

**SERIES: Power through Weakness**  
**SERMON: Here Comes the Judge!**  
**SCRIPTURE: 1 Cor. 3:10-15, 2 Cor. 5:9, 10**  
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Last Lord's Day we introduced the issue of future judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and today we're going to delve into it in much more detail. To many in our pluralistic, tolerant, subjective, and relativistic culture, judgment seems crude, self-righteous, hateful, and proud. But that is only because our society rejects the notion of moral absolutes or accountability to a creator God. If God is even acknowledged to exist, He is seen as a celestial Santa Claus who hands out goodies with only a vague warning that "you better watch out; you better not cry; you better not pout, I'm telling you why...", but no one expects Him to do anything about it if we fail to watch out. But, friends, if God is who He says He is in Scripture, then judgment is inevitable.

Among Bible-believing Christians, few have difficulty accepting the judgment of the wicked. We see it as necessary, not only because the Bible promises it, but also because that's the only way the books can be balanced. The prosperity of the wicked in this life is evident for all to see; we simply cannot accept that they be allowed to prosper in the next life, as well. Our sense of fairness will not allow it.

But what about the judgment of believers? So troubling is this issue that many Christians just simply ignore it. In fact, even many theologians ignore it, and those that don't often downplay it, neglecting those passages which teach that believers will stand before God in judgment in favor of those which seem to teach we have nothing to fear. For example, Romans 8:1 is a much-loved and often-quoted verse: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Or Psalm 103:12: "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Or Jer. 31:34: "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Or Micah 7:19: "... you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

Those are great verses, and I believe them, but they have led some Christians to assume that sin in their lives is inconsequential, because after all, hasn't Christ forgiven it all? Yes, Christ has forgiven every sin—past, present, and future. But, forgiveness of sin doesn't necessarily mean that discipline will not occur or that consequences will be avoided.

Remember the words of the prophet Nathan to King David after David confessed to the sins of adultery and murder: (2 Samuel 12:13-14) "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. (That's forgiveness, friends). *But* because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die." (That's consequences). The fact that consequences follow sin like night follows day is a spiritual law built into the very warp and woof of God's universe. Remember Galatians 6:7? "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."

What many of us fail to realize is that the consequences of sin can follow us even into eternity—and even for believers. I want to begin this morning by establishing four basic facts about biblical judgment, and then we will turn our attention to two passages that paint a balanced picture of the coming judgment for believers.

**Important biblical principles about future judgment.**

**1. Everyone will face judgment.** It is simply not true that the only ones who will face judgment are the wicked or unbelievers. They are the only ones to face condemnation, to be declared guilty, but they are not the only ones to face judgment.

**2. The Judge will be almighty God.** I've only been before a judge once—and that was in traffic court. The judge was a two-bit, part-time municipal magistrate, but he sure scared me. Imagine standing before the God of all the universe, who knows absolutely everything, and who will judge without partiality because He is just, holy, righteous, true, and perfect in all His ways!

**3. His Judgment will be final.** Since God Himself is the judge, there will be no appeals. After all, to what higher court could one appeal his case?

**4. There will be two separate judgments.** You know, there are a thousand jokes about St. Peter's Gate, which has become a fixture in our culture and in pop theology. But there is no gate where St. Peter or any other saint sits to determine whether you get into heaven. All those who die without Christ have a guaranteed reservation at the Great White Throne Judgment, while all those who have received Christ as Lord and Savior have an appointment at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Neither of these judgments are to determine *where* you spend eternity; you make that choice in this life. The judgments determine *how* you spend eternity, that is, the degree of punishment for unbelievers (at the Great White Throne), and the degree of reward or loss for believers (the Judgment Seat of Christ).

Now there simply is not time this morning to deal adequately with both of these judgments, so I am going to limit myself to the Judgment Seat of Christ, where believers will face judgment.

### **Believers will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ.**

Now this is the judgment that we confronted in our journey through 2 Cor. 5. But I want us to look first at 1 Cor. 3:10-15. Will you turn there with me?

*"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."*

Nothing could be clearer than that this passage is speaking of believers. These are not just professing Christians but possessing Christians. It says even regarding the one who suffers loss at the judgment, "he himself will be saved." That's the good news, and it is good indeed. But there's some bad news as well for this individual: "he will suffer loss;" in fact, he will be saved "only as one escaping through the flames." He apparently gets to heaven by the skin of his teeth.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

**According to 1 Cor. 3:10-15:**

**1. Our task is to build the church.** This does not contradict the claim Jesus made that “*I will build my church.*” (Matt. 16:18). Rather it is to recognize that *the means* Christ uses to build His church is generally to employ believers as evangelists, teachers, mentors, servants, prayer warriors—subcontractors if you will in the building process. In 1 Cor. 3 Paul paints an easy-to-grasp word picture, as he talks about the builder, the foundation, and the superstructure. The builder he identifies as himself. The Greek word translated “expert builder” in verse 10 is actually the Greek word “architekton,” which we have simply carried over into English as “architect.” I think Paul is talking about his role as pioneer missionary, prophet, leader, and strategist in the early church. The foundation, on the other hand, is clearly stated to be Jesus Christ. There is no other foundation upon which the true church can be built—not any other person, not any philosophy, not any creed, not any principle.

But it's the superstructure that draws most of Paul's attention. The foundation has been laid; the architect has done his job. It's the superstructure that is *our* responsibility.

**God is concerned about the materials we use.** At first glance it looks like there are six different kinds of materials—gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw. But in fact, there are only two kinds—costly or cheap, imperishable or perishable, permanent or temporary. What are some examples of these two kinds of materials? I would suggest to you that a heart of service is like gold, silver, and costly stones, while spiritual laziness and the attitude, “Let others do it, I've done my time,” is like wood, hay, and straw in God's sight.

Generosity with our possessions is gold, silver, and costly stones, while selfishness and stinginess are wood, hay, and straw.

Coming to church with a heart of worship is the former; coming to impress others is the latter.

Doing ministry only after it has been bathed in prayer is the former; doing it in one's own strength is the latter.

When a pastor feeds people the Word of God he is using the former; when he just tells interesting stories or does book reviews, it is the latter.

When a teenager stands up to peer pressure and maintains a strong moral testimony, that is gold, silver and costly stones in God's sight; when he or she bows to the pressure of the crowds, that is wood, hay and straw.

But God is not only concerned with the materials we use in building His church.

**He is also concerned about the quality of our workmanship.** Look again at verse 13 and 14: “His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day (what day? I believe he is

speaking of the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment) will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the *quality* of each man's work." Nowhere are we told that God will test the *quantity* of our work. God isn't numbers-driven the way we often are. I don't think I will ever be asked by God, "How many people did you preach to each Sunday?" or "How many baptisms did you do?" But I do expect to be asked, "How faithful were you to my Word? Did you preach in the power of the Spirit rather than in your own power and intellect? Did you live at home what you preached at church?"

**2. Our work will be tested by fire.** We have generally assumed that fire is an element that belongs only to the judgment of the wicked in hell, but here we are told there will be a fire of sorts for believers at their judgment as well. Probably a figurative term, it nevertheless conveys the notion that much of what we do in this life may go up in smoke. There's an old adage that is absolutely true:

*Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.*

The rest that we do is temporary. Some of it may be good but it's not lasting.

**3. The consequences of this judgment are twofold:**

Reward for workmanship of eternal quality  
Loss for workmanship of shoddy quality

**Reward for workmanship of eternal quality.** There are literally dozens of passages which speak of rewards in heaven. Much of this comes in the form of word pictures about crowns:

A crown of rejoicing for bringing people to Christ (1 Thes. 2:19);  
a crown of righteousness for loving His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8);  
a crown of life for enduring testing with love for the Lord (James 1:12);  
a crown of glory to elders who are faithful to their responsibilities (1 Peter 5:4).

I don't know of what these crowns consist, but they are at the very least signs of honor. There is an indication in Revelation 4:10 that what we will do with these crowns is not wear them, but lay them before the throne of God in gratitude for our salvation.

But there are other passages that speak of rewards in terms of responsibility and privilege. In a parable in Luke 19 Jesus talks about the servant who is faithful investing his resources and is therefore given commensurate responsibility (he is put in charge of ten cities). Another faithful servant is put over five cities. But a third servant who did nothing with the resources entrusted to him not only receives no cities but is stripped of his resources and they are given to the first person. In response to the objection, "But he already has ten!" Jesus says, "I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away." (19:26)

Clearly the greater the faithfulness, the greater the reward when the King comes. The kicker is that we don't always judge service the way God does. We are so prone to look at attendance

records and balance sheets and converts and facilities. But God also looks at our thought life, our prayer life, our motives, our parenting, our hospitality, our love for people. The cities He assigns in this parable are, I believe, representative of the privilege and responsibility believers will receive in the coming Kingdom. In other words, the reward for faithful work here is more work there. Now to a lazy person that might not seem very attractive, but most of us know that work is itself a gift from God. It is pretty clear that heaven does not consist of sitting on a cloud and strumming a harp, though I suspect one will be able to do that in his leisure time if he so chooses.

Now none of these passages on rewards teaches that we can earn our salvation. Eternal life is a free gift; it comes to us by grace through faith. Nevertheless, our reward or lack of same *is* related to what we do in this life. Dependability and faithfulness on earth translates into greater responsibility and privilege in heaven. But it is also true that the reward coin has another side.

**Loss for workmanship of shoddy quality.** Have we given sufficient attention to this issue of loss? I think if we're honest, most of us would have to admit that we have viewed the Judgment Seat of Christ as just kind of an awards ceremony where we will pick up our ribbons—some blue, some red, but everyone will get a ribbon. It's kind of like Little League today, where every kid gets a trophy, whether his team won every game or lost every game. We want to protect our children, you know, from any damage to their self-esteem.

But does that do justice to the severity of the picture offered here in 1 Cor. 3:15: "he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames"? I think not. I would like to suggest to you that some believers are in for something other than rewards—they will receive divine chastisement for slothful, careless living at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Alan Redpath writes,

*Any conception of the judgment seat of Christ which gives us the idea that it is going to be—what shall I say?—a happy prize-day for the Christian when everything else about his life is completely overlooked and forgotten, is far from the truth.<sup>1</sup>*

Consider some other well-known verses that we have too often ignored when it comes to the judgment of believers:

Romans 14:10-12: *"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God."*

Colossians 3:25: *"Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism."*

Hebrews 4:13: *"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

Just the thought of being laid bare, stripped of every outward facade of respectability, and openly revealed for what we really are should cause many of us to tremble. All our hypocrisies and secret sins of thought and deed will be open to scrutiny.

But how can our sins be *forgiven* and yet at the same time we be *judged*? To answer that question we must distinguish between punishment and condemnation, on the one hand, and discipline or chastisement, on the other. Both are painful, but they have very different purposes. Punishment always has a backward view—making you pay for something you’ve done. Discipline has a forward view—helping you to become all you can be.

Christ bore our punishment and paid the only penalty possible for all the believer’s sins—those committed before salvation and those committed after salvation, those confessed and those unconfessed. We will never be punished for our sins because Jesus paid it all. The following story illustrates this powerfully:

*A wagon train started a dangerous journey westward. Day after day, the men, women, and children faced the rigors of the long trip. One day, after several months on the trail, the wagon train climbed a steep hill. When they reached the top they were greeted with a horrifying sight. Before them, as far as the eye could see, was a great wall of fire being driven by the wind in their direction. Everyone was about to panic.*

*Suddenly the wagon master rode quickly to the rear and, before the startled onlookers could object, started a fire behind the wagon train. The people were astounded and began to panic as they saw themselves hemmed in by fire front and back. But soon the wind that was blowing the fire toward them was blowing the newly-started fire at their rear farther behind them. In a matter of moments, the entire train was able to back up to the burnt-out area. As they watched the flames licking their way toward them, a little girl cried out, “Are you sure, are you sure we’re safe?” The wagon master responded, “Yes, we’re safe, because we’re standing where the flames have already been.”*

At Calvary the fire and wrath of God fell on His Son. There, the just died for the unjust, and the holiness of God was completely and eternally satisfied. If men back off to Calvary, they need not stand at the Great White Throne Judgment, where the fire of God’s wrath will fall and consume the wicked.

However, as we have already seen, there is another fire with which we will have to contend—the fire of discipline and chastisement at the Judgment Seat of Christ. While we will never be *punished* for our sins, there are and will be *consequences* for the believer’s sins.

We know plenty about the present consequences of sin, whether it be STD’s for promiscuity, liver disease for drunkenness, poverty for gambling, etc., but we don’t seem to think much about the eternal consequences. When a believer does not walk in fellowship with God, he is passing up opportunities for reward which may never come his way again. As a result he will lose the reward that God would have so lavishly bestowed on him had he been faithful. This will be a real and even eternal loss.

But I suspect there will also be shame for some. The Apostle John exhorts us in 1 John 2:28, “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and

unashamed before him at his coming.” If shame weren’t a possibility, I don’t think John would have said that. Some will be brought face to face with the fact that they frittered away so many of their opportunities and built God’s church with wood, hay and straw.

The second passage I want us to look at briefly this morning is 2 Corinthians 5:9, 10, which was part of our text last Sunday:

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

**According to 2 Corinthians 5:9, 10:**

- 1. Judgment is for all believers.**
- 2. Judgment is individual.**
- 3. Judgment is purposeful: that each one may receive what is due him.**

Once again it is clear this passage is addressed to believers. Paul actually uses the first person, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” Even Paul expected to stand before that judgment. Three important facts are stated: First, this judgment is universal. All believers will appear at this judgment. No one will get a pass—not even Billy Graham or Charles Stanley. Second, it is individual. “*Each one* will receive what is due him.” This is not a class action suit. It’s each person standing before the Judge of all the Earth. Third, it is purposeful, and the purpose is, again, to balance the books. Isn’t that what Paul means when he says, “that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body”? Listen again to Alan Redpath:

*If we ask why this should be so, we do not have to go very far for the answer. The absolute injustices of life on earth demand that there shall be a day when right is vindicated and wrong is condemned. How many Christian people—and maybe you are among them—have suffered because of motives that were misjudged and actions that were completely misconstrued! How many Christians have lived a whole life of suffering simply because of the damage that has been done to them by somebody else! Many have gone through life with a wound in the soul from which there seems to be no deliverance, no recovery, no forgetfulness! How many have served faithfully and yet have had no recognition, but rather a great deal of abuse! Yes, there is a wonderful comfort in knowing that we must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. And many who have spent a lifetime with a sore heart and a sense of utter frustration may find wonderful solace in the assurance that, among the great things that will happen on that day, right will be vindicated and wrong condemned.<sup>ii</sup>*

But, as Redpath observes, that is only half the picture, albeit a very important half. Here’s the rest of the verse, “that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good *or bad*.” If that last phrase hadn’t been added, I would say the Judgment Seat of Christ would be a wonderfully comforting thought. But that last phrase makes it also a very disturbing thought. What about those brothers and sisters in Christ whom *we* have misjudged and wounded? What about the times *we* have gossiped or envied or lusted? What

about *our* dark habits and addictions, our phony spirituality, our profligate spending on ourselves while being stingy with the Lord?

I have no idea what movies you watch or what internet sites you visit, but God has a record of them, and someday you are going to receive what is due you—not in punishment but in discipline and consequences.

I have no idea what you teenagers do when you're alone on a date, but God knows, and someday you are going to receive what is due you, if not in this life, then at the Judgment Seat.

I have no idea how much you give to the church or to missions or to the poor, but friends, someday your checkbook and your tax returns are going to be audited by almighty God. and you are going to receive what is due you.

Erwin Lutzer has a chapter in his book, *Your Eternal Reward*, that is entitled “Tears in Heaven.” And he writes,

*... I believe there are good reasons why there will be tears in heaven. When we reflect on how we lived for Christ, who purchased us at such high cost, well might we weep on the other side of the celestial gates. Our tears will be those of regret and shame, tears of remorse for lives lived for ourselves rather than for Him who “loved us, and released us from our sins by His blood” (Revelation 1:5). Perhaps we would never cease crying in heaven if God Himself did not come and wipe the tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).*

What I struggled with as I prepared this sermon is how do I maintain our attention on the joy and blessed hope of the Second Coming, while being honest about the seriousness of the believer's judgment. How do I keep the focus on the fact that our entry into heaven is by grace through faith, not by works, while conveying that our privilege and responsibility in heaven are directly related to our works? How do I motivate us to live lives that are pleasing to the Lord without being legalistic?

Let me close with an analogy that you may find helpful. Graduation ceremonies are one of those milestones everyone looks forward to. Everyone who graduates is glad to get out of school—there are few tears at graduation other than tears of joy. Those who have studied hard and have done their best will receive commendations on their diplomas which read, *cum laude* or *magna cum laude* or *summa cum laude*. The valedictorian and salutatorian may even receive cash awards, in addition to the privilege of addressing their classmates. Some of the athletes who went the extra mile may get trophies.

Everyone at graduation is happy to be there, but some are happier than others. Some may have remorse at the knowledge they frittered away their time and barely graduated. They may feel even more remorse when they see the top students receiving responsible jobs at excellent pay, while they go to work in a fast-food place because they are under-qualified.

No analogy is perfect, of course. The criterion at the Judgment Seat of Christ will have nothing to do with IQ or academic achievement or natural physical gifts. It will be faithfulness to the work God has assigned each of us.

I have a very simple question to ask each of us in closing: “Is your contribution to the building of the Church of Jesus Christ fireproof?”

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i. Alan Redpath, *Blessings Out of Buffetings*, 84.

ii. Redpath, 85.