

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 26, 2017)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: We are SO Grateful!

Grateful that Our God is a Rewarding God Study #2

(2 Corinthians 5:1-10; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

Introduction: The investment of a lifetime...

“Becoming Warren Buffett” is an hour and a half long HBO documentary that aired back in January. It traces the life and times of Buffett, the Oracle of Omaha, one of the wealthiest people in the world and one of the wisest investors of all time.

At various points during the video, we see Buffett interacting with about a dozen students from Omaha Central High School, talking with them about life, work, and money.

At a certain spot, he asks these teenagers, *“What if someone were to offer to give you a car? Any car you might choose, any color, any make or model. You choose, and it will be delivered to your home, wrapped up in a big bow.”*

(The student’s eyes get big at this point because Warren Buffett could easily give them each a car...but, no, that’s not Buffett’s style)

They know there’s a catch - and there is. He tells them, *“The ‘catch’ is that this is the only car you’re going to get in your lifetime.”*

And the question that goes with this *“What if...”* scenario is, *“If this is the last car you will ever own, how will you treat the car? How will you care for it?”*

Warren Buffett asked his question to encourage these young people to take care of their bodies and their minds, because, after all, they will only get one of each to last them a lifetime.

The question was an exercise in stewardship, about making the investment of a lifetime in caring for what can’t be replaced.

Put yourself in that story. You would take great care of a car if you knew that it would have to last you decades. And, if we have our wits about us, we won’t abuse our bodies or our minds, because they are non-renewable resources. We just get one of each.

Warren Buffett’s *“What if...”* question is a great one when it comes to the material world. This morning, I want to ask a *“What if...”* question about investing and stewardship that relates to the world of the spirit and to our life with God.

Thanksgiving, take 2...

Jesus said that if we place our trust in Him, God will forgive our sins. The New Testament assures us that it is by faith alone in Jesus alone that we escape God’s condemnation. He bore the penalty that should have been ours when He died on the cross.

So, we are now and will eternally be thankful for God’s amazing grace as we spend that eternity in heaven.

But *“What if...”*

What if the quality and the richness of our eternity in glory depends on investments we make in this life?

We “get” the point of Warren Buffett’s little story. The car you get as a 16-year-old will be valuable in your 60’s only if you have taken really good care of it through the years.

So, what if our experience in glory is directly related to our faithfulness *here* and *now*?

In the central passage from the Bible we're looking at today, the Apostle Paul pulls back the curtain and allows us to glimpse eternity. As he does, he not only whets our appetites for what is to come, he tells us how to best prepare for the life that comes after this life is over.

No need to lose heart

In 2 Corinthians (4:16), Paul tells the Corinthians - and us - that we who serve Jesus need never **"lose heart"** in serving Jesus.

Are you not seeing obvious results from your service? That's OK. Life-changing impact is ultimately up to God. Not us. So, be faithful.

Are you not feeling particularly effective for Jesus, not "up" to the challenges life is throwing your way? Again, not a problem. God's strength is best demonstrated when we are weak. His super-adequacy shines through our inadequacy.

By focusing on the *internal* (not our physical body, which is decaying), the *invisible* (the things unseen are more beautiful than what our senses perceive), and the *eternal* (not the temporal stuff that is here today, gone tomorrow), we don't lose heart. We can have great confidence that serving Jesus counts.

And that thought of our service "*counting*" leads Paul to consider this life as a campout.

Our New Home - In Heaven! (5:1-5)

[1] For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. [2] For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, [3] inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked.

[4] For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. [5] Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

I've always enjoyed sleeping in tents, so I like it when Paul presents life on earth as nothing more than an extended camping trip.

On this expedition, though, our bodies are the tents. And tents are, by definition, temporary dwellings. Every tent eventually gets torn down, and the tent that is our body will one day be torn down.¹

One day, each of us will lay our body down and leave this life. Paul says that on that day, our tent will be replaced by a solid stick-built home - a glorified body - built by God that will be ours forever.

And what we call "death" is simply the door through which we all must pass to inhabit this new and improved, permanent body in a glorious place Paul calls "heaven."²

However, until we take up residence in that permanent body in that permanent place, we **"groan"** - to which I say, "*Amen.*"

Increasingly, this "tent" which is our body is sagging in the middle. The stakes are loosening and the rivets are ripping out. And, having experienced *literal* tent failure, I can tell you that it's no fun to be stuck in a tent that's coming apart at the seams.

One time, when my sons were young, I took them and a couple of their friends (Micah Johnson and Nels Jacobson) on a campout to the Hill Country State Natural Area, a state park near Bandera.

The night of the campout it rained. It was a downpour! We got eight inches of rain overnight and a river ran right through our tents.

We started out the night in two tents and ended up with us all in the one tent still standing. It was an interesting, cold, wet, cramped, and smelly night.

¹In the first chapter of John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus "dwelt" with us. The Greek word that is used for "dwelt" is the word meaning "to camp in a tent." The implication is that Jesus was physically with us only a brief period of time.

² Heaven is not just a state of mind. Heaven is a place more REAL than anything we have ever known.

Our tent failed. Tents inevitably fail. These earthly bodies will fail. But our future tent will not fail.

We won't enter eternity with THIS body - to which I say, "Whew!" Nor will we enter eternity DISEMBODIED.³ We will enter eternity with a NEW, GLORIFIED body!

I am both relieved and SO grateful to God when I think about all of this.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes tells us that God has placed **[3:11] eternity in [our] hearts.**

In other words, you and I were designed by God for eternity. We were made to enjoy eternity, not in this disease-ridden, accident- and sickness-prone, groaning tent.

No, we who believe in Jesus have the promise from God that "**a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens**" is our future.

Given this amazing hope for eternity we have a certain resolve for the present. We who anticipate heaven want nothing more than to please the One who has given us such an awesome hope.

Our New Life's Aim: Pleasing Jesus! (vv. 6-9)

[6] Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord - [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight - [8] we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

There is a strangeness in the way we talk about heaven. We say that people "die and go to heaven" as if heaven was a place for dead

³ The Lord Jesus will have a body throughout eternity, that body demonstrating an eternal joining of His deity and His humanity.

people. And then, we refer to this present time when we are absent from the Lord of Life as "life"!

We have it all backwards!

One of the great evangelists of the 1800's, Dwight L. Moody, said this from his deathbed - "*Soon you shall read in the newspapers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe it. I shall then be more alive than now!*"

Dwight Moody had it right. And we don't have this confidence about our life to come because we can "see" what lies beyond the grave. We can't.

No, let's be honest about this. There is mystery about what is on the other side because none of us have ever been there.

We are confident because we are willing to believe that what Jesus says is coming, is coming. As Paul says, **[7]...we walk by faith, not by sight**, and we long for what we only see by faith.

When we keep the future on the front burner, it impacts the way we live, now. And with that future hope intact, we live for Jesus.

[9] Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to the Lord.

Our sins are forgiven because Jesus died. Our eternal future is secure because He rose from the grave. And because of all that He has done for us and because of all that He promises to do for us, we seek to live in such a way that glorifies Him and pleases Him.

Which, believe it or not, leads exactly to what he says next.

The Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:12-15)

Christ, the Judge (v. 10a)

[10a] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ

God as a Judge

It's tempting to believe that the whole idea of God's judgment is old-fashioned and out of style. It isn't. It's tempting to believe that God's judgment contradicts the idea of God's love. It doesn't.

Judgment is a function of love. Take away judgment, you've also taken away love.

Jesus was the most loving Person who ever lived - and at times He is described as a Judge in the Gospels. When He is revealed in the book of Revelation, He is executing judgment.

So, our loving, compassionate God is also a consuming fire.

But, here Paul is writing *to* and *about* Christians. How can he speak of judgment? Christians escape God's condemning judgment when they place their faith in Christ, right?

Yes. We do. And there is no condemnation for the one who is in Christ. But, "no condemnation" doesn't mean "no judgment". And an after-this-life-is-over judgment of believers is a very prominent topic in the New Testament.⁴

Judgment of believers?

No, *punishment* is not at issue when we speak of believers' judgment. Jesus took the punishment for our sins when He died on the cross. We who believe in Jesus will not be punished for our sins.

⁴ One Bible scholar, Thomas Meachum, has said about believer's judgment, - "*The New Testament places just as much emphasis on the judgment of the believer as it does upon the judgment of the non-believer.*"

Neither is *condemnation* at issue in the judgment of believers. Once you are made a member of God's family, God is your forever Father. You who have believed are in no danger of losing the eternal life Jesus gave you. I mean, if you can lose it, it wasn't ever very eternal, was it?⁵

Nevertheless, judgment for Christians is real. Paul says, "***WE must ALL stand before the judgment seat of Christ.***"⁶

So, what is this "judgment seat of Christ"?

Well, the word we translate "judgment seat" is the Greek word, BEMA (Greek - *βημα*), and it was the place where justice was handed out in the cities of ancient Greece.

Today, San Antonio has numerous "judgment seats". There are lots of them located in the Bexar County Courthouse. These are the courtrooms where judges and juries render verdicts.

In the ancient Greek world, every major city had a BEMA.⁷

There was a BEMA in Corinth (the city to which Paul was writing this letter). Archaeologists tell us that it was a large marble-covered platform located in the center of the main market.

In fact, when Paul mentions the BEMA here in 2 Corinthians 5:10, his readers may well have remembered when he was brought before the Corinthian BEMA to be tried by a judge for breaking the law.⁸

Here, though, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, Jesus is the Judge, eternity is the time frame, and heaven is the place of judgment.

⁵ As Paul says in another place, [*Romans 8:1*] ***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.***

⁶ Or, a better translation, "*we will all be manifest at the judgment seat of Christ.*"

⁷ In Nehemiah 8:4, the wooden podium upon which Ezra the scribe stood to read the words of the Law to the people was referred to as a *bema*.

⁸ And, there are other BEMAs mentioned in the New Testament. The BEMA in Jerusalem was the place from which Pilate condemned Jesus to death (Matthew 27; John 19). At the end of the book of Acts, when Paul made his defense before the Roman government official, Festus (Acts 25), Festus was seated at his BEMA.

So, what happens at this Judgment Seat of Christ? I want to know, since I will stand before Christ's BEMA. I'll bet that you want to know, too, since you also will stand before His BEMA.

God's Rewards Program (v. 10b)

The purpose of the BEMA is **[10b]...that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad⁹.**

Recompens\$e

As we highlight a couple of important thoughts from this packed sentence, we'll first note that the Greek word we translate "**recompense**" (Greek - *κομιζω*), when used in the first century, almost always had reference to the world of finance and business.

When you purchased something, you would "**recompense**" the seller with money for the goods or services he provided.

The idea is of a commercial transaction, sort of like the arrangement Kathy and I have with REI.

When we buy something at REI, we pay money and get hiking shoes, clothes, or some new camping gizmo.

We all understand that. But here's where the deal with REI helps us understand Paul's point to believers when it comes to the Judgment Seat of Christ.

⁹ Some Bible teachers have taught that the word "evil" here (Greek, *φαιλος*) really means "worthless," and not "sinful." But, a careful examination of virtually every other place where this word is used reveals that the only translation value possible is "evil" or "sinful." Other New Testament passages using the word *phaulos*: John 3:20; John 5:29; James 3:19; Titus 2:8; Romans 9:11. In all of these passages, the word clearly refers to sinful acts, or to an evil character.

At the end of the year, REI gives us a "reward" based on the money we have spent at the store during the previous twelve months. We are "recompensed" with money back for having spent money.

Yes, of course I know that the whole thing is a scheme created by REI to lure us into buying more stuff.

If we don't buy much, we won't get much money back. If, though, we spend enough at REI to put ourselves into the poorhouse, we'll get a big check.

What a deal. Spend money, get money. Spend more money, get more money!

So, here's how that relates to us and Jesus. When I obey Jesus today, it brings me great benefit, today.

I get the satisfaction of knowing that I have brought a smile to my Savior's face. I get the benefit of the blessing that often comes when I live according to God's wisdom. I get to experience what Jesus describes as "**the abundant life**" (John 10:10).

AND, my obedience is going to pay rich dividends in the life that comes after this life is over.

Recompens\$e for our good deeds

Think of faithful, obedient, loving, and God-glorifying deeds as *currency*.

Every time you plop down a loving deed, God puts reward in your eternal account, payable at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

If you spend that currency like it's going out of style - love sacrificially, obey like crazy, live for His glory alone - then at Jesus' BEMA you will have an amazing pile of rewards waiting for you.

And the difference between Jesus' BEMA and REI is that REI's program pays a puny percentage as a reward.

But God will reward you at the Judgment Seat of Christ in such an over-the-top way that you will count whatever sacrifice you made in this life to earn His reward completely insignificant.

It turns out that Jesus is a *very* gracious and extravagant gift-giver! And He wants us to pile up reward. He will be delighted to reward us at the BEMA for having led God-honoring lives.

Of course, there is a flip side to this, too.

Recompense for our evil deeds

If we choose to be stingy in this life with our possessions, if we are misers with our love, if we are penny-pinchers with our worship and obedience, we'll get to the other side and find no reward - and that's pretty sobering.

None of us wants to think, while standing before Jesus, *"Man, I sure do wish I hadn't passed up all those opportunities to spend my love and worship and service on earth, because now, I get no reward."*

And that is a summary of what Paul says about the Judgment Seat of Christ in 2 Corinthians 5. But, you should know that the judgment of believers is a theme he addresses in lots of other places.

If you wanted to learn more about it, you could check out Galatians 6, Philippians 2, Ephesians 6, Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 4 and 9, Colossians. 3, and 1 Timothy 4 and 6.

But you would also want to look at 1 Corinthians 3, where we'll briefly turn now. In this passage, Paul uses a figure of speech (the image of fire) to tell us something crucial about the judgment that is waiting for us on the other side.

Rewards on "The Day" (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

First, it's clear that he's speaking to those who have trusted in Jesus. He says of those who go through this judgment, **[15] *If any***

man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.¹⁰

So, eternal life is not at issue at the Judgment Seat of Christ. No matter how that judgment turns out, eternal life is yours.

The point of the Judgment Seat of Christ is that the life we lead *here* and *now* will determine the reward - or lack of reward - we receive *then* and *there*.

Paul pictures the quality of life that a Christian leads by the quality of the building materials he now lists.

[12] Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, [13] each man's work will become evident; [11] for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. [14] If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he will receive a reward.

The first materials are preferred over the last materials. It's not that gold is a better building material than wood. The point is that gold is more beautiful than wood. Silver and precious stones are more valuable than straw.

Aside from beauty and value, though, the most important feature of the preferred materials is that they are not combustible.

¹⁰ The fire is NOT the fire of hell, but a symbolic fire of purging. It is vital that when reading the Bible, we not instinctively think of eternal condemnation every time we read of fire or even of the fire of judgment. Sometimes that is the point (Revelation 20:14) and sometimes it is not (John 15:6). There are other biblical passages that use the terminology of being saved "yet so as through fire." See Amos 4:11; Zechariah 3:2; Jude 23.

¹¹ Paul and Laura Lere, who currently lead International Training Partners, were members of Northwest before they became missionaries. While in San Antonio, they rented a home that had been built without much attention paid to quality. Paul is an excellent handyman and he walked me through his home once and showed me that there was no interior wall that touched ceiling and floor from corner to corner. Every wall in his home was separating from either the floor or the ceiling. Care had not been taken in the early stages of building. At our inspection, the shoddy workmanship was evident.

Gold, silver and precious stones can pass through a fire and not be consumed. Wood, hay and straw instantly go up in flames.

The worthless deeds of wood, hay, and straw - think faithless, disobedient, rebellious deeds - will be consumed at the Judgment Seat of Christ, bringing no reward.

But the gold, silver, and precious stones deeds - things like sacrifice and love, generosity and service, obedience and grace - will be rewarded. Any work that survives the fire of Jesus' judgment will result in a reward.¹²

And just to be clear, the reward is NOT eternal life. That is a gift of grace, paid for by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

The rich rewards are God's blessings on us for faithfulness in this life. And, these rich rewards as we enter the presence of God are ours for the making and ours for the taking.

Your child is your child is your child. Obedient or not, she is yours; he is yours.

But your enjoyment of your child will depend on his obedience, her loyalty, their helpfulness around the house.

You might even reward a helpful child with money or privileges in ways that you won't reward an unhelpful child. Those rewards are your kid's for the making and for the taking.

Judgment and reward / loss of reward don't contradict grace.

Kicking a redeemed son or daughter out of the family would nullify grace. Condemnation would contradict grace. But accountability doesn't. Standing before Jesus in heaven to have our lives evaluated - with consequences - doesn't.

And THAT is what is in view when we're considering the Judgment Seat of Christ.

So, if "**suffering loss**" is a real possibility at the BEMA for having built my life with inferior materials, whatever "**wood, hay, and straw**" means, I'm going to stop my "**wood, hay and straw**" life NOW.

Would you accept the challenge to take some time this week, just you and God, and ask the question,

"Lord, what in my life today is 'wood, hay straw'? What is there about the way I'm living that will burn on that Day? Please open my eyes to see it so that I can walk away from it and walk toward Jesus' abundant life, hear Your 'Well done!', and receive a reward at the end."

An hour in God's presence, honestly asking the question, could change the whole trajectory of your life *here* and your experience *then*.

And if "**receiving a reward**" at the Judgment Seat of Christ is what you have to look forward to for faithfulness now, then you will pursue a life of "**gold, silver, and precious stones**" for all you're worth.

There are lots of you here who are building your lives out of "**gold, silver, and precious stones.**"

You are learning to love sacrificially and to give generously of your time and your treasure. You're cooperating with the Spirit of God, inviting Him to use hardships and challenges to mold your character into something that looks like Jesus.

You can be assured that your Father is a great Rewarder.

For a life invested in Him, He will grace you now with an abundant life filled with purpose and He will grace you later with a reward that is out of this world.

He's promised a future worth preparing for. Will you prepare?

Conclusion:

¹² "Reward" = *μισθον* - Morris says that this would be better rendered "wage."

This afternoon, Kathy and I are going to drive over to College Station to visit our daughter, Erin, and her husband, Kody. It's a quick overnight stay and it will probably be our last visit before she gives birth to our granddaughter in mid-December. We'll toss a few things in the car and hit the road.

Next week, we're flying to Denver to visit our son and daughter-in-law who just added Daniella (Dani) to our collection of grandchildren. We'll spend a good bit more time in preparation for that trip. We're gone longer. Denver's colder.

Any trip we take is going to require a certain amount of preparation. Some day, sooner or later, we're all going to take a really big trip. It'll involve laying down our earthly "tent" and meeting our Savior face to face.

Preparations for that trip are worth the investment of a lifetime, and the preparation is made one faithfulness at a time.

Our God promises great reward *then* and *there* for faithfulness *here* and *now* - and we are SO grateful!