads.” And then verse 9: “When the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying ‘Worthy are *You*, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power.” You see, the more crowns you have, the more crowns you’re able to lay at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ in humble adoration and worship.

The reward that the believer will gain or lose is, most ultimately, the capacity to worship and glorify Christ for eternity in heaven. Greater reward means a greater capacity to honor our dear Savior! Paul’s saying, “I beat my body to bring it into subjection, I endure beatings and stonings and imprisonments, I persevere through all manner of conflict in ministry, I lay down my life in service to the church, because I want Christ to get what He is worthy of in my life! I want the **reward**—I want the privilege—of making so much of the grace of Christ in my life, of being able to demonstrate before the host of heaven how gracious He was to the chief of sinners, so as to produce in me a life of obedient service to Him. I want every crown of reward I can get so that I can lay them at the feet of Him who is worthy of all worship!”

### Conclusion

What is the conclusion to these thoughts? Look at verse 11: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord—that is, being experientially acquainted with holy reverence for Christ as our Judge—*we persuade men.*” Dear brothers and sisters, lay down your life to persuade men!

Lay down your life to persuade lost men of their sinfulness and of the suitability of Christ to meet their need for salvation. Lay your life down to persuade saved men of the glory and beauty of Christ—that the satisfaction that is found in obedience to Him is greater than any satisfaction that sin could bring. Don’t waste your life with what is worthless, and useless, and of no eternal significance or value. Recognize with every decision you make concerning how to spend your time, you’re erecting a building that will be laid bare before the judgment seat of Christ. Don’t build with wood, hay, and stubble—with those worthless things that will only burn up in the presence of Christ. Build with the precious stones of radically-sacrificial service to Christ and His Church—of joyful, enduring ministry, even in the midst of affliction.