



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

Even If It's Nothing...

2 Corinthians 5:9-10 & Romans 14:10

Brothers and sisters, hear again the word of the Lord from 2 Corinthians 5:9-11.

^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 5:9**...So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 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. ¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.

Hear it also from Romans 14:10.

^{NIV} **Romans 14:10**...You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat...For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, send now your blessed Holy Spirit to come and, as this word's true author and therefore its infallible teacher, instruct us as to what it means and why it matters. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, and to instruct how we are to live in light of what you have done. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

Brothers and sisters, in the end, we will all stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and present to him the fruit of our labor and life, the cumulative content of all we have done for him in this life, and we will do that whether the fruit of our labor and effort is small or great. We will do that even if it's nothing.

Now I don't know about you but I find that idea...that thought, intensely sobering...even unnerving. To think that I will in the end have to stand before the Lord is sobering enough. To be in the His presence, to stand before His burning holiness and regal grandeur is sufficient, in and of itself to disquiet my soul. But to have to stand before the Lord and to have to give an account of the stewardship of my life...to account for how I spent my money, how I spent my time, how I loved my wife, how I nurtured my children, where I focused my energy, where I made the most of or squandered precious opportunities to serve Jesus and to advance His kingdom, what I said or did not say...well, that is something else altogether. I don't know if I would say it is a terrifying thought but it certainly is a solemn one, perhaps the most solemn thought a person might ever bring themselves to think.

But here it is in Scripture plain as day.

^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 5:10**... For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...

And...

^{NIV} **Romans 14:10**... For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Now notice that it doesn't say all unbelievers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ or all profligates or reprobates or deviants or even all smut-faced gutter

rags. No, the language is about as clear as language can be. It says, **“We all must appear...”** and **“we all must stand”** and the context of both of these passages, of both 2 Corinthians 5 and Romans 14, is talking about believers. That is, it’s talking about Christian men, women, boys and girls like you and me. It’s talking about Christians standing before the Lord Jesus Christ and giving an account to Him of the stewardship of their lives. It is not talking about heaven or hell. It’s talking about having our lives evaluated in light of having been redeemed. Now what that means, if language means anything, is this.

In the end, we will all stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and present to him the fruit of our labor and life, the cumulative content of all we have done for him in this life, and we will do that whether the fruit of our labor and effort is small or great. We will do that even if it’s nothing.

Now this morning I want to spend my time helping us to consider together why the sobering thought of standing before the judgment seat of Christ ought to compel us to renew our passion for righteousness, to renew our desire to grow in our sanctification, to renew our commitment to guard what we do and what we say.

But to do that, I need to tell you how I came to think about these things in the first place. That is, I want to tell you how I think the Spirit of God has woven several passages together in my mind which have resulted in my writing this sermon.

The idea first came to me, over a year ago when one of elders mentioned a little book tome by John Piper called *Don’t Waste Your Life*. It was, of all things a collection of sermons Piper gave while speaking at a youth conference. At the

conference he was appealing to young people to consider living their lives to purposely advance Christ's kingdom. That is, he was asking kids to live their lives to make a difference. He asked them to consider living their lives heroically for Jesus. And while doing that, he wrote this:

I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of the Reader's Digest, which tells about a couple who **"took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball and collect shells."** At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke. A spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your Life—your one and only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great Day of Judgment: **"Look, Lord. See my shells."**¹

Now, I have to admit I could not get that thought or image out of my mind. It may be harsh. It may even be unfair. But it is clear and it is certainly unforgettable. And then last June, that same idea or concern was pushed along while I was preparing a Sunday school lesson. I was preparing a lesson on Romans 12:1. It's a passage you all know. It goes like this.

^{NAS} **Romans 12:1**...I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship.*

Do you see that little phrase, **“to present”**? Well that phrase is the translation of the Greek word *παρίστημι* and that little phrase caught my attention. It caught my attention because of the way Paul used it to call the Romans to present their lives to God. Now when Paul uses the word **“present”** he’s not using it like we sometimes do in English when we say, **“Oh let me present my wife to you.”** He doesn’t mean **“to introduce”**. No, what he means is something much more personal, more permanent...like when a delivery nurse wipes off a newborn infant and places it on the bosom of its mother and says, **“Mrs. Smith, may I present to you...your daughter.”** That nurse does not mean, **“Oh, let me introduce you.”** No, what she means is, **“Take her. From now on she’s yours.”**

Now that struck me. It struck me that Paul calls upon the Romans to **“present their lives as sacrificial offerings to almighty God.”** And when he does, he calls on them to do that without reservation, without holding back at all. You can tell that is what he means because he refers to the gift of their lives as a sacrifice. You don’t take sacrifices home with you after giving them to God.

Now that idea struck me and because it struck me, I began to look for other passages in Scripture that contained the same idea...the idea of presenting oneself, and this is what I discovered. It is an idea that is repeated time and time again. You can see the exact same idea, for example, in 2 Timothy 2:15.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul appeals to Timothy to quit holding back in presenting himself an approved workman to God. Look what he says there.

NIV 2 Timothy 2:15...Do your best (spare no effort) to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

You can see Paul's point. It is really is transparently simple. It's this, **"Look Timothy, you are going to give an account of your ministry one day. So pour yourself into your ministry. Apply yourself as fervently as you can and do that...do that so that in that day, that final day, you won't be ashamed."**

Now let me ask you, **"What would Paul worry about Timothy being ashamed?"**

I think the answer to that question is obvious.

I think he was worried about it because he knew that it was a possibility. Paul knew that a day was coming in which Timothy would to have to present himself to God. Paul knew that a day was coming which Timothy was going to have to give an account of his life and actions and ministry. That is why Paul was so quick to encourage Timothy to pursue his calling with boldness and resolve. Paul knew that one day his work and efforts were going to be evaluated.

Now in Colossians 1:22, Paul brings up the idea of a great day of presentation and when he does so to remind the Colossians that the Father sent the Son into the world to reconcile sinners to himself through the blood of the cross in order that in that day He might present those He had reconciled to Himself, holy and blameless. Look at verse 22.

^{NIV} **Colossians 1:22**...But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--

Now isn't it a remarkable thought that God will one day present to Himself the works of His own hands? Isn't that what the passage says?

But to me what Paul says down in verse 28 is even more remarkable. Paul says that he was granted the privilege, as a minister of the gospel, to play a part in that very same day of presentation. Paul says that God has granted to him and his fellow servants the responsibility of preparing men and women and boys and girls for that day when they too will stand before God. Look at how he says what he says in Colossians 1:28.

^{NIV} **Colossians 1:28**...We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

You see Paul simply cannot get that great day of accounting out of his mind. He simply cannot get past the idea of a great day of presentation. And his point is something like this, **“God has reconciled us to Himself, but He has granted to us a role in helping to prepare others for their day of presentation before God...and because of that we proclaim, we teach, we admonish, we plead with everyone we meet and we do that...we do that in order that we may present everyone we meet mature and complete in Jesus.”**

Now, my beloved, what that tells me, what that burns into that fabric of my soul is the certainty that Paul believed he had an obligation, a responsibility to those under his charge. What that tells me is that he was much more worried about his responsibility to others than about their responsibility to him. What that tells is that he saw his obligation clearly and it drove him along in his pursuit to be pleasing to Christ. But...it also...it also tells me this...

In the end, we will all stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and present to him the fruit of our labor and life, the cumulative content of all we have done for him in this life, and we will do that whether the fruit of our labor and effort is small or great. We will do that even if it's nothing.

And then there was one other passage that has helped focus my thoughts regarding this solemn theme. It's a passage much like those I've already read. It's Ephesians 5:25-27. Would you look at it with me?

Now Ephesians 5 is a passage you all know. It starts off as a command to husbands to love their wives and then explains how husbands are to do that by illustrating how the Lord Jesus loved the church and sacrificed Himself for her in order that He might present her to Himself clean and holy. Look how Paul describes the purpose and point of the works of our Savior's nail-pierced hands.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:25**...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Now it seems to me that that there are two great visual images contained in Ephesians 5:25-27. One is explicit. By that, I mean it is obvious. The other is implicit. By that, I mean it is less obvious. Now let's consider together for a moment the first great visual image in Ephesians 5:25-27, the one that is obvious. The scene that Paul is describing is set in the courts of heaven. It is a scene where all of the redeemed of all of the ages are standing together, white-robed, pure and clean and undefiled before the throne God. I think it is the kind of scene you can envision in your mind's eye if you try...an enormous throng of saints, a

throng beyond number, standing together singing and praising the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now if you were able to place yourself in the midst of that throng and were to look to your right and to you left, you would see men and women and boys and girls from every tribe, tongue and nation...men and women of every race and color, of every epoch and time period...united in their worship of the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. You would see their radiant faces looking toward His throne full of joy and adoration.

And if you were there in the midst of that throng and were to look up in front of you, you would see, way up in front of you, the Lord Jesus Himself. You would see Him standing there, in the full splendor of His royal majesty, gazing down with eyes of burning holiness and love upon His own purchased possession, the church.

You would see Him holding out His arms receiving to Himself the cumulative result and fruit of His great atoning work and then, and this is borne out in passages like 1 Corinthians 15:24, you would see the Lord Jesus turn and present to the Father all that He had wrought.

I can see that scene so clearly in my mind. The Lord Jesus presenting to the Father the church He has purchased with His own blood. I can hear Him saying, **“Father for you and for your pleasure and praise I have purchased these your people with my own blood and have sanctified them with my word and have sent preserved and prepared them through the Spirit for this very moment.”**

Now I think, in that moment, if you were there in the midst of that great chorus you would hear the praises and shouts of all the saints and angels in heaven culminate in the one great crescendo of praise toward which the whole of creation had been inexorably moving since it was first spoken into existence. It's an extraordinary thought and scene, don't you think? And it's not a scene that we imagine will happen; it will happen. It will happen because the text says He has done what he has done with the intention of presenting the church to Himself, a bride pure and spotless and clean. But there is another scene that is implicit in the text and it is a bit different. It involves a different husband and a different wife. It involves me and my wife.

You see, as a Christian husband, I am commanded to emulate the love of the Lord Jesus but in doing that I am also called to one day present my bride before Him. And you know that has caused me to ask myself, **“Have I prepared her? Have I prayed for her? Have I honestly and earnestly taught her and encouraged her and loved her? Have I been patient and longsuffering? Have I purposely loved her and nurtured and pushed her along in her sanctification in order that she might be truly prepared to stand before Him?”**

And you know, I know the answer to that question and it breaks my heart. I have not done anywhere near what I ought to have done but praise be to God I am not yet done.

You see, I am called to love her as Christ loved the church but I am called to do that with a purpose or end in mind and that purpose... that end is to present her to the Lord Jesus Christ all scrubbed up and sanctified as best I can. You see I am called to do that no less than what the Apostle Paul was called and gifted to do

when he was called to present the Gentiles to God and if you are a husband you are called to do the same and the reason that ought to matter to you is because...

In the end, we will all stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and present to him the fruit of our labor and life, the cumulative content of all we have done for him in this life, and we will do that whether the fruit of our labor and effort is small or great. We will do that even if it's nothing.

And you know it is the same for you whether you are married or not. It is the same for you if you are a kid, or a young adult. It is the same for you if you are newly married or if you have been married for fifty years. It is the same for you if you are divorced or widowed. You see we are responsible to live our lives, all of our Christian lives, in light of the gospel and the fact that our lives have been redeemed from sin and from hell. And you know, because that is true, I want to appeal to you this morning to take your Christian responsibility seriously.

I appeal to you kids to lives that honor your parents. I appeal to you to obey your parents and to avoid the sins of youth that can come back and plague your consciences or that can destroy your testimony for your whole life. I appeal to you because one day you will have to give an account of how you lived your life to the Lord Jesus.

And I appeal to you young men and women in our church. Flee immorality. Refuse to allow yourselves to be sucked in by the lies and distortions of this present evil age. Instead commit yourselves to live heroic, Christian lives...lives that are pleasing to God.

And it is the same with you married couples. I appeal to you to love you spouses and to fulfill you responsibilities to each other and to your children. Cleave to one another.

I especially appeal to you men to emulate our Savior. Avoid the lusts of our age. Guard your hearts. Flee from pornography and the sinful images of our day that pollute minds and rob men of honest affection. Guard your homes. Protect your wives. Teach your children.

And lastly, I appeal to you seasoned and senior citizens. Do not stop serving Him. A Christian may honorably retire from any and every vocation they have...but one. A Christian may never retire from being and acting like a Christian. Resolve to finish your lives in faithfulness.

You know, I will never forget our beloved brother Morris Wise. I know many of you still remember him. Morris was Avis Brice's dad. Morris wasn't baptized until he was an old man. I still remember him standing up here at 78 years of age with Cara Chamberlain and a small infant and the three of them being baptized at the same time. What a wonderful day that was.

Anyway, Morris found out he had cancer after that and I used to have the privilege of going to visit him from time to time and taking lunch and reading the Bible to him and praying for him. One day when Morris and I were eating he looked up and said to me, **"You know Tom, I didn't start out my life very well. I was in World War 2 and I sort of lived for the moment. I wasn't exactly wild but I didn't live with much direction. And then after the war, I came back and had a family and spent all my time trying to make money. And now, I've**

become a Christian as an old man and my chief hope...the thing I really want most is to finish well."

And you know, he did finish well. He finished with a vibrant testimony. He wrote notes and called friends on the telephone and encouraged and bolstered other people's faith. And you can do the same. Pray for your children and your grandchildren. Write notes and cards of encouragement. Model your faith and your joy and your hope of heaven.

And let us do that...let us do that...

^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 5:10**... For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ...

Let us do that that we may have something more than shells to offer Him in that day.

Let's pray.

¹ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), 45-6.