



Quality of Believers' Works Are Evaluated by Christ with Fire: Divine Good Is Rewarded, Human Good Is Not; All Are Saved, 1 Cor 3:14-15

Vine, W. E., et al., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, 612-13:

The same tribunal is called the "judgment-seat of Christ," 2 Corinthians 5:10, to whom the Father has given all judgment, John 5:22, 27. At this *bēma* believers are to be made manifest, that each may 'receive the things done through the body,' according to what he has done, 'whether it be good or bad.' There they will receive rewards for their faithfulness to the Lord. For all that has been contrary in their lives to His will they will suffer loss. This judgment-seat is to be distinguished from the pre-millennial, earthly Throne of Christ, Matthew 25:31 (David's throne at the Second Advent), and the post-millennial "Great White Throne," in Revelation 20:11, at which only the dead will appear. This judgment-seat of Christ will be a tribunal held in His presence with His saints after His return to receive them to Himself (the Rapture).

In the New Testament the word **ἐκκλησία, *ekklesia*** refers to both the assembly of the local church during the Church Age and that of the universal church at the "judgment seat of Christ."

From this information we are able to develop an interpretation of our translation: 1 Corinthians 3:13 refers to a post-Rapture assembly of the universal church made up of all those who believed in Christ during the history of the Church Age. This assembly will take place in heaven while the events of the seven-year Tribulation transpire on earth. At this assembly the Lord will evaluate each believer's personal fulfillment of the plan of God for his life on earth between the point of his salvation and his physical death or the Rapture, whichever comes first.

Every Church Age believer will appear before the Supreme Court of Heaven where Jesus Christ presides as Chief Justice. The Lord will be positioned on a tribunal, or as the Greek puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:10, **τοῦ βήματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, *tu bēmatos tou Christou***: the judgment-seat of Christ.

But our research into etymology of *bēma* and the isagogics of how it was used in Scripture and in the Greek-speaking world informs us that it was not a judgment-seat but rather a place of honor held by a judge, in this case the Chief Judge of the human race, Jesus Christ. It refers to the chambers of the Supreme Court of Heaven and the bench on which our Lord sits. His purpose for assembling the members of the church together is to evaluate their works whether good or bad. This is not a session for the judgment of the works of the unsaved masses but of the saved few. Thus the translation "the judgment-seat of Christ" is better rendered in the English as "the evaluation tribunal of Christ." The quality of each believer's production during his post-salvation life is said to be tested by fire:

1 Corinthians 3:13 - each man's work will become evident; for the evaluation tribunal of Christ will show it, because it [**man's work] is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.**

Notice that verse 13 is prophetic. There are three predictive future active indicative verbs in the verse: (1) "man's work *will become* evident (*γίνομαι, ginomai*)"; (2) the "evaluation tribunal of the Lord *will show* it (*δηλώω, deloō*)"; and (3) the "fire itself *will test* (*δοκιμάζω, dokimazō*) it."

Notice that our works are not "judged" but "tested." The word is:

δοκιμάζω, *dokimazō* - "to prove, test, verify, examine for approval, evaluate, discern"



Spicq, Ceslas. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by James D. Ernest. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1:354, 356:

When someone submits a case to an authority for examination, it is in order that the authority may evaluate it, decide, and finally approve. (p. 354)

When 1 Peter 1:7 specifies that faith is more precious “than perishable gold, which is nevertheless tried by fire”, not only does this mean that the fire selects, purifies, refines the material and gives the metal greater value; the text also uses the verb *dokimazō* in the sense where gold is tested by fire to prove its authenticity and to remove impurities. This meaning also appears in 1 Corinthians 3:13, where each (believer’s) work “will be made manifest by fire” and the “fire will prove its quality.” Fire is the means of verification and control, as with precious metals: that which is worthless is destroyed, but that which is solid and eternal remains. (p. 356)

Therefore we find that Paul is using metaphors to describe divine good and human good. The gold, silver, and precious stones represent metals that can withstand the fires of purification while wood, hay, and straw cannot.

In verse 12 the two sets of building materials are used figuratively to describe the two kinds of production that will be evaluated by Christ. Gold represents deity and speaks of production performed while in fellowship with God. Silver is figurative for redemption and points out that production is made possible by the believer’s union with Christ and the spiritual assets imputed as a result. Precious stones denote the great variety of divine-good production that can be accomplished through the filling of the Holy Spirit and His enabling power.

On the other hand, the second bill of materials is not only consumable by fire but also has no permanence. Wood speaks of the dead works of the believer who is out of fellowship with God. Hay when set ablaze makes a quick hot fire but dies out just as fast, similar to the production of the unbeliever who, although having the availability of the spiritual assets, functions under the energy of the flesh. Straw represents human good production that results when the believer functions without the filling of the Holy Spirit and His enabling power.

Notice that these building materials are figurative for those things that a believer chooses to do following salvation. If he is in fellowship with God, utilizes the assets imputed at salvation, and is filled with the Holy Spirit then his application of the Word of God produces divine good which merits rewards at the evaluation tribunal of Christ.

If the believer is not in fellowship, fails to utilize the spiritual assets, and is not filled with the Holy Spirit then his application of the Word of God is impossible and he produces human good which is rejected by Christ as unworthy of reward.

The fire is symbolic of divine evaluation which through omniscience is able to accurately distinguish between divine good and human good production:

1 Corinthians 3:14 - If any man’s work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward.

v. 15 - If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet as through fire.