

CHAPTER 9

ADDITIONAL POINTS ABOUT THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward.
2 John 8 (RSV)

“...And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.”

Revelation 2:23(b) (RSV)

²⁵ only hold fast what you have, until I come. ²⁶ He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, ²⁷ and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; ²⁸ and I will give him the morning star.

Revelation 2:25-28 (RSV)

The most important thing of all is just to hear Jesus praising you for how you lived your life

It must surely be the most thrilling and moving experience to hear Jesus praise and congratulate you when you stand before Him. What could ever compare with that? I would like rewards as well but, above all, I want to know He was pleased with me and to hear Him say so, rather than rebuke me. Consider how people speak of the immense honour they feel when they attend Buckingham Palace to receive a knighthood, peerage or other award.

They stand or kneel in front of the Queen for a few moments and have a brief conversation. Most of them never forget the experience. Some become very emotional during it, as do their families who are watching. Yet that is trivial in comparison to what is going to be done for those who please Jesus by their service to Him. I would like Jesus to say of me something similar to what the Bible says about King Hezekiah:

¹Hezekiah became king when he was twenty-five years old; and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. ²He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.

2 Chronicles 29:1-2 (NASB)

Contrast that with the Bible's blunt assessment of King Ahaz:

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God, as his father David had done.

2 Kings 16:2 (NASB)

Remember that whatever Jesus' assessment of you is, it will stand for all *eternity*. His words about you at the Judgment Seat of Christ will be remembered with joy and satisfaction forever. Alternatively, they will be a source of deep, ongoing regret. We therefore need to bear that in mind and live each day with the Judgment Seat of Christ firmly in mind, because so much depends on how we are assessed on that Day.

Many will be surprised, and many will be disappointed, at the Judgment Seat of Christ

I suspect that there is hardly a person on this Earth who accurately sees themselves as Jesus sees them, or at any rate, who consistently does so. Virtually all of us get it wrong in one direction or another.

Some feel insignificant and cannot see much in their own service to God that is worthy of any praise or reward. They may well be in for a pleasant surprise.

Conversely, those who feel quite smug and satisfied with themselves and who see no need for repentance or improvement, are probably heading for a nasty shock at the Judgment. It would seem that there are likely to be many surprises in both directions. Those who assume they have done well may be astonished to find Jesus rebuking them.

Others, who assumed that they were very ordinary during their lives and that they had done nothing impressive, may be delighted to discover that Jesus rated them very highly, although they never realised it. There is a pattern to this. Both groups see themselves inaccurately, but for opposite reasons.

The overly confident people do not engage in much, if any, self-examination. It is unsurprising therefore that they find nothing wrong in themselves. Such people will only find out about their faults for the first time at the Judgment. By contrast, the sincere, earnest, repentant person is willing, and even determined, to examine himself. The trouble is he tends to so overly critically.

Therefore he finds plenty of faults in himself now as he goes through life, trying to change and grow. The very nature of a godly, sincere person tends to cause them to see their own faults quickly and easily. But they often overlook, or are unaware of, their own qualities or achievements. They tend to focus only on what they need to do to improve.

So they never feel they have arrived, which is correct in one sense. However, they have usually made more progress than they realise. The willingness to criticise oneself is a quality, but it too can sometimes be overdone and can lead us to form overly harsh conclusions.

Therefore, let us examine ourselves as rigorously and honestly as we can. We must firstly ensure that we do not fall into the self-congratulatory camp which believes that it can confidently expect to get an A* at the Day of Judgment. However, we also need to avoid the opposite error of being unable to recognise any signs of progress in ourselves.

If we do that, we can easily become discouraged, by assuming that nothing we ever do is pleasing to God, or is of any value. That too is a false and unhelpful way to think. God is far more realistic and patient than some of us imagine. Therefore He is actually pleased with every part of our progress, even where we are still a long way from the finishing line.

Also, He will judge us relative to how long a period of time we were given. So, God does not expect us to make in one year the kind of progress that can only be made in 20 years. He is fair and reasonable and He fully recognises those disciples who are on the way, and who are making some steps forward.

That said, if we look at the generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, we find that with most of them God was *not* pleased:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same supernatural food ⁴and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." ⁸We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰nor

grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 (RSV)

We are told about that generation of Israelites for our instruction, so that we can take note of how and why they went wrong and displeased God. By looking at them, with a genuine desire to learn and to avoid imitating them, we can prevent ourselves ending up as they did. Those who are willing to learn from their errors will do so, but those who are not are likely to go wrong in the same ways.

We get a glimpse of the surprisingly varied kinds of verdicts that Jesus makes about different Christians in the seven short letters that He dictates to apostle John. These are in the book of Revelation, at chapters two and three. In those letters we see Jesus giving His assessment of seven different local churches in the area of Asia Minor (which we now call Turkey) at the very end of the first century AD.

These were seven real churches and Jesus made some surprising assessments of them, both positively and negatively. In every case, what He has to say seems not to be what the church in question would have been expecting.

The assessments Jesus makes in His seven letters in the book of Revelation reveal a little more of how the Judgment Seat of Christ will operate

Revelation chapters two and three are unique because they contain the only letters we have that were directly written by Jesus Himself, albeit that they were written down and recorded by apostle John. In these seven letters Jesus sets out what He thinks of each church and how well, or how badly, they are doing. He is surprisingly tender and generous with some of them, but also extremely frank and blunt with others.

With some He is a bit of both. These seven letters give us a foretaste of what the Judgment Seat will be like. We see tenderness and encouragement, but also stern rebuke. He appears to be particularly gracious and understanding towards those churches where the people have had to *suffer* on His account. However, He is at His most forthright with those who are *complacent, self-satisfied and lukewarm*.

Those are faults which most of us don't regard as being particularly bad or blameworthy, but Jesus evidently does. Let's look at some brief extracts from each of the seven letters. The way that Jesus handles these churches gives us a good indication of how He is likely to deal with us at the Judgment Seat, and what issues He is likely to focus on.

Praise and rebuke for the church at Ephesus

In this first letter to the church at Ephesus, Jesus gives a mixed report. He both praises and rebukes them and He also calls upon them to repent. This is a letter written to a genuine church, containing real Christians. Yet Jesus still criticises them where it is due.

Therefore we surely have no conceivable reason to suppose, that Jesus will be unwilling to criticise or rebuke us at the Judgment Seat. On the contrary, it seems clear that He will do so and, moreover, that He will be as frank as is warranted by our behaviour and attitudes. For example, this is Jesus' assessment of the church in Ephesus:

¹"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ²I know your deeds and

your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

⁴But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent. ⁶Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

Revelation 2:1-7 (NASB)

Jesus praises them for their toil, perseverance and intolerance of evil men, and also for their discernment and endurance. However, He also gently corrects them for having *left their first love*. He then calls on them to repent and warns them that unless they do, their 'lampstand' will be removed.

This is interesting, because, centuries later, the whole of Turkey, including Ephesus, was overrun by the Muslims. The whole area has been under the oppression and darkness of Islam ever since. Islam almost entirely extinguished the light of the Gospel. Could it be that the church in Ephesus, and also the other Turkish churches, failed to take to Jesus' warning seriously enough?

Encouragement to the church at Smyrna

By contrast, Jesus has nothing but praise and encouragement for the church at Smyrna. However, note what He is encouraging them to do. He tells them to be faithful until death! In return for that, He says that He will give them the crown of life (See below for a discussion of what this crown, and other specific crowns, might be):

⁸And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

⁹I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

Revelation 2:8-11 (NASB)

Praise and warning to the church at Pergamum

Jesus both praises and rebukes this church. He commends them for remaining faithful to Him, even in the face of persecution. However, He also rebukes them for holding to "*the teaching of the Nicolaitans*". When He says that, Jesus is rebuking them for their wrong doctrine and practice. That proves that having accurate doctrine does matter and that it is possible to be rebuked for holding the wrong *beliefs*, not only for our wrong *behaviour*.

This particular false doctrine, '*Nicolaitanism*', appears to be a reference to the practice, which was, even then, starting to creep into the churches, of having a distinction between leaders and those who are led. Jesus is talking about the creation of a special professional *clergy class* which is seen as different from, and higher than, ordinary Christians.

There is not meant to be any such group as *clergy*. The very concept is a man-made invention and does not exist in the Bible at all. They should not therefore exist in the Church. However, by about the year AD 95 they had already begun to appear. Jesus does not want there to be any such thing as clergy and lay people.

He wants churches where everyone participates and where there is also a group of several unpaid leaders, called *elders*, who protect and serve the people, not a single, paid leader who rules over them. It is not biblical to have one man operating as a paid 'professional leader', least of all one who calls himself a *priest*.

That concept of priesthood is another quite separate error. It has its origins in the vast influx of pagans who joined the churches at the time of Emperor Constantine. They brought the pagan concept of priests with them into the churches. However, no such title or role exists in the Bible. (See Book 8 for more details.) Here is what Jesus says to the church in Pergamum:

12''And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

13'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

17'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

Revelation 2:12-17 (NASB)

Praise and rebuke for the church of Thyatira

Jesus praises this church for various things, but then rebukes them for their willingness to tolerate a woman in their church who was operating as a false prophetess. That is a clear warning to us. Most of us do not choose to display the courage that is needed to stand up and confront wrong practices or wrong teaching in the church. However, we should.

I used the word 'choose' deliberately, because courage is primarily a choice, not an ability. We have a duty to make the decision to do what is right, not what is easy or safe. Note also the further reference to the need to be an *overcomer* and how much significance that clearly has to Jesus. Why else would He keep on referring to that factor in virtually every letter?

18''And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: 19'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. 20'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21'I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. 22 'Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.

23'And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. 24'But I

say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them - I place no other burden on you. ²⁵'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. ²⁶'He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; ²⁷and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; ²⁸and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Revelation 2:18-29 (NASB)

Nothing but rebuke for most, but not all, of the church in Sardis

This is a sobering letter, because what Jesus says to the church in Sardis could be said of most Western churches today. He says they are *dead*. By that it would seem that He means they are complacent, unmotivated and lacking commitment. He probably also means that they contain some people who are not genuine Christians.

Nevertheless, despite the *overall* condition of that church being unacceptable to Him, it does still contain at least a few people whom He wishes to commend. This letter also implies that, at the Judgment Seat, there will probably be more for Jesus to rebuke than to praise, at least amongst our own generation in the West:

¹'To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ²'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.

³'So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵'He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. ⁶'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Revelation 3:1-6 (NASB)

Praise for the church in Philadelphia

This is a letter to a church which is struggling in the face of hardship and difficulty due to Satanic/demonic opposition. Consequently they have had to persevere. Jesus urges them to “*hold fast what you have so that no one will take your crown*”.

This implies that it is possible to be in a position where we currently deserve rewards, and are in line to receive them, but then succumb to some pressure or deception and so cease to qualify for those rewards. That possibility must concern us, and it means there can be no complacency, even if we have been doing well so far:

⁷'And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: ⁸'I know your deeds Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹'Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie - I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. ¹⁰'Because you have kept

the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

¹¹I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹²He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. ¹³He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Revelation 3:7-13 (NASB)

Nothing but rebuke for the church at Laodicea

This church receives nothing but rebuke. Again that is worrying, because they sound even more reminiscent of the Western churches of our own day. The church in Laodicea is complacent, lukewarm and self-satisfied. They imagine themselves to be rich and to be doing well, but they aren't.

Jesus is very frank indeed and says He wants to spit them out of His mouth. That can hardly be described as a gentle correction. It is very blunt. However, how can our generation expect a verdict any better than this? On average, we are probably even more lukewarm than they were.

¹⁴To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. ¹⁶So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, ¹⁸I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

Revelation 3:14-18 (NASB)

Concluding comments arising out of Jesus' letters to the seven churches

The main conclusion one feels obliged to reach as a result of these seven letters is that none of us can expect an easy interview when we face Jesus. His remarks to the seven churches are just a brief summary of His view of them. However, when we face Him we will have to hear His detailed comments, concerning our entire lives since we became Christians.

For many of us much of what He has to say will surely be as painful as what was said to some of these seven churches, and probably more so, because it will be an exhaustive and comprehensive assessment, not just a brief summary. Above all, we have no valid basis to suppose that Jesus will pull His punches with us, i.e. go easier on us than He did with them. Why should He?

Our generation in the West has had more comforts and privileges than any group of people that has ever lived. Yet we have largely failed to share the Gospel. We have been even less faithful when it comes to making disciples. Many of us have also been unfaithful in a host of other ways too.

We can therefore learn a lot from these seven letters. Even though they are not written to us, they are highly relevant. We should listen to them, take them seriously, and repent, wherever we are at fault in the same ways as they were. We should then turn back to Jesus now and repent, while there is still time for us to *change the outcome* of the personal judgment that awaits us.

Repentance changes everything and can be the basis for us to turn things round, so that we can be rewarded after all. Jesus has therefore issued an invitation to all of us in the Church who are not right with Him, or who have left our first love, or neglected Him, or been unfaithful. He is asking us all to *open the door* and invite Him back into our churches and into our own lives. If we will do this, then He promises to come in:

¹⁹Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. ²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²²He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Revelation 3:19-22 (NASB)