

Some considerations about the Bema Judgment of Christ

(From a letter written to pastor Bud Wilson 2/4/98)

It seems that there is a hesitancy on the part of some to call sin in the believer's life "sin". I am sure that anything which falls short of Christ's best for our life as a believers is sin. Theologians speak of "sins of omission and sins of commission." The first category rests on, among other passages no doubt, Rom. 14:23 *"And he that doubteth is damned [condemned] if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin,"* and James 4:17 *"Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin."* As to the difference between the "sin" of unrewardable works and the sins for which Christ died and for which we have forgiveness:

-- The sins for which Christ died include all sins of our entire life, both those we have committed in the past and those which are still future (after all, they were all future sins when Christ died for them!), while the "unrewardable works," though He died for them too, only involve our lives as believers.

-- The sins of our whole life are all considered, in the courtroom of heaven, as settled before the bar of justice in light of the Cross, while the life of the believer as viewed at the Bema is a family affair before the Father. It is not **legal justice** in view at the Bema, but **loving evaluation of service**. When a son gets a speeding ticket he comes before the court. When he has paid the fine the case is legally over, but when he returns home he may have to hear a few wise words, and possibly endure some form of chastening, from his father. The confrontation with his father is for his own good and will not send him to jail nor impose a fine. *"If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?"* (Hebrews 12:7). It is important, however, to realize that the **chastening** is taken care of in this life (or by a shortening of this life -- 1 Cor. 11:30, *"For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep"*), not at the Bema. Chastening is not to "make us ready for heaven" ¹ but to refine us in our walk and ministry and protect our testimony before men down here -- to make us ready for service.

-- The sins of the unbeliever are sins against His Law or His righteousness, or our neighbors welfare -- the sins dealt with at the Bema are sins against the Father's love and the Savior's grace. Perhaps this is what David had in mind when he, after sinning against Bathsheba, against her husband, Uriah, and against his legitimate wives, said, *"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest"* (Psalm 51:4).

-- The Cross deals with penalty, while the Bema has reward in view. The Law offered no rewards, ² only penalties for transgressions. I find no clear reference to penalties at the Bema, only to rewards and the loss of them (and very possibly the righting of wrongs among believers).

¹The weakest and most wayward true believer is as "ready for heaven" as was Paul when he wrote Second Timothy. Neither is the Bema a judgment to make the believers ready for heaven, for most of those at the Bema will have already been consciously in the presence of Christ in heaven for a long time -- some for over 1,900 years -- before the Bema takes place.

²Exodus 19:5, 6 does not offer rewards to individuals, but constitutes the basis for a covenant with the nation.

It has been asked, "Is it possible for 'unrewardable works' to have been done 'in the Spirit'?" In answer to this question, I am sure that anything done in the Spirit will be according to the will of God -- and hence rewardable. *"For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting"* (Gal. 6:8). Surely this verse is not stipulating how to be saved, but how to reap that which is linked to eternal life and the enjoyment of it to the full. *"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit"* (Gal 5:25). Our walk has to do with our works for Him and there is no hint that one can walk in the Spirit and not please the Lord. *"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not"* (Galatians 6:7 - 9). Surely the "due season" includes rewards at the Bema, for there is often not very much discernible reaping in this life.

There are a couple of passages outside of Paul's epistles, which give us illustrations of principles that surely will apply at the Bema.

Think back to the story of Joseph. His brothers were related to him from the beginning of the story, yet they sinned against him grievously. What were the results?

- They caused grief and suffering to Joseph and also their father.
- They were without the fellowship they could have had with Joseph, and surely did not really feel comfortable with their father, knowing how they had hurt him.
- They were chastened by Joseph. He not only put them in the position of being falsely accused of theft, and put them in prison for a short time, but also kept their brother captive when they returned home. The brother he kept was no doubt the one who was the leader in the sin against Joseph.

However it was when they were in the presence of Joseph that they were brought to face fully their guilt and admit their blameworthiness. So what did Joseph do with them when they were finally face to face with him? He wept over them, he freely forgave them and then he sent them home to confess to their father what they had done (he didn't tell them to do this, but there was no way they could escape it). He also urged them, now that he had forgiven them, not to blame one another for what they had done *"So he sent his brethren away, and they departed: and he said unto them, See that ye fall not out by the way"* (Genesis 45:24). He even told them not to blame themselves, since God had been able to use even their evil for good. *"Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life . . . But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive"* Genesis 45:5; 50:20). Here it was not merely a matter of failing to do good, or bungling the job of doing good, but actually doing serious evil. Were they "brought into court" -- no, for they were Joseph's family. Were they chastened? Yes, severely -- over a period of several years. Did they repent and confess their sin to the father before they came face to face with Joseph? No, certainly not. Did Joseph accuse them of what they had done? No, he only mentioned the fact that they had sold him into Egypt to identify who he was. One look at his face and what they had done overwhelmed them like a flood. Did Joseph accuse them? No, there was no need -- they were

fully self accused, *"And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us"* (Genesis 42:21). Did Joseph punish them? No, he gathered them into his arms *"Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life . . . Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him.*(Genesis 45:5, 15).

Here we see: the sins of Jacob's sons did not go unnoticed, there was chastening; they did not escape facing what they had done and the seriousness of it; they were surely ashamed before Joseph when they stood in his presence, but were not punished; the sins were fully addressed and the gracious way they were handled by Joseph healed all the relationships involved; all twelve brothers dwelt in peace with one another and with their father in a place prepared for them by Joseph.

Another passage is from the Gospels. The story of the prodigal son, of course, had to do with the way the pharisees were treating the publicans and sinners (Luke 15:1, 2), but it surely illustrates some principles of God's dealings with those who are His sons. First of all, the story is not about a lost soul finding the Savior, but about a **son** being reunited with his father. One evangelist I heard speak on this passage remarked that there are two kinds of lost dogs. There are those that are lost from their owners and there are those that are lost because they have no owner (strays). The one is lost from fellowship and the other from ownership. The "prodigal" was a son when he left home, he was a son when he was eating with the pigs, he was a son all the way home and he was a son at the feast held for him. As a matter of fact the point of the story is the **other prodigal** -- the brother who would not receive him back as a brother. His thinking was "If he can do what he did and get away with it, I might as well do the same thing" -- indicating he was a prodigal also, in heart, but didn't have the courage to act on it.

How was the prodigal received? The father had anticipated his return and had been eagerly looking for him, for he saw him a **great way off**. He **ran** to meet him and kissed him **over and over** (literally, "kissed him again and again" -- NASB margin). He ministered to him. He was barefoot so he was given shoes; he was dressed in rags, so he was given the **best** robe; he was financially ruined, so he was given the father's ring (evidently the signet ring, which today would be somewhat equivalent to giving him his father's check book); he was hungry, so they prepared him a feast; he had been lonely and sad and bitter, so they had a party and rejoiced in his presence.

The brother said, in effect, "You should not give him such a welcome, he deserves punishment!" He was implying, "You are not dealing adequately with what he has done!"

What is the father's answer? To paraphrase it, "All these years he has been eating with the **pigs** -- you have been eating at **my table**, is that of no value to you? His inheritance is all gone -- all that I have is yours. You could have had a feast with your friends any time you asked for it. His life has been a living death in a faraway land. Yours has been an enjoyable life with me. He has suffered enough for his ways and has lost his inheritance. The past has been sufficiently met, let us now **rejoice** that he is **home!**"

It may be pointed out that the prodigal repented **before he started home**, but here is an understandable difference between this account and that of Joseph. Joseph's brothers lived before the Law, the prodigal pictures Israel, under the Law and called upon to repent as a preparation for their meeting with the Savior. Like Joseph's brothers, we are not under law. I don't think this is something to be pressed, but it may be worth keeping in mind.

Something else comes to mind about the "sins" which will be addressed at the Bema. Our service is seldom either totally flesh or totally in the Spirit. One may be commended for his motive, but not for what he did *"Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest **the counsels of the hearts**: and then shall every man have [his due] praise of God"* (1 Cor 4:5). Also one may be commended by God for what he longed to do, even though he was unable, or forbidden, to carry it out. David was commended for wanting to build the temple, but if he had carried out his purpose he would have been sinning against God, *"But the LORD said to David my father, Forasmuch as it was in thine heart to build an house for my name, thou didst well in that it was in thine heart"* (2 Chronicles 6:8). God must have been pleased with David, later, when he longed to return the ark to Israel, but His judgment fell on **how he did it** -- he did not follow the revealed instructions for the transport of the ark.

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