

## Rewards And The Judgment Seat Of Christ

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What is the judgment seat of Christ all about? This article considers the existing confusion which surrounds the judgment seat of Christ as well as what the Bible clearly teaches. There is both an examination of what the judgment seat of Christ is as well as what it is not.

The judgment seat of Christ is a subject which juxtaposes two great doctrines. Ecclesiology and eschatology are brought side by side since this sobering event involves the future evaluation of the church. Throughout the church age, however, ecclesiology has been subjected to a wide spectrum of interpretations and applications. Likewise, eschatology has experienced numerous misinterpretations, and has also suffered from noticeable neglect until relatively recent times. As a result the doctrine of the judgment seat of Christ has often has been denied or relegated to minimal consideration under the subject of a general judgment. Consequently, there has been widespread confusion concerning eschatology in general and the true nature of the judgment seat of Christ specifically.

From the plain testimony of Scripture this doctrine is of cosmic significance to each one who is a part of the true church, the body of Christ. A proper understanding of this subject has far-reaching ramifications which affect all areas of Christian life and conduct. With increased knowledge there comes increased responsibility, and increased responsibility in the present results in an increased accountability in the future.

Biblical eschatology and Christian ethics find a focal point at the judgment seat of Christ. The purpose of this awesome event is twofold: in the present to serve as a motivation for Christian living and in the future to review and reward each

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Christian individually. The prospect of this evaluation should incite believers to faithful and godly living against the backdrop of a future day of reckoning before the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Confusion Exists

Some writers believe that Christians will face their unconfessed sins, while others believe that the believer's sins, whether confessed or unconfessed, will have no place at the βῆμα.

Some view the judgment seat as a place of great fear; others see it as a place of great anticipation. These issues will be considered after an examination is made of the nature and implications of the three other judgments which have a direct bearing upon Christians: the judgment of the cross, the self-judgment of the believer, and the disciplinary or chastening judgment of the believer. Without an accurate understanding of these judgments the nature of the judgment seat of Christ is subject to hopeless confusion.

### The Judgment Of The Cross

The question of the nature of the judgment seat of Christ is vitally related to the doctrine of soteriology. The problem which the Bible student confronts is: To what extent did the work of Christ on the cross relate to sins in the Christian's life? In light of Christ's past dealing at the cross with sin, how does God deal with them in the present and in the future? What does Scripture teach concerning justification and God's grace?

Many verses indicate that the Christian will never face condemnation, that is, he will never face eternal punishment for sin. For example, John 3:18 states, "He that believeth on him [Christ] is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already" John 5:24 reads, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from

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death unto life." Romans 8:1 says, "There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."

Many passages teach that by faith a person is justified or declared righteous in God's sight. To be justified is to be declared righteous by God. It is to have a new standing before God in which the believer is regarded as righteous in His sight. Thus no legal charge can be brought against the believer whereby he must pay for his sins. Romans 5:1, 9 read, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him."

Similarly, Romans 3:22-24 state, "Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Romans 8:33 reads, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth."

God sees the Christian clothed in the righteousness of Christ as a result of the believer's justification by grace through faith. This righteousness is an imputed righteousness and not an attribute of God's righteousness which is possessed by the believer. To be justified is to be legally declared righteous, not to be made experientially righteous by God. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption."

Therefore, the believer in this life and in the life to come will never be called upon to render any judicial payment or experience any judicial suffering for any of his sins, since the complete payment for his sins has been fully and forever paid. God the Father sees the believer clothed

in the righteousness of Christ. He can find no more to forensically accuse in the Christian than He can find to accuse in Jesus Christ.

Some might object that Colossians 3:24, 25

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does teach that there will be some sort of future punitive action taken against the sinning Christian by the Lord. These verses state:

Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong [ὁ ἀδικῶν] shall receive [κομισεται] for the wrong which he hath done [ὁ ἠδίκησεν] and there is no respect of persons.

The problem which is raised by this passage is the meaning and implications of the expression “he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done.”

The verb κομισεται is a future middle indicative of κομιζω which means to receive back to get for oneself, or to receive pay or wages.<sup>1</sup> This is also the same word which appears in 2 Corinthians 5:10 where the βημα is specifically mentioned. This verse states, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive [κομισηται, first aorist middle subjunctive] the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

Both of these passages do teach that there will be a “paying back” or a “receiving back” both for the good things which are done in the Christian’s life as well as for the wrong or bad things which are done. In the light of the analogy of faith and clear teachings from the Word of God previously mentioned, it must be concluded that this repayment [or “receiving back”] for the wrongs which have been done cannot refer to any judicial payment

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for the wrongs committed.

It should be carefully noted that what the disobedient believer will receive back for his wrongdoing is not mentioned in either of these two passages. To read into these passages judicial punishment or some form of chastisement in the future life is to go beyond the bounds of sound exegesis and to do injustice to the analogy of faith.

In order to determine what the disobedient Christian will receive for his wrongdoing one could go to such passages as 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 1 John 2:28. These verses indicate that wrongdoing does have eternal consequences, namely, the loss of eternal rewards which one could have received and the experiencing of shame before the Lord of glory. To the degree that a Christian is unfaithful he will experience loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ. This loss will be a real and eternal loss which can never be regained.

## Self-Judgment Of The Christian

The past aspect of judgment was accomplished by Christ at the cross “in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 6:8). In the present God deals with believers as sons. 1 John 3:1 states, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.”<sup>2</sup> As a son a twofold judgment is operative, namely, the self-judgment and disciplinary judgment by God which is basically a corrective or remedial judgment.

The self-judgment of the believer is mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:31. He writes, “For if we would judge [διακρινω] ourselves, we should not be judged [κρινω]. The word διακρινω means to self-evaluate or to self-examine. Here this self-examination is to determine if there is

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any unconfessed sin that would hinder fellowship with God. The resultant purpose for this judgment is to avoid the Lord’s chastisement as stated in the following verse: “But when we are judged [κρινω], we are chastened [παιδεω] of the Lord, that we should not be condemned [κατακρινω] with the world” (v. 32). James Boyer in elaborating on this self-judgment, writes:

This judgment which we might avoid by self-judgment is the chastening of the Lord. Here, then, is a present judgment of the believer’s sins. If we judge ourselves, and deal with our sins in the appointed manner, God’s purpose for our lives will be realized.<sup>3</sup>

God’s appointed manner for the believer in dealing with his sins is succinctly expressed in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Confession brings forgiveness and cleansing which results in restored fellowship with God.

Although the believer is not forensically punished for his sin, nevertheless, there will be temporal consequences as well as eternal consequences. Present unconfessed sin results in a loss of desire for service as one is out of experiential fellowship with God. Unconfessed sin also results in loss of power in the believer’s life since the sin grieves the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, unconfessed sin results in loss of opportunity since the sinning believer is not living according to the will of God. Although these are three present consequences of unconfessed sin in the believer’s life, likewise, there are future consequences. When a believer is not walking in experiential fellowship with God, he is passing up

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opportunities for reward which he will never have again. As a result he will lose the reward that God would have so lavishly bestowed upon him had he been faithful. This will be a real and eternal loss indeed.

## Disciplinary Judgment Of The Christian

In regard to confessed or even unconfessed sin it must be concluded that God’s justice was completely satisfied in the substitutionary death of

Christ. Because the Christian is a member of the family of God, any unconfessed sin in his life invites God's discipline, which has as its purpose restoration to fellowship rather than retribution through judicial punishment. Thus God's disciplinary judgment in the believer's present experience is not a matter of justice but rather a matter of loving correction.

Doubtless, discipline takes varying forms and degrees of severity. Some Christians, like wayward children, are very strong-willed, and they might require severe discipline to achieve any real change. Other Christians can be rebuked and corrected by just a word. The question is not how much punishment should be meted out in light of the offense, but what is necessary to bring the child back to proper behavior. The omniscient heavenly Father is an all-wise disciplinarian, apportioning corrective chastening to the unique need of the individual Christian.

## Evaluative Judgment Of The Christian

The expression "the judgment seat of Christ" in the English Bible has tended to cause some to draw the wrong conclusion about the nature of the evaluation at the James L. Boyer, *Prophecy: Things to Come: A Study Guide* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1973), 100. βημα. A common conclusion which is drawn from this English translation, "judgment seat," is that God will mete out a just retribution for sins in the believer's life, and some measure of retributive punishment for sins will result. However, as shown earlier Christ has borne the quilt

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of the believer's sins. The Christian will stand glorified before Christ without his old sin nature. He will, likewise, be without quilt because he has been declared righteous. There will be no need of forensic punishment, for Christ has forever borne it.

However, sin will have its eternal effect of loss of reward which was within the grasp of the believer. There will be no need for discipline for he will be entirely perfected and cannot morally improve in his experiential holiness. Paul writes, "So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7, 8).

Again the apostle writes in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, 13, "And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

Discipline in the present life is designed to lead the believer back to fellowship, but without the sin nature the Christian will be morally perfect as Christ is morally perfect. Paul describes the glorified church in Ephesians 5:27: "That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." That which is true of Christians' moral condition corporately is true individually. Christians will be beyond the point where discipline will have any meaning in relationship to purification or separation in the eternal state.

The only question which will remain concerns the faithfulness of a believer's life as a member of the body of Christ. All of his life as a servant of God and as a steward of abilities, opportunities, and privileges which have been entrusted to him by the Master remains to be examined. The result of this examination will be rewards for faithfulness or loss of rewards for unfaithfulness.

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## Suggested Erroneous Purposes Of The Judgment

In order to facilitate greater understanding of the judgment seat of Christ consideration will be given to various erroneous views.

### The Judgment Seat and Punishment

An erroneous view of the judgment seat which is common in various theological circles teaches that God will punish believers for all their unconfessed sins and for carnal living. George Dollar defines βημα in the glossary of his book, *A History of Fundamentalism in America*:

It is the judgment of the believer that will take place after the rapture of the Church but before the Lord's return to earth. Its purpose is to make manifest and deal with the sins of the believer that he has not dealt with in self-judgment. Its purpose is not condemnation but examination and the meting out of rewards.<sup>4</sup>

Dollar believes and teaches much more concerning the judgment seat of Christ than that which is revealed in this book. In a sermon he commented on the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. Verse thirty reads, "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Dollar states that this unprofitable servant "was a self-centered, carnal, selfish, wicked, lustful, bad Christian."<sup>5</sup> His fleshly works are burnt up at the

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judgment seat of Christ. Dollar describes what Christ said to the profitable servants:

I'm going to make you ruler and during the millennial reign he will rule. He will have a throne. He will rule and reign with Christ for a thousand years Do you think wicked Christians are going to rule in the millennial reign? One thousand times never.<sup>6</sup>

Dollar then continues by describing the lot of the unprofitable Christian. Dollar believes and teaches that the carnal Christian is to be cast into outer darkness for a thousand years. He states:

For a thousand years when the Lord rules and reigns over the earth, you'll not rule But throughout that one thousand years, up there in the outer darkness there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. You don't care now, you'll care You'll have a thousand years, my friend, and I am a friend to your soul to warn you Lazy, unprofitable wicked servants, you will have one thousand years of remorse He's going to take the good and faith ful servants with Him; they will rule with Him over the earth. But He's going to send all of the wicked, lazy, unprofitable Christians to outer darkness for one thousand years and they shall weep and there shall

Such a view misinterprets and misapplies this parable, for the unprofitable servant is not a saved individual, but an unsaved man facing eternal damnation. To apply this to a Christian, even to a carnal Christian, is contrary to the whole tenor of Biblical revelation.

Kenneth Dodson also writes of punishment at the judgment seat of Christ:

Justice toward His children demands that God reward them for both “good works” and “bad works” at the “Judgment Seat of Christ.” There will be crowns and rewards for “good works” There will be chastisement and “stripes” for “bad works.”<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, William Narum pointedly concludes, “There will be punishment, then, as through fire, in the judgment for our evil works.”<sup>9</sup>

However, Scripture teaches that for the believer God’s justice has already been fully and forever satisfied at the cross in relation to the believer’s sins. If God were to judicially punish the believer for his sins, He would be requiring two payments for sin and would, therefore, be unjust. Such a concept erroneously disparages the all-sufficiency of Christ’s death on the cross.

Hebrews 10 removes any question in regard to the finality of payment for sin. Verse twelve reads, “But this man, after he had offered *one sacrifice for sins forever*, sat down on the right hand of God.” [Italics mine.] The writer then applies this truth to Christians: “For by one

offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified” (Heb. 10:14). His conclusion is stated in Hebrews 10:17, 18: “And their sins and iniquities *will remember no more*. Now where remission of these is, there is *no more* offering for sin.”

## Public Exposure View of Unconfessed Sins

Many expositors with varying degrees of severity describe the judgment seat of Christ as the place where the Christian will be faced with his unconfessed sins. Some writers picture the scene as one of public humiliation. Dodson writes:

The whole Bible teaches that God is a God of absolute justice and holiness, Who will bring every word and deed of human beings into judgment. He has a video-tape of every human life, with all the lines of human influence that have gone from that life into other human lives, and He will play back all of these video-tapes of all humanity. This will be “God’s Drama of History.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Clarence Mason writes of public humiliation in heaven:

Many expositors believe that this scene will not be individual and private, but overt and public. How much better to go to a brother and make things right now so that we shall not hang our heads in shame at Christ’s Judgment-seat. Secret sin on earth is open scandal in Heaven.<sup>11</sup>

Most writers who believe that unconfessed sins will be an issue at the Bema are not as extreme in their positions as the above. Many simply state that unconfessed sins will be judged or confessed at that time. M. R. DeHaan is rather vague concerning the effects of unconfessed sin. He states, “While the sin question is settled at Calvary, our walk is judged by God’s chastening in this life, and all unconfessed sin will be taken care of at the Judgment Seat of Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

## Present Experience View of Unconfessed Sins

In contrast to the view that Christians will be confronted with all of their unconfessed sins at the βῆμα, other equally respected and reputable Bible teachers and Bible scholars reject this position as erroneous. They emphasize that Scripture teaches that all sins, both confessed and unconfessed, have been borne by Christ on the cross, and the Christian will never be faced with either at the judgment seat of Christ.

Gromacki states that the believer will never face punishment for unconfessed sins:

Will God punish believers for all those sins which were committed after receiving Christ? No, because God has removed all of our transgressions (past, present, future) from us as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). The believer will never be punished for sins because Christ bore that punishment in His body on the cross. Some have suggested that the Christian will be punished for all unconfessed sin, but

Christ paid the penalty for all sin, both confessed and unconfessed. Unconfessed sin brings immediate loss of the divine blessing to the child of God; this is his loss.<sup>13</sup>

Scriptural support can be presented to demonstrate that when God removes sin from the believer, He does it completely. For example, God says, “I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins” (Isa. 44:22). The Psalmist writes, “As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). Micah declares, “Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19).

Using these verses and others as background, Pentecost writes:

There are others who hold the view that is kin to this last [that all post-conversion sins of Christians will be punished] and is likewise erroneous. They claim that if a believer confesses his sins he is forgiven those sins on the basis of his confession. But if he refuses, or fails, or forgets to confess a sin, God is going to judge him at the Judgment Seat of Christ and make him confess and then be punished for all the sins he failed to confess. This presupposes the fact that my sins have not been completely and perfectly dealt with by the blood of Christ. It presupposes that God is keeping a record of all my iniquities so that He can present them before me when I stand in His presence. Such is contrary to the holiness of God and to the finished work

of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion one thing is certain, in neither passage in which the judgment seat of Christ is explicitly found is the issue of sin in general, or unconfessed sins in particular referred to by Paul. The penalty for the believer's sins has been fully paid. The issue at the judgment seat will, therefore, not be the Christian's sin but the Christian's service.

The believer's life will be examined and evaluated in regard to his faithfulness as a steward of the abilities and opportunities which God had entrusted to him. Faithfulness will be graciously rewarded while unfaithfulness, which is sin according to James 4:17, will go unrewarded. Thus the primary purpose of the judgment seat of Christ is to reveal and review the Christian's life and service and then to reward him for what God deems worthy of reward. Not only is the purpose of this event future manifestation, but it also should serve as present motivation for contemporary godly living.

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<sup>1</sup>William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, trans., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by Walter Bauer (4th ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957; Cambridge: Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, n.d.), 443.

<sup>2</sup>See also such verses as Romans 8:14; Hebrews 12:5–11; and 1 John 3:2.

<sup>3</sup>James L. Boyer, *Prophecy: Things to Come: A Study Guide* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1973), 100.

<sup>4</sup>George W. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism in America* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1973), p. 378.

<sup>5</sup>George W. Dollar, "Rewards," Sermon preached at Faith Baptist Church, La Crosse, Wis., n.d. Taped.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Kenneth F. Dodson, *The Prize of the Up-Calling or Paul's Secret of Victory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 82.

<sup>9</sup>William H. K. Narum, "A Study of the Eschatological Motifs of the Christian Life" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1951), 299.

<sup>10</sup>Dodson, *The Prize of the Up-Calling or Paul's Secret of Victory*, 77.

<sup>11</sup>Clarence E. Mason, Jr., "A Study of Pauline Motives as Revealed in 2 Corinthians 4:16–6:4a," *BSac* CXI (July, 1954), 221.

<sup>12</sup>M. R. DeHaan, *The Believer's Judgments* (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, 1963), 16–17.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Glenn Gromacki, *Are these the Last Days?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970), 160.

<sup>14</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, *Prophecy for Today: An Exposition of Major Themes on Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), 153.