

Old Testament lesson – Genesis 22:1-14

New Testament lesson – Matthew 10:40-42

Risks and Rewards

After I was hit by that car while I was riding my bike, I received an insurance payout. It didn't make me wealthy, but it gave me enough money that I wanted to do something with it besides putting it into a bank account. I wanted to invest some of it.

I invested some of it in the Kingdom of God, of course. That was an eternal investment. I gave money to some Christian organizations that I know practice good stewardship and work for the expansion of the kingdom, not just maintenance of it.

I invested other money in more selfish ways that would provide some earthly return on my investment. As many of you are aware, of course, there are two basic things you have to think about when doing this: How much risk is there and how much reward is likely? High risk can bring high rewards, while low risk usually provides low rewards. As the old saying goes, you pay your money and you take your chances.

Our OT lesson is a story of tremendously high risk. And there is no apparent promise of any reward. Genesis 22, in the opinion of many people, is one of the most disturbing stories in the entire Bible. It's not as bad when you know how it's going to turn out. Everybody who has heard the story for the past 3,000+ years knows how it turns out. But Abraham did not know how it was going to turn out. When we consider that fact, the story is absolutely astonishing, and perhaps a bit repulsive.

Child sacrifice was certainly not unheard of in those days and in that region. Later the practice would be declared an abomination to God. The sacrifice of children by fire to the Ammonite god Molech was considered a horrible practice.

And yet, here is God telling Abraham to do exactly that to his son Isaac. Not only was Isaac his son, he was his only son, whom he loved. He was the son of promise, the son whom God had provided in Abraham's and Sarah's old age after

years and years of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise.

And now, says God, I want you to throw it all away, simply because I tell you to.

When someone hears this story for the first time, at this point God must seem like a cruel and capricious deity indeed.

But what does Abraham do? He plans to do exactly what God tells him to do. He makes all the preparations to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loves. Abraham risked everything he had that actually meant anything. He had no indication that things would work out as they did. Nevertheless, he told Isaac that God would provide the lamb for the sacrifice. That was true, but as far as Abraham knew at that time, he was lying to his son.

After reaching the point where Abraham tied up Isaac and had the knife raised to kill him, the angel of the LORD finally intervened. Still, I wonder: Do you suppose after this Isaac lost some of his enthusiasm for going to worship with his father?

If one continues reading the story of Abraham, one will find that he was rewarded by God just as God had promised earlier. He became a great nation, and if you follow the story all the way to the NT, you find that great nation of Israel becoming the means by which God did indeed bless all the families of the world. He did so by bringing his Son Jesus into the world through the Jewish people, despite the fact that they were an occupied nation when God did that.

Our NT lesson contains the final instruction to the apostles as Jesus sent them out in pairs to teach and heal and proclaim the kingdom of God. He speaks here of rewards. In the rest of the chapter leading up to this, he spoke mostly about risks and dangers.

Jesus was bringing a message of good news, a message of God's salvation. But this message would not be greeted warmly by all, so to proclaim it carried some risk. The disciples

would not be treated any better than their master. They would be delivered to councils and flogged. They would be persecuted, and the families of some who heard and believed would turn against them.

In our lesson Jesus provides some reassurance for his apostles, and for those to whom they would deliver the gospel message. Anyone who welcomed the apostles was actually welcoming not only Jesus, but God himself. After all, God is the source of this message. Welcome the message, and you welcome the original sender.

Now, the business of receiving a prophet may need a little explanation. A prophet is not simply someone who tells the future. A prophet is anyone who proclaims the word of God to a person or a group of people. If God wants people to know something about the future, he will use a prophet. But more often than not, God simply wants to deliver a message to someone. In that sense, the apostles were prophets. They were delivering God's message to people. And those who understood them to be doing so and welcomed them because they were prophets delivering God's message, those people would also receive a prophet's reward, whatever that is.

As for all those who believed the message and became disciples of Jesus – they carried within themselves the potential to bring blessing to others. Even their thirst for a drink of water could provide a reward for someone who gives them a drink *because they are a follower of Jesus*. Notice the reward is not simply for giving a drink, but for giving a drink *because the person is a disciple*.

Of course, we might wonder what these rewards are. In our world we look for rewards in the form of discounts or points towards a purchase or a free movie ticket or even a free flight with our favorite airline. I think we can count out that sort of reward.

But honestly I don't know exactly what Jesus had in mind. Will it be a more comfortable room in heaven? Frankly, I can't think how that would

be possible. It's heaven – which rooms would be uncomfortable?

Is it a better crown or one with more jewels? Again, how can one be better than another?

How about a seat closer to God? But heaven will be filled with his presence, so how will one spot be better than another?

Maybe the rewards will be in this life. So then, why did Jesus warn about persecutions and flogging and taking up our cross? I don't think the rewards will be in this life, at least not in any material way.

If you take the risk, where is the reward? Jesus clearly says there will be risks. He clearly says his followers will experience negative consequences if they are following him as they should. But he just as clearly says here that there will be rewards. So what are they? He doesn't explain, so we may have to speculate.

First, there is eternal life. By the time of Jesus, people who believed in the God of Abraham had begun to believe in a resurrection into another life after this one. We know that there was disagreement among Jewish religious leaders about this, but those of the Pharisees, for example, believed in a resurrection of the body.

There is perhaps some system of rewards to be given at judgement after the resurrection. Paul wrote to Timothy about a "crown of righteousness" which would be given to him by Christ on the judgement day. That crown would be given to "all who loved his appearing." There may be other rewards. I don't pay much attention to that sort of thing. Perhaps it would be motivational, but I think it might be counterproductive. I think it taints one's attitude of obedience with an ulterior motive.

I think there is reward in simply doing what is right, in doing what God commands us to do. I think it is tied in with our conscience. When you try to follow Jesus, your conscience becomes more developed, sort of like the way exercising your muscles through work or a gym routine will cause your muscles to become stronger.

As your conscience develops, you will notice that you feel some sense of satisfaction or fulfillment when you do what is right. On the other hand, when you do something wrong or even if you neglect to do something good when you have the opportunity, you will feel pangs of guilt. That's your conscience, being prompted by the Holy Spirit.

When we obey the instructions of Jesus, our conscience rewards us with that feeling of fulfillment. We know that we have obeyed God and the reward is the feeling we have as a result.

However, I think that if we seek to do good things with the specific desire to have that feeling, the feeling will diminish. It is most apparent when we do what is right simply because it is right.

If you pay attention to sermons, I think you will find that Joel and I both put forward ideas about what we should be doing to follow the instructions of Jesus. For example, both of us talk about the importance of attending worship. When you miss a Sunday out of choice rather than some necessity, I truly hope that your conscience bothers you. If you miss because you are sick or attending a family gathering some distance away, that's one thing. But if you're just sleeping in because you stayed up too late, then I hope God will work on your conscience and remind you that you really ought to be worshipping him.

Another thing I have mentioned several times over the past few months is prayer. I have mentioned it in a number of ways, but one of the things I am going to keep talking about is praying with your spouse. I can tell you some definite rewards for this one even though they are not mentioned specifically in Scripture.

First, and this one can be found in Scripture, prayer draws you closer to God. That is true of prayer in just about any situation. If you pray alone it will bring you closer to God. So when you pray with your wife or husband, it will draw both of you closer to God.

As it draws you both closer to God, it will draw you closer to each other. That is very beneficial to a marriage. It is so very easy to drift apart with time as each person focuses on various tasks. When we focus on tasks we can lose our focus on each other. We feel like we can not neglect things like work, children, bills, cooking, sleep, and so on. Then we feel a need to relax and maybe watch TV or read a book. The one thing we often take for granted is that person we once promised to love, honor, and cherish. But when we take them for granted, those vows become a little dusty, don't they? Praying together goes a long way towards restoring those vows.

Praying together can protect your family. And every family needs protection. If you pay any attention at all to the news, you know that there is a lot of evil and craziness in our world. Our families need protection against the stuff that is permeating our society. Living in a small town no longer provides any insulation against such things. Social media, regular media, and the internet bring all of that nonsense into direct contact with us every day. Against such evil the Second Amendment is powerless and ineffective.

Here are a few suggestions about prayer with your spouse, in case you just don't know where to begin. First, thank God for each other. Thank God for your marriage. Thank God for bringing you together. Thank God for your children. Pray for them and for other family members. If you have trouble figuring out what to say, try the Lord's Prayer.

If you were to ask one of the widows in the congregation this question, how do you suppose they would answer? Here's the question: If you could have your husband back for a day, but only to spend time praying with him, would you do it? Granted it's a foolish question, because it would never happen. But let's change it around a bit. Since you don't know how much time you have left with your living husband or wife, do you think it would be worthwhile to spend some time praying with them?

Several years ago I mentioned a book that I came across with the title, I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church. I've been talking about prayer quite a bit in the past several months, because I am certain it is a key factor for having a living church. I am growing impatient with the reluctance to embrace such a basic Christian practice, even among those who consider themselves church leaders. Frankly, it's getting on my nerves.

I'm almost 72 years old. Lately it seems like every time I turn around some new health issue

pops up. It may be that preaching twice a month is becoming something my body does not want to handle. So if I feel like I am just beating my gums up here to no effect, I have to ask myself whether it is worth continuing.

Prayer is something that can bring great rewards. It involves little risk, so I am not sure why there is such reluctance to engage in it. But that needs to change. No excuses. No ifs, ands, or buts. Amen.