**Homeletical Outline: The Reality of Rewards**

**Sermon Purpose:** That my fellow Pastoral Ministries students will live lives motivated and focused by God’s manner of stewardship over their lives and the rewards it promises for profitable labor.

**Homiletical Proposition:** Live and Work as if everything you do in this life counts toward the next!

It’s here. The Texas State fair opened on Friday. Has anyone been yet? Let me tell you an interesting story about the fair:

Not far from here, two ranchers live with almost identical farms, side by side. The only major difference between the two, is that one is an atheist, and the other is a Christian. Each fall, the State Fair gives them an opportunity to compare their farm’s productivity on relatively equal footing. However, in the past, the atheist man always grew annoyed at the Christian farmer’s talk of God’s provision. Finally, one year the atheist issued a challenge to his neighbor: “You keep praising God and I’ll curse Him, then we’ll see who’s right!”

A year later as the fair was approaching it became clear that the atheist’s farm had out-produced the Christian man’s farm…and he was livid with anticipation of their meeting. When the day arrived, the atheist confronted his neighbor with the reality, expecting to be praised for his superior wisdom, and to see his neighbor repent of his “ignorant, religious ways”. When all he got was a calm acknowledgement of his success, the atheist was incensed, and pressed the matter further. “Can’t you see I’ve won?” he asked. But, with the calm, composed demeanor only a Texas farmer could project, the Christian man simply responded, “God doesn’t settle His accounts in October.”

[Pause]

“God doesn’t settle His accounts in October…” That advice needs to ring true for us as well. Like the Christian farmer, we are facing ridicule and discouragement in our lives too. Even in a group of minister’s this size, there’s a strong probability that a few of us will be run out of our first church by the elders. How will you respond if it happens to you? Like the farmer, we have need of a motivation, a perspective that will allow us to endure the difficulties that this life has in store for us.

This afternoon I want to talk to you about living and working from the perspective of eternity—when God settles His accounts. **First**, we’re going to take two texts: Luke 19:11-27—the parable of the minas, and 1 Corinthians 3:8-15—the analogy of the building tested by fire, and place them side by side to help us see the Reality of Rewards that await us. **Then** we’re going to talk about this Reality of Rewards, and why it is a better motivation, a proper motivation, and a motivation that transforms our life and ministry.

Let me set these passages up for you: In Luke, the entire course of Jesus ministry progresses upon His approach to Jerusalem. In chapter 19 we are approaching the climax as Jesus is only one day’s walk from Jerusalem and is about to make the triumphal entry into the holy city. But just before He gets there, Luke records that He tells this parable to prepare everyone for the fact that their expectations of a physical Messianic kingdom are premature.

The parable itself is about a nobleman who gives 10 servants each some money to use while he is away seeking to gain ruling authority over the region. When the nobleman returns, he takes three actions: he rewards the servants who used his money profitably with a HUGE responsibility, he takes back his money from an unprofitable servant, and he slaughters his opponents. Now, unlike the parable of the talents in Matthew (which many of us know so well), this parable includes the added element of enemies so that good and bad servants are distinguished from outsiders. Its goal is to focus our attention on the difference between the kingdom’s insiders. Jesus is teaching his followers about the stewardship of believers in His absence—the unprofitable steward in this parable does not receive punishment—that is reserved for the enemies of the king. The difference between the stewards in this parable, is that the profitable stewards are rewarded according to their labors, and the unprofitable steward does not receive a reward. (Possibly read v.16-24) That’s the solid foundation on which the Reality of Rewards is built.

The other foundation I want to explore with you is found in 1 Corinthians 3. It is the analogy of the building tested by fire that Paul uses to suspend the church’s judgment upon his ministry and motivate the workers in Corinth to live and work in sync with God’s purposes for the church in that city. Twice, Paul points to the result that will come from labor for the Lord. In verse 8 talking about himself and Apollos, he says, “*each will receive his own reward according to his own labor*.” Then in verses 13 through 15, he says of the work of others who are building upon the foundation of Christ that, “*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 as one passing through fire to escape*.”

Luke 19 and 1 Corinthians 3: foundational passages that teach the Reality of Rewards. So rewards are real. What I want us to draw from these two foundations, from Luke’s gospel and Paul’s letter, from Jesus’ parable and from the apostle’s exhortation is an understanding that rewards are a better motivation, a proper motivation, and a motivation that should transform our life and ministry.

First, let’s explore the question, “Why is the reality of rewards a better motivation for us?” Here’s what we find in the passages that we’re exploring: motivation is multifaceted.

What I do mean? Well, the unprofitable steward and the enemies of the nobleman in Jesus’ parable draw a sharp contrast for us. The steward is motivated, and he tells us his motivation. He’s afraid. He’s afraid of his master, because he knows his master places high expectations of the performance of his money. Look at verse 21, “*for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow*.” The nobleman’s enemies by contrast, are not afraid. They send a delegation to oppose him, and when he returns, they are still within his kingdom.

So fear is a legitimate motivation. Like the unprofitable steward, many people come into the kingdom of God because they don’t want to go to hell. They fear being under God’s wrath. The beginning of wisdom, we are told, is fear of the Lord. But fear is not the only motivation for following Christ, its often the foundation of our motivations. Fear is enhanced by gratitude. Gratitude is enhanced by Love. Love is enhanced by daily fellowship with God through the leading of the Holy Spirit. Fellowship is enhanced by growth, and on and on. But amidst these motivations, we find reward. And as the parable suggests, reward is a better motivation than fear. It helps move us past doing the minimum, into acting as a profitable steward.

As John Calvin said it, “It is my ***happiness*** that I have served Him who never fails to reward His servants to the full extent of His promise.” ~ John Calvin

Like the Christian farmer, rewards from God keep us from serving for earthly rewards or depending upon praise from men. And as 1 Corinthians 3 highlights, because they are the result of a quality test from God, they keep us working in the right areas, rather than the wrong ones. Only quality work gets a reward.

The Reality of Rewards is a ***better*** motivation for us in the present life…[Pause]

**and** the Reality of Rewards is a ***Proper*** motivation for us in the present life.

So many people I meet that consider this principle struggle with whether or not reward is a legitimate motivation for us as believers. They feel as if this simply projects selfish ambitions into the heavenly realm, or that it represents God manipulating us in some way…and these are legitimate concerns. After all, we are often disgusted to hear that Islamic terrorists are motivated by their desire for the security and rewards promised to a martyr of the faith…immediate entrance into heaven, seventy virgins, etc.

We ourselves have all likely experienced this as kids, or done this with our own kids. “If you do this, Dad will give you a treat.” And offering rewards for good behavior does produce good behavior…but it does not guarantee that the behavior will be repeated when the reward is gone, or that the behavior is done from the right attitude of heart. Rewards in that sense, teach hypocrisy as much as good behavior. Act good only when it benefits you. This is one of the pitfalls of Prosperity Theology. It’s also one of the problems the nation of Israel struggled with—often dismissing God after they had received His promised blessings.

But herein lies the difference between this philosophy and God’s philosophy of rewards. The same Jesus who gave us this parable of stewardship taught extensively that the motives of the heart count just as much as the actions we take. The apostle who speaks of rewards in 1 Corinthians 3 exhorts us to build carefully—that the quality of our work will be tested—certainly a reference to our motives as much as our results. The rewards we receive depend as much upon what happens inside of us, as what happens outside of us. That’s why they are a proper motivation.

And our desire for rewards is not misplaced. Desire is a good thing in the Christian life. As C.S. Lewis said, “*The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our cross in order that we may follow Christ—and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.*

*If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that it’s a bad thing to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from the teachings of Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of rewards and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak…We are far too easily pleased*.” ~ C.S. Lewis

The Reality of Rewards is a ***better*** motivation for us in the present life…

the Reality of Rewards is a ***Proper*** motivation for us in the present life…

**AND** the Reality of Rewards is a motivation that should transform our life and ministry.

How do we allow the Reality of Rewards to transform our life and ministry? We must take a season of our lives and focus on this reality. We need to let it seep into our lives and refine our classwork, our relationships, and our thoughts, the way a marinade slowly works its way through a nice steak or a thanksgiving turkey, until every inch of the meat oozes with flavor.

Consider how you might dedicate a season of your life to this reality. Read a book on rewards…slowly, thoughtfully. Consider even just reading the gospel of Luke with a focus on this doctrine…as C.S. Lewis said, it is packed with insight that we miss because we have had our mind on other things. Or take time to imagine yourself at the time of rewards. Journal what God might reward you for over the course of the past day, week, month, or year. Lastly, if you need a visual reminder, dig up an old trophy, and set it somewhere to remind you of this reality. Use an earthly symbol to remind you of the heavenly symbol that awaits you: praise from God.

The Reality of Rewards is a Better Motivation for us.

The Reality of Rewards is a Proper Motivation for us.

Let the Reality of Rewards transform Your life and ministry.

The Farmer did not get discouraged by a lack of earthly rewards…

and with the perspective of the Reality of Rewards, neither should we.