1 Corinthians 3:8-17 Sermon Manuscript

“Are There Heavenly Rewards?” Part 1

We are very familiar with the concept or idea of awards or rewards for good works or achievements. We can be awarded the most prestigious trophy in college football; the Heisman trophy. Or you can win a Grammy for being an outstanding musician, or you can win an Oscar award if you are a Hollywood actor. Or if you win gold at an Olympic event, well…you get a gold medal. Well when it comes to the Christian life, are there such a thing as rewards for living faithfully? You might be surprised or even shocked to hear me say that there is such a thing as eternal rewards for living faithfully as a believer, but not in the way you might think. And because there is much for me to say about this topic, I want to divide this topic up into two parts. The first part, today, will go over verses 8-17 of chapter 3 and I will introduce this topic of whether there is such a thing as heavenly rewards. And furthermore, if there is eternal or heavenly rewards, how are we to think about it. And next week I hope to talk more deeply about that topic. Last week we looked at the question, whether it was possible for a Christian to be a “carnal Christian,” in the sense that Scripture sees a legitimate third category that Christians can fall into. And because that topic was confusing and controversial, I spent a good amount of time focusing on it, while still going through our passage. And in a similar way, because this topic of rewards is often a confusing for believers to sort out and potentially controversial, I want to focus much of our time on it.

For those of you who haven’t been with us consistently in our series of 1 Corinthians, the first three chapters that we have looked at is on division in the church. The church at Corinth had a number of issues of immorality, division, and wrong doctrine or wrong understandings of God’s Word and/or wrong application of God’s Word. All of these issues can be traced back to a forsaking of and deviation from the gospel. And God through the apostle Paul writes this letter to get them to correct these issues through going back to the gospel. And the first one that the apostle Paul works on is division in the church, specifically caused by the Corinthian believers forming factions or groups or followings after certain leaders in the church. Paul starts off in chapter 1, verses 10 through 12 saying this: “*Now I exhort you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ*.”

Forgetting who is the head of the church and the forgetting the foundation of the church, which is Jesus Christ, the Corinthian believers were exalting and boasting in and lifting up on a pedestal the various leaders that helped to found the church. They were basing their criteria for a great preacher or a great church leader on the worldly and sinful values around them. The Greek culture of that day valued and esteemed how rhetorical a preacher sounded, how persuasive he was in his speech, whether he was a great debater and eloquent with his words. They were not so concerned with the content of the message and whether it was truth or not, as much as they were concerned with how much the preacher or speaker could woo and impress the crowds with his speaking antiques. And so we ended last Sunday with verses 6 through 7 of chapter 3 where the Word of God says “*I (Paul) planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth*.”

Now if Paul ended chapter 3 right there at verse 7, there might be some confusion and wrongful conclusions, and misunderstandings that might be drawn from what he has just said. He was just emphasizing the “nothingness” of the preachers like himself in comparison to God who has the power of growing the church regardless of the vessel. So the conclusion might be drawn that it doesn’t matter how faithful you are or how much you have to get God’s word right to be used effectively by Him, because after all God is going to grow and build His church regardless of the way you build the church. But that is not at all what Paul would like us to conclude from this, and that’s why he continues on in verse 8 emphasizing that the way we build a foundation, the way we act, live, and build on top of the church is just as important as recognizing the fact that God alone builds the church and God alone gets all the glory.

So he continues in verse 8, look with me: “*Now he who plants and he who waters are one, but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.”* When he says “he who plants and he who waters are one” he’s referring to the fact that one is not better than the other unlike the Corinthian believers who were propping up one apostle or leader over the other. No, they are equal, they are one in Christ, they are working for the same purpose and end goal, to glorify God. However, “*each will receive his own reward according to his own labor*.” Sounds almost like a contradiction? But there are no true contradictions in the Word of God so what is Paul talking about? Surely he’s not saying that our salvation comes by works? I thought salvation comes only by God’s grace through faith, and not of works?! Yes, that’s true. The Word of God is clear that you cannot earn or keep your salvation by doing good works or working hard for the Lord. Salvation comes by God’s work and power alone. We are kept by God alone. However, that doesn’t mean there is no responsibility or accountability to God for the way we live our lives here on earth. We are responsible for how we build on top of the foundation of Jesus’ church.

So that’s why in verse 9, Paul gives a construction analogy to help us see if we are building our own lives in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. Verse 9 he says “*For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building*.” The “we” here is referring to Paul and Apollos and Cephas and all the other apostles and prophets who laid the foundation down for the church. These apostles are fellow workers, and the “you” in the “you are God’s field” is speaking to the Corinthian believers, and thus to all believers. He goes in verse 10: “*According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.* God gave the apostle Paul His grace to save him, and through the grace that Paul received, like a wise architect, he laid a foundation, and another is building on it (like Apollos who came along later). Paul recognizes that he and the other apostles and prophets are laying down a foundation, but only Jesus Christ can lay down the chief foundation or chief cornerstone foundation that is the foundation of all other foundations built on it. Ephesians 2:20 says that the church is built on the “*foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone*.”

Now there are no longer any apostles and prophets today like it was back then when the church was still being established, so nobody today is laying a “foundation” in the church like Paul or Apollos would lay a “foundation” today. However, there is still an application for us today. We are all contributing one way or another in building up the church of Jesus Christ. Through the way we live, the way we serve, and the way we use the various gifts that God has given to us to build one another up, we are affecting how the church is growing and being built up. However we have the potential to forget about the chief cornerstone. We have the potential to forget that ministry is all about glorifying Christ instead of ourselves. That is why Paul warns us in verse 10 that “*each man must be careful how he builds on it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ*.

And if we forget that the church, and the Christian life is all about Jesus and His glory and not our own, then we may find out before the judgment seat of Christ, that our works was worthless and will be burnt up because it was done with a right heart motive. And so starting in verses 12 through 15, it says, “*Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident, for the day will indicate it because it is revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work*. *If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire*.”

Now you can imagine that if you show these verses to any works-based religion, they would be glad that this is in the Bible because it seems to support their worldview. Roman Catholics go to this verse to support their doctrine of purgatory and other works-based doctrines. Of course, it’s a misinterpretation or an abusive interpretation of these passages. As I mentioned before, this is not talking about a works-based salvation. The Bible is crystal clear that salvation comes only by God’s grace given as a gift and received by faith. It does not come by works, and it is not kept by our works. True saving faith does produce the fruit of good works, but true saving faith is not started by or kept by good works. See Ephesians 2:8-10. Well when we stand before the “bema” judgment seat of Christ (this judgment is for believers, not the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers), we will have our lives evaluated. And the “quality” of the building materials we have used in our life so to speak will be tested by some fiery trial. I don’t know what the fiery trial will look like, all I know is that God is going to test the foundation and building materials we have used in our life to see whether it withstands his test of holy fire. Anything that we have based our lives off of that is not the foundation of Jesus Christ will be revealed to be wood, hay, and straw and will be burnt up and we will suffer loss. We will realize with sorrow how much we could have lived our lives more for Christ and we will have regret.

But wait a minute Teru. I thought in the book of Revelation God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more sorrow, and pain, or crying for the former things have passed? Well, actually, I believe that wiping away of the tears happens after the judgment seat of Christ. Scripture does not say the exact timing of when the judgment seat of Christ happens for believers. Some say it happens as early as when you die and go to be with the Lord you will be judged for your works. But some put it as late as the Great White Throne Judgment, where the judgment of believers for their works happens around the same time as the Great White Throne judgment of unbelievers for their eternal judgment. So even if the “Bema” judgment, or the judgment seat of Christ happens right before or at the same time as the Great White Throne Judgment, still it is before Revelation 21 where God creates the new heaven and new earth and where he then wipes away every tear from our eyes. I think among those tears that are wiped away by God, there will be tears of mourning and sorrow and shame over the parts of our life that we did not live our life to the fullest for Christ.

And if you think about it, when that time comes, if you have a glorified body free from sin, you will all the more be able to sense your sense of shame and regret because you are more acutely able to see and discern the parts of your life that were sinful and were not fully for Christ more than you were able to discern back in your earthly life with a corrupted body. I am not conscience of anything that I do in my life as sinful or contradicting the Word of God. It is not to say I don’t sin or I don’t realize when I sin. Oh for sure, just ask Heidi!!! What I am saying is that in the future when I stand before Christ, there may be things in my life that I thought were not sinful or thought were glorifying to Christ, when in reality, it wasn’t and I find out through the testing of God’s purifying fire that what I thought was gold, silver, and precious stones was actually wood, hay, and straw.

But even though we might have that moment when our works of wood, hay, and straw are burnt up and we feel that shame, but praise God I don’t think it will last forever because heaven is going to be filled with wonder, joy, peace, and praise to our Savior and God is going to wipe away every tear from our eyes, because those memories of our sin were in the past, and the Bible says in Revelation 21:4 “*there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.[for] The first things passed away*.” If there is a possibility even if it’s brief of experiencing shame, sorrow, or regret for things not done and things that shouldn’t have been done, isn’t that all the more motivation to live ever more faithfully to Him? Wouldn’t we want to live SO THAT we don’t have to experience that? That’s why 1 John 2:28 says “*And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He is manifested, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming*.” And so as Jesus Christ, our Lord, Master, and Savior, told His disciples, let us abide in Christ so that we would bear much fruit. And if you are truly one of Jesus’ disciples, if you truly are one who keeps Jesus’ commandments, Jesus said you will abide in His love, because it’s not you who ultimately makes you abide in Christ, it is God Himself who makes you abide in the love of Jesus Christ His Son. Bethel, above all things, keep abiding in Christ.