

Eternal Rewards: Living for Maximum Eternal Joy

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

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Today is our third message from 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. This is another application message for one of the key passages in the New Testament about the judgment seat of Christ.

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. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

I'm not going over everything we've said thus far, but it is important to realize that there are two future judgments to come. One for the unforgiven and condemned and one for those whose sins are forgiven by faith in Christ. The first is known as the *The Great White Throne Judgment* and is a moral judgment which ends in condemnation to hell because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The second is called in 2 Corinthians 5:10, *The judgment seat of Christ. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* (2 Corinthians 5:10) This is not a moral judgment for heaven or hell as the Christian's moral debt was paid by Christ on the cross and appropriated to the Christian by faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The judgment seat of Christ is a judgment of life service that we served, sacrificed, stewarded and suffered for Christ. The judgment seat of Christ is a qualitative judgment in which our lives will be evaluated. In verse 14 it says, "some will receive a reward." Verse 15 says, "some will suffer the loss of reward." So there are two kinds of sinners in eternity. Unforgiven and forgiven. It is pretty important to ask, which will I stand before? You don't want to be at the Great White Throne Judgment and the judgment seat of Christ calls for constant consideration.

The aim of our mini-series is to help us live today in such a way that we will be glad we did when we stand before Jesus to give an account. I have been asked the question, *Do we just do it only for the rewards?* No, receiving a reward is one of several motives for serving Christ.

Biblical Motives for Serving Jesus

Duty/obedience (Luke 17:10)

If Jesus is our Savior, than He is also our Lord. We are obligated to obey God regardless of our feelings or circumstances. *So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'* " (Luke 17:10) This is somewhat similar to asking why we have to obey what our parents say. Their answer is, *Because I said so.* There is a simple obedience element to following Christ. We do what He says because He said so and He is our Lord. We have talked about how duty

obedience is missing something important. God is not honored by our “have to’s” but by our “want to’s” - our obligations.

Love (2 Corinthians 5:14)

Paul says, *Christ’s love compels us.* (2 Corinthians 5:14, NIV). Love is both the wonder of God’s love to us and our need to love Him in response.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Sacrifice without love is empty. This is the first great commandment, to love the Lord your God; serving Him for love and deep affection honors Him.

To please God (2 Corinthians 5:9)

When you love somebody, you want to please them. Paul writes, *we make it our aim to please him.* (2 Corinthians 5:9b) Indeed we do! Why? Because we love God. Why do we love him? Because he first loved us. (1 John 4:10)

Reward

Does doing something for reward strip it of its virtue? Apparently not or God would never fill the Bible with promises of reward and commendation from Christ. It’s important to realize that the reward is not a payment. God is not obligated to give us anything. It is a love gift from Christ to His faithful servants. He doesn’t have to give us anything. He’s under no obligation and our service creates no debt He owes us. He gave His life for us and there isn’t any Christian who understands the gospel at all who would say that’s not more than enough reason to serve Him. Yet, in addition to His life, He promises to lavish us with rich reward. Why? He is a generous King.

Eternal rewards create a dilemma for us in how to view our eternity. If every Christian is completely happy in eternity, how are those with rewards happier and more honored than those without reward from Christ? Here’s the real question, *Is eternity the same for all Christians? Is heaven the same for everyone?*

Is Eternity the Same for All Christians?

The answer to this is no. It is not the same. There will be degrees of reward and with those rewards come greater joy and happiness to those who receive them. Yet here is the paradox I want to explain – everyone is completely and fully happy, but those with rewards are happier.

There is obviously a lot we don’t know about this and we have to approach it with humility. But from Scripture both truths are clear. Salvation and eternal life are the same for all Christians, but some are happier in eternity than others. Nobody will be less than fully happy in heaven. *In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.* (Psalm 16:11) To be with God is fullness of joy. To see Christ in His glory and to fellowship with Him face to face is human ecstasy. However, there are clearly levels of honor in eternity. For example, Jesus told His disciples they would sit on 12 thrones judging

the tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19:28). The disciples (all but one of whom died as martyrs for Christ) will have great honor. *The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations.* (Revelation 2:26)

The last description of what's going to happen is Revelation 22:4-5. *They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.* (Revelation 22:4-5, emphasis added) Somehow these rewards are the basis for distinction and authority on the New Earth. The greater our service, sacrifice, stewardship, and suffering in this life for Christ, the greater our honor and happiness in eternity.

Our service, suffering, sacrifice, and stewardship for Christ grow our love for Him in this life and are the measure of our joy capacity in eternity.

The eternal rewards are not material; they are not physical crowns on our heads. Real riches and pleasure in eternity are fullness of joy in Christ and fullness of joy from Christ (Colossians 2:2). Right now let's refuse to let the lie of American materialism minimize this. We don't get it. Someday we will. Here's the deal. As we serve Christ, suffer for Him, sacrifice for His kingdom, and steward the opportunities we have, our love for Christ grows and our capacity to experience fullness in eternity grows as well. The result is that eternity is not the same for everyone. Everyone's fully happy, but some have more reward and more eternal joy than others. *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* (2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV)

Let me illustrate it this way. I have three glasses here. A shot glass, a medium-sized glass, and a large glass vase. The shot glass represents the man in 1 Corinthians 3 whose life had little service for Christ, didn't sacrifice much, didn't do much that mattered in eternity, wasted his life. The medium glass symbolizes a Christian who did some, but not as much as they could have. The large glass vase symbolizes the faithful servant who lived with the proverb, *Only one life twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last.* How do some grow their capacity from the small to the large? We covered these last week.

Criteria that Christ's rewards are based on: (These are taken from the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 951-2)

- **Enduring temptation** – James 1:12
- **Diligently seeking God** – Hebrews 11:6
- **Motivated by God's praise, not man's** – Matthew 6:5-6; 1 Corinthians 4:5
- **Dying for Christ** – Revelation 2:10
- **Degree of Sacrifice** – Matthew 19:29
- **Faithfully doing God's will and longing for Christ's return** - 2 Timothy 4:8
- **Acts of kindness** – Galatians 6:10
- **Hospitality (cups of cold water)** – Matthew 10:40-42
- **Faithfulness in service** – 1 Corinthians 4:2; Matthew 25:14ff.
- **Stewardship of the abilities and opportunities God gave us** – Matthew 25:14ff.; Mark 12:41ff.

Our lives create a capacity for eternal joy which Christ promises to fill. Our church is on Lake Michigan water. There is a huge reservoir of water just like there is huge reservoir of joy God has and can give to us. The question is not the size of the reservoir (infinite) but the size of our love grown by a life of service and faithfulness. So the shot glass Christian steps into eternity and God fills him with joy. The medium service Christian steps into eternity with a greater capacity and God fills him with joy. The third person steps into eternity and is filled as well, but he has more joy than the other two, yet all are full of joy.

Doesn't this change how we might look at service and trials that grow our glass? When we suffer some heartbreak but trust God in it, it grows our glass. When we give up something valuable to us for Christ's sake and His kingdom, it grows our glass. When we serve Jesus faithfully in the ups and downs of life, it grows our glass. At the same time, sin shrinks the glass. Laziness shrinks the glass. Halfhearted service shrinks the glass. And then we die.

When we die, we step into eternity with a glass capacity that our lives have created and that God will fill with joy in Him - some with more, some with less. What size glass do you have?

To try to illustrate this, I wrote a short story that I'd like to share with you. Jesus often did this in His teaching and this is my first attempt at it. I am hoping this story will motivate us to seek a big reward.

There once was a Master who owned a very large estate. His estate was located close to a debtor's prison. The prison was for those whose debts were so large they could not repay them. Over the years, the Master hired servants for his estate from the debtor's prison by personally paying off the debt of the prisoner. He would give them a home on his estate and a job suited to their skills. He gave all his servants the same opportunity to work and labor in his sprawling estate. He provided for all their needs and told them that they would all be rewarded for their faithful work someday. Word around the place was that the Master was going to permanently leave the estate. Nobody knew for sure or what that would mean.

The other important figure at the estate was the Master's son. The Master loved his son very much. This was obvious throughout the estate because it was filled with portraits, pictures, and paintings of the Master's son. Everyone on the estate knew the son and the son knew them. Every day he walked the grounds, greeted the servants, and tried to encourage them in their work.

Time passed. Then one day, as had been rumored, the Master and his son permanently left the estate. After all this time, the workers were eager to discover what their reward would be. His lawyer gathered all the workers to tell them what the Master's final wishes were. The lawyer announced that the Master wanted them to continue to work on the estate. As a reward for their service, he was bestowing upon his servants every picture and painting of his son scattered throughout the estate. Big and small, paint or stencil, each servant would receive one portrait. He also announced that the Master had set a schedule when each servant was to leave the estate. At that time they could choose their favorite portrait and take it with them.

There was a stunned silence in the room. Some were disheartened as this was not at all the reward they were expecting or wanting. During their years of serving, they were not too concerned about pleasing the Master or his son. Sure, they put forth some effort when the son or others were watching. But mostly they spent their time relaxing in the nicer sections of the estate. They and their friends were almost like a little club to themselves. Every once in a while they'd pool their money and send it to workers in rougher sections of the estate. However, their real passion was enjoying the comforts and luxuries available there.

Among them was Lonnie Smith. As he processed what the lawyer said he felt dismayed. Lonnie figured when his time came to leave, he'd pick the smallest and most conveniently carried photo of the Master's son he could find. No reason to burden himself with a big frame or heavy picture.

Others at the assembly were surprised and quite happy about this. You see, they loved the artwork of the son around the estate because over time, they had come to deeply love and admire the Master's son.

But which picture to choose? They wondered.

Susan Winters had always loved the large portrait of the son in the dining room. He looked so courageous in it. Whenever she was working in the dining room it motivated her to do the best she could. Old Tom Parker thought about the life-size portrait of the son in the grand entryway. When he came to work discouraged he would often walk past it and stare. The Master's son looked so strong in that picture that Tom thought, "Since he's around here, what do I have to be afraid of?" He got through lots of hard days while his wife struggled with cancer just letting that picture remind him of the strength of the Master's son.

Then there was Rosie Johnson. Rosie worked in a dark corner of the mansion's basement. Her job was doing the laundry. She didn't get out much as the laundry required constant attention. In fact, most people in the estate didn't even recognize her or acknowledge her work. They were glad for the clean towels and linens but didn't give much thought to where they came from. Yet Rosie served faithfully year in and year out.

When the announcement was made that they would be allowed to take a picture of their choice, she knew immediately which one would be hers. You see, before Rosie came to the Master's estate, she had slaved away in the laundry pit at the debtor's prison. She despised everything about being there and hated everyone around her. She was filled with bitterness and anger. But one day the warden came to Rosie and told her that someone cared enough for her to buy her out of the debtor's prison. She was dumbfounded. Who would give money for someone like her?

As she stepped out of the dark prison, she met the Master and his son for the first time. They hugged her and told her that they loved her and always had. The son said, *I have something special I want you to do. I want you to use your ability to do laundry and help make our estate beautiful. Will you do this for us?* Rosie would never forget how happy she was to be out of the prison and to be personally serving such a wonderful Master and his son. She did think to herself, *I love those men. I will do my best for them.*

Several years after leaving the debtor's prison and serving in the basement laundry, Rosie discovered in a dark corner of the basement a hidden storage room. Since she was the only one who went down there, she was the only one who knew the treasure she had found there. In that dusty room, Rosie discovered a mirror. At first she thought it was just a big, old dusty mirror and put it away. Years later she looked at it again. A strange thing was happening. As she saw herself in the mirror, she could just faintly see, almost like a hologram, the subtle image of the Master's son in the mirror. It spooked her and she put it away quickly thinking she'd never look again.

Sometime later, after a very hard thing happened in her life, Rosie went and looked at that mirror again. Strangely, she saw her face, but now even more clearly, in her face she saw also the face of the Master's son. Similar to how a child can look like her mom and her dad at the same time. Disturbed, she put it away. But over the years as she continued to serve faithfully in that basement laundry, she would sneak a look at the mirror and she would see less and less of her reflection, and more and more of the Master's son. In fact, it actually looked less like a mirror and more like a portrait of the Master's son all the time. She came to love that frame because the less she saw of herself in it, the more she saw of the son.

Time continued to pass. Slowly workers were called to leave the estate according to the Master's schedule. The workers wondered what it was like on the other side of the tall walls. They wished someone who left would shout over the walls and let them know what it was like there, but they never did.

Then one day, Susan Winters, Tom Parker, Lonnie Smith and Rosie Johnson were all summoned to leave the estate at the same time. They were told to leave everything behind, select their favorite picture of the Master's son, and go to the gate. Like all the others before them, they felt anxiety about what awaited them on the other side of the walls of the estate.

Susan rushed to the dining room and carefully removed the courageous painting of the son that had given her courage as well. Tom Parker stood in the vast entry of the mansion and gazed one last time at the life-size portrait. With effort he took it down and headed for the gate. Lonnie Smith simply dropped his things and picked the smallest photo of the son he could find as he sauntered toward the exit. Rosie Johnson tiptoed down the dark steps to the basement one last time. She hoped, after all these years, no one had secretly taken the mirror from the hidden closet. She smiled as she found it and looked one last time. By now there was no reflection of her at all in the frame. The mirror looked entirely like a portrait. She struggled as it was quite large and too big for an old woman. But the adrenaline of being summoned and leaving the estate helped her lug the mirror all the way to the gate.

Susan, Tom, Lonnie, and Rosie each took a deep breath and stepped through the door. They were shocked at what they found on the other side. It was another estate - like the old one, only better - brighter, somehow happier. Something strange began to happen with the pictures they held. The larger and heavier the picture was, the larger and heavier it became. The lighter and smaller a picture was, the lighter and smaller it became; kind of like how a number multiplies and gets bigger and a fraction multiplies and gets smaller.

As their eyes adjusted, who was standing there before them but their old Master and his son! But now they seemed so different as well - healthy, vibrant, glowing with energy and joy. The Master answered their bewilderment by telling them no one on the estate dies; they just leave the old one and come to the new one.

The next thing that happened was also shocking. The Master said, "Bring to me my picture of my son!" Susan Winters stepped forward with hers unsure as to what all this meant. The Master looked at the courage picture and said, "I love this picture and I love that you do too. I will now give to you 1000 times the weight of this portrait in gold. Susan gasped. It was a very heavy picture and she was only a laborer after all. "Why are you giving this to me?" She asked. The Master said, "I am rewarding you according to your love for my son. In your love for him, you brought a big picture and great will be your reward."

Tom Parker stepped forward with his life-size painting. The Master laughed with delight to see it again. "I remember the day I put it in the entry." he said. "I have always loved this picture. Thank you for loving my son and his portrait too." Tom was stunned. The scale reported a gold value he couldn't even calculate. He was filled with joy!

Lonnie Smith was excited. Now was his chance. After years of living for comfort on the old estate, he hoped for more of the same in the new. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the wallet size photo of the Master's son he had brought. The Master frowned. There was an awkward silence. The Master's son kicked at the ground. Finally the Master said, "Is this all you brought?"

"I am afraid so," Lonnie replied. "But can I still get what Tom got?"

The Master said, "Like all the others, you will be fully rewarded according to your love for my son. Of course, faithful service on my estate, sacrifices of time and energy, were all designed by me to increase your love for my son. I did this so that when you left, you'd bring a big picture because I love to give a big reward. But Lonnie, you lived for convenience and personal comfort and they don't produce love for my son. The picture you brought will be the measure of your reward and happiness in the new estate because here, it's all about him." And he pointed fondly at his son. With his reward in hand, Lonnie stepped into the new estate fully happy, but with less happiness than Tom and Susan.

Finally, Rosie stepped forward. Everyone knows mirrors are really heavy, but after stepping through the gate, this mirror weighed more than she could move. It took many others' assistance to put her picture on the scale. As the scale hummed to calculate the weight and reward, the Master winked at the son. The son beamed with happiness. When the final tally was announced, you could hear gasps and cheers from all over the estate. Everyone there was thrilled for Rosie, but none more than the Master and his son.

"You have been a good and faithful servant, Rosie. Thank you for serving me in the basement laundry. We had the cleanest linens to be found anywhere. Now, great shall be your reward."

Rosie didn't know what to say. How could a laundry girl and an ex-con like her be the recipient of so much reward and joy? She finally said, "I have to ask you, over the years, why did the mirror turn into a portrait of the son?"

The Master's son said, "That's just it, dear one. All of the pictures in the estate actually were not pictures at all. They all were mirrors. The more you loved me and served me, the more the mirror looked like a portrait of me. As Susan found her hope in me, the reflection of my courage was seen in the mirror. As Tom found strength in who I was for him in his trial, my strength was portrayed and seen in the mirror. This was even true for Lonnie, only in his case he allowed so little of who I am to be formed in him, all he could ever see around the estate were little pictures. But you, my good and faithful servant, you have been true to me. Great shall be your reward. Welcome to my eternal kingdom!"

And so it shall be for all of us. Might this not change our perspective of the trial we are struggling to get through by faith? It grows our glass. Doesn't this change our perspective on serving God in hard places and difficulty? Every day we live is a day that grows or shrinks our capacity for eternal reward and joy.

So don't waste your life. There are thousands of good things that distract us from doing the things that grow our glass, and someday, our eternal joy. Christian, live today in a way that when you're dead, you'll be glad that you did.

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