

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Reward of Costly Service

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 5-7)

LIFE Beyond This Life

(2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

Study #1

Introduction: Trip prep...

Kathy and I leave this week to visit our son, Zach, and his family in New Mexico. We'll pack to prepare for the trip. But Albuquerque has stores, so we can always buy there what we forgot to bring along.

With some trips, though, more thorough preparation is wise.

Within a small circle of friends and family, I am moderately famous for being obsessive when preparing for a backpacking trip.

Before going to some wild place, I pore over topographical maps, make packing lists, revise them, and then re-revise them.

I lay out food supplies, pre-pack my pack, check the condition of gear, and then un-pack in preparation for the final packing.

I prepare so carefully because you only have what's on your back out there, and there's no stores on the trail if you forget something.

- You don't want to be out on the trail on the first day and discover that you have left your coat behind in the car. (Did that.)
- And you sure don't want to discover that you've left your trekking poles at your son's house in Denver as you pile out of the car at the trailhead in Wyoming. (Did that, too.)

- And you definitely don't want to find out at the first rest stop that the water purifying pump you've brought along for the trip is broken. (Yep. Did that).¹

The planning principle

We all know the importance of preparation prior to taking a trip, whether it's an overnight getaway or a wilderness excursion.

Before you set out, you want to make sure that you've got what you'll need once you arrive or the whole trip could be a bust.

The importance of trip prep applies not only to trips we take to camp or to see family.

It applies to the final trip each one of us will take at some point. And this morning, the Apostle Paul whets our appetites for that trip and tells us how to best prepare for it.

Orient to previous weeks and weeks to come...

Earlier this year, Jeff and I brought a series of messages from the second letter Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Corinth.

Looking at the first four chapters of 2 Corinthians, we explored the exciting new way of relating to God and of living that Jesus has brought by His death and resurrection and by the power of the Spirit.

We then took a break to celebrate Easter. Beginning today, we're returning to 2 Corinthians for a second installment of studies.

We'll spend the five Sundays of May working our way through chapters 5, 6, and 7, where Paul will explain that service to Jesus will often be costly, but it will always be worth it.

It will be worth it for the smile that our service brings to Jesus' face. It will be worth it for the meaning and purpose serving Jesus brings to our own lives.

¹ Then, there was the missionary in Uruguay who told the group from our church in 2007 that if there was anything we didn't have, but needed, just let her know and she would tell us how to get along without it.

And our costly service will also be worth it because of the rich rewards our Father will give us then and there for serving Him here and now.

No need to lose heart

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul has been telling us that we should never lose heart in serving Jesus.

If you don't see great impact from your service, don't lose heart. Remember. Life-changing impact is not up to us. It is our place to take initiative, but it is God's job to make impact.

For another thing, we might be making impact by God's grace, but might not see it. God sees it, though. And one day we will see it, too.

So don't lose heart or hope as you serve Jesus.

Hope thrives as you fix your gaze on the INTERNAL (not the 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).

And speaking of the eternal...

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

Our Current Tent (v. 1a)

[1a] For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down...

I like the way that Paul, a first-century tentmaker, talks.

I still like to camp out, but in my "mature" years, I've discovered that the earth's crust has been getting rockier and harder, especially at night in a sleeping bag.

And literal camping trips aside, the apostle says that it is best to view life on earth is nothing more than an extended camping trip.

We're living in a tent, and tents are temporary dwellings. Every tent eventually gets torn down.²

The tent we're carrying around with us on this lifelong expedition - our body - will be torn down. And in this context, to have our tent "**torn down**" is to die.

Just think about that. One day, your tent will be torn down.

Lots of people think that nothing happens when we die. We simply cease to exist and enter an eternal nothingness. (This was my own belief as a teenager.)

Others believe that it is impossible to know about life after death. They say that anything might happen.

But believers in Jesus have assurance that when our earthly tent is "**torn down**," God has something very specific in store for us.

Our Future Mansion! (vv. 1b-5)

Heaven, a REAL place (v. 1b)

[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 by hands, eternal in the heavens.

When this tent is torn down, it will be replaced with a solid, stick-built "home" that we will enjoy for eternity.

And, yes, we must pass through death's door to receive this new-and-improved permanent, glorified tent / body "**in the heavens.**"

Here, as everywhere else in the Bible, Paul speaks of heaven as a place. It is not a state of mind. Heaven is more real than any place you've ever been.

² In the first chapter of John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus "**dwelt**" with us. That word (dwelt) is related to the Greek word used here for "tent." Jesus was physically with us only a brief period of time. He was just camping out with us.

And there is more.

Heaven, a permanent HOME (vv. 2-4)

[2] For indeed in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from Heaven, [3] since in fact after putting it on, we will not be found naked. [4] For indeed, we who are in this tent groan, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.

I've spent some nights groaning inside a groaning tent.

One time, when my sons Ben and Zach were teen-agers, we were on a week-long trek through the mountains of southern Colorado (the Weminuche Wilderness area), when a storm hit after sundown.

We were each in our own one-man shelter during this mountain storm.

It lasted for hours with the wind whipping and the rain and thunder so loud that we couldn't hear each other's shouts to see if the other two were OK.

My tent had a river running through it. The seams were stretched to the breaking point and the fabric was leaking and I was soaked to the skin - inside the tent. The whole tent was groaning.

Increasingly, this "tent" which is our body is sagging in the middle. The stakes are loosening, and the rivets are popping out.

Our home in heaven will not sag.

We won't enter eternity disembodied, and we won't enter eternity with this body - to which I say, "*Whew!*"

No, we will enter eternity with a new, eternal, glorified body.

On the other side, God will provide me and you with new-and-improved bodies. And He will give us a greater sense of being at home there than we have ever felt here.

Heaven, HOME at last (v. 5)

[5] Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave us the Spirit as a pledge.

God designed us with eternity in mind. He put a hope for eternity in our hearts. We are rightfully concerned for eternal safety.³

And we who believe in Jesus have the promise that "***a building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens***" is in our future.

All this good news about the future equips us for a certain kind of living now.

Our New Life's Aim: Please Jesus! (vv. 6-10)

"Home" if THERE; "Absent" is HERE (vv. 6-8)

Encouraged - by faith - NOW while absent from the Lord (vv. 6-7)

[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 -

Those words highlight a great irony in the way we talk about Heaven. We say that people "die and go to Heaven" as if Heaven was a place for dead people.

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 Christian leaders of the 1800's, Dwight 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!"

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

That is true. And that is a uniquely Christian perspective. This confidence you and I can have about what our life to come will be like doesn't come because we can "see" what others can't see.

We can't see what lies beyond the grave any more than anyone else can. So, let's be honest about this. There is mystery about what is on the other side. None of us has ever been there.

But we do have confidence about it. And our confidence is tied to our willingness to believe that what Jesus says is coming, is coming. As Paul says, **[7]...we walk by faith, not by sight.**

He continues with his faith eyeballs wide open and focused.

Preferring to be at home with the Lord (v. 8)

[8] but we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

Paul had a clear preference for Heaven over his present life. I'm not so sure that we are all that eager for the life to come.

And if we don't have the longing for Heaven that Paul had, it is probably because we have not considered that:

- our most boring experience in Heaven will make our most exciting earthly experience seem boring by comparison.
- our relationships with each other here are sometimes wonderful and genuine and intimate. They will be far richer there than they are here, since there we won't have to wrestle with sin in our relating like we do here.
- our fellowship with God, which are often deep and rich here, will be face-to-face there.

As much as we might want to believe that this world is home and as much as we try to make this world "homey," this world is NOT our home.

That new toy you're enjoying so much? It'll get old, will break, will lose its luster and be updated.

Linger long enough in any moment and something about it will sour. No matter how awesome an experience may be, it never quite satisfies, and never for very long. As rich as the relational connection may be, eventually, there is friction, tension, conflict.

Here, there is always something wrong with everything. But not there.

And when we keep this amazing future on the front burner, it impacts the way we live, here and now.

We Want to Please God - Wherever! (v. 9)

[9] Therefore, we also have as our ambition, whether at home (in heaven) or absent (on earth), to be pleasing to Him.

Paul is speaking for himself here. But we agree wholeheartedly with what he says.

Jesus died for us. So, our sins are forgiven. We have - present tense! - eternal life and our future in Heaven is secure.

So, because of all that He has done for us and because of all that He promises He will yet do for us, we make it our ambition to live in such a way that He is pleased.

And I'll take just a minute to say this about living to please Jesus...

I learned a long time ago that deciding to live to please Jesus is not a "one and done" thing. It is a daily decision. I face a "live to please Jesus - or not" decision multiple times on most days.

And you should know that I don't always answer, "Yes!"

I sometimes dodge the decision and muddle along a middlin', mediocre path. At other times, I consciously refuse to do or to say the thing that I know would please Him and instead follow a selfish path.

I wish that wasn't my story and I wish that I could tell you that I've grown past all of that and that I now always live to please Jesus. The fact is, I've got lots of "next steps" to take in my walk with Jesus.

I can't tell you that I've arrived, but I can tell you this. There is no better way to live than to live to please Jesus.

If I had a few minutes alone with you, I would tell you that the best seasons of my life have been those when I have been living to please Jesus. I'd love a do-over for every time I've chosen otherwise.

I would say to teenagers and those who are younger, and I would say to anyone who is older than I am, and I would say to everyone in between, *"Live to please Jesus. That is the best possible life."*

A shovel was made to dig holes, and a hammer's purpose is to pound nails. Just so, the purpose of anyone redeemed by the grace of God is to live to please Jesus.

A life of service, prayer, generosity, and sacrificial love is the most fulfilling life you could ever have.

One thing you and I can do here at Northwest is to cheer each other on to live to please Jesus. It's the reasonable, smart, grace-centered way to live.

And then this. Immediately after a passage dealing with the grace of God and Heaven, Paul brings up the most sobering of all biblical topics.

At first blush, the next words don't even seem to fit the context. Grace, grace, grace...

We Will All Stand Before Christ as Judge (v. 10)

Christ, the Judge (v. 10a)

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

Evidently, in Paul's mind, this discussion of an after-this-life judgment while discussing heaven does fits."

So, we'll ease our way into a consideration of this theme of Jesus as Judge.

God as a Judge

It is popular to think that the concept of God-as-Judge is antiquated or that it is contrary to the idea of God's love.

Nope. In the Bible, God is regularly referred to as a Judge.

And this doesn't violate the Bible's teaching about grace or God's love. Judgment and justice are functions 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. And when He is revealed in the book of Revelation, He is frequently portrayed executing judgment.

But, here, Paul is writing to Christians. So, how can he be speaking about judgment? The Christian has escaped eternal judgment when he or she placed faith in Christ?

Right? Right!

Despite that, the idea of an after-this-life-is-over judgment of believers is very prominent in the New Testament.

Judgment of believers?

Besides this passage, you can find lots of other places that deal with the judgment of Christians.⁴

⁴ Look at Romans 14:10-12, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 and 9:24-27, Galatians 6:7-9, Ephesians 6:8, Philippians 2:16, Colossians. 3:24-25, 1 Timothy 4:8 and 6:19.

Eternal condemnation is not at issue in this judgment. Once a person is made a part of the family of God, God remains their Father forever. No one who has believed in Jesus will lose his or her salvation.⁵

But a time of assessment / judgment for Christians is real. And there won't be a select few believers who will face Jesus as Judge.

Paul says that ***“we must ALL appear before the judgment seat of Christ!”***

So, what is the Judgment Seat of Christ?

The Judgment Seat of Christ

The word that we translate ***“judgment seat”*** is the Greek word *bema* (Greek - *βημα*).

In the ancient Greek world, major cities always had a *bema*. It was the official place of legal justice.

There was a *bema* in Corinth, the city to which Paul was writing this letter. Archaeologists tell us that the Corinthian *bema* was a large marble covered platform located right in the center of the main market.

In fact, when Paul mentions the *bema* here in 2 Corinthians 5, his readers would have thought back to the time when Paul was arrested and brought before the Corinthian *bema* for judgment.

He was tried at the *bema* for bringing the Gospel to them.⁶

In ancient Greece, a human judge would stand at the *bema* and preside over a trial. In 2 Corinthians 5, though, the Judge is Jesus.

These passages all describe a judgment of Christians after this life is over. The issue is not heaven or hell, but reward or loss of reward.

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

⁶ 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*. You probably want to know, too, since you also will stand before Him.

While we aren't given many details, Paul does outline the essentials of Jesus' judgment.

God's Rewards Program (v. 10b)

The purpose and the upshot of the *bema* is ***[10b]...that each one may receive compensation for his deeds done through the body, in accordance with what he has done, whether good or bad.***⁷

Transactional

The Greek word we translate here ***“compensation”*** (Greek - *κομιζω*) was used when discussing the world of finance and business.

In Paul's world, just as in our own, when a purchase was made, the seller would be *compensated* (same word as in 2 Corinthians 5) with money for the goods or services he provided.

This, the world of compensation, is what Paul wants us to be thinking about when we think about the Judgment Seat of Christ.

To put the idea into more modern terms, think of the “cash back” rewards programs offered by credit card companies.

When you purchase something with your American Express or Visa card, you may receive a percentage of that purchase price back.

At the end of the year, if you make enough purchases, you could get a sizable amount of money back from the card company. You would be compensated with money for having spent money.

⁷ Some teach that “*bad*” here (Greek, *phaulos*) means *worthless*, and not *sinful*. But a study of every other place where this word is used tells us that the best translation value is *bad / sinful*. See these passages using the same word: John 3:20; 5:29; James 3:19; Titus 2:8; Romans 9:11.

Of course, I know that the whole thing is a ploy by the credit card companies to get you to buy more stuff with their card.

If you are frugal with your purchases, you won't get much money back. But if you spend enough to put yourself in the poorhouse, you'll get more money back.

What a deal. Spend money - and get money. Spend more money - and get more money. It's a really nice scam.

But it seems to me that the credit card companies' cash back reward programs give us an excellent picture of how God deals with us at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Our good deeds

Think of faithful, obedient, loving, and God-glorifying deeds that you might do in this life as *currency*.

Every time you do anything to please Jesus, no matter what it is, no matter how small it may seem, no matter if anyone sees it or knows about it, God puts rewards in your eternal account, payable at the Judgment Seat.

If you spend that currency like it's going out of style. If you give yourself to love sacrificially, pray fervently, give generously, serve with energy, exercise your gifts to bless others, tell unbelieving friends about your Savior - then at the *bema* you will have an amazing pile of rewards waiting for you.

There is one huge difference, though, between God's "reward program" and that of the credit card companies.

American Express only pays you a paltry percentage of your original purchase 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 worth it.

You can mark it down as fact. Judge Jesus is a VERY gracious and extravagant gift-giver.

When He makes reference to "**rewards**" in the Sermon on the Mount seven times and then tells us to **[Matthew 6:20] "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,"** He isn't promoting a "health and wealth Gospel" in which the more you give, the more you'll get NOW.

He is promising that if you walk by faith, not sight, believing that living to please Him NOW is worth any sacrifice, any suffering, any hardship, any loss, then He will be delighted to reward you THEN.

Our bad deeds

Of course, if we are stingy in this life with our things, if we are misers with our love, if we are penny-pinchers with our service and worship, we'll get to the other side and find little or no reward.

That's sobering.

None of us want to be thinking, while standing before Jesus, "*I sure do wish I hadn't passed up all those opportunities to spend my love and worship and service for Him.*"

No! What we want to hear from Jesus is, "**Well done.**" (Matthew 25:23)

Conclusion:

Live to please Jesus now and you'll enjoy the abundant life He promised now. Live to please Jesus now and you'll be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ as only a good God knows how to reward.

How will you be rewarded? I don't know.

Will you be rewarded with an increased capacity to enjoy Heaven?
Will you be rewarded by an enhanced capacity to glorify Jesus in Heaven?
Will you be given extra responsibility and even authority to reign and rule with Jesus in Heaven?

There are hints of all of this scattered throughout the New Testament. But one thing a consideration of the Judgment Seat of Christ makes clear: THIS LIFE REALLY COUNTS!

So, let's give ourselves to pleasing Jesus. That will bring God the richest glory, will bring us the richest experience now, and will bring a "*Well done!*" - and whatever else He chooses to give us - reward from Him.