

A large, ornate, empty stone throne is the central focus of the image. It is set against a dramatic, cloudy sky with warm, golden light. The throne is made of a light-colored stone and has a high, arched back with decorative carvings. It sits on a multi-tiered stone base. The overall mood is solemn and majestic.

Amplifying Our Ambition

2 Corinthians 5:9–10

“For we must all appear
before the judgment seat of Christ.”

What do you think of when you hear the words
ambition and *reward*?

~~Ambition~~ = ~~Pride~~

Humility! ✓

~~Reward~~ = ~~Merit~~

Duty! ✓

Recovering *Ambition*

“Humility, rightly understood, shouldn’t be a fabric softener on our aspirations. True humility doesn’t kill our dreams; it provides a guardrail for them. . . . Humility should never be an excuse for inactivity. Our humility should harness ambition, not hinder it. Talking about your dreams for God isn’t proud—it’s essential. If you’re too humble to dream, maybe you have an incorrect understanding of humility. The servant who is faithful with little still has an eye on the much.”

—Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition*, 14, 117

“Ambitions for self may be quite modest. . . . Ambitions for God, however, if they are to be worthy, can never be modest. There is something inherently inappropriate about cherishing small ambitions for God. How can we ever be content that he should acquire just a little more honor in the world? No. Once we are clear that God is King, then we long to see him crowned with glory and honor, and accorded his true place, which is the supreme place. We become ambitious for the spread of his kingdom and righteousness everywhere.”

—John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 172–73

Recovering Reward

“I confess that I was surprised by the number of times Scripture uses rewards to motivate obedience. Like many of us, I tend toward the Kantian notion that we should simply do our duty for duty’s sake and never think about reward. But that notion is quite unbiblical. If God takes the trouble (this many times!) to urge our obedience by a promise of reward, we should embrace that promise with thanks, not despise it. That is, we should not only do good works, but we should do them for this reason.”

—John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 283–84

“The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak.”

—C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 25–26

“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

—2 Corinthians 5:9–10

I. Adopt the Right Ambition (v. 9)

II. Anticipate the Final Assessment (v. 10)

Context



- Paul brought the gospel to Corinth on his 2nd missionary journey (AD 50–52; see Acts 18:1–18).
- The church was located in one of the most immoral cities of the Roman empire.
- The church was the focus of Paul's dedicated attention (at least 3 letters; at least three visits).

- Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, on his way to Corinth at the end of his 3rd missionary journey (AD 56):



- 1) To encourage the Corinthians after hearing about their repentance (2 Cor 1–7).
- 2) To appeal to the Corinthians to collect a gift for the Jerusalem Church (2 Cor 8–9).
- 3) To exhort the Corinthians to reject those claiming false apostleship (2 Cor 10–13).

- Second Corinthians 5:9–10 falls within an important section on ministry motivations:



- Vv. 1–3 – The certainty of the resurrection
- Vv. 4–5 – The promise of the Spirit
- Vv. 6–8 – The presence of Christ
- Vv. 9–10 – The certainty of recompense ←

I. Adopt the Right Ambition (v. 9)

“Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.”

- “Therefore” – Paul draws a *self-evident conclusion* from the previous sentence about the assurance of seeing Christ (vv. 6–8).
- “We also have” – a *timeless present*; Paul describes (and prescribes) what all believers ought to have as their ever-present mindset.
- “At home or absent” – the language comes from v. 8; the first describes *being in Christ’s presence after death*; the latter describes *life in this present world* (“whether up there or down here”).

“Therefore we also have as **our ambition**, whether at home or absent, **to be pleasing to Him.**”

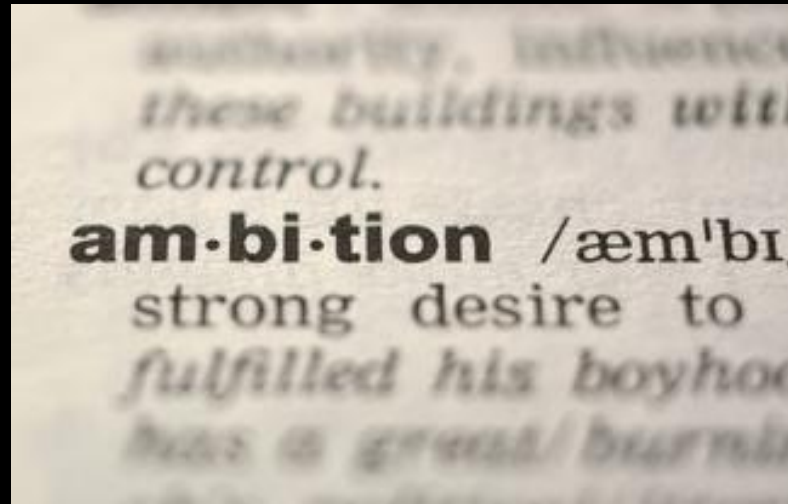
- “**Our ambition**” – “to earnestly aspire to something, implying strong ambition for some goal” that prompts one to *do everything he can* to achieve it.
 - An active, intentional, all-encompassing ambition that influences all areas of life.
- “**To be pleasing to Him**” – the *substance* of this ever-appropriate, always-praiseworthy, constantly-intensifying ambition; a favorite expression of Paul to describe the goal of the Christian life.

“To ‘please the Lord’ well summarizes the Christian’s life, and is to be understood as doing good and avoiding evil. . . . It is a desire that springs from the joyous prospect of being ‘with the Lord’ (v. 8) and reflects true conversion; one always wishes to please the one he or she loves.”

—Paul Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 273

Yes, pleasing the Lord is something you can actually do in this life!

- **Ephesians 5:8b–10** – “Walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.”
- **Colossians 1:10** – “so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”
- **1 Thessalonians 4:1** – “Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.”



“Formerly our aspirations were the soul-shrinking agents of self-exaltation. But because of Jesus, everything has changed. Having God’s approval changes why we obey, aspire, and apply. Now aspiration fuels delight. We can pursue great things

for God, and it will enhance our joy in God. We no longer live ambitious for approval, but we act ambitious because we have approval. Here’s the difference: One disillusion us, the other inspires us. One is temporary, the other permanent. One drives us, the other delights us.”

—Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition*, 59

II. Anticipate the Final Assessment (v. 10)

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

- “For” – Paul now explains why such an ambition (v. 9) is both good and necessary.
- “We must all appear” – a *future fact*; Paul asserts that *all Christians* (the same “we” as in v. 9) will make a decisive appearance; this appearance has the idea of *disclosure, revelation* (see 1 Cor 3:13), and it is unavoidable.

“For we must all appear **before the judgment seat of Christ**, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

- “The judgment seat of Christ” – the βῆμα (*bēma*) of Christ.
 - It is used 12 times in the NT, mainly of other “judgment seats” (e.g., Matt 17:19; Acts 12:21; 18:12, 16, 17; 25:6, 10).
 - It is used 2 times to describe Christ’s/God’s “judgment seat” (here; Rom 14:10).
 - It is *not* to be confused with the Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20:11–12.

The *bēma* at Corinth



- *bēma* = “A raised platform used by officials usually for judicial purposes; also used as a place for publicly bestowing honor and reward.”

**“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body,
according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”**

- **“So that . . .”** – the *purpose* for this appearance by each and every Christian: *recompense*, “to receive back something that one is owed.”
- **“For his deeds in the body”** – the *focus* of this remuneration: *lit.* “the things through the body” = the Christian’s works in this life, *absent from Christ* (v. 9), *in this earthly tent* (v. 1), *in this earthen vessel* (4:7).
- **“According to what he has done”** – repeats the same idea as the previous phrase for the sake of clarity.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

- **“Whether good or bad”** – this inescapable assessment will render perfectly appropriate recompense for each believer’s efforts at pleasing the Lord (see 1 Cor 3:10–15).
 - This is not the reward of eternal life for “good deeds,” or the damnation to hell for “bad deeds.”
 - This is for believers—those who already have been granted eternal life.
 - The rewards are issued for the life to come in response to Christ-pleasing works done in this life; commendation (“suffering loss”) is withheld for that which missed the mark.

“Believers do not face condemnation at Christ’s tribunal (see Rom 5:16, 18; 8:1) but rather evaluation with the view to the Master’s commendation given or withheld (see 1 Cor 3:10–15; 4:5). . . . The teaching about the judgment seat before which all believers must come reminds us that we have been saved, not for a life of aimlessness or indifference, but to live as to the Lord.”

—Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 274

Yes, how you live now matters for the future!

Questions for Self-Examination

- 1) How well am I living my life when compared to the revealed will of God in His Word?
- 2) Am I growing in faithfulness to use all that God has given me in terms of skills and opportunities?
- 3) Is my motive to please Christ with this life I have been given, or is it to seek my own glory?
- 4) Am I aware that all that I do—word and deed, service up front and behind the scenes, on Sundays and throughout the week—will be evaluated?

