

“Will Christians Be Judged For Their Works?”

What kind of a Christian are you? How spiritual are you?

Let's back up a minute. Are you a Christian? Have you repented of your sins and committed your life and will to Christ as your Savior? We want to make sure we've taken that step!

If you are a follower of Jesus, what kind of a follower are you? How far along are you in your walk with Christ? Will we be judged on what we do, or don't do, as a Christian?

These questions set the stage for today's message. Turn to 1 Corinthians 3. The Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. In this letter, he doesn't tiptoe around, but bluntly tells them that they are spiritual babies, not mature in Christ. “And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready” (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). He tells them that they are spiritual babies, people of the flesh (i.e. governed by the “flesh”, or sinful human nature. He can't feed them with solid food, only milk – they can't digest the deeper truths of the faith. You don't serve steak or a beef roast to a 3 month old!

How can he tell they are immature in Christ? “For you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:3-4). There's jealousy and quarreling in the church. Division: people claiming allegiance to one Christian leader or another. Some say, “I belong to Paul”, others say, “No, I follow Apollos, he's my man!” (Apollos was a gifted preacher in the early church).

He says that God has assigned different roles and ministries to those in the church. Paul was a church planter. He would go into an area where there was no church, start a church, then move on. Others would follow and build on what he had planted – helping new converts to grow and mature. Each had a role to play, but it was *God* who made their work fruitful and successful.

Then Paul says this: “The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, *and each will receive wages according to the labor of each*” (verse 8). Here Paul uses the imagery of the construction of a building. Using the gifts God has given him, he lays a foundation. And Christ is the foundation. Others build on it. He continues: “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done” (1 Corinthians 3:12-13). You build on the foundation with different materials. Gold, silver, wood. But also lesser materials like hay and straw. He seems to be suggesting that the works that believers do have different worth and value. Whether the works are lasting or not.

“Each will receive wages according to the labor of each” (1 Corinthians 3:8). Our works for the Lord will be tested and judged. “The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will

disclose it” (verse 13). What we’ve done for God will be exposed and evaluated on the Day – the Day the Lord returns.

Paul continues: “If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire” (verses 14-15). If what we’ve built on the foundation endures, we’ll receive a reward. If the work doesn’t last, the builder will suffer loss. The builder *will be saved*, but only as by fire.

What does all of this mean? This seems to be saying that if we’re Christian believers, we will be judged for the life we live, the works we do – as a believer. If we do poorly, we’ll still be saved, but we’ll suffer loss. If our works are pleasing to God, we’ll receive a reward.

I think the Bible is clear that even as Christians, our lives will be judged. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (Paul is writing to Christian believers). Romans 14:10,12 says, “You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat... each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” (Again, Paul is addressing these words to followers of Jesus).

Now Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If we’re in Christ, if we’re saved, there will be no eternal punishment, no condemnation. But we may miss out on rewards. Going back to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3, “If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; *the builder will be saved*, but only as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

A lot to think about! Let’s unpack this a bit more. *Let’s be careful here. We’re not talking about doing good works in order to be saved. We’re not saved by doing good works.* We don’t become a Christian on the basis of merit. We’re saved by grace. Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” This discussion has nothing to do with our being saved by being a good person, or doing a lot of good deeds. It’s talking about the works we do *as a Christian, after* we’ve been saved by God’s mercy and grace in Christ.

Here’s something else we need to be very careful of: *None of us has any right or leverage to demand a reward from God.* “Hey God, look, I’ve been a faithful church member and attender for 50 years”, “I tithe my income”, “I’ve kept my nose clean morally, and done a lot of nice things for people” – *so You owe me some nice rewards here!* Really? Everything we have comes from God – even any rewards He chooses to dish out. We don’t have any claim on any rewards God chooses to give.

When you think about it, if the reason we live a good life and do good things is to get a reward from God, that’s the wrong motive. It’s selfish! If we do a good deed to get a reward, it’s no

longer a good deed! We've done it out of self-interest, for what we can get out of it.

This should also keep us from appointing ourselves as the one who decides who gets what reward! "Well, I certainly ought to get more reward than the person who just started coming to church. I've been coming to church since I was 10 (or 8, or 17)." I myself could say, "Well, I certainly deserve more reward than you. I've spent a huge chunk of my life as a pastor, in ministry, serving people, doing the Lord's work." Nope! I know it doesn't work that way.

There's a parable Jesus told that should cure us of thinking we can decide who gets what reward. Do you know what the parable is? It's the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Some are hired early in the morning, and agree to work for the normal day's wage. Others are hired a little later, at 9 a.m. Still others are hired at noon. Then even a few more at 3 p.m. Finally, even at 5 o'clock some are hired. When they're paid, remember what happens? They all receive the same amount! Naturally, those hired first thing in the morning, then at 9 a.m. are furious that those hired at 3 and 5 in the afternoon get the same wage. The punchline in the story is when the owner says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15).

I'm a sinner. I don't have any claim on the goodness of God. It's not for me to determine who gets what when God parcels out His rewards. My reward is salvation – and I don't deserve that. Anything beyond that is a bonus!

I think it's a healthy thing, and an important thing, to keep in mind that our lives will be judged as a follower of Jesus. It can help prevent us from being careless and casual in our Christian walk - not taking our claim to be a follower of Jesus seriously.

There is no condemnation for those in Christ – no eternal punishment. But, as it says in 1 Corinthians 3, if our works as a Christian are shabby and do not stand the test of time, we may suffer loss. Now, honestly, I'm not sure what this "loss" might be. The Bible doesn't say. But I'd rather not have to find out!

Keeping in mind that we all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ can help prevent us from taking our calling to follow Jesus lightly – from thinking that because we are saved by God's grace and mercy, we can live as we please.

On a positive note, realizing that there are rewards for those who live faithfully for Jesus, can make us even more humble and thankful for the graciousness and generosity of God. Jesus once said, "Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High" (Luke 6:35). "Your reward will be great!" Isn't God good, that He honors those who obey Jesus and live as Jesus told us to live!

There's another Scripture passage that ties in with all I've been saying. And I'd like to close with our looking at that. It's in 2 Timothy, chapter 2. Paul is writing to his young coworker

Timothy. He urges Timothy to be his very best for God, someone who will not need to be ashamed. He tells him to avoid certain sins, and to urge the people under his leadership to do the same. Then he writes this: “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work” (2 Timothy 2:20-21 NKJV).

In a large home there are all kinds of utensils. Some of gold and silver. Some of wood and clay. Some for ordinary use, others for special use and special occasions. Those Christians who seek to live clean and devoted lives for the Lord, will become “*vessels of honor*”, *sanctified (made holy)*, *useful for the Master*.

I like that: Vessels of honor. Sanctified or made holy. Useful for Christ, our Master.

There are many kinds of Christians. Some Christians are deeply devoted to Christ, consciously trying to live each day with Him in mind, asking “What would Jesus do?” in situations they face. Other Christians “believe” – but pretty much live their lives through the week without much thought of the Lord and His will.

Some Christians find a power in their faith to overcome bad habits and unhealthy passions, while others carry these destructive habits with them throughout their lives, in spite of their being a follower of Jesus.

Some Christians excel in love – in patience, kindness, thoughtfulness. Other Christians are rough around the edges – and hurt as many people as they bless.

Some Christians are rich in good works, giving to others, serving others. Yet other believers are pretty self-centered, reflecting an “it’s all about me” attitude. And on and on.

There are many different kinds of Christians. Some more like old wood and clay household utensils – that may do some good, and are somewhat useful, but not much. Since we all will be judged – even as followers of Jesus – for the life we live and the deeds we do, or fail to do – may the Lord help us to be “vessels of honor – Christians who are more and more like Jesus, and useful to Him!

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