

Introduction

It might be disheartening if all we ever learned of serving Christ is that it is going to be hard. The Lord wants us to know it is going to be difficult, and the degree of difficulty will be significant, but he also wants us to know that if we embrace the difficulty, if we embrace the shame and self-denial of the cross, if we intentionally lose our lives for the sake of Christ, we will surely find real life, real joy, real meaning, real reward. Jesus states, "Whoever loses his life for my sake WILL FIND IT."

Still, as Jesus has been instructing his disciples about the harsh conditions they will face as they go out into the harvest, the weight of what he has said has definitely been on the challenges of division and opposition and hostility that will tempt them to cave in. But Jesus is not done. He concludes this course on the harvest with a solemn testimony to the disciples that there are prizes. From the greatest to the least, God will greatly reward the disciples for the work done for him. The central truth the Lord has for every Christian in this section of the text is that he highly regards the least acts you do to support and extend the kingdom and to encourage its citizens, and he is going to prove it to you by rewards both present and future.

[Read Text; Pray]

At some point every follower of Christ is going to feel down. We are going to be beaten up by this hostile world in which we are called to sojourn. We will feel like we have made effort after effort in ministry, in evangelism, and in discipleship only to see little to no results. We will have been pouring out ourselves only to face rejection and maybe even abandonment. Nobody knew this better than Jesus himself. He certainly felt this sense as his very own disciples abandoned him and he bore the shame of the cross all by himself. It is one thing in those times to remind ourselves that the Lord said it would be this way . . . that he said it would be hard. And yet it is another to also remind ourselves that none of it is in vain. No suffering, no hardship, not even the experience of hostility and abandonment is in vain.

That is because each and every act done to promote and expand the kingdom of God finds favor with God. From boldly declaring the gospel on the street to resolutely pursuing holiness in life to the simplest act of kindness to a fellow disciple of Christ, God finds pleasure in each, and God is pleased with all. Of this I am sure because that is the principle that underlies what Jesus says here in these final remarks about working in the harvest. So whereas for the last several weeks we have been warning of the challenges that disciples will inevitably encounter, this morning we get to proclaim assurance of rewards that the disciples of Jesus Christ will ultimately inherit. This assurance urges every disciple of Christ to persevere in doing well. Three strands of this assurance appear in this conclusion to Jesus' mini course on harvesting.

The first strand of assurance is that

I. Not Everyone Will Be Hostile.

A. Jesus has emphasized the hostility the disciples will encounter, much of it within a disciple's very own family. He has illustrated the hateful intensity of the hostility. He has pointed out that enemies of the kingdom would even have disciples of Jesus put to death. It would, therefore, be natural to wonder whether anyone would actually turn from their evil ways and come and join the band of those who follow Jesus. Is anyone going to listen? Will anyone receive our message?

It is certainly true that sometimes we ourselves might be tempted to wonder, "Is anyone actually responding to the gospel message?" We see many in the world following after the false but feel-good message that does not confront sin but assures people that Jesus wants to help them get through life. But it seems not so many are responding to the true Jesus who says that if you do not repent, you have no part with me. We might be tempted toward discouragement. We truly do have to persevere in sharing the good news even when it appears the response is not all that huge.

B. It is helpful to hear Jesus say, in verse 40, "Whoever receives you receives me..." Jesus is assuring his disciples that not everyone they will encounter will be a wolf. Not everyone of them will take them to court. Not everyone of them will hate them and be out for their blood. Not everyone will call them "Lord of Filth." There WILL BE those who receive the

disciples. There will be those who will listen and believe the message they bring. There will be those who will accept the King's offer of peace. They will rejoice with the disciples in the good news of a forgiving Savior who has died for their sins. They will join in seeking to live in obedience to and in fellowship with God.

That is the kind of thing that happened in Philippi. Paul and Silas preached the gospel at a riverside prayer meeting and a woman named Lydia believed. She invited them to stay at her house. After many days Paul and Silas cast a demon out of a fortune-telling girl. The girl's owners were infuriated and dragged them before the rulers. A crowd gathered and a riot ensued. Paul and Silas were attacked by the crowd and beaten by the magistrates and thrown into the inner prison in stocks. During the night they were praying and singing hymns. All these days in Philippi and only the household of Lydia had responded. But that very night there was an earthquake which shook the foundations of the prison, opened the doors, and loosened the bonds. The awakened jailer was about to take his life for fear that prisoners had escaped and he would be tortured by his superiors. Learning all prisoners were accounted for, however, the man fell before Paul and Silas in fear and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." The jailer and his family were baptized at once. They set food before Paul and Silas and rejoiced in their faith in God. In the words of Jesus in Matthew, this family RECEIVED the disciples.

Many may say, "No" to the gospel, but some will say yes. And, oh!, the joy when that happens!! And, oh! The sweetness of fellowship when God brings salvation. It is felt in the epistle Paul sent to the Philippians. He wrote this: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now . . . I hold you in my heart, for you are partakers with me of grace . . . I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

C. Those who receive the disciples of Christ receive Christ and receive the Father who sent him. And there is joy in that fellowship. John talked about this in his first epistle. He says he preached Christ so that others can also

enjoy the fellowship of believers and their fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And he writes these things so that his joy may be complete. Joy is a great reward to those who proclaim the gospel. There is hardship to be sure. There is hostility. It is tough. But joy is made complete as others come to faith in Christ and share in the joy! It is a reward! This is an incentive to keep on. Keep on sharing the gospel. Keep on striving to make disciples. Keep telling the good old story. Did someone just reject you? Just tell the next person and the next. And delight in those times when you are welcomed and there are those who join in believing.

So now let's look at a second strand of assurance to which Jesus directs attention here . . .

II. Every Kingdom Work Will Be Rewarded.

I just love the simplicity and complexity of the Bible! On the one hand Jesus does not explicitly say that a prophet will get a reward but by his assumption, he declares that a prophet will get a reward. The same is true in regard to what he calls a righteous person. At any rate Jesus is actually declaring that there are many works that contribute to the life and expansion of his kingdom. All of them are important. And all of them are rewarded.

A. He starts by speaking of a prophet's reward. A prophet is one who speaks for God. He bears his message. Moses is a prophet as are Elijah and Elisha and a host of others whose names bear their prophetic work recorded in the Scripture. John the Baptist was a prophet. These disciples were commissioned by Jesus here as prophets as they were directed to loudly proclaim from the house tops the things he whispered in their ears. These are the more prominent of Jesus disciples. And they will be rewarded as such. This would seem to be a high level reward.

Now there are those who consciously share in the work of the prophet because he is a prophet. These welcome the words of the Lord. And they enter into hospitality and support for God's spokesmen. I am thinking of preachers and teachers and evangelists and missionaries. Not only are they rewarded but those who are the infrastructure of their ministry will be rewarded in the same way. Not all of us can go to a foreign country to make disciples. But we can help support those who do, and we should.

And when we do, we become a part of the very things they are doing. And it pleases God and he rewards us for it.

I would turn again to Paul's letter to the Philippians. At the end of the letter he begins to express appreciation for the fact that they have sent a financial gift. Listen to what he says, "It was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again." [They had helped him financially previously and he genuinely appreciated it]. He continues, "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit." [paraphrase] The gifts you have given to me are a fragrant offering to God, a sacrifice which is acceptable to Him and which pleases Him.

Paul used the word PARTNERSHIP. The principle declared by Jesus and manifest by Paul's words to the Philippians is that when disciples support and sustain the one who is spreading the word, proclaiming the word of the kingdom, there is a partnership in God's eyes. God sees the partners as involved in the work performed by the prophet. And he rewards the partnership. They are a team and God awards the team.

B. Then Jesus speaks of a righteous person's reward. The righteous person is less prominent than the prophet. But this one is incredibly important to God. Seeking holiness is what all God's people are to do. Ministering in the kingdom in righteousness is our calling. Spurring one another to love and good deeds is a group task. And God rewards his people in the whole of this work. There is reward coming from God to his people, a holiness-seeking people. We as disciples are called and commissioned to support and strengthen one another in this pursuit of holiness with encouragement and exhortation and meeting needs. The world may reject us but we are to love each other and show hospitality and assistance to one another. And this finds great favor with God. He rewards these acts of love and kindness.

C. And then Jesus speaks of a category of disciple as "one of these little ones." MacArthur says Jesus is speaking of "believers who seem insignificant and unimportant. They might be new believers who are

untaught and stumbling in their new life; or they might be lifelong believers whose devoted years of service have attracted little attention.” (235)

Seemingly insignificant even among other disciples, they are not insignificant to God. He values even the smallest kindness shown to them. “Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cold cup of water because he is a disciple” will be rewarded.

See how Jesus goes from one end of the spectrum to the other. Whether it is being a prophet and supporting that prophet or whether it is something as small as a refreshing cup of water given to a disciple because that one is a disciple, it is noticed by God. It is precious to God. And God will display his pleasure by rewarding that disciple.

D. Jesus’s teaching here is an encouragement that we believers should always be looking outside ourselves and our little corner of the world. We must be intentional about supporting missionaries about encouraging them who are at work in fields far from home. We need even to pass out cups of refreshment to brothers and sisters. It pleases God for us to care deeply for one another and spur one another on in love and good deeds. Again it is just something we need to determine to be mindful of and to do.

It is so easy to be a face in the crowd at church. It takes effort to receive one another. It takes caring about others. It demands setting aside time to be aware of one another and praying for sensitivity and looking for opportunities. And yet that is exactly what we should do. But what helps us in this regard, however, is not just knowing we should do so, it is realizing how much it matters to God. It matters so much to him that he rewards it! So we should do it gladly, excitedly, and expectantly.

We come then to the third strand of assurance with which Jesus seeks to encourage his disciples as they go out into the harvest.

III. No Reward Will Be Forgotten.

A. Jesus concludes this session of instruction with an indisputably strong declaration of certainty. He declares that no reward will be forgotten. You can depend on it that no reward will be forgotten, no good work to a disciple will be overlooked because not the slightest good deed from one

disciple to another will be overlooked. Giving a cold cup of water—there is nothing easier than that and nothing more basic to life than water. It is easy to do. It does not take a lot of effort and it does not cost anything. Last time I went to a restaurant I had water, and they are still not charging for water. But says Jesus not even an act of kindness so light as this will fail to be rewarded by God.

B. And yet we need to notice the emphasis Jesus brings to bear upon this closing statement. It is now the third time in this session with his disciples that Jesus underscores what he has to say with the same compelling phrase, “Truly, I say to you.” Jesus never lies. Never. No deceit was ever found in his mouth. Yet for the third time in chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus lets us know emphatically that he is speaking the truth.

He did this back in verse 15 when he told the disciples to shake the dust off their feet when they departed from a town or a home that would not listen to or receive their words. “Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.” He did it to declare that this is a statement you cannot afford to take lightly. It is a breathtaking statement to be taken with all the weight in the world.

Jesus used the qualification again in verse 23. There he was impressing on the disciples that time is of the essence. They needed to get on with the task of proclaiming the gospel and not get bogged down with those who persecuted them. “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Next town. . . next person. Keep moving because you will not get to them all as it is.

So bring the emphasis from those two instances into verse 42. “Truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” The movement of Jesus’ talk to the disciples with the repetition of this phrase communicates like this: be absolutely sure that hell will be worse for those who reject the disciples’ message than it will be for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Be absolutely sure you do not mess around but urgently go from one town to the next. The coming of the Son of Man is going to take place before you

know it; so don't waste time. And then . . . but you can also be absolutely sure that God will not overlook one reward for the smallest act of kindness one disciple does for another in the name of Jesus. Be sure of the severity of the judgment of God on those who reject the gospel. Be sure to redeem the time as you go. But be sure of this: God will not forget a single deed of kindness you do for one of his little ones.

C. Every day has its news. Broadcasters and journalists inform us with each installment of the things that they believe really matter. Sometimes the news is so urgent they cut into current programming. You can look at the history of the world through the eyes of the news media. But I think we all know that more so today than ever before, you will get a leftward slant. There is a definite agenda here. We only get what they want us to see. And we get it through their eyes as they see it. And yet, even if you could correct the slant, the point of focus would still be on Donald Trump, the Kardashians, the weather, sports scores, and the fluctuation of the markets. These are the things that really matter in their eyes.

And yet, the focus of heaven sees and delights in things that largely escape the notice of this world and its media outlets. And one day it is going to be revealed. Remember a few weeks back when we pointed to the fact that the future is going to bring with it full disclosure? Jesus said, "nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." The specific context speaks of the fact that the motives and hostilities of the hearts of those who hate Christ's disciples will be exposed. But it is just as true that God will expose what and make clear where his delights are. He will set things straight.

For one thing the true king will be exalted. Jesus, having humbled himself to the point of death on the cross, will be seen to have been exalted to the right hand of God. That day that reality will be abundantly clear as every knee bows and every tongue confesses he is Lord.

But in addition heaven will demonstrate that the things that captivate God on a day-to-day basis are the smallest deeds of godliness and kindness done by the disciples of Jesus. Because not even the least of those will fail to be rewarded by Him.

Conclusion

One night in an Egyptian prison, the cup bearer to the king of Egypt had a dream. He had offended the king and been sent to prison, and his dream greatly troubled him. Meanwhile Joseph, the man of God who had been wrongly convicted by false testimony, was also in the prison. The cupbearer told Joseph the dream. And by the grace of God Joseph interpreted it. He said, "in three days you will resume your service to the king." He then requested of the cupbearer that when he was released and restored to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh so as to free him from a situation he had done nothing to deserve.

Circumstances came about as Joseph had said they would. The cupbearer was restored to his position before Pharaoh. And yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him for some two years.

Brothers and sisters, I want to assure you today that you have a Savior who will never forget you. He will not overlook a single deed done in support and in kindness to the least of his people. There are rewards today in terms of joy and fellowship. But we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that we may receive what is due for what we have done in the body whether good or evil. And he will not fail to reward his people. Saved by grace through faith according to the glorious gospel of the kingdom, we will also be rewarded by a glad Savior who rejoices in good done to his people and who celebrates and values the work done to proclaim his saving grace and make disciples of the nations.

Jesus endured the cross with an eye to the reward. He submitted to the cross according to the will of God. But he endured the shame and he bore the wrath for the joy set before him. He died in order to receive sinners. He sacrificed himself so as to be able to welcome to heaven the least of those who draw near to God through him. Today if you have not repented of sin and trusted in the victory won on the cross by Jesus Christ, you have yet another opportunity to do so. Don't pass it by. Call out to the One who alone can save.