

A SIMPLE PAPER ON REWARDS

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I have written a long and detailed paper on this subject before [*Rewards in Biblical Theology*], but here I want to explain the matter from a different angle as concisely as possible. Understanding this Biblically or not has a big impact on how we live our life.

What it does not mean

The NT doctrine of rewards does not imply works righteousness or meritorious salvation. It does not entail the thought that man can, by nature, do good things – he cannot. It does not mean that we can put God in our debt – such a thought is ridiculous. It does not mean that God is so impressed with our character that he rewards us. Neither does it mean that we cease to be sinners in this life and start earning spiritual things. It certainly has no implications of legalism, that we have to do certain things in order to please God. All of salvation is by free grace and the doctrine of rewards does not alter this.

We must think Biblically

Though it seems strange, to some, that God gives rewards to those who do not deserve it, it is the overwhelming teaching of scripture. Now although the great reward of the elect is God himself in Christ, although the crown of salvation is Christ, the Bible also teaches – and it teaches this very clearly and loudly – that God gives other rewards also.

How can God give rewards to those who have nothing to offer, are steeped in sin in their old nature and who have no strength in themselves? How can God reward us when every breath of our lives is given us by God? Can God reward us when he does everything for us?

True religion is full of mysteries. Mysteries are things that we must accept when revealed by God even if we don't understand them. When the Biblical revelation is clear, then we must accept the truth – even if it goes against the grain of human understanding.

For instance, God is one. Scripture affirms this strongly; yet God is three persons in that oneness. No one can really claim to understand this but we are all called to believe it.

Jesus is God's Firstborn Son. He is begotten of the Father and loved. Yet Jesus is God; he is equal with the Father in rights and yet submits to his purpose. How can Jesus be equal in authority and in submission? How can Jesus be equal in personhood and yet begotten? The way forward is not to think in human terms. 'Begotten' does not imply in God that Jesus came after the Father; it means that the Son has a role in the Trinity that is as a son.

The Spirit is also God and yet he proceeds from the Father and the Son. To us this implies submission, he does what the Father and the Spirit send him to do – but he is also equal in authority and exists before all things.

The key is that we must not look to human experience to understand the things of God. We must simply accept what God's word tells us – even if it seems strange. This is exactly how we are to accept the doctrine of rewards.

This is important

If we do not accept this doctrine we are in disobedience to God because the revelation of it is so clear. There is no confusion in revelation – there are multitudes of references to it, including some very simple narratives and pithy statements by the Lord himself. It is only denied when it cuts across the teachings of certain men. Some people erect systems of

theology where rewards have no place. We must deny these systems and simply accept what scripture tells us in black and white.

What does scripture say?

From this point I will examine the issues in the form of a catechism.

Is the principle of divine rewards present in the OT?

Yes it is. Many saints looked to the reward.

Is this reward not salvation in Christ?

God is the exceeding great reward (Gen 15:1); salvation in him is the reward of faith. However, the patriarchs and saints looked to other rewards also. Many tied their hope to the promise of the land, an eternal city (Heb 11:10, 14, 16) where they would have authority after death. There was also a clear understanding of reward for specific deeds done by those who were already saved people (Ruth 2:11-12; Ps 19:11; Prov 25:22; Isa 49:4 etc.). [If these rewards regarded salvation then the verses would teach works righteousness – clearly they mean something else.]

Does the NT mention rewards for work done?

Yes, very many times. For instance:

- But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly. [Matt 6:3-4]
- Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. [Matt 6:19-20]
- And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward. [Matt 10:42]
- For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. [Mt 16:27]
- And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. [Gal 6:9-10]
- Knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. [Eph 6:8]
- I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. [Phil 4:17]
- Let no one cheat you of your reward. [Col 2:18]
- And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. [Col 3:23-24]
- For God is not unjust to forget your work and labour of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. [Heb 6:10]
- Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. [2 Jn 1:8]
- And I will give to each one of you according to your works ... and he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations. [Rev 2:23-26]
- Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labours, and their works follow them.’ [Rev 14:13]
- And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. [Rev 22:12]

What does ‘reward’ mean?

There are various Greek words used: *misthos* means dues paid for work (wages), the fruit of toil. *Apodidomi* means to pay off, discharge what is due, a debt, wages. *Katabrabeuo*, means to decide as umpire against someone, to defraud or beguile of the prize of victory, to cheat of a reward (Col 2:18). *Antapodosis* means recompense, to reward or repay someone (Col 3:24). The words cannot be misunderstood; they all teach a reward for something done; a payment for toil.

In general God will repay every man according to his work in the sense of those who choose to sin will be repaid with condemnation and those who demonstrate faith in Christ by their works will receive eternal life (Matt 16:27; Rm 2:5ff; Rev 22:12). However above that is clear teaching that God also rewards the faithful labour of saints. This cannot be eternal life in view or it would teach works salvation. The verses are clear.

What are the observations from these verses?

We could mention many, but a few include:

- Jesus mentions ‘treasures’ plural [Matt 6:19-20]. If the believer’s reward is Christ, why did Jesus not use the singular?
- Charitable deeds result in rewards. [Matt 6:3-4, 10:42]. Jesus is not given as a crown for a work of man towards a fellow man.
- We can be cheated out of our reward [Col 2:18] but Paul is not saying that we lose our salvation. If the reward is Christ, then he can be lost. This is preposterous.
- Righteous acts of the new nature have a repercussion in heaven [Rev 19:8].
- The works of the saints have a result in heaven (e.g, prayer). [Rev 14:13].
- The dead saints (those who are in the Book of Life) are judged for their works [Rev 20:12].
- The Lord specifically states that his reward is ‘with him’ when he comes for his saints [Rev 22:12]. This means that the reward is different from union with Christ in glory. Furthermore, the reward is based upon works performed.

Summary

All works are judged. The believer who trusts and obeys God by doing good works (works of faith and love) will receive treasures in heaven, multiple rewards. God praises these good works. The Lord brings his reward with him at the Second Coming. Those who fail to work well will lose their reward. The implication of the two parables of the pounds (Lk 19:11-27) and talents (Mt 25:14-30) is that rewards are linked to authority in God’s future kingdom.

Are you suggesting that believers can waste their lives?

Yes. This is the teaching of Paul in places like I Cor 3:8-16, 6:19-20 and 2 Cor 5:10 which cover corporate and individual situations. Note: **If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.** (1 Cor 3:14-15). Some believers will enter heaven like a man who leaps from a burning building and loses all. Other believers build for eternity and their spiritual works follow them. **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad** (2 Cor 5:10). [The word ‘bad’ does not imply condemnation; it means ‘worthless’, ‘not as it ought to be’ – like a son who has not behaved correctly.]

Are you suggesting that there are varieties of function and authority in heaven?

Yes I am. This is clearly taught in scripture. ‘Well *done*, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities. ... You also be over five cities’. (Lk 19:17, 19). His lord said to him,

'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things'. (Matt 25:21).

Surely all Christians are equal?

All believers are equal in justification, there are no varieties in standing before God. No one is more holy than another because all are righteous in Christ. However, as there are varieties of function and service, so there are degrees of function in the glory. This is normal in God's service; note the kings, prophets, priests and judges of the OT.

All angels are ministers of God but there are ranks amongst the angels. Some are archangels for instance (1 Thess 4:16; Jude 1:9) and some are called to fight other spirit beings. The angel Michael is called 'one of the chief princes' (Dan 10:13). The church also has various functions and a leadership. God's plan includes variety of function and orders of rank. In the new world the government will have different levels of stewardship. In Jesus' words, some will be in authority over one or more cities, others will have other tasks. All will be glorious, all will be holy, all will be joyful, but there will be differences of rank and function. The gift of God's rewards appears to be the way this ranking is measured out.

Why does God institute rewards?

He does this to encourage and motivate good works. Though he has no need to reward such, in his great grace he chooses to do this in consideration of our weakness.

We are called to do good works as the *outworking of* (not gaining) our salvation (Phil 2:12-13). They also demonstrate true faith (Jm 2:17). These works were predestined in eternity (Eph 2:10) and the energy to perform them is given by God (1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:29;).

The performance of these works results in a reward. The reward is not eternal life but something additional. The eternal inheritance of the believer is Christ and all believers share equally in this inheritance; but the reward of the believer is for toil. The reward is still part of Christ since everything in salvation is in Christ; nothing is outside of him (Eph 1:3). The works that gain rewards glorify Christ and testify of him (such as the love expressed in giving a drink of water to a thirsty man); the reward pertains to his delegated authority in heaven (ruling a city on his royal behalf).

What happens at the end?

Believers are going to give an account of their lives (2 Cor 5:10). This is done before the tribunal of Christ (Rm 14:10). At this point all the actions of believers will be evaluated as either good or worthless. What is worthless is burned up as dross, but what was done in Christ's Spirit will be rewarded (2 Cor 5:10). Thus the believer's works done on Earth follow him to heaven.

Conclusion

It is vital to understand that conversion is not the end, but the beginning of a new life. Regeneration is not the final state of the believer. We mature as we exercise our new nature and walk in faith, bearing fruit. In his great grace God has decreed that he will reward those who serve him faithfully in exercising this new life. Saints do not deserve this since they are merely doing God's will by his strength; but this is the measure of how great God's grace really is. Rewards are a stimulation to service. We should thank God for them and give ourselves willingly to obey his word.