



What is the Reward of the Redeemed?

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Part 1: Page 4
Introduction to the Parable of
the Laborers in the Vineyard

Part 2: Page 11
The Parable of the Laborers in
the Vineyard

Part 3: Page 25
A Dwelling Place for Christ

Part 1

Introduction to the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

During His earthly ministry, Jesus had much to say to His disciples about what it would mean to follow Him, and what it would mean to be His servant. One of the best teachings on the matter is in the form of a parable. In Matthew 20, we find what is usually referred to as, "The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard." This parable gathers together much Truth about ministry.

First, let's get the setting – let's see WHY Jesus gave this parable. Jesus had just had a conversation in the hearing of the disciples with a rich, young ruler. That young ruler would not follow Jesus at personal cost. As he walked away from Jesus, Jesus said, "It is with great difficulty that a rich man enters the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 19:23)

Peter and the disciples were, "amazed. It would seem that they were

somewhat shaken. Why? Because at this point of time they were following Jesus for what they believed they would get out of it – as those who would be at His side in His kingdom. The disciples mistakenly expected that Jesus was going to set up a material kingdom at any moment, and that they would be given possessions, authority, and, of course, riches. But when they heard what Jesus had to say, their confidence that this was going to happen was greatly shaken. Peter stepped to the front and expressed the concerns of the disciples by asking this question:

***Then answered Peter and said
unto him, Behold, we have
forsaken all, and followed thee;
what shall we have therefore?
(Matt. 19:27)***

There it is – all wrapped up in a single question. Peter and the others had indeed forsaken all and followed Christ. But at this point in their understanding, they were following Him because they thought it was going to PAY them to follow Him. They expected a reward. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is a

teaching given by Jesus to correct their motives and attitude for following Him.

Are we following Jesus because we believe it will earn us a greater reward? Because we believe it is going to PAY us to follow Him? This is probably an attitude most of us have in the beginning. But thank God that He does not abandon us in such deception. Instead, He will begin to expose our unbelief – usually by showing us that we could never merit PAY or reward. He will reduce us to where we will walk with Christ at great COST if necessary – simply because we love Him, and love other believers.

This parable reveals that what God is after are those who will give themselves to Him to the complete disregard of personal gain or reward – He is after those who will allow God to use them as extensions of Himself for the benefit of others. He desires true stewards who will pay a great cost so that others might receive all that God has for them – and so that God may receive HIS inheritance in the saints.

This is impossible to learn in a seminary because it is not theological. It is not a profession. It is produced by a relationship with Christ. It is the outcome of having been apprehended by Christ for His purposes – and of abandoning oneself to Him.

Of course, at this point, Peter was not yet faced with this reality – although he definitely WOULD be. But we must be clear about this: Jesus is speaking this parable to show His disciples the dangers – the sin and unbelief – of following Jesus for a reward; of following Him because we think it will PAY us to follow Him. And He is revealing that the real reward for giving ourselves to Christ is nothing less than Christ Himself.

The Work of the Cross

In order for Peter and the others to be brought to the place where they can be faithful stewards who walk with Christ for His glory, it will take a work of the Cross – there must come a death in Peter and the others – with regards to their ambitions and religious flesh. All of that needs to be crucified. They must be convicted of

their unbelief and repent of following Christ for what THEY think they are going to get out of it. They would do so later – but Jesus is telling them this parable to warn them as to what can happen if a person tries to serve God for what they will get out of it.

It would seem that few of us have any idea of the possibilities in our own heart on this matter. If there has been one sin of the church for the last two thousand years it is that people have taken the things of God unto themselves and used them for personal gain – financial gain, the gain of power and position, the gain of self-righteousness, or the gain of, “being someone,” in the eyes of others. The church has generally dragged down that which is spiritual into the realm of religious flesh and has corrupted it.

None of us are free from at least this possibility, and that is why any calling of Jesus Christ to ministry will ALWAYS include a calling to the Cross. This is true of any calling to Christ, but it is especially so with regards to any calling to influential ministry.

Despite the fact that this parable is a warning against following Christ for personal gain, we must keep in mind that all of God's warnings are redemptive in nature. If we have wrong motives for following Jesus Christ in this age, God will, by His spirit, bring enough light so that we can turn and repent; so that we can get back to following Christ for HIMSELF and HIS glory. So as we examine this parable, we have to keep that in mind.

These first disciples, except for Judas, avoided the pitfalls against which Jesus warns in the parable – they did allow God to set them free from these dangers. But it is possible that those called last could fail through unbelief in the way that those called first failed in the parable. This parable, as is the case with most parables, presents spiritual principles -- and is not intended to cover every possibility. Jesus is simply focusing upon those given the greatest Truth and responsibility – and thus are in the position of the greatest danger.

The Spiritual Kingdom

Jesus begins this parable with the same words He uses to begin many parables. He says, "For the kingdom of heaven is like unto..." So this parable is not about the physical or material world. No. The vineyard is the kingdom of God – or more specifically – it is life in Christ. The working IN the vineyard is all that we might do to produce the spiritual fruit that God is after in our personal lives -- and in the lives of those whom we impact from out of our relationship with Christ. The material objects in the parable are used to convey to us spiritual Truth.

This parable is a revelation to God's people as to the necessity of living for Jesus Christ – of living for the interests of God, rather than our own. Of course, this is the outcome of losing one's life for Jesus' sake. But it reveals that if we live and minister for the sake of Jesus that we will receive and value all that God has for us. But if we live or minister with self-interest in mind we will not value what God has for us – indeed, we will not value God Himself.

Part 2

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man [that is] an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, [that] shall ye receive.

Jesus gives the picture of a householder calling laborers to work in this vineyard. The vineyard is not to be limited to performing ministry. The vineyard is really the Christian life – and therefore includes all that is within the Christian life that is supposed to produce fruit. This makes the parable apply to each believer.

Note a couple of important details. The laborers are pictured as being called into the vineyard – called unto Christ -- at different times of the day. None of the laborers decided when to be hired or called. But they did have a heart that was ready to be called – for they were waiting and ready. This shows that God was already doing a work in them to draw them to Christ – such that when He does call finally call them they do come to Christ.

Again, this does not cover all possibilities. Jesus is not addressing those whom God draws to Christ but who resist. That is not the point of the parable. He is limiting His teaching to the context of those whom God draws to Christ and who come to Christ when they are called.

So, each group of laborers are called at a different time of the day – which means that each group of laborers work a different amount of time in the vineyard. This means two things: First, those called first have a greater opportunity and a greater responsibility than those called later. Second, those called first must, “bear the heat of the day,” to an extent those called later do not need to bear. All of this is decided by God. None of it is decided by us.

This is actually the real meaning of election and predestination as taught in scripture. Election is NEVER unto salvation. Rather, election is unto the calling and purpose FOR those who are already saved. God decides the specific purpose for which He has saved each of us. He decides the time and the responsibility. We decide whether to be faithful.

So far we have this: The laborers are called into the vineyard at different times -- according to the will of the master. They are given different amounts of responsibility, and thus,

are called to bear different amounts of, "the heat of the day."

But then we come to the WAGES. The householder AGREED with the first group on a set wage. Thus, this first group went into the vineyard expecting that this amount would be given to them at the end of the day. But this was not the case with the other groups. Jesus specifically says that regarding those called last that there is no wage that is agreed upon - - but the householder promises to pay them, "whatever is right."

Can we see what Jesus is getting at here? The first group enters the vineyard for an agreed to wage. That does not picture GRACE. Rather, it pictures a, "works based," relationship with Christ. The other laborers entered – trusting the household to pay them, "whatever is right" – which is a picture of GRACE and FAITH.

Here we find the first challenge: Will we walk with Christ – fully giving ourselves to Him – but do so leaving any question of wage or reward to HIM? Or must we walk with Christ under the motivation of an expected reward for doing so?

Or, to bring in a passage discussed earlier, having freely received from God, will we now free give back to Him, and unto others? Or will we attach an expected reward?

Jesus said, "Whoever would lose his life for My sake will find it." Can we see that this applies to any thought of reward? Jesus is teaching that we must lose our reward for His sake – lose ourselves to Him to the complete disregard of reward or personal gain. But if we will do so then we will discover HIM as our reward.

The End of the Day

Back to the parable -- the details given about the wage agreements are vital to see because those details flow through to the end of the day when the wages are paid. The motives behind why each laborer works in the vineyard remain their motives when they are paid at the end of the day.

But again – this does not cover all possibilities. Even though we might, in the beginning, be walking with Christ for a reward – or ministering to

others for a reward -- it is a motive we can repent of. And even if we have initially served God by His grace, some do stray off course.

We have to remember that this parable is a correction and warning being given by Jesus in answer to Peter's question. Jesus is, in effect, saying, "You want to know what you are going to receive from God because you have forsaken all and followed Me? But this question, of itself, betrays an attitude that is dangerous. I am telling you this parable to illustrate that fact."

Jesus continued with the parable:

So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers, and give them [their] hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that [were hired] about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received [it], they

murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought [but] one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take [that] thine [is], and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

Here we see a picture of not only what often happens in this life and in this age – but it is also a picture of what is possible at the judgment seat of Christ. All of the motives are exposed. The true character of our relationship with Christ is brought out.

Despite the fact that the laborers – through no choice of their own -- did different amounts of work -- bearing different amounts of the heat of the

day – they ALL received the SAME wage.

This did not sit well with the group called first – who worked the most. They felt cheated. But those called first were not cheated – they were given exactly the wage to which they agreed. The fact that those called last received the same wage for doing less work did not change that fact.

This brings us to the entire point of the parable: God gives ALL the same reward regardless of the amount of work done – regardless of how much of the heat of the day each has to bear. What this means is that those who were called first are actually called first so that those who are called last might receive equally with them. Those called first bear that responsibility – we might even call it a privilege. To be called FIRST does not mean that I have the opportunity to earn MORE from God. Rather, it means that I have the privilege of suffering for the sake of others in the body so that they might share equally.

Does that seem unfair? If it does then we are actually asking the same

question as was asked by Peter, and which prompted this parable.

Those called first in this parable resented God because despite all of their suffering and work in the vineyard the others were given the same wage. God openly states that He has the right to FREELY GIVE what He pleases with what is HIS -- but those first called resented Him for it.

God says, "I have freely given and you must freely receive, and then from out of what you have freely received you must freely give." In other words, He is saying, "Walk with Me, and serve Me, with utter abandonment. Leave any rewards to ME – leave it to ME to decide, "whatever is right."

But if we walk with Christ in a spirit of entitlement we will not FREELY receive from Him – and we will not FREELY give to others. Rather, our entire Christian life and service will be upon the wrong basis. It will not be upon grace and faith. Instead of, "Yet not I, but Christ," my life will proclaim, "Yet not Christ, but I." In the end it will come down to that.

Suffering for Jesus' Sake

So here is the question for each of us: Are we willing to give ourselves fully over to God – for whatever it takes – even if it means that we must suffering the heat of the day – are we willing to do this even if it earns us nothing more than other believers who are not called to such a walk?

Another way to ask the same question: Will we serve Christ for our own interests? For our own gain? Or will we allow Him to crucify those motives out of us and serve Him for His glory, His interests, and for the spiritual benefit of others?

Remember that the vineyard is life in Christ. Thus, "bearing the heat of the day" is not limited to suffering because of ministry." Rather, it is any suffering because of Jesus Christ. And ALL who are in Christ are going to suffer – it is just that some are called to suffer more – for the sake of Christ and for the sake of others.

Are we willing to suffer for Jesus' sake – for the sake of His body – so that others may receive the same as we

have received? Do we think that this means we will be cheated? No. It simply means that we will receive all that God has to give – but that we will have suffered so that others may share in the same. This is the teaching of the parable.

So you want to be called of God into ministry? Such a calling is NOT so that you can BE SOMEBODY, or so that you can earn a greater reward. No. Such a calling is so that through your suffering others can be brought in to share equally in Christ.

The Called and the Chosen and the Faithful

The final statement of Jesus in this parable of the laborers in the vineyard:

So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen. (Matt. 20:16)

In context, the FIRST are obviously those who were called into the vineyard FIRST. Sure. And the LAST were obviously all of the others -- represented by those who worked only

one hour – they were called, “the LAST,” in the parable. And when the wages were paid, the FIRST were the LAST to be paid, and the LAST were the FIRST to be paid.

In addition, it is clear that the, “MANY who are CALLED,” included everyone who was CALLED into the vineyard. But, the “few CHOSEN,” were those who were called FIRST – they were called to bear the greatest responsibility – to bear, “the heat of the day.” Indeed, they were CHOSEN to bear this greater weight for the sake of all of the others; for the sake of Jesus.

Jesus was saying to the apostles, “I am going to call MANY unto Myself. But within those who are CALLED, there will be a much smaller group – the FEW CHOSEN. The CHOSEN will be people who are called to be, “stewards of the mysteries of God.” They will be given greater responsibility, and thus, will have greater accountability. This will NOT be because they are better people, more obedient, or are more righteous, or have greater ability. No. And they will not be given a greater reward.

God is saying, "I will choose them because I want an instrument through whom I can work – unto the spiritual life and growth of others."

Paul was a great example of someone who was CHOSEN, "to bear the heat of the day," so that OTHERS could receive. He said of himself:

***Who now rejoice in my sufferings
for you, and fill up that which is
behind of the afflictions of Christ
in my flesh for his body's sake,
which is the church. (Col. 1:24)***

Are we willing to allow God to use us for the spiritual benefit of others? Even if it does not result in a greater reward for ourselves – but simply because we love Christ, and others? That is quite a question, isn't it? But it is love of God. Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

We are not called to Christ to try to earn a greater reward from Him. He has already given all things freely in Christ – if we would simply believe that it would stop all of this nonsense of trying to earn. We are actually

called for what God can receive through His work in us – which is HIS inheritance in the saints. That may be a shocking revelation for those of us who continue to be self-occupied – following Christ for what seems to be a justifiable self-interest. But it is the Truth – and if we understood it, we would see that it is a wonderful reality in which God wants all of His people to share. So there it is – and this is the message of this parable.

Part 3

A Dwelling Place for Christ

All of those who are in Christ are presently allowing – or not allowing -- God to build a dwelling place in them for Christ. We are doing that personally, but then by extension – by our communion with others in Christ – contributing to the building of a dwelling place for Christ in the body of Christ as a whole.

This ought not to be surprising, for Christianity at the core is, "Christ in you." (Col. 1:27) Therefore, if am truly born from above, Christ already dwells in me – I am joined to Him in spirit through resurrection union. Thus, when we speak of building a dwelling place for Christ, we are not talking about salvation – but we are talking about what happens AFTER salvation, and because of salvation. We are really talking about spiritual growth – we are talking about increasing the dwelling place for Christ in us. We are talking about our need to decrease in order that He might increase. We are talking about becoming a person in and through

whom the Christ who dwells in us can live and move and be expressed.

This fact leads us to a phrase we find a number of times in scripture: "Rewarded according to works." What works? And what reward? We are going to discover that the work is the dwelling place in each of us for Christ. And the reward is Christ Himself at one with us in that very same dwelling place.

This is actually going on right now, although the fullness of it will be released into the eternal ages. Right now we are a dwelling place for Christ. The purpose of God is that our capacity for Christ might be expanded – we must decrease that He might increase. To the extent that this happens, we will be able to more fully experience Christ, and be an expression and extension of Him. This can happen NOW. Thus, we do partake of what is called a "reward," now – we can experience Christ now. But it is at the end of this age when Christ returns that there will be a full release of these realities. And Christ will dwell in and through us eternally. We will be, "rewarded" – the word is recompensed – for the WORK – the

dwelling place we have built – by the eternal presence of Christ in that dwelling place. In short, “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” will become, “Christ in you, the realization of His glory.”

The Work and the Recompense

In I Corinthians 3 Paul directly speaks to the idea of a reward as the outcome of ministry. But you will notice that he uses the term, “fellow laborers.” Here again we see that ministry is not only for Jesus’ sake – but within Jesus’ sake it is for others. God has chosen some to, “bear the heat of the day,” so that others may freely receive and share in what God has given them.

This does not eliminate personal responsibility. In fact, it is only if God is building a dwelling place for Christ in EACH that the body of a whole is benefited. Note verse 8 which reads, “Every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor.” The point Paul is making, first of all, is that despite the fact that all in the Body are fellow-laborers, the reward of EACH is based on the, “labor,” of

EACH – it is based on the individual. There is no reward here by proxy.

The phrase, “rewarded according to our works,” is repeated a few times in scripture. Most interpret this to mean that yes, we are saved, “by grace through faith,” but we are rewarded according to our works. But does this make sense? Are we saved, “by grace through faith,” only to live the Christian life – or perform Christian ministry -- on the basis of earning a reward based on works?

Does it make sense that Jesus would say, “Freely you have received, therefore free give” – to those who would minister – and then turn around and say that the same are going to be rewarded according to their works?

There are other questions about the common interpretation of, “rewarded according to our works.” First of all, what works? Most limit this supposed reward to our good works, or to the good results of our ministry. But if we are going to be rewarded according to our works then ALL of our works must be taken into account – all of our outward works, inward works, thoughts, and attitudes – all of our

faith and all of our unbelief. ALL of the impacts of our ministry, both good and bad, must be taken into account. ALL of this must be gathered up and tallied in order to determine the reward of each person.

So ask: If ALL of our works, and ALL of our ministry, both good and bad, are going to be taken into account to determine our reward, how much of a reward do we think we will merit?

There are some who would suggest that all of our bad works and bad ministry will be forgiven, but all of the good we have done will determine our reward. Ok, but then ask: How good is good enough?

As you can see, once we bring any part of the Christian life down to works – once we say that our eternal reward is going to be determined by our works – we are right back under the law. We may not be under the law as it pertains to salvation, but we are under the law as it pertains to our reward as saved people. And the Christian life that emerges will be essentially the SAME – that of trying to merit the things of God.

No. This cannot be. God has freely given us all things in Christ. We are to freely give all things freely to others. "Freely," means grace. It eliminates rewards as a motivation. It eliminates the fear of the loss of rewards. We are not only, "saved by grace through faith," but all that is of Christ is upon that same basis of GRACE.

Now, that being the case, we must still explain what God means when He says that His people will be, "rewarded according to works." We can begin to see the Truth on this matter by turning to our passage in I Corinthians 3.

According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another builds thereon. But let every man take heed how he builds thereupon. For no other foundation can any man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be

revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and [that] the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which [temple] ye are. (1 Cor. 3:10-17)

If we read this entire passage it becomes clear that what is being built is a dwelling place for Jesus Christ – that dwelling place is individual believers who collectively constitute the body of Christ. That is verified by Paul's conclusion that, "You are the temple of God."

Thus, "each person's work," is not what is done TO build this dwelling place, but rather, "each person's work," is the finished dwelling place. We use this kind of language all the time. If we stand in front of a building we have constructed, we will say, "This is my work." We are

referring to the building, and not to the things done TO build it.

Paul is saying that the body of Christ is a living temple of God – a dwelling place for Jesus Christ. Each of us is building out of ourselves a dwelling place for Christ, and we are likewise – through our oneness with others and through our ministry – building the same in others. That is the work that will determine the reward.

But what we are building is going to be revealed as to its true nature by fire. If what we build consists of wood, hay, or stubble – that is, temporal and corruptible materials – it is all going to be burned out of existence. But if what we are building in ourselves and others consists of eternal materials – that which is of the life of Christ – then the fire will bring that out. It will be proven eternal.

How does the reward figure into this? Well, if we are going to be rewarded according to our work, and the work is the dwelling place for Christ, then the reward is the measure of Christ that can dwell within what we have built. Sure. The reward is ACCORDING TO our work.

What could be a greater reward than Christ Himself – eternal fellowship with Him? We are building a dwelling place for Him. Or to put it another way, we are right now building an eternal relationship with Him.

A Dwelling Place for Christ

Paul tells us, "let each man take heed HOW he builds." So ask: How do we build a dwelling place for Jesus Christ?

The answer is simpler than we might expect. We build a dwelling place for Christ by abandoning ourselves to Him by faith -- for whatever it takes and for whatever He desires. This is an inward surrender before it is anything outward. And through ministry we help build a dwelling place for Christ in others by teaching this Truth and joining each other in Christ by faith.

We are already becoming a dwelling place for Jesus Christ – or we are not. To build a dwelling place for Christ, we must decrease – our old, "dwelling place," must be torn down through the work of the Cross – so that He can increase in us. To the extent that we lose ourselves to Him we will experience Him as our life – and be

for Him a dwelling place. And to the extent that we edify others in Christ we are building in them. This is about what Christ is becoming in a person.

The, "finished building" – one that will pass through into the eternal ages – is one that proclaims, "Yet not I, but Christ!" Clearly, this is NOT about how wonderful we are. Rather, it is about how wonderful He is – and whether we have unconditionally lost ourselves to Him.

Let's gather this up: The temple, or dwelling place in each believer, is what is being built. Thus, the dwelling place that is being built determines the extent that eternal fellowship with Christ is possible. The eternal fellowship with Christ – the capacity to experience Christ Himself – IS the reward.

But Paul is also telling us that the true nature of what is being built is going to be tested by fire – and it will be revealed. If what has been built is merely religious and of natural man it will not be able to pass through the fire. Thus, there will be no dwelling place for Christ that remains. But if

what is built is of Jesus Christ then the fire will prove it to be eternal.

We need not push off this testing by fire to the last judgment. Of course, that will be the ultimate. But this testing by fire is going on right now. Our faith and relationship with Christ is right now being proven – as is anything we have built into the lives of others. Trials will expose our spiritual life as being fake or as being real. The fire will expose what we have built in others as fake or as real.

God is always redemptive. Thus, if the fire shows our faith to be fake – if the fire exposes our lives to be built of religious materials -- confess it and begin to allow God to build in us that which is eternal. For if the fire exposes that our life is built upon that which is merely religious, or built upon self interest, and we keep building back up what God wants to tear down, in the end we will own it. There will be no room in us for Christ. We might nevertheless be saved – as Paul says – but what a loss!

The Goal

The goal of the Christian life is to know and experience Christ, resulting in the glory of God being made manifest in and through us. The temple is what is being built – the temple is the work -- and the fullness of Christ that is able to dwell within that temple IS the reward that corresponds TO that work. To the degree that we become a dwelling place for God's will and glory – this will be the degree to which we will be able to experience Christ and experience all of the spiritual blessings that are found in Him. Thus, our reward is Christ Himself – and all that this means by extension.

Once we gain an understanding of some of these passages having to do with rewards we should realize that God does not keep score. He is not tallying our good works vs. our bad works. In fact, this isn't about what we DO at all – as far as serving, preaching, teaching, or any other performed works. Rather, it is about relationship with Christ. In the end, that is what is going to matter. What matters right now is our relationship with Christ in grace and Truth – in

spirit and Truth – and whether we are being built into a temple in which Christ can dwell forever.