

NOVEMBER 23, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “The Crown” 1 Cor 9:24-25, 1 Thess 2:19-20, 2 Tim 4:2-8, 1 Pet 5:2-4, James 1:12, Rev 4:9-11

This week the request is one that is incredibly hopeful. The question: What is the significance or meaning of the crowns in scripture?

The crowns we are talking about here aren’t the ones worn by kings, queens, and royalty. Those are signs of earthly authority and rule. The crowns we are looking at are the ones mentioned in the letters of the New Testament.

The crowns we read about in Revelation may or may not have anything to do with those mentioned in the letters. Regardless, what happens in Revelation is wonderfully telling and helpful for us to get perspective.

The crowns themselves are symbols of victory. They are awards. The reference is not unlike that of a certificate, trophy, medal, or some other token of honor given for an accomplishment. In the days of scripture, athletes and competitors who were victorious received a crown of things like olive branches to wear as a sign and trophy of sorts.

That’s these crowns.

When we think of awards or trophies we think in our own human terms. These are signs of achievement that we seek after. In whatever field of life we are engaging, there are often recognitions that we can chase after. We need to have caution that the reasons for chasing these things in this world don’t confuse how we see these crowns that seem to be awarded in a heavenly realm.

The way we talk about heaven and rewards often paints a very confusing picture of what all of that is supposed to look like. It’s understandable as our only reference point is the economy and values in our world. The challenge is to push past this world and do our best to value things in a way that is Godly and Christlike.

If heaven is a place of perfection, we have a problem when we also talk about wanting “treasure in heaven” and different rewards when we get there. We focus on how big our “mansion” will be. For some there is a hierarchy in heaven, a pecking order for us.

All of these things are drawn out from scriptures that are trying to use limited human understanding to describe something that is beyond comprehension. So we can get things mixed up.

Perfection means that there is nothing that we need or want. Everything is exactly as it should be. There is no room for pride because God is at the center of all there is. There is no “pecking order”. There is no need for treasure. What good would it be? We don’t need or want for anything. If all is perfect then there is no friction or division between us.

All of the things we describe from an earthly view would interrupt that perfection. Wanting more treasure or a bigger house is a sign of status. In our world these things create jealousy, feelings of better than and less than, and contention. Hierarchy and pride does the same thing. It creates division when there should be unity.

The descriptions are useful to let us know that heaven is a place of unsurpassed glory, beauty, and value. We need to avoid the double speak that puts the things that cause sin in this world into the mix of a place that is supposed to be everything but disrupted by the things that cause that sin.

In fact we see that even if these “crowns” are literal rewards we don’t hang onto them. In Revelation these elders remove their crowns and throw them at the feet of God. There is no need for such trinkets in the presence of almighty God and in the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven. Everything we lack in this world is made up in the next. There isn’t a need for anything more than the Kingdom and the love, glory, and presence of God.

This isn’t to say that the crowns, the awards aren’t worth pursuing. The question becomes why. There are a few reasons I’d like to offer that we run after awards here in this world.

Credibility- When we are wanting to pass on a skill or knowledge it is useful to have something to vouch for us. Diplomas, recognitions, trophies and the sort all serve this purpose. They verify our quality, knowledge, and skill.

Personal development- Sometimes we have something to prove to ourselves. We look to improve ourselves, our character, our confidence and awards help affirm that we are on the right track. As I get older I hear more and more people challenging themselves just to see “can I still do this?” Even an award that shows something is completed, whether there is a placement attached or not, is a validation.

Pride(to different extents)- Many of us have things in our lives that are passions and part of who we are. Achievements help people see that importance in our lives. They are identity markers. For others it goes from pride in a passion to outright arrogance. “I am awesome, I know I’m awesome, you need to know I’m

awesome, and you need to let me know that you know how awesome I am.”

Perhaps the most frustrating is looking for the award just to have it. To have the title or label. The interest is in possessing it rather than earning. This is dangerous. For any of us who have seen someone elevated that didn't deserve it, especially when we know of many others deserving of the recognition, it is frustrating. The other reasons we've noted all have in common doing the work. This gives permission to lie, cheat, bribe, bully, and so forth to get what is desired. There isn't any meaning to it.

Story about Timmy and the black belt.

And this is what we are getting at. Meaning and value. What are these crowns really worth? I can tell you the material value of any award or trophy every given. Just show me the receipt. That's it. That's the material value. But for awards hard won the meaning is so much deeper.

They represent the hours and discipline of training hard when everyone else has quit or given up. The reading, research, discussions, projects, and papers that build the skills and understanding. The generosity, compassion, and love for a cause or community that sets self aside in favor of others and a purpose that is selfless and sacrificial.

This is the value and meaning in a crown.

The crowns in scripture have a wonderful attribute. They can't be faked. God is the one judge with complete integrity. Who can't be manipulated or fooled. There is only honesty and authenticity.

Lip service is meaningless. Talking the game only matters if it is backed up by a life that puts the talking into action. The crowns of scripture are fairly simple.

In Corinthians Paul talks about running the race to completion. Starting is important, but finishing is even more so. Do we do the work to not just finish but to run the race well? Paul's comparison to an athlete is accurate. There is sacrifice, discipline, and continuing to grow in who we are in Christ. The reward for this kind of faith doesn't fade. It doesn't pass away. It lasts eternally.

Thessalonians has an even grander view of victory and reward. It isn't about ourselves. It is about the lives we touch and improve. Here it is how we inspire lives to be more like Christ. To find faith. It isn't how much I can accumulate here in this world or how awesome I can become. It is all about how my life impacts others to make their own journey more faithful and fulfilled. That is my reward. Knowing that a difference has been made and that it will please Christ.

The Timothy passage is written to Timothy and directed to leaders. If you lead, the call is to press on and endure even in the face of hardship, frustration, and stubborn people unwilling to listen. The reward is that God will call you righteous. I see this as an addition to what we see in Thessalonians. Our reward is the difference we make in the lives of others. At the same time we can do our utmost and it falls on deaf ears. God sees the frustration and honors the faithfulness and effort even when it meets with resistance.

Peter is similar in encouraging us to care for those who are given to us to care for faithfully. It is about faithful leadership. This crown is a crown of "glory" that is unending. What is this glory? I doubt anyone knows for sure. Though what we feel confident in is that the spiritual body we inhabit eternally is far more glorious than this flesh and blood body we occupy now. We are rewarded with an eternity that never fades or wears away. Finally, James talks about the crown of life being given to those who persevere. This is similar to Paul in Corinthians. We run the race of life and faith to the end. We know there will be temptations, successes, failures, challenges, tragedies, and more. We resolve to meet all of it faithfully with the strength, love, mercy, and compassion of Jesus.

All of these crowns point to the same reward. Redemption and a home in God's eternal heaven.

How do we get there? Yes, it is through faith in Christ. But these passages remind us that faith isn't just a few well spoken words. It is about allowing Christ to be part of every aspect of life.

In the world we are living in so much of what interferes with living as we are called in these letters isn't just the overt, direct challenges like facing people and circumstances directly threatening us for living faithfully.

It is the subtle voices and pushes and pulls. It's those half truths that tempt us to limit and check our love of neighbor. It is confusing emotional worship with love of God that allows us to compromise authentic faith for convenient lives that merely lift up hands on a Sunday morning.

The crown is just a reflection of something so much deeper and greater. It reflects the heart and life fully given over to God. It is always so important to remember that this isn't claiming to earn salvation. It is remembering that a life worthy of the crown of eternal life demonstrates salvation by the love it pours into the world.

If you've ever felt the peace that comes from doing the right thing when everyone is trying to get you to do wrong. If you've ever felt the pride that comes from seeing another person grow in character faith, and love for Jesus and known you had a hand in it. If you've ever put your head down weary from felling like you were banging into a wall all day, but still had a calm and content because you know you did your best by God regardless of the outcome.

If you've done any of this and more and felt that warmth and settled nature that only comes from the Holy Spirit then you've had a sliver of that crown laid on you.

So we keep going day by day and growing a moment at a time. We persevere and trust that these little crowning moments during the course of life are signals that when this life is done we will receive the crown of life. Not because we say we want it. Not because we say we deserve it.

Because we have placed our trust in the One who offers it and allowed Him to be our Lord and guide as we participate in the redeeming grace He so freely offers.

BIBLE STUDY

Chapter 10 is significant in that it is the final work before Jesus enters Jerusalem. His prediction of what is about to happen in this chapters directly foreshadows what's coming next. It also makes sense that Mark is punching hard with final heavy points for the disciples to understand as they get ready to follow Him to His crucifixion.

The teaching about divorce has to be put in context. This isn't Jesus making some random pronouncement about divorce. He is responding to a challenge by Pharisees. It's no coincidence that the subject is the same one that got John the Baptist beheaded. How to deal with divorce. Remember John criticized Herod for his marriage to his brother's wife. This wasn't taken well, John was baptized, and ultimately executed as a result. Jesus doesn't necessarily argue with the Law. He has them state what Moses said. Jesus clarifies the why without refuting it. He then makes things more strict by appealing to Genesis to make the point that marriage is something that is a serious commitment and intended to be for life.

Notice something interesting here. The argument is about divorce, not defining marriage. Jesus is using His contemporary marriage context. The only context they had was male marrying female. The marriage to one person was actually a development, not a moral law.

All throughout the Old Testament polygamy was normal. In some cases like the Levirate marriage it was even necessary and required. There was no prohibition against having multiple wives. Marriage looked different in the Old Testament from the New. This wasn't so much a Biblical difference as a cultural one.

In Jesus' day monogamy had become more the norm. The trap with this question from the Pharisees was potentially offending rulers and kings. A problem was that while kings may have been expected to have one wife, it didn't keep them from getting bored with the wife they selected. Fickle and superficial divorce was a problem. It was just a matter of being tired of one wife and dismissing her for the purpose of marrying the more recent interest.

Jesus answer didn't violate any Law. At the same time it did come into agreement with John the Baptist's sensibility that got him into trouble. It definitely thumbed the nose at powerful men who were accustomed to having their way. Jesus is poking the bear as He heads into Jerusalem.

Notice that the intent here is to take the marriage vow seriously. That is the point. Jesus is confronting meaningless vows and superficial splits. This isn't addressing situations where there is significant abuse, infidelity, etc.

The lesson moves once again to children and the rich young ruler dovetails nicely into it. Keep in mind that last chapter Jesus used children as an illustration for whom they should serve. Children were the lowest on the totem pole and Jesus called them to welcome the children. To welcome them was to welcome Jesus and to welcome Jesus is to welcome God.

Here the disciples have forgotten that lesson clearly. Jesus now not only welcomes children again, but uses them as an example for the most necessary and purest of faith. Most of us see the children here as examples of unquestioning trust, innocence, vulnerability, and devotion. These are all fine attributes. They are also our understanding of children. The disciples understanding adds another layer for us.

As the lowest of the low the identity of a child was found entirely in the father. That was their name, their role, and likely why so many followed in their father's occupation. This is the faith that we are called to. To find our identity unquestioningly in God. God is the Father, and in whom we commit ourselves. Everything about us is defined by that relationship. This is the faith Jesus calls us to.

This kind of faith is rooted in humility, which the rich young man lacked. He did well with following the 10 commandments. His value in his wealth was his barrier. Where Jesus says identity is wrapped up in God, this man's was wrapped up in his wealth.

The rich then were seen in sometimes almost divine perspective. Their charity supported the needs of many of those who struggled. The idea that power and wealth equal favor from God or gods isn't new. It was a mistaken view even back then. It's easy to believe your own hype when it elevates status and a perception of divine favor. It's also a fatal flaw.

To give up his wealth would be to give up this status. It would be to make himself common in order to serve

God. This was too steep a price. Pride has a cost. He would rather be served than serve.

God's economy is then flipped to as the disciples ask about what the deal is since they've given up everything. Jesus tells them they will get back a lot more than they gave up. In THIS LIFE no less! Of course it will also come with persecution. That's the price.

We see as the Acts church organizes this comes to pass. Family becomes bonds of faith rather than blood. They share all things in common. They also suffer at the hands of their fellow Jews and then the Romans as well. Persecution is real. But the bonds of faith hold strong and fast. This is an accurate prediction for the near future for them.

Today we should be aware of how things have changed. Christians turn on Christians. You or I could walk into a given church and be shunned over one or two disagreements in issues. We could walk into a church as believing Christians, have a need, and be told we are lazy, to "get a job", or some other dismissive insult just because we've fallen on hard times.

In other words, the church today is divided amongst itself. It turns away even honest, heartfelt, and earnest believers in times of need(though if the believer is in a time of plenty it's amazing how much can be overlooked...). We need to get back to this sense that Jesus called for to His disciples. We are to be family. To love one another. To support one another.

Congregations that truly grasp this have their work cut out. Our job is to be that presence in the world to welcome back those who have been disaffected by churches, theologies, and congregations that have lost their way. In the midst of all these lessons, Jesus must have had the face palm of face palm with John and James. They are still arguing about status. Really?!!!!

Jesus' response is honest, and oddly comforting without them knowing it. If they want status they need to be willing to do as Jesus does. They say the can and will. They have no clue. He is talking about suffering, death, mockery, and rejection. They don't have the faintest idea what awaits in Jerusalem(even though Jesus has tried to inform them). Even in their ignorance Jesus affirms that they will share in His affliction.

They do. They suffer as disciples and apostles. In His correction though Jesus knows their potential. He knows that despite their present condition they will grow into bold and strong messengers. They will be faithful unto death. Jesus knows them, and us, better than we know ourselves. Our prayer should be to have the mettle to stand strong in authentic faith even when hardship comes.

The healing of Bartimaeus is famous. It's not unexpected or altogether extraordinary at this point. Jesus has healed and exorcised countless times and in a multitude of ways. What is important is the following.

Bartimaeus calls Him "Son of David". Jesus is Messiah, in line with the Davidic kings. Bartimaeus sees Him. Perhaps others do as well. But even if Bartimaeus is physically blind he has some spiritual sight. Many who are physically sighted remain in spiritual blindness.

In healing him Jesus does, or doesn't do, something. He doesn't tell him to be quiet. There is no need to stay silent any longer. To this point He has told those He's healed to keep quiet. His "time had not yet come." No more.

Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. His time has come. No need to stay silent any longer!!!