

We bow our heads in prayer: Dear heavenly Father, may we take heed to our precious foundation, Jesus Christ, and be careful to build upon it with gold, silver and precious stones so that we may receive Your promised reward for all eternity. Amen.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

There were sinful division breaking up the unity in the Corinthian Church, jealousies and strife. They were gathering into parties, some boasting that they followed St. Paul's teaching, others Apollos. Far from being proud that some thought so highly of him, Paul reprimands them all. They were being "merely human," instead of maturing in their Christian faith and knowledge.

But as a loving father who corrects and then teaches his children,

St. Paul takes the opportunity to teach them about God's grace to them through God's ministers.

...We read as follows in Jesus' name:

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So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.<sup>(ESV)</sup>

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen* (John 17:17)

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On a Sunday where the theme is "Justified by Grace," this text would seem to say the opposite.

We just heard that God's ministers **each will receive his wages according to his labor.**

And then again, that if the work of a pastor survives the fire of the final judgement, **he will receive a reward.**

Those sound an awful lot like works righteousness, don't they?

They do, if your natural inclination is to think this way. Which it is.

We read and hear phrases like that and perhaps rather quickly you are motivated to get to work.

It sounds as if you can have an impact on your eternal salvation.

...**Each will receive his wages according to his labor.**

Doesn't that sound like the ideal opportunity in our culture:

the harder you work, the better your wages?

But true good works are not done to seek after a reward for yourself,

either here on earth, like more prestige or wealth or glory, or in paradise.

Nor are they a strong arm by which we can force God into giving us what we think we deserve.

Those are selfishly motivated thoughts and are the works of the flesh.

They are not done out of love or trust in God, nor in love toward your neighbor.

But neither are good works forced or coerced out of us.

We don't do them because we have to, because if we don't, we won't be rewarded.

We don't do them because they are expected of us, and we will look bad if we don't.

These are motivations that anybody could have, believer or unbeliever, and aren't fruits of faith.

Such works do not please God.

For a long time, other church bodies have accused this teaching of grace alone

as removing any responsibility and motivation from the Christian to desire and do good works.

And in truth, it goes against our sinful nature.

Why would I want to be more and more selfless when it appears that I would get less and less?

This would impoverish me and if I can't even do it for a reward, even in paradise,

then what benefit is it to me, says our old Adam?

But such thoughts will not survive the fire on the last day. They are twigs, hay, and stubble.

Those who teach that our works are at least in part what our salvation is based upon,

will suffer great loss. Their life's work will go up in smoke.

For they combined our human notions with the true teachings of God, resulting in worthlessness.

They have minimized the work and motivation of the Gospel upon the new man,

and God's gifts and power to overcome the old sinful nature by it.

And have elevated in their minds man's abilities in spiritual matters.

But we have to strive against these thoughts ourselves.

There is also in us the strong notion that we can manipulate our behavior and the behavior of others into God-pleasing behavior by commanding it to be done.

Stop swearing. Get married. Give up the alcohol. Don't smoke that. Don't read that smut.

Stop watching that stuff. Stop gossiping. And the list could go on.

But simply giving such commands, whether to yourself or someone else,

doesn't really have power to make a person stop, does it?

How often have you said such things, or things like it, and been happily surprised by the outcome

and not only immediately, but for the long haul?

In my experience, such commands not only don't work, but even embolden the old Adam more.

So how is it that true good works are brought about and encouraged and empowered,

while our sins and evil lusts are drowned and die.

This is the work of the Gospel and so is only the work of God.

Let's return to the context of those phrases about reward to see what they are really talking about.

St. Paul removed all possibility of thinking that our salvation is given to ministers or congregations

as a due for our works or merits.

Remember how St. Paul emphatically points out that God is the one to get the credit and the glory?

The planter isn't anything. The waterer isn't anything. They are simply God's instruments.

Their work would be entirely fruitless if God did not give the growth.

The workers are God's ministers. The Church is God's field, God's building.

Therefore, He and He alone gets the glory for our salvation,

for it was He who chose us from before the beginning. Ephesians1:11

It was He who sent Jesus to redeem us in time.

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It was He who sent the Holy Spirit through His ministers to *call and enlighten you by the Gospel.*

It is He who is the **author, maintainer and finisher of your faith in Him.** Hebrews12:2(NKJV)

It is He who **works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.** Philippians2:13

**For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,**

**which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.** Ephesians2:10

And it is He who has given you the gifts, the abilities, and the resources to accomplish them,

just as St. Paul indicated in our text when he said, **according to the grace of God given to me.**

So the good works which you perform, the works that are good on account of your God-given faith, were prepared by God, motivated by God, and empowered by God through you.

This does not mean that you are an automated robot, though, as if you did not participate.

According to your new man, you do desire to and participate in these good works.

You cooperate with God, not as two equally yoked oxen on the plow,

but like a 2 year-old child helping his father carry a bucket of water.

His little helper is encouraged and praised by dad, but it is a very sloppy ordeal.

So what room do we have to boast in our good works or to try to earn a reward?

As Jesus indicated to His disciples, **"When you have done all that you were commanded, say,**

**'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"**

Instead, our joy is the work and righteousness that Jesus has accomplished already on our account:

His selfless life lived not to earn any reward for Himself, but for you.

Your boast is His work of spilling His precious blood on the cross to remove from you all stain of the selfish thoughts and motivations about your works and rewards.

Your motivation is given by the Spirit, as He imprints in you the image of God,

and your new man arises desiring to thank, praise, serve and obey Him.

So how are we correctly to understand the words of "wage" and "reward" in our text?

Consider the Gospel lesson today about the workers in the vineyard.

The owner promised those who began to work at the beginning of the day that they would receive a denarius.

Those who worked only one hour however, did not bargain for anything,

but received from the owner their wages also, a full denarius, a day's wage for an hour's work.

Was the wage given based upon the merit of the workers?

Not at all, for those who worked all day received the same as those who worked one hour.

So what was the wage based upon? It was due because of the promise of the owner

whose generosity was given without account to his own impoverishment.

Therefore, we, along with the Lutheran confessors at Augsburg,

*confess that eternal life is a reward;*

*it is something due because of the promise, not because of our merits.* Apology III: 241[362] p. 137 (Concordia)

Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*