

PREFACE

Our recent forced hiatus was not just unnaturally long, but textually inconvenient: it occurred in the middle of an important paragraph—a paragraph about the quality of each individual believer’s work in the kingdom of God (v13). With this lengthy interruption in mind, in our last session we cut to the punchline for the paragraph as a whole—but we did not complete our examination of the details of the rest of the paragraph: vv14-15. I want to begin this week with a brief review of what we have covered so far in this passage, then we will continue into the final two verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-13.

REVIEW

In v10 Paul states that he—by the grace of God—came to Corinth and laid a foundation for the church. He acknowledges that the work in and of the church did not end with that; other preachers, other leaders would follow, but also there would be the work of every person in the church that would be added to the foundation.

Just what was this foundation? Christ Jesus. He is the only foundation for the church and for the individual believer’s life.

Then, in v12, Paul lists six different items that seem, at first, to be building *materials* chosen by each builder—as if the studs and walls and roof beams of this metaphorical building would consist of “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, [or] straw”. But in our last session we learned that in v13 Paul is clear that what he is referring to is not the building materials, nor the tools used for the construction, but *the quality of the work*—and not the overall quality of the church, or the collective work of the body, but “*each man’s work*.”

v13

In our last session we used v13 to establish the foundational lesson of this important paragraph. Now I would like to dissect v13 for the particulars.

each man’s work will become evident... the quality of each man’s work.

each man’s^{nasb}, **each one’s**^{esv,nkjv}, **every man’s**^{kjv} = *hekastos* = as if a superlative of *hekas* (afar); each or every :- any, both, each (one), every (man, one, woman), particularly.

Each person’s “work” (service, workmanship, quality of labor, “of what sort each man’s work is”) will be evaluated. It won’t matter who your preacher was, who your pew mates were, or who your spouse was; each person will have to answer for him or her self.

each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it

There is a, perhaps intentional, frightening aspect to this—if not frightening, at least sobering, intimidating. This may have been the reason behind Paul’s choice of words. If we are OK with our Lord evaluating our service in His name, my guess is we would like that evaluation to be conducted quietly, in private—perhaps in a back room of the heavenly throne room, to which He escorts each believer in turn.

But that’s not how Paul describes it.

First he says that our work will become "evident."

evident = *phaneros* (fan-er-os') = from <G5316> (phaino); **shining, i.e. apparent** (literal or figurative); neuter (as adverb) **publicly, externally** :- **abroad**, + appear, known, manifest, open [+ -ly], outward ([+ -ly]).

Do you get the idea that this interview will *not* be conducted in a private back room? Then Paul adds to this that the day will "show" it.

show = *deloo* (day-lah'-oh) = from <G1212> (delos); **to make plain (by words); explain** :- **declare**, shew, signify; "make it clear."

I believe what Paul is saying with this word *deloo*—especially when followed by *apokalyptō* ("revealed")—is that this moment of judgment for each Christian will be not just openly public, but will be, as W. Mundle puts it, "God's final active revelation." In fact this circles back to the OT Septuagint, where *deloo* "is principally a designation for the divine revelation," and "[in which] it is not possible to differentiate precisely between *deloo* and other synonymous words such as *apokalyptō*."

It could very well be that the apostle wanted to slap the Corinthians—and us—upside the head with this. He is not talking about salvation—about the same type of judgment that every unbeliever will face—but the fact that every one of us will be called forward to account for our lives in Christ. For every believer is not only called by Christ, but he or she is specifically given personal gifts with which to serve. All is a gift; all is of grace. So the Lord is not out of line to bring us forward and ask, "All right, what did you do with the gifts you received from Me?"

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.

The means by which this judgment will proceed will be "fire."

Sidebar: In Catholicism, v13 is foundational to its concept of "purgatory."

What is purgatory? Purgatory is a state of purification after death. The souls in purgatory possess the divine life and know that they are saved; but they long to see God. They cannot help themselves, but can be helped by the prayers and sacrifices of the faithful on earth and the souls in heaven.

from Life in Christ: Instructions in the Catholic Faith, 1958.

I'll not take the time here to rebut this nonsense, only to point out that the judgment "fire" referred to in our passage is not punitive, nor is it for the purification or refinement of the soul, but to "disclose the quality of work of Christians." The venerable commentary of *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown* puts it this way:

The *fire* (probably *figurative* here, as the *gold, hay*, etc.) is not *purgatory* (as Rome teaches, that is, *purificatory* and *punitive*), but *probatory*, not restricted to those dying in “venial sin”; the supposed *intermediate class* between those entering heaven at once, and those dying in mortal sin who go to hell, but *universal*, testing the godly and ungodly alike (2Co_5:10; compare Mar_9:49). This fire is not till the *last* day, the supposed fire of purgatory begins *at death*. The fire of Paul is to try the *works*, the fire of purgatory the *persons*, of men. Paul’s fire causes “loss” to the sufferers; Rome’s purgatory, great gain, namely, heaven at last to those purged by it, if only it were true. Thus this passage, quoted by Rome for, is altogether against, purgatory. “It was not this doctrine that gave rise to prayers for the dead; but the practice of praying for the dead [which crept in from the affectionate but mistaken solicitude of survivors] gave rise to the doctrine” [Whately].

No one can say what this moment will literally, physically be like for the believer or those in attendance, for whatever the process it will be supernatural and divine. But the context has a clear eschatological association; it is associated with the fire of the end times, the *parousia*, the return of Christ in judgment. The imagery of fire and great heat is prominent in this climactic, earth-shattering event.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7.

Read 2 Peter 3:10-13.

Read Isaiah 66:15-16.

Obviously not all these passages pertain to the judgment of believers, but they do illustrate how the imagery of fire is so prevalent during the end times.

v14

In vv14-15 the apostle gives us the details of this fiery process. In these two verses Paul describes the verdicts and consequences of this trial by fire.

If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

A number of years ago, when we were in the process of selecting the components for our new kitchen, part of that was choosing new cabinets. At one store I looked closely inside a number of the cabinet drawers; the corner joints seemed sloppy, with gaps here and there in the joints. At another store the drawer corners were neatly and precisely dovetailed. Not surprisingly, it was the latter store that got our business. They were “rewarded” for their fine workmanship, and the other store was not.

- The “it” in this sentence (“which he has built on it”) refers back to the foundation (v12: “if any man builds on the foundation...”), which is Jesus Christ.
- “Remains” refers to the survival of work that has passed through the testing fire.
- Note that when it comes to the evaluation of our work, there will be no graded system of A through F, or percentages. It will be “pass/fail”; no gray areas in-between. If the work is consumed by the fire, it fails the test; if it is not consumed, it passes, and a reward will be granted.

Just what will be this “reward”? What form will it take? First we must understand the word translated “reward” in all our versions. Even though all our common translations use the word reward, I think it is an unfortunate rendering. To American ears “reward” means to receive something over and above what one normally would for an act or service that is considered over and above the norm. But that is not what the word means.

reward = *misthos* = apparently a primary word; **pay for service** (literal or figurative), good or bad :- hire, reward, **wages**.

Only the *Young’s Literal Translation* captures it:
if of any one the work doth remain that he built on it, a wage he shall receive;

Read Matthew 20:8-9. (same word, *misthos*)

Perhaps the word “reward” has been favored here and in other passages to emphasize the fact that this does not represent working for one’s salvation. The reward or wages spoken of here are not for our salvation, nor are they something due us, but they are indeed over and above our salvation. This leaves the question, however, What form will this reward take? Cash? A nicer apartment? Crowns?

Let’s quickly look at two passages for a glimpse into what the Lord may have in mind for our reward or wages. The first is from Christ’s familiar parable about the talents, and what the master granted to the two slaves who showed a profit from what was entrusted to them.

Read Matthew 25:20-21.

It may come as a surprise to you that our reward in heaven may include more responsibilities—i.e., more work! Now let’s hear how the apostle Paul describes his anticipated reward.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20.

For Paul, his anticipated crown would be the blamelessness of the Thessalonian Christians when Christ returns. That is what he was looking forward to: not an eternity of sipping iced tea on a sunny beach, but an eternity that includes those to whom he preached. *That* would be his reward.

v15

If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Remember: While there is true destruction and loss when the verdict is thumbs-down, it all applies to the “work”—not the individual or his salvation. Ultimately what our reward, or wage, will be is the praise of our Savior. In that moment of judgment, the *loss* of that praise will be loss indeed.

One important lesson from this paragraph is that our heart’s desire should be to always turn in earnest, quality work for the Lord—not to gain or retain our salvation, but to please and bring praise to our Savior. For when we live that way, He is so gracious as to one day share some of that praise with us. And *that* will be our wage for work well-done.