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Sermon Notes

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The Eternal Reward of all Faithful Servants: Praise from God

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Love of honor motivates people to make extreme sacrifices

Think of an Olympic figure skater who gets up for years to practice, to hone her craft... think of the number of times she crashes to the ice, the hard bruises and painful gashes from her skates, the early morning cold... all for WHAT? The glory of an Olympic gold medal, and with it the cascading praise that will shower on her head... she can picture the final moments of her gold-medal performance; the music ends and the crowd erupts in overwhelming praise for her skill and dedication

Or think of the extreme sacrifices made by a loyal soldier seeking to please his commanding officer... what he will do to win a medal of honor

On July 15, 1815, the defeated Emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, boarded the British warship, the HMS Bellerophon, and was being sent to his final earthly destination... exiled to the tiny volcanic island of St. Helena in the exact middle of the South Atlantic, over 700 miles from the nearest island. This man had thrown the world into turmoil for twenty years... he had led armies of over 600,000 men; he had won battles in Egypt, and throughout Europe; he at one point controlled most of Continental Europe; the Napoleonic Wars resulted in the deaths of as many as 6 million human beings

His soldiers were fanatically loyal to him, and were willing to trudge through the snows of Russia in order to establish his glory

As Napoleon was talking with the captain of the Bellerophon, the ship that would carry him to St. Helena... he was in a pensive and ironic mood. He reflected back over his amazing military career, and the immense sacrifices his soldiers made to win him an empire. He then uttered these famous words:

"A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon"

Medals of honor, medals of valor, medals of glory, medals of achievement, medals of bravery, medals of service...

Napoleon said these motivate men more than just about anything

Why? It is because inside each of us is a yearning for glory and recognition, for honor and praise.

It is essentially idolatrous in the non-Christian, because it is not connected in any way to faith in Christ.

But what then should we do with this... every Christian yearns to hear one statement from Christ on Judgment Day:

Matthew 25:21 'Well done, good and faithful servant!

Is it WRONG to yearn for praise and honor and commendation from Christ, our Master? Amazingly, not only is it not wrong, it is sinful NOT to live for this and yearn for it:

Romans 2:7-8 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

Paul describes the life of those who go to heaven... by PERSISTENCE IN DOING GOOD, they are seeking GLORY, HONOR, and IMMORTALITY

This and this alone is the way to live your whole life!

A life that God will richly reward by grace on Judgment Day

Conversely, one of the greatest idols of the human experience is seeking PRAISE FROM PEOPLE... to seek to please man rather than God

John 12:42-43 Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Paul also addresses this. He speaks of what he calls "a true Jew, a true son of Abraham" ... the person who's heart has been circumcised by the Spirit, not by the written code, a person who lives by faith in the unseen God:

Romans 2:29 Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God

In our text this morning, we are going to walk with Paul through his internal motivation in serving Christ

Paul was someone who lived for human glory... for the accolades given by human courts... he sought to please the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court; to win the approval of the High Priest and his family by his persecution of the church... he was living for the temporary mist of PRAISE FROM MEN

But on the Road to Damascus, Paul was supernaturally weaned from all that

The glorious risen Christ called him into his service; and from that day on, he lived only to please his Master... he was set free from human opinion, and lived only to serve Christ

I. Christ's Servants: Stewards of the Mysteries of God

1 Corinthians 4:1 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.

A. Basic Question: How Should People Regard Us?

B. Paul Walking a Tightrope

1. On the one hand, he has been humbling himself and all servants of Christ, so that none of the Corinthians would think TOO HIGHLY of them

1 Corinthians 3:5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe-- as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

1 Corinthians 3:7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

2. But on the other hand, he has to defend his ministry to the Corinthians; he has to make them willing again to submit to his authority as an Apostle; he doesn't want them to think TOO LOWLY of him either
3. Many of them had been poisoned specifically against Paul... they were willing to receive the word from Apollos or from other teachers, but not from Paul
4. This is undoubtedly the work of Satan, because Paul had a unique role as apostle to the Gentiles; so Paul was uniquely singled out for attack and slander
5. So, in this chapter, Paul has to reestablish his authority as an Apostle, and he will do it by appealing to his sufferings
6. But first, though he makes very little of himself as a servant, and though he has said "All things are yours..."

1 Corinthians 3:21-22 So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas

7. YET... he wants them to know that he is not THEIR servant but Christ's

8. He is not ultimately answerable to them but to Christ

Some churches need to understand this more deeply than they do

I thank God for FBC and for the marvelous way this church embraces and encourages the leadership of the elders and of faithful teachers of the Word

BUT there are some churches who treat their pastors like employees, and think "We pay your salary; you are answerable to us! You serve at our pleasure!"

Paul would say, "Nothing could be further from the truth! I was called by Christ to preach the gospel. I am answerable ultimately to him. So while I am your servant to bring you the word and to lead you to spiritual health and maturity, you Corinthians are not my master... Christ is!"

C. So... People Ought to Regard Us as...

1. Paul cares how the Corinthians were seeing ALL faithful ministers of the word... but especially HIM
2. So he begins in the plural... "US" meaning all servants of the word
3. And how should they regard us? How should they think of us?

D. "Servants of Christ and Stewards of the Mysteries of God"

1. First and foremost, we serve Christ... he is the Master to whom we are accountable

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

2. Since Christ is the Master, each faithful minister of the Word must ultimately answer to him and him alone
3. Not only as servants of Christ, but Paul calls him and his fellow ministers STEWARDS of the MYSTERIES of God
 - a. A steward is a servant put in charge of managing the Master's possessions
 - b. A steward does not own what he is managing, but has a measure of authority to make decisions about his Master's estate

- c. Paul has been entrusted with the ministry of the Word of God and the shepherding of these churches he has been planting
- d. As a steward, he knows full well the church and the Word do not belong to him, but to Christ... and he will someday have to give an account for his management

E. What are the “mysteries of God”?

1. This is clearly the ministry of the Word, but especially as the full plans of God are being unfolded before their very eyes
2. Paul uses the word “mystery” many times in his epistle
 - a. A Mystery is something hidden in the mind of God but part of his eternal plan for the salvation of his people
 - b. These mysteries are now being revealed in the final days, the days since the incarnation of Christ
 - c. Christ himself is called the “mystery” of God

1 Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

In other words, there are aspects of Christ’s mission which were hidden in God for ages past and only now are being revealed through the preaching of the Word

- d. The salvation of the Gentiles as full members of the people of God is called a mystery

Ephesians 3:6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

- e. Paul also calls the indwelling of Christ in us by the Holy Spirit a mystery

Colossians 1:27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

- f. And finally, Paul calls the future plans of God a mystery now being unfolded by revelation

Ephesians 1:9-10 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

3. Paul was a steward of these mysteries... they were revealed first to him and the other apostles, so that they could then be preached among the churches and become part of our theology, part of our understanding of God's purposes for us and the world

F. People OUGHT TO REGARD US as Servants of Christ and Stewards of God's Mysteries

1. Those are WEIGHTY offices, worthy of sincere respect
2. So, Paul is saying, do not think TOO HIGHLY of me as a servant... put all your focus on God and on Christ
3. BUT do not think TOO LOWLY of me as a steward of God's mysteries... I am unveiling to you the fullness of God's wise plan for the ages, and without that unveiling you would be lost eternally

II. Christ's Servants' Requirement: Faithfulness

1 Corinthians 4:2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

A. All that Christ Wants from His Servants: Faithfulness

1. The eternal, complex plan belongs to the infinite mind of God
2. He alone knows how best to position his servants for maximum effectiveness
3. He calls a person, equips him or her for the mission, providentially orchestrates the circumstances of his/her work

B. The One Thing He Requires: Faithfulness

1. Literally, this is what the Lord SEEKS, DEMANDS from his servants and stewards... faithfulness to himself
2. This really just means obedience...

John 14:15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command.

3. BUT a special kind of obedience... obedience TO A SPECIFIC WORK OVER A LONG TIME and obedience DESPITE THE OBSTACLES
4. Faithfulness means loyalty and trustworthiness... given a task, you DO IT... you SEE IT THROUGH

5. It also means, in the context of warfare, that the soldier will remain loyal to his flag, his country, his orders, his commanding officer, despite any temptations toward treachery...
 - a. Temptations like cowardice under fire
 - b. Or allurements by the enemy to become a turncoat, to betray his country
6. Christ wants all his servants to be FAITHFUL to him, loyal to his Kingdom, courageous in the battle, unable to be tempted to become a TRAITOR
7. Paul met this criteria in AMAZING WAYS... despite almost incalculable costs, he was faithful to the heavenly vision of Christ calling him into his service

At his trial before King Agrippa, Paul described his calling by Christ on the Road to Damascus, and how the Lord had given his commission to preach the gospel boldly:

Acts 26:19 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.

- C. The Question Before us All... HAVE WE BEEN FAITHFUL?
1. The Lord has called us into his service... are we serving him or our own appetites?
 2. The Lord has called us to witness to our generation... to our neighbors and coworkers and unsaved family and friends... HAVE WE BEEN FAITHFUL?
 3. The Lord has entrusted us with many blessings as STEWARDS... money, time, strength, spiritual gifts, opportunities... HAVE WE BEEN FAITHFUL?

Paul's clarity on this frees him up entirely from human evaluation

III. Christ's Servants' Freedom: Concern Over Human Judgments

1 Corinthians 4:3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself.

- A. Literally, Paul says "For me, it a very small thing, something of very little importance" whether I am judged by you or any human court
- B. Paul spoke from experience: he had been ARRAIGNED before more human courts and tribunals than any figure in church history
- C. Again and again, he was hauled up in front of the authorities to give a defense for himself, his life, and his doctrine
- D. Paul's total focus on Christ's pleasure FREED HIM UP from grave concern about human opinions

E. That included the Corinthians themselves... he was very aware that they were judging him harshly, slandering him, deriding him

F. Paul said FOR HIMSELF...it really didn't matter what they thought at all

1. Their judgment of him WILL MEAN LITERALLY NOTHING on Judgment Day

Romans 8:31 If God is for us, who can be against us?

G. Paul actually INCLUDES HIMSELF in this

1. His own evaluation of his life, his deeds, his motives, his achievements will mean literally nothing if they are different than Christ's
2. We must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, and Christ's judgment will be perfect and final
3. At that time, will it matter at all what you or anyone else thought about your life?
4. Will it matter what your non-Christian boss or neighbor thinks about you? Will it matter what the total stranger sitting next to you on the plane thinks about you?

H. Even Our Conscience Cannot Vindicate Us

1 Corinthians 4:4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

1. Paul mentions his conscience many times, and it is a weighty thing to have a clear conscience
2. The conscience is the part of us that urges us to DO RIGHT and AVOID DOING WRONG and then evaluates our behavior/motives and says "YOU DID RIGHT" or "YOU DID WRONG"
3. Paul in some sense did evaluate his conscience... as he says here: "My conscience is clear"... AND during his trial before Felix

Acts 24:15-16 I [believe] that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. ¹⁶ So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

If you violate your conscience as a Christian, you have almost certainly SINNED... and therefore it is a worthy goal to never do anything that causes you to have a GUILTY CONSCIENCE

4. BUT this is a key verse to say that a clear conscience is not enough... Christ will not be asking us about our clear conscience on Judgment Day... he will simply JUDGE US

I. Bottom Line: All Human Judgment is NOTHING Compared to the Evaluation of the King!

Application: this has the power to free us from fear of man! People are usually so afraid what people will think of them, so they don't share the gospel, or help a needy person, or stand up for an unpopular cause

Paul's mindset freed him up from all human evaluation... his enemies', his friends', the Corinthians', total strangers... even his own conscience. ALL THAT WILL MATTER IS WHETHER JESUS FOUND YOU FAITHFUL to what he called you to do

IV. Christ's Servants' Judgment: Secrets Exposed, Rewards Given

1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.

A. Since Human Judgments Will Mean Nothing... Stop Evaluating My Ministry

1. It is essential that Paul be proven as a faithful teacher of the Word of God...
2. All congregations should evaluate their teachers to be sure they are true servants of Christ, true stewards of God's mysteries

Matthew 7:15-16 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

3. But the true evaluation of all the servants of Christ must wait till Judgment Day
4. That day alone will reveal who we really were, and what we really did

B. The Second Coming of Christ

1. Paul tells the Corinthians to WAIT TILL THE LORD COMES... the second coming of Christ
2. That is the day Paul wrote about in the last chapter when our labors will be tested with fire to see if they are gold, silver, costly stones OR wood, hay, and straw

C. Specifically: the Lord Alone Can Read the Human Heart

1. On Judgment Day, Christ will lay bare all our hearts... the hidden motives of the heart will be revealed
 - a. People may serve God from the purest motives... love for God and for others
 - b. OR they may serve God because it suited their fleshly desires...
 - c. Christ alone knows the secret motives of a human heart

Revelation 2:23 I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

Psalm 139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

2. So also all the secrets of our lives... the things we did in secret, when no one was watching
3. Not only that, all of God's own purposes and plans will be revealed
4. Conclusion: all human ministries cannot be properly evaluated now... only on Judgment Day will their true value be exposed

V. Christ's Servants' Reward: Praise from God

1 Corinthians 4:5 At that time each will receive his praise from God.

- A. This is the Essence of the Rewards We Will Get on Judgment Day
- B. That God Would EXPRESS His Pleasure to Us personally for our faithful service to him

Matthew 25:21 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'

Also:

"Enter into the JOY OF YOUR MASTER"

This is the key... that Christ will let you share the joy he had in your secret prayer life, or money given to the needy or to spread the gospel, or faithful teaching ministry a woman did in leading a women's Bible study for years, or the courage someone showed in sharing the gospel with a neighbor or coworker

Your Master was PLEASED at the time... on Judgment Day, he will allow you to ENTER INTO the joy he had at that time, and he will continue to express it to you for all eternity

This praise will not be said just once on Judgment Day, and that's it!

Rather Christ will give eternal and heavenly honors to his faithful servants

- C. This Can and Should Be STORED UP in LARGE AMOUNTS by faithful service over a lifetime

Matthew 6:19-20 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

VI. Applications

- A. Come to Christ!
- B. Live as a Servant of Christ and a Steward of God's Word
- C. Seek Faithfulness to His Calling on Your Life
- D. Free Yourself from Concern About Human Opinions
- E. Focus Entirely on Judgment Day, When Christ Will Reward You with PRAISE FROM GOD!!