

012: The Last Will Be First

(based on Ch. 11 from The End of the Pilgrimage)

Does a system of merit at the Judgment Seat trouble you?

- Does it sound too much like the works-*salvation* of some religious belief systems?
- If so, remember that salvation in the initial sense of regeneration is not in question at the Judgment Seat.
- Though it is possible to lose one's soul and be negatively rewarded, the spirit of a believer is eternally secure, nonetheless.
- Thus, works-*salvation* is completely out of the question.
- Eternal life is not at issue at the Bema; eternal rewards are at stake (1 Cor. 3:13-15).
- Perhaps, then, you are concerned that being rewarded for meritorious behavior after salvation smacks of works-*sanctification*.
- If the doctrine of rewards is taught incorrectly, it surely can.

The problem with works-*sanctification* is twofold.

- First, expecting works to sanctify (i.e., keeping a list or doing certain things to become spiritual) is one of the aspects of legalism Paul condemns in the epistle to the Galatians.
- The apostle made it very clear that we are sanctified the same way we are saved — by faith, not by works!
- **Gal. 3:2** This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?
- (and the correct answer, of course, is BY THE HEARING OF FAITH) — then Paul goes on with a follow-up question:
- **Gal. 3:3** Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

Nevertheless, SPIRITUAL works are definitely an essential component of progressive sanctification.

- Indeed, we will be judged for our works (1 Cor. 3:13-15).
- When James wrote to the Jews who had been scattered abroad, he reminded, *Faith without works is dead*, James 2:20.
- Despite what some theologians have taught through the centuries, James 2:14-26 has absolutely nothing to do with salvation of the spirit, or regeneration
- It is all about soul-salvation, or we could say, progressive sanctification.
- The point of James' admonition is: faith that truly sanctifies is never devoid of works.
- If it is devoid of works, then it is not sanctifying faith.
- It is dead, lifeless sanctification. In short, that believer is not growing in grace.

Unfortunately, in some segments of Christianity works are viewed as the *cause* of progressive sanctification, whereas in reality, they are the *effect*.

- True spiritual works can only flow out of one whose life has been filled with the Holy Spirit.
- As we come to know and submit to Christ in greater measure, we grow spiritually and learn to abide in Him.
- The fruit of such a life in union with Christ is evidenced by spiritual graces and spiritual works ...
- (in contradistinction to works of the flesh — I would recommend that you read Gal. 5:16-24 — and even flesh-dependent good works — that is, works done in the power of one's own strength, rather than in the enabling power of God — I would suggest reading 2 Cor. 3:5-6

- I will address the process of spiritual growth in a future study and hopefully clarify the difference between works-sanctification and sanctified works.

The second problem with the works-sanctification mentality is that it obligates God to reward according to what man does in the name of Christ, without regard to what motivates the doing.

- In spite of the fact that works may be done in flesh-dependence, the worker expects a reward.
- This has led many believers to an entitlement mentality with respect to rewards, an expectation that God has a divine sense of duty to reward their labor and activity for Christ, as THEY define it.
- Is this not especially true of many churches and Christian ministries, whose traditional theology leads them to believe that all saved people are, by nature of their position in Christ, overcomers, and therefore expected to inherit the rewards for overcomers?
- Undoubtedly, many will be shocked one day to discover that their position as children of God is not, of itself, sufficient for receiving rewards at the Bema seat

God is not bound to reward all works done in the name of Christ, particularly not those done with a works-sanctification mindset

- think of Christ's warning, given to believers in Matt. 7:21-23
- **Matt. 7:21** Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.
- **Matt. 7:22** Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?"

- **Matt. 7:23** And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"
- these are not unbelievers being sent to hell
- these are believers losing their inheritance and being excluded from the New Jerusalem, because they do not carry out the will of God
- they do their own thing, which seems to them to be a GOOD, but it is considered disobedience and lawlessness according to God
- Of course, that raises a very important question.
- If we are not to have an entitlement mentality about rewards, then are rewards even a valid motivation for serving God?
- Let's take a few minutes to talk about the motivations that God gives us in His Word for serving Him faithfully
- I see four possible motivations

1. Duty

- **Rom. 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.*
- when we consider all that God has done for us, and the great mercy He has bestowed upon us, it is only logical that we should serve Him in return, by presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to Him
- indeed, it is our DUTY
- **1 Cor. 4:2** It is required in stewards that one be found faithful.
- We are God's stewards; therefore, we should be faithful in our service.

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said:

- and I like the way the KJV words this passage

- **Eccl. 12:13** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this *is* the whole *duty* of man.
- **Eccl. 12:14** For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether *it be* good, or whether *it be* evil.
- At the end of an unsatisfying life, trying all that the world had to offer, Solomon concluded that the only meaningful thing is to fear God and obey Him.
- Indeed, this is our duty.
- In fact, God will judge us as to whether we did our duty.

now we turn to the words of Jesus in Luke 17:7-10

- **Luke 17:7** And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and sit down to eat?"
- **Luke 17:8** But will he not rather say to him, "Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink?"
- **Luke 17:9** Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not.
- **Luke 17:10** So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do."
- Good servants do their duty even if they are never thanked, and they have an attitude of unworthiness about being a servant.
- As believers, we should recognize our un-worthiness to be servants of Christ, demonstrating faithfulness to Him in everything we do.
- that leads to a second biblical motivation for serving the Lord

2. Fear

- **2 Cor. 5:10** For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.
- **2 Cor. 5:11** Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men
- **Heb. 12:28** Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.
- **Heb. 12:29** For our God *is* a consuming fire.
- Believe it or not, the Word of God points to fear as a valid motivation for serving in faithfulness.
- This is not an unhealthy, anxious trembling kind of fear, but rather a profitable, reverent dread of displeasing God.
- In addition to the above verses, 1 Pet. 4:17 reminds us, *Judgment begins at the house of God,*
- and 1 Cor. 11:31 admonishes that we should judge ourselves lest we be judged by God.
- perhaps the most obvious motivation for serving the Lord is:

3. Love

- **1 John 4:19** We love Him because He first loved us.
- and when we truly love Him, we will be keeping His commandments, John 14:15.
- The love of Christ constrains us (it compels us) not to live for ourselves, but for Him who died for us, 2 Cor. 5:14.
- This should be our greatest motivation to obey and serve in faithfulness, but it is also closely connected with rewards, as we shall see.

- Taking this to the ultimate, Paul says something rather startling in the love chapter.
- **1 Cor. 13:3** And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.
- You can give everything you possess to the poor — and even die as a martyr! — both of which have rewards attached therewith if done out of the right motivation (Luke 14:13-14; Rev. 20:4).
- But if you are not motivated by love when you give your possessions or your life, it profits you nothing.
- You will forfeit any reward! That is convicting.
- we come now to the fourth motivation for serving Christ

4. Rewards - both positive and negative

- Although we are to be motivated by duty, fear of displeasing the Lord, and ultimately love, rewards are also motivational, to provoke obedience and faithful service, while deterring misbehavior and neglect of duty.
- More importantly, the heart of Jesus is to bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10), a faithful bride that can co-rule with Him in His kingdom.
- Thus, God has graciously designed a system of rewards for His children, though we are unworthy of His favor.
- Seeing that He has ordained that REWARDS be given for FAITHFUL service, as well as PUNISHMENT for UNFAITHFUL service, we ought to live in a manner that makes us worthy of His rewards.

Let us strive to be rewarded, for that glorifies our Lord!

- **Heb. 11:6** But without faith *it is* impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

- In the Scriptures we find numerous rewards as motivators. Following are just a few from the Beatitudes:
- **Matt. 5:3** Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- **Matt. 5:4** Blessed *are* those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- **Matt. 5:5** Blessed *are* the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- **Matt. 5:6** Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.
- **Matt. 5:7** Blessed *are* the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
- **Matt. 5:8** Blessed *are* the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
- **Matt. 5:9** Blessed *are* the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
- **Matt. 5:10** Blessed *are* those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- **Matt. 5:11** Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.
- **Matt. 5:12** Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven.

On-and-on we could go through the rest of the New Testament.

- The list is quite long and includes many of the parables.
- For instance, the faithful servants in the parable of the talents are handsomely rewarded.
- **Matt. 25:21** His lord said to him, “Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

- The apostle Paul expressed his heartfelt desire for reward:
- **1 Cor. 9:24** Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*.
- **1 Cor. 9:25** And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for* an imperishable *crown*.
- **Phil. 3:14** I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Is it selfish of Paul to want to be rewarded for serving God?

- No, it is biblical.
- In Matt. 19:27 Peter asks Jesus what the disciples will receive for forsaking all and following Him.
- Jesus never rebukes Peter for selfishness but promises him and the others a magnificent reward.
- Then He promises a great reward to anyone who will do the same, and that includes all of us.
- Clearly, we are given motivations to serve, even as we are expected to serve.
- God even warns us not to lose our reward:
- **2 John 8** Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward.

Consider this very important question.

- Shouldn't we be doing all of these things, whether we are rewarded or not?
- Shouldn't we be poor in spirit and mournful and meek and hungering and thirsting after righteousness and merciful, etc.?
- Of course! We should do these things out of duty and fear and, ultimately, love.

- Then why has God attached promises of reward with each of the Beatitudes and with so many other admonitions in Scripture?
- All I can say is because He is gracious and loving and wants to maximize OUR love for Him and HIS love for us.
- **Matt. 6:21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- If we see Jesus as our treasure, our reward, we will love Him more, and we will experience a greater degree of His love in return.

The bottom line is, we serve a good and gracious God.

- Was He obligated to implement a system of meritorious reward for faithfulness out of some inherent goodness on our part?
- Certainly not, but because He has promised to reward, and God cannot lie, He *must* reward — and, in fact, delights to reward — when we lovingly obey and serve him in faithfulness.
- Is not the Scripture abundantly clear on this point?
- Rewards are a valid motivation if kept in proper perspective
- Incidentally, Jesus shared a parable that puts rewards as motivation in proper perspective.
- In the parable He also deals with the entitlement mentality.
- bear with me as I read a lengthy parable from Matt. 20:1-16

Matt. 20:1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

- **Matt. 20:2** Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

- **Matt. 20:3-4** And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went.
- **Matt. 20:5** Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.
- **Matt. 20:6** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?”
- **Matt. 20:7** They said to him, “Because no one hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.”
- **Matt. 20:8** So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first.”
- **Matt. 20:9** And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.
- **Matt. 20:10** But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.
- **Matt. 20:11-12** And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner, saying, “These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.”
- **Matt. 20:13** But he answered one of them and said, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?”
- **Matt. 20:14** Take *what is yours* and go your way. I wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you.
- **Matt. 20:15** Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?”
- **Matt. 20:16** So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

I remember when one of our sons was just a little boy.

- We were having a birthday party and the cake was about to be served.
- He positioned himself at the front of the line and said, “Me first!”
- My wife decided to give him some scriptural admonition, quoting Matt. 20:16, *The last will be first, and the first last.*
- So he instantly moved to the end of the line and said, “Me last!” —
- with the expectation, of course, that he would be served first, because the last will be first.
- He obviously missed the point! What is the point of this difficult passage?

Humanly speaking, our tendency is to be surprised that both groups of laborers — first hired and last hired — receive the same amount of pay.

- Why is that? What is Jesus teaching here?
- I believe the purpose of this parable is to challenge us to think about our motivations for serving Christ.
- Do we serve with the expectation that all saints will receive the same benefits in eternity?
- Do we view rewards as a valid motivation?
- By way of background to the parable, it is important to understand a common workday in the first century was twelve hours, from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.
- A vineyard owner goes into the marketplace before the workday begins — perhaps as early as 5:30 am — to hire workers to harvest his grapes.
- We find that his first group of workers is hired for an agreed amount of a denarius a day, which was the average wage of their day.

The workers seem happy with that amount, and they start work at 6:00 am.

- At the third hour, or 9:00 am, the vineyard owner finds several more workers standing idle in the marketplace and hires them.
- No specified amount of pay is mentioned.
- The vineyard owner simply says, *Whatever is right I will give you.*
- These workers also seem content and go to work.
- Following the same pattern, the vineyard owner hires several more workers at the sixth hour and the ninth hour, or 12:00 pm and 3:00 pm.
- Then, finally, at the eleventh hour, or 5:00 pm, he hires still more workers for the last hour of the day.
- They had been standing idle all day in the marketplace, waiting to be hired.
- He tells them, *Whatever is right, you will receive.*

At 6:00 pm, it is quitting time, and all the men are paid.

- Curiously, the employer starts by paying the last workers first, that is, the ones hired last.
- Remarkably, these workers, who had completely trusted the vineyard owner to do right by them, find that he blesses them abundantly, with a full day's wages for only one hour of work.
- When the laborers who were hired first step up to the cashier for their pay, they expect to receive more, because they see the last group of workers has received a denarius.
- So they expect to receive at least twelve denarii each.
- But they are shocked when the steward gives them only one denarius.
- In fact, they are upset!

- They complain that the workers hired at 5:00 pm have only worked one hour, yet their pay is equal to those who have labored in the heat for twelve hours.

As I said earlier, I believe this parable is about rewards and our motivation for serving God.

- If rewards are a legal payment of sorts for every hour of work done or every act of service performed, then we would have to agree with the disgruntled workers and expect the vineyard owner to pay them more.
- Otherwise, the Department of Labor Relations might get called in.
- But that is not how God has set up the system of rewards.
- It is not a labor contract, paying you for your daily service on His behalf, which is your reasonable service (Rom. 12:1).
- No, God's rewards are an act of His grace in which He bestows upon you what He sees fit, based on your loving labor for Him.

Here is the key, I believe, to understanding the parable.

- The focus is not on the amount of pay.
- The focus is on the attitude of the workers.
- The workers hired after the first round are all rewarded more graciously, it seems, because of their attitude.
- They don't have the attitude that their pay rate needs to be legally negotiated with the boss in advance.
- Nor do they have the attitude that their pay must be equal compensation with everyone else.
- They don't have the attitude that the boss has a legal requirement to fulfill.
- That seems to be the attitude of the first group, but not of the other groups hired later.

The men hired at the third hour, the sixth, the ninth, and the eleventh all completely trust the vineyard owner to treat them rightly, as He sees fit.

- The men hired at the beginning of the day, in contrast, have a legal attitude toward their pay — a “you owe me” attitude.
- We could refer to them as legalists. Therefore, they (the first) are made last.
- In what sense are they first?
- Not merely in the time of their hiring, but also in their attitude – a “you owe me” attitude.
- They do not labor out of love and trust, like the others.
- They serve out of a legal, contractual arrangement that demands legal compensation in return.

Incidentally, isn't this akin to those modern Christians who believe that because they are saved, they are overcomers and, therefore, God has a legal obligation to reward them at the Judgment Seat equally with everyone else?

- Isn't their expectation very similar to the first group of workers hired in this parable?
- I wonder if they will have the same murmuring response as these workers, at the Judgment Seat, when they are made to be last, which probably means least in the kingdom
- After saying the first will be last, Jesus adds, *For many are called, but few chosen.*
- To what are they called? They are called to discipleship and maturity in the Christian life that leads to reward
- in fact, all believers are called to reach that goal – to press toward the mark for that prize

Who, then, are the chosen?

- They are those who fulfill the requirements
- They are chosen by Jesus to become His bride and co-rulers in the coming kingdom.
- and they are chosen because they are faithful, not because they are entitled
- I wonder if those who are not chosen will be upset with themselves and have to learn to live with regret throughout the millennial age, where they will be consigned to the darkness outside.
- I would challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS