

Living Scripture
Week 5 – 1 Corinthians 3
Judgment Seat of Christ Article by Josh McDowell
<http://www.realchurch.org/wednesdaynight/>



Week 5 2019.10.08

CHAPTER 2

What Will Happen to Believers during the Judgment?

We now turn to consider three events in which the believers will participate after Christ comes to take them to be with himself and while judgment is being poured out upon the earth.

The judgment seat of Christ is one subject about which there is much confusion among believers. Most believers know that there is such a thing as the judgment seat of Christ and picture it as some dreadful scene at which all of the sins that they have successfully hidden during life will be revealed. Others view it as a time when unconfessed sins done in life are paid for and punishment meted out. Two passages of Scripture are particularly pertinent for our study.

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 shall give account of himself to God. (Romans 14:11–12)

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

THE TIME OF THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

It is apparent that the judgment seat of Christ must take place after the time that believers are taken to be with Christ because reward follows resurrection. This principle is made clear in Luke 14:14 when Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees encouraged his host to invite the poor, maimed, lame, and blind to his feast. These poor people could not in any way remunerate the host for his expense. Jesus said, “You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” In other words, there is coming a time when all righteous deeds must be recompensed. This time of reward would take place when the just (righteous) are resurrected. That time of reward is the judgment seat of Christ.

When we use the word *judgment* it is generally in a punitive context in which someone who has done something wrong is called to account for his wrong deeds. However, such is not the case at the judgment seat of Christ. Its purpose is not punitive, that is, to punish believers for any sins that they have not previously taken care of. In the Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 passages when Paul uses the terms *we, us, every one*, etc., he is referring to believers. At the judgment seat of Christ there will be only believers present. Unbelievers will appear at the great white throne judgment, which will occur one thousand years later. The subjects of the judgment seat of Christ, then, are only those who have believed in Jesus Christ as their own personal Savior. This is a time when they will appear before their Savior “that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). But more of this later.

THE JUDGE OF THE JUDGMENT—JESUS CHRIST

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ....For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10)

From these portions of these two verses it is obvious that this judgment will take place before Jesus, the Son of God, into whose hands God the Father has committed this judgment. His presiding at this judgment is a part of his exaltation and to him has been committed the right to manifest divine authority in judgment. The fact that the judge is none other than Jesus Christ assures that the judgment will be objective, thorough, and completely righteous. It is Jesus Christ who will render judgment upon those for whom he has died and belong to him.

There are four bases—two negative and two positive—upon which judgment will be rendered at the judgment seat of Christ. The negative bases of the judgment are: (1) It is not to determine salvation because only believers will be there. Since only believers are there, the basis of this judgment cannot be to determine the salvation of the subjects. That was already determined while the subjects were still living upon earth and received Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. (2) It is not a judgment or punishment of sin or sins because believers’ sins have already been judged. The most common misconception concerning the judgment seat of Christ is that it will be a judgment at which believers will be called into account for sins committed after they were saved, especially for any sins that they failed to confess, whether willfully or out of ignorance. This cannot be the case because Christ’s payment for sins was once for all and complete. It must be remembered that every believer’s sin was future with reference to the time when Christ died. The penalty for every believer’s sin past, present, and future was completely paid for by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. That means that there is no sin for which the believer must pay anything. Jesus paid it ALL! The judgment seat of Christ will not be an investigation at which believers’ “dirty linen” is discovered and laid out to open view.

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The positive bases for the judgment seat of Christ are: (1) It is to reveal the essential righteous character of the believers. Rather than to display the secret sins of believers, the judgment seat of Christ will display their righteousness and demonstrate that they rightly belong in heaven to be with Jesus forever. (2) It is for the purpose of receiving rewards for Christian stewardship. This is Paul's emphasis as he said:

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. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The emphasis that is usually drawn from this verse is that the believer will stand before the judgment seat of Christ in great fear as all of his shortcomings and failures in life are rehearsed before everyone in heaven. Then there will be tears of regret as the believer weeps for his failure to share the gospel or do some good work. The judgment seat of Christ, however, is not punitive. Some will receive more rewards than others but there will be no jealousy or envy or regrets over rewards not received. Just to be in heaven forever with Jesus will in itself be reward enough!

THE PURPOSES OF THE JUDGMENT

There are two purposes for the judgment seat of Christ—one for the present and one for the future. Paul reveals to us the purpose of the judgment seat of Christ for the present:

Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men. (2 Corinthians 5:11)

The "fear of the Lord" is not something that is fearful or dreadful. It is the "awe" or "awesomeness" of the Lord. It is a reference to his majesty and omnipotence. Since Jesus Christ is the Judge at the judgment of believers, the only sensible thing for them to do in the present is to seek to persuade all mankind to receive him as their personal Savior. The purpose of the judgment seat of Christ for the present, then, is to motivate us to be faithful in our witness for him.

The purposes of the judgment seat of Christ are twofold. The first purpose is to examine the character and motivations of believers' works. Paul states:

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 upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:13–15)

In the immediately preceding verses, Paul points out that there are two categories of material that the believer can use to build upon the foundation "which is laid, which is Jesus Christ:" (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11). They are perishable materials—"wood, hay, straw"—and imperishable materials—"gold, silver, precious stones." The judgment seat of Christ will determine "of what sort" the believer's works were. It is possible for one to give himself to "hay works," which may seem impressive to some people in this life, but at the judgment seat of Christ they will all disappear. Another may give himself to small "gold nugget" works, which may not be at all impressive to man but will endure for all eternity and bring God's eternal reward.

The second purpose of the judgment seat of Christ is to render one of two decisions: (1) the loss of rewards or (2) to give rewards. Paul describes the loss of rewards as he writes:

But I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

In this statement Paul is not expressing fear that he might lose his salvation. Rather, he is expressing the possibility of standing before the judgment seat of Christ and being "disapproved." In the whole context of Paul's statement he is talking about receiving rewards and he does not want to come before the Judge and be disapproved for receiving a reward.

There are five rewards or crowns that will be given to believers at the judgment seat of Christ. They are (1) an incorruptible crown (1 Corinthians 9:25), which will be given to those who mastered their fleshly desires, (2) a crown of rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 2:10) for those who were soul winners, (3) a crown of life (James 1:12) for those who endured trials, (4) a crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8) for those who loved his appearing, and (5) a crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4) for those who were willing to feed the flock of God. These crowns (or, diadems, from *diadema*) are rewards associated with honor and dignity and are bestowed upon the victors who overcame the world, the flesh, and the devil. These crowns are not for the eternal glory of the recipient but for the glory of God who gave them. In all likelihood those who receive the crowns, like the twenty-four elders (Revelation 4:4), will throw their crowns at Jesus' feet in an act of worship and adoration. ¹

¹ McDowell, J. (1997). [*Josh McDowell's handbook on apologetics*](#) (electronic ed.). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.