1 Corinthians 3:8-17 Sermon Manuscript

“Are There Heavenly Rewards?” Part 2

It’s amazing how just one week of not being in a series can really throw off a preaching rhythm…in a good way. I said to myself, “ok where are we now?” Oh that’s right, we are on the subject of rewards. Last Sunday, many of us were at family camp and I heard there were 43 people even here at Bethel on that Sunday. That’s encouraging! When I asked if Bill Griggs would cover for me for last Sunday, he asked me, “will there be any people I will be even preaching to?” And then later he asked Tami Devinck the same question when she was trying to confirm with pastor Bill, “will there be any people I will be preaching to?!” Well God answered his prayer and desire to not be all alone and have 40 people to preach to. Retreat was a wonderful time of fellowship, fun, and learning more about the Lord. I would highly encourage you all to come next year as it is an edifying and refreshing time.

Now the Sunday before our retreat weekend was in 1 Corinthians and there I started a two parter on the subject of heavenly rewards. And as our title says, the question I wanted to explore through the Scriptures was “are there such a thing as heavenly rewards for a believer?” I wanted to bring up this question of heavenly rewards because there are certain Scripture passages that you will come across or have come across that seems to say there are rewards for faithfulness. For example, one that you might be thinking of is in 1 Corinthians 9:24 “*Do you not know that those who run in race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.*” But brother Teru? If we are saved by grace alone through faith alone and we already have been granted all things and all riches in Christ, isn’t that enough? Why would I need to be motivated to be faithful to Christ by the thought of winning a trophy or reward from Him? If there is no condemnation in Christ, if my salvation is secure and heaven is mine, why should I be motivated by the prospect of eternal rewards if heaven and Christ is already my home?

Those are all good questions and points. In answer to those questions, yes Christ’s sacrifice, the gift of heaven and salvation, should be enough to motivate you to live as faithfully as you can to the glory of Christ regardless of whether you receive something or not for your faithfulness. But you see there is this a problem, and it’s called sin. And we still have the potential to live the Christian life with the wrong motive in bringing glory and attention to ourselves rather than to Christ, and/or to become lazy, and unmotivated, and begin to coast in our Christian life. Let’s take the analogy of an Olympic track event. Christ dying for you and choosing you for salvation is like being made to qualify for an event. You are already in. There are no Olympic Trials in the kingdom of God. You have all been qualified to share in the inheritance of the kingdom by virtue of the shed blood of Jesus for you. You have already been qualified for the spiritual Olympics not because of your work, but because of Christ’s work on the cross. But how well you compete in this spiritual Olympics depends on you. An Olympian can take the Olympics very seriously and train hard for it and do your utmost best for it and possibly earn the top medal spot. Or they can choose to not take it seriously and be undisciplined, lazy, eat poorly, and party heavily and as a result do very poorly at the event.

Let me put it another way: Think of a sport that you liked to do or are doing right now. If you have never done a sport, well think of maybe anything that you used to like to do, or are doing currently, maybe like chess or a board game, that also has the option to be at an elite level of competition. There could be 4 possible motivations for why someone does what he does whether it’s a sport or anything else that could have a competitive side to it. Number One: You could do what you are doing because you are motivated by how much reward or prize money it brings. You may not necessarily like doing what you are doing, but maybe you are doing what you are doing because you are good at it. I was pretty good at math in high school, but I didn’t like doing math. I just did it because I was good at it and because I was able to earn AP credit doing it by scoring well. The second possible motivation you might have to do what you are doing is that you do something purely out of enjoyment of doing the very thing you are doing, regardless of how competitive it is, and regardless of what rewards it brings if you are good at it. You might like basketball because you just love basketball, and you don’t care about challenging yourself to a higher competitive level, nor do you have dreams to make millions being an NBA star.

A third reason you may be motivated to do something is because you do it to get the applause, attention, and respect of people around the world who recognize you as being the best of the best. You do it because you love the attention and the bragging rights that becoming number one brings. That makes sense right? It’s pretty hard to enjoy being number one if nobody knows you are number one. If you are trying to break one of the Guinness book of world records, likely nobody is going to try to break it in private, with no one else as an eyewitness, just for the satisfaction of you knowing you broke it. Or the fourth reason you could be doing what you are doing because of some combination of all the above. As I speak, my sister is doing the Ironman 70.3 in the Tri-Cities. She’s probably either doing the biking part or running part right now. I believe it’s 1.2 miles of swimming, then 56 miles of cycling, then a half marathon of running 13.1 miles. Talk about loving the feeling of pain and suffering! My sister’s nickname in high school was “The Beast.” As painful and difficult as that is, she loves doing Triathlons and probably gets gratification from being on the top woman athletes. She’s not doing it to pay the bills, but she loves doing it.

Now that applies to the world, but what about for the Christian and all the passages in the Bible that talk about disciplining ourselves for the purpose of godliness and running this race of life as best as we can and passages like this one in 1 Corinthians 3 that’s on rewards? For the Christian, when it comes to the first motivation, should Christians be motivated to strive for godliness, holiness, and faithfulness in Christ because of what he will get out of it, as if his livelihood depended on it? No Christians should not be motivated for these eternal heavenly rewards like an athlete would look forward to being number one so that he could get millions out of it and pay his bills. The bill, the “prize money,” so to speak has already been paid for in full by Christ when He died to pay the penalty for our sins. Colossians 1:12 says the Father “*has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*” Or later on Colossians 2:14-15 puts our salvation in terms of purchase and getting the receipt as proof of our purchase. “*Christ has canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us which was hostile to us, He also has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*” It was as if Christ purchased our eternal life for us to the Father, and the Father took the receipt and stamped it on the cross saying “paid in full.”

Well what about the second motivation of doing something purely because you enjoy doing it? For the second motivation, for the Christian that is a yes. A Christian should be motivated to be and live out his life as a Christian simply because he enjoys his freedom as a believer in Christ, regardless of how well he does or what he gets out of it, whether good or bad. Jesus spoke about how following His commands will bring true joy in Him, not because obedience to His commands brings salvation, but because obedience to His commands are not a burdensome task but a joyful one. John 15:9-11 “*Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete*.” What about the third motivation that you are doing it because you enjoy the applause, accolades and recognition and pleasure from the crowds recognizing you as one of the best of the best? That is both a yes and a no for the believer. Yes, a Christian should be motivated to live the Christian life because he loves and gets satisfaction from the applause and praise of God. But it’s a no when it comes to pleasing men. Paul says in Galatians 1:10 says “*For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a slave of Christ*.” Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 2:4 says “*but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts*.”

From the world’s perspective, ego and pride are encouraged to be fed so that you can be brag about being more superior or better than everyone else in that field. But for the believer, running this race of life as best and as faithfully as you can is not so that you would feel more superior or better than other Christians (which would be legalism and sinful and will cause divisions), it’s living and racing to please not yourself but God who alone belongs the glory. It’s not a competition in that sense that the world thinks, it’s not a rat race, to one up each other, and to climb the corporate ladder. Last time we were in 1 Corinthians, Paul said that “*he and Apollos are one*.” One is not better than the other. I am not better than you, you are not better than me. God has gifted each member of his body uniquely to help serve and complement one another’s weakness.

I remember the pastor of the church I went to while in college was preaching on a similar passage on rewards. And he gave a word picture of Christian kindness and love saying that the church should look a bunch of Christians in front of a revolving door of a building. On the other side of that door are other people in need and needing to be served. The church should have this healthy type of competitive kindness where there are believers trying to outdo one another with kindness by pushing their way through the revolving door of kindness and love saying “How can I serve you?” only to be pushed back inside the building by a Christian pushing his way to the outside people through the other way saying “How can I serve you?” And it should keep going on like that. In Romans 12:10, it says that we are to be “*devoted to one another in brotherly love, giving preference to one another in honor*.” That word for “giving preference” can be translated “outdo.” The word is proegeomai, translated something like “lead the way” but you aren’t leading the way for yourself, you are leading the way by being last and being a servant, which is a concept the world finds foolish and backwards.

One final question you might have is why mention rewards at all? Why this language of rewards? Well I think God has mentioned this aspect of rewards to motivate us to more faithful living in part because it’s an analogy and picture that is easy for us to relate to. We work hard in a corporate job to earn a promotion. We work hard as an athlete to one day win gold and earn a medal. We tend to do better and tend to be more motivated as human beings when there is a goal or reward for our hard work. But for the believer, the right way is to think of it in reverse. For us, working hard at being a “Christian” is not because we want to earn heaven, but because we want to reflect the joy of having heaven in the way we live our lives unto God. Working for those eternal rewards that God is going to give to the faithful is the joy and motivation to work for them not because we are lacking those rewards and need those rewards to fulfill a missing hole in our lives, but because of what those rewards symbolizes. A professional athlete isn’t trying to win “gold” primarily because that “gold metal” is so valuable that he can sell it for enough money to retire. No, he seeks after the gold because he wants to display it on his shelf of glory. He wants it because of what it symbolizes, that he has worked extremely hard and has fought his hardest to earn that number one spot in the Olympics.

And so that leads us to verses 16-17 of chapter 3. I was supposed to cover this in our last sermon, but I felt it was more appropriate to leave these verses for this sermon. Look with me at VV. 16-17 “*Do you not know that you are a sanctuary of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the sanctuary of God, God will destroy him, for the sanctuary of God is holy, and that is what you are*.” Do you see how much God treasures and values the body of Christ? We are a holy sanctuary of God. The Holy Spirit of God dwells inside each one of us and is the one who is uniting all current believers and future believers into the body of Christ. We are supposed to represent the holiness of God on earth. That is a staggering privilege to think about that we as wretched, depraved sinners get to represent the holiness of the Holy One of God on earth? But as beautiful and pure as the holiness of God is, it is also dangerous for anything impure to be a part of it. Anything impure will be cleansed from the sanctuary of God, the church like how Ananias and Sapphira’s sin of deceit against the Holy Spirit was cleansed from the early church in Acts. And similarly, God says He will destroy anyone who tampers with the holiness of His people.

In its immediate context, that is likely referring to the false teachers that have crept into the church of Corinth and were tampering with the gospel and with the holiness of God’s people. It is a serious warning against those who take the holiness of God lightly. And that warning of destruction is not only for physical destruction but spiritual destruction as well for all those who reject the gift of the Holy Spirit coming to indwell someone. If the Holy Spirit does not dwell within you, then that means you don’t know Christ or are rejecting Him. To reject Christ is to reject His Spirit. To accept Christ is to accept His Spirit. Because God is too good and because God is too loving, He will one day come to make all things holy, separate from sin, so that His people can enjoy Him forever without the sorrow of sin. Zechariah 14:20-21 says, “*In that day there will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, “Holy to Yahweh.” And the pots in the house of Yahweh will be like the bowls before the altar. And every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to Yahweh of hosts; and all who sacrifice will come and take of them and boil in them. And there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of Yahweh of hosts in that day.*” Don’t be one of those unclean Canaanites that will be turned away into hell by Jesus when he says, “*I never knew you*.” Be one of redeemed whom the Lord will welcome with open arms *“well done, good and faithful slave, enter into the joy of your master*.” [pray]