

WE BELIEVE IN REWARDS¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

Among the very last recorded words of our Lord Jesus Christ are these: “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My *reward* is with Me, to give to every one according to his *work*” (Rev 22:12; italics added).

This is a clear and definitive statement on the subject of rewards by the Lord Himself. Not to believe in rewards is not to believe His words. The Grace Evangelical Society *does* believe in rewards!

II. REWARDS AND GRACE

Some Christians are troubled by the doctrine of rewards because this doctrine seems to suggest “merit” instead of “grace.” They argue that a doctrine of meritorious good works is a contradiction to the truth that we are not under the law but under grace (Rom 6:14).

This point of view is a serious misreading of the Scriptures. As a matter of fact, it badly confuses the doctrine of *divine grace* with the truth of *human responsibility*.

Look again at the words of Jesus quoted above. Our Lord says clearly that His “reward” is according to each man’s “work.” There is no way to escape the obvious implication that “rewards” are *earned*.

Salvation, of course, is *not* earned. Therefore it can be said to be “by grace...through faith” and “not of works” (Eph 2:8-9). Our works have nothing to do with whether we go to heaven or hell. Salvation is a gift and it is absolutely free. Faith in Christ is the means by which this gift is received.²

¹This article originally appeared in the Autumn 1991 issue of *JOTGES*.

²Preus is expressing Lutheran theology when he states “that faith’s role in justification is purely instrumental, that faith is an organum leptikon, like the empty hand of a beggar receiving a gift, that it alone (*sola fide*) is the appropriate vehicle to receive reconciliation, forgiveness, Christ and

Paul taught us clearly that grace and works are mutually exclusive. His words are important:

And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work (Rom 11:6).

In the light of this clear-cut statement, we dare not confuse the Bible's teaching about rewards with the truth of God's unconditional grace to us. If we claim that rewards must be "by grace" then we are saying they can have nothing to do with "works." But if we say *that*, we contradict our Lord's words which relate His "reward" to each man's "work."

If we try to "redefine" works in terms of "grace," then according to Paul we change the character of one or both of these. Either what we call "work" is no longer really work, or what we call "grace" is no longer really grace.

Lordship Salvation illustrates this unavoidable result. Since Lordship theologians claim that people must do good works in order to reach heaven, they cannot really call their doctrine salvation by "grace." But of course they *do* claim to teach salvation by grace. Yet, according to Paul, what they call "grace" is no longer really grace!

But Christians who deny that the works considered at the Judgment Seat of Christ are really rewarded on the basis of their spiritual merits fall into a similar error. They are trying to fit "works" and "grace" together in a way that Paul says is impossible. In the process they will either distort the true meaning of grace or distort the meaning of work.

His merits..." See Robert D. Preus, "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45 (1981) 172.

Faith, then, is not a good work (as it is taken to be quite often in Calvinistic circles). Faith is accepting the testimony of God as true (1 John 5:9-12). One may believe the gospel without saying a prayer, without raising a hand or walking the aisle, indeed without any *effort* whatsoever. Work, on the other hand, always requires some *effort* on our part. To turn faith into a good work is a colossal confusion of categories and annuls the Pauline antithesis between faith and works.

Saving faith is a mere beggar's hand (to use the Lutheran metaphor), without any trace of meritorious activity at all. It offers nothing to God, and receives everything from Him.

Let us hear Paul again:

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (Rom 4:4).

In this verse, Paul uses precisely the same Greek word for “wages” that Jesus used in Rev 22:12. It is the Greek word *misthos*, which basically means “pay, wages.”³ It clearly carries the suggestion of getting what one has *earned*.

There is no getting around this biblical truth. God *gives* us His salvation, but He *pays* us for our good works.

To confuse these two lines of truth is to subvert the doctrine of grace and the doctrine of works in Scripture. It is an attempt to mix spiritual apples and oranges. The result can only be confusion about the true nature of both of these great themes in the Bible.

This is *not* to say, of course, that there is *no connection* between God’s grace to us and the works that we do for Him. Of course there is a connection! We would not even be able to do rewardable good works if we had not been regenerated by grace through faith. As the Apostle Peter makes clear to us, at the moment of salvation we receive “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3). That is to say, God has given us—by grace—all that we need to live a godly life.

But we must utilize this provision *diligently*. Peter says this quite plainly too:

But also for this very reason, *giving all diligence*, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge...(2 Pet 1:5; italics added).

Thus God graciously supplies the means by which we may serve Him, but the decision to serve, and the diligence employed in doing so, are *our* contribution. Thus our works involve *our* efforts and are rewardable.

A totally passive view of the Christian life, in which we make no effort to do right or to please God, has no foundation in the

³ *Misthos* refers to some kind of monetary compensation in Matt 20:8; Acts 1:18; Jas 5:4; 2 Pet 2:15; and Jude 11. But the English word “pay” (or “compensation”) would work in virtually every NT instance of this word. The frequent traditional translation “reward” somewhat clouds for the English reader a point that was obvious to the Greek reader. “Reward” referred to one’s pay or compensation for this or that. A day of *misthos* would signify “payday!”

Bible. We are not mere passive vehicles for the Holy Spirit, but active ones who must apply “all diligence.”

As we do, we *earn* rewards!

III. REWARDS AND SELFISHNESS

Another problem some Christians have with the doctrine of rewards is that this doctrine seems to them to appeal to our “selfishness.” Such Christian brothers may go on to say that we do not need to be motivated this way. Instead, we ought to do all that we do for God out of love and gratitude to Him.

This point of view, however, confronts a serious problem of its own. Not only is a doctrine of rewards taught in Scripture, but we are actually commanded to pursue them.

Thus Jesus said:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt 6:19-21).

We may observe here that our Lord does not present the pursuit of heavenly treasure as though it were optional. On the contrary, it is clear that He wants every disciple of His to lay up this celestial wealth.

The reason for this is also stated. Wherever our *treasure* happens to be, that’s where our hearts will be focused. And God wants our hearts to be focused on heaven and that is why we are commanded to invest in heavenly rewards.

God knows better than we do what will captivate our hearts for Him. Evidently, rewards play a significant role in this.

It may sound pious for someone to say: “*I* am not interested in rewards! *I* serve God out of love and gratitude alone!” But such a person is claiming to be more loftily motivated than even the Apostle Paul himself! He wrote:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my

body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (1 Cor 9:24-27).

Obviously Paul was not running to obtain his justification or his eternal salvation! Those things were already his by *grace alone*. It follows then that Paul is talking about the reward—the prize—that could be won by a person who ran a winning race.

Obviously, too, Paul is highly motivated by the thought of winning this prize. He dedicates himself to obtaining it with the same intense self-discipline that characterizes the superior athlete.

Those who disparage rewards as a powerful Christian motivation ought to read their NT again—this time, with their eyes open!

But is this motivation selfish? We believe that no motivation encouraged by the Lord Jesus and His Apostles could ever possibly be termed “selfish”!

What is wrong, in fact, is our own incorrect view of “selfishness. Scripture does not teach us to be uninterested in our own happiness or well-being. The very desire to escape eternal damnation is a legitimate and urgent self-interest. The instinct to preserve our lives is the same. Nor are pleasure and enjoyment illegitimate experiences.

When God put Adam and Eve in the garden, He furnished them with “every tree...that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9). They could enjoy themselves freely provided they abstained from eating from the one forbidden tree. Similarly, Paul tells rich people that “God...gives us richly all things to *enjoy*” (1 Tim 6:17; italics added).

Selfishness ought not to be defined simply as the pursuit of our own self-interest. Instead, it should be defined as the pursuit of our self-interest *in our own way*, rather than in God’s way. Since “love” is a preeminent virtue in Christianity, true selfishness often involves a pursuit of self-interest that violates the law of love.

But no one who seriously pursues heavenly treasure can afford to be unloving. As Paul pointed out in his great chapter on love, all seemingly spiritual and sacrificial activities are reduced to nothing in the absence of love (1 Cor 13:1-3). Loveless activity will no doubt go up in billows of smoke at the Judgment Seat of

Christ as though it were so much wood, hay, or stubble (1 Cor 3:11-15).

No indeed! It is not selfish to obey God by pursuing eternal rewards. Still less can someone who does so afford to be selfish in nature. For if he is, he is forfeiting the very rewards he professes to seek.

No wonder that James censures his Christian readers for showing partiality toward the rich and neglecting the poor. In doing so they violate the “royal law” of Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Jas 2:8).

A couple of verses later, James gives his fellow Christians the bottom line:

So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas 2:12-13).⁴

The doctrine of the Judgment Seat of Christ and of rewards is not merely *not* selfish. It is one of the strongest scriptural motivations for an *unselfish*, loving, and merciful lifestyle!

IV. REWARDS AND OTHER MOTIVATIONS

It is not the point of this article to claim that rewards are the *only* motivation for godly living. Nor is it our point to claim that rewards are the *best* motivation. Our point is simply that rewards provide a valid and important biblical motivation for the Christian life.

But clearly there *are* other valid and important motivations for commitment to God. Let us mention some of these.

A. Love and Gratitude

Love and gratitude are indeed worthy motivations. Paul could write that “the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith

⁴James 2:12-13 contains a challenging concept. If we have been unmerciful people in our lifetime—harsh, censorious, unconcerned, unhelpful—at the Judgment Seat of Christ we can expect judgment “by the book” without that admixture of divine mercy which we will all urgently need. Mercy will beat (“triumph over”) judgment in the sense that the merciful person will get more credit than would be strictly due in a rigid, uncompromising review of his or her life. Which of us would not wish for this kind of “extra credit” when we stand before our Lord?

in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Elsewhere Paul speaks of being constrained by the “love of Christ” to a life no longer lived for oneself but “for Him who died” for us “and rose again” (2 Cor 5:14-15). Obviously Paul found in the Cross a manifestation of love that was powerfully motivating to him. So of course should we.

The Apostle John likewise said: “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

B. Temporal Consequences of Sin

Another motivation for godly living is concern about the *temporal* consequences of sin. Although no failure can call a believer’s eternal salvation into question, the believer’s sin may have disastrous earthly consequences.

When Paul warns about immorality within the Christian community, he also warns about divine retribution for this. “The Lord,” he says, “is the avenger of all such” (1 Thess 4:6). James, in turn, warns that sin can lead to physical death (Jas 1:14-15; 5:20), just as the OT frequently so warned (Prov 10:27; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16).

The Lord Himself promises, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten” (Rev 3:19).

Ananias and Sapphira, of course, were punished with immediate death for their lie in the midst of a Spirit-controlled church. Nothing in Acts 5:1-11 suggests that they were not saved. King David is the classic example of a born-again person who reaped the consequences of committing adultery and murder. Though forgiven for his sin (2 Sam 12:13), God nevertheless exacted a price from him. The child that Bathsheba had borne to him died (2 Sam 12:15-19). The subsequent rebellion of Absalom, with all its tragic ramifications, was another part of the divine chastening on David (2 Sam 12:11-12; see 16:20-23).

Forgiveness, of course, re-established David’s fellowship with God. But it did not annul all temporal penalties for his grievous sin.⁵ We need to take this to heart. We can indeed confess our sins and be forgiven and restored to harmony with God (1 John 1:9).

⁵ It is important to remember that forgiveness is not the remission of a penalty but the removal of estrangement between two parties. This is true whether we think on a human or a divine level. Forgiveness extended by the party who is wronged to the one who has wronged him is the same as saying that friendship, or harmony, or fellowship, is renewed.

But this may not prevent such dire temporal consequences as loss of health, broken homes, disturbed children, and many other negative things.

Handled in a biblical way, this principle can be powerfully motivating.

C. Temporal Benefits of Righteous Living

But just as there are temporal *consequences* of sin, there are also temporal *benefits* from righteous living. These benefits can provide yet another motivation for a holy life.

For example, Paul declares that “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). Here he seems to be talking about *our present* experience of God’s kingdom (compare Col 1:13). Obviously, too, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) is made up of traits which are highly profitable to possess as we move through life. They are among the blessings of righteousness.

The Apostle Peter also directly addresses the matter of present benefits from godly living. He does so by drawing on Psalm 34 when he writes:

“He who would love life
And see good days,
Let him refrain his tongue from evil,
And his lips from speaking guile;
Let him turn away from evil and do good;
Let him seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord
are on the righteous
And His ears are open to their prayers;
But the face of the Lord
is against those who do evil” (1 Pet 3:10-12; Ps 34:12-16).

Peter clearly believed in the temporal benefits of righteous living (see 1 Pet 3:13-17 as well).

No doubt the list of biblical motivations for holiness could be extended further. For example, one could mention the challenge in 1 John to “abide” in Christ to avoid shame at His coming (1 John 2:28). But enough has been said to show that the NT is

When God extends His forgiveness to us, He restores us to fellowship with Himself (see 1 John 1:5-10). But as the case of David shows, He may allow us to reap severe consequences from what we have done wrong. I should not carelessly suppose that when I confess my sins to God, I have insulated myself from all the unfavorable consequences—even death—that my sinful behavior sets in motion.

For example, a believer may seek and find forgiveness for homosexual activity. But he may still contract AIDS and die.

rich in motivational material. The doctrine of rewards is biblical. It is one excellent motivation to live well.

But it is not the only one.

V. CONCLUSION

Many people tend to downplay the role of rewards in Christian experience because they are looking for a simple answer to a complex question. There is a tendency to want to fix on *one motivation par excellence* as the crucial key to Christian living.

But careful study of the NT does not encourage so simplistic an approach. Man as created in God's image, and fallen into sin, and then regenerated by God's grace, is a highly *complex* entity. There are no easy answers as to how such a person may learn to live for God. We need everything that God has been pleased to reveal about this process in the NT.

There are no one-line, "sound-bite" answers to this question. If we seek for such answers, we are chasing an illusion. Nothing will replace careful and detailed study of the many passages that bear on this subject.

But the study of the NT in detail does disclose one thing. It discloses that there is a biblical doctrine of rewards and that this doctrine surfaces in *many, many* passages both in the Gospels and in the Epistles.⁶

The failure to recognize this truth for what it is has caused many people to confuse it with the doctrine of salvation. But such a misconception serves only to collapse the basic NT distinction between grace and works. Among its worst effects is an error like Lordship Salvation.

But even many Christians who understand grace are confused by the doctrine of rewards because they try to make *everything* grace and eliminate "merit" of any kind from the Christian experience. But to indulge this kind of confusion is to rob oneself of a potent and spiritually energizing motivation to do God's will.

⁶ It is not the purpose of this article to discuss all these passages, or even the various kinds of rewards about which the Bible speaks. That is well beyond the scope of a brief presentation like this one. In fact, this writer has written an entire book on the subject of rewards (*Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards*, 3rd edition [Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2007]). For those interested in doing so, the subject may be pursued more fully there.

Let us get ourselves back on track. Let us give to the doctrine of rewards the same high visibility that it has in the NT. Let us sense anew the dynamic power of this truth in the lives of great spiritual men, like Paul himself.

Let us listen again to the famous words he penned prior to his approaching death. Can anyone fail to see in them that the Apostle was inspired right to the end of his earthly career by the prospect of reward? He wrote thus:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Clearly the Apostle Paul believed in rewards. That is a conviction we should all heartily share.