

REWARDS AND JUDGMENT

INTRODUCTION

This is an important subject which is given considerable space in the Bible in various ways: teaching, parables, warnings, analogies and experience; yet we hear so little of it in these days. The modern focus is upon the here and now. Yes people want to glorify God, but attention seems to be mainly upon building a big work than can be observed, a healing or miracle that can be seen, a hefty bank balance able to be used or a prominent platform ministry that can be advertised.

God, however, continually advises us to build for an eternal kingdom, to lay up treasure in heaven, to wait for a city that has foundations. At best we are only pilgrims in this world, tabernacling (camping) in a land that is foreign to us. Whilst we are to maintain a testimony now, that witness is often in suffering, persecution and even martyrdom. That was the experience of the early church and of the body in most revivals. The testimony is not in comfort but in returning good for evil.

In order to focus our mind upon God's eternal kingdom, scripture tells us that our works will be judged and appraised. The result will be the apportionment of rewards and positions of authority (or not). There is, therefore, both a negative and a positive incentive to do good and obey God. Our wasted efforts will be destroyed, good works done in the power of the Spirit will be rewarded.

This paper intends to examine this subject and provide an encouragement for saints to glorify God in the body. It will not examine the judgment of unbelievers on the last day. That is an altogether separate subject. Our point here is to see what the scripture says about the evaluation of God's people.

ASSESSMENT / JUDGMENT

SPECIFIC TEXTS / TEACHING

We must first make absolutely clear that believers are not included in the general judgment when all men will give an account of their sinful lives to God at the last day. We have been justified by faith in the work of Jesus and declared not guilty. Not only that but we have received the righteousness of Christ himself so that we stand welcomed in the presence of God. We are family, heirs with Christ (see Rm 4-5). We are not outcasts to be judged. The blood of Christ has completely cleansed us. Unbelievers will face the wrath of God in judgment for sin; believers will not:

We wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. [1 Thess 1:10]

Christians will not have to stand before God in fear of wrath for sin. God is dealing with that now in our lives. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to deal with our faults and bring us into sanctification. Sometimes his discipline can be serious (eg 1 Cor 11:29-32).

Believers will be called to give an account, however, of the use of God's gifts (new life and gifts of the Spirit). We will be called before Christ's judgment seat, a tribunal for assessment not wrath and our lives examined as the following texts show.

For whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him (The Lord). For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.
[2 Cor 5:9-10]

Judgment seat = tribunal
evil = worthless

For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God ... so each of us shall give an account of himself to God. [Rm 14:10-12]

We do not avoid the scrutiny of God because we have been justified by faith! Rather, God is most watchful over us and loves us too much to ignore our progress. He is our Father, and like a human father has plans for his children and desires them to develop into full maturity. At the end of our lives we will have to give an account to Jesus himself as to how we used his gift of life. These verses are very clear. There is no escaping the fact that Jesus will examine our performance and assess it.

ANALOGY

A BUILDING

Let each man take care how he builds ... if anyone builds with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - each man's work will become manifest; for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done ... (read whole passage) [1Cor 3:10-15]

Paul is specifically speaking about building in the church here. He has mentioned his fellow workers in Corinth who served the church pictured as God's field and God's building (v9). In v16 he says that you (plural) are God's temple, so his teaching on judgment of work applies in the first instance to workers, to leaders, to elders and teachers. As such this should be taken very seriously. It means that the whole of a leader's work can be worth nothing at the end of the day if it wasn't focused on Jesus. It is Jesus who builds the church, we must implement his strategy not invent our own, no matter how laudable our objectives. God doesn't want us to build a big or good work for him, he wants us to do as we are told. The man who tried to help God out when his testimony in the earth was falling was struck dead by God (2 Sam 6:6-7). He does not need our help. He requires our obedience.

A famous evangelist has written of a well-known church leader in the USA who had retired after building a church of 5000 with a brand new building and a famous ministry. As he walked along the street he prayed a satisfied prayer of what he had built for the Lord in his life. The Holy Spirit responded crisp and clear, 'You didn't do it for me but for yourself.' The man was broken as he realised the truth. His life's work was in vain. It had been flesh, a dead work.

However, we can also apply this teaching to ourselves as individuals. The principle still holds true. Later in 6:19 Paul says that our bodies are also a temple of the Holy Spirit. You are not your own (singular), glorify God in your body. So we can all learn from this object lesson. We must take care how we build in our lives.

What is produced by the Spirit in our lives is like gold, silver and precious stones. They all are untouched by fire. The fire of God's gaze will pour over our lives and what is worthless will be burned up. All that is produced by the flesh will be destroyed so that there is nothing of the old creation in heaven. A genuine Christian will not lose his salvation, the person is not burned, it is the works that are tested by fire.

THE BOOK OF LIFE

Another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. [Rev 20:11-15]

Everything you think or do is being recorded and will be played back in the sight of all. Those in the book of life will still be judged, not for wrath but for rewards.

Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

[1 Cor 4:5]

(Context is the stewardship of the mysteries of God in the service of Christ in church life.)

REWARDS

INTRODUCTION

It must be stated at the outset that we deserve nothing from God as a result of our own strength. Our best efforts profit nothing in the scheme of salvation. Nothing we can do unaided deserves commendation from God. At best, in ourselves, we are just rebellious dust.

However, God has clearly stated in his word that our actions can merit, not only his favour but also his reward. We are judged according to our works but not because of them (Rev 22:12). Even our best service in Christ is full of weakness and failure. As such, our defects are continually covered by the blood and righteousness of Christ. Even our prayers must be mixed with the incense of Christ's life to be acceptable to the Father (Rev 8:3-4). This will always be true as long as we have a fleshly nature prone to sin.

God does not need to, yet he chooses to reward us for doing his will. Even the good works we are rewarded for are the actions he planned before time for us to perform and we can only do them with the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:10; Gal 5:22; Ezek 36:27; Phil 1:6, 2:13) and the grace of God (1 Cor 15:10, Jn 15:5). At the end of the day we are only unprofitable servants (Lk 17:10).

Yet God not only blesses us now but promises a future inheritance. An inheritance in Christ that also contains specific and individual rewards. Our current suffering will give

way to a glory to be revealed in us (Rm 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17). An inheritance is something we receive from a Father, not something we earn.

Rewards are called such (and even called 'wages'), in order to excite our endeavours, not to foster pride (even children - a gift of God- are called 'a reward' in Ps 127:3). So, there is no merit intended in the statements about these rewards. The crown is given as a free gift and promise of God. Paul didn't deserve it, he felt that he was the chief of sinners and never forgot his early persecution of the church. He was given a crown for obtaining God's grace in his weakness and obeying God. He was obligated to preach the gospel and even went further in doing it at his own expense. We can all obtain a crown by fulfilling our tasks chosen by God, unless we choose to throw away our reward by disobedience and selfishness.

SPECIFIC TEXTS / TEACHING

- Matt 6:19-20 *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven.*
- Phil 3:13-15 *I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature be thus minded.*
- Rev 19:8 *It was granted her (the Bride) to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure - for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*
- Rev 14:13 *'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!'*
- Matt 6:3-4 *When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*
- Matt 10:42 *Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.*
- Heb 11:6 *Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*
- Heb 10:35 *Therefore do not throw away your confidence which has a great reward.*
- Heb 11:26 *He (Moses) considered abuse suffered for the Christ (Messiah) greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward.*

The teaching is clear. Not only are there rewards for obedience, but Jesus directs us to lay up treasure in heaven. We are to build in our lives for the future kingdom not this world. There has been a very unhealthy shift in thinking in recent years as the church has become adapted to worldly methods and aspirations. We have been caught up in an instant culture that wants results now. Sincere motives may be behind this but it is not of God to think this way. Jesus did not come to build an earthly kingdom. He often deliberately provoked the crowds of his followers with words hard to understand or obey. Many left as a result. His was a little flock. Now large churches are not evil, but building with a focus to develop a large church for its own sake is. If God blesses our numbers, fine; but our focus must always be on the eternal kingdom, the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Moses had a large church (called the church in the wilderness). It was probably over 2 million followers, yet his focus was the reward in heaven and he is commended for that. He was not satisfied with large numbers for its own sake. He did not feel a success because he had a large following. (In fact it was his downfall.)

Paul planted churches all over the Roman Empire and was reaching out to Spain at the end yet that was not his satisfaction or his motivation. He pressed on to a different goal. His calling was upward not earthly. Paul was as happy to speak to a small congregation in a smoky upper room as larger gatherings (Acts 20:7). We see Paul continually speaking of the crown or the goal in Christ as his motivation, never numbers. Neither do we see Paul emphasise his healing ministry or his ability to work miracles. Sometimes he ministered in total weakness and seemed rather uncharismatic (1 Cor 2:1-5, 2 Cor 12:7-10). He even clearly says that God chose the weak, foolish, unwise, powerless low, and despised so that we could not boast of our achievements (1 Cor 1:26-29).

We must not look to building here and now. This is good news for folk who feel condemned because they are poor, weak, ill, despised, unable to work miracles, possess few gifts. We must build for the future kingdom. The principle of rewards is that I can seek to overcome where I am and God will honour it. Success to me might be getting up in the morning despite my depression. Dealing with my children so that they have a good example to follow and are disciplined correctly. Doing a good job at work despite pressure because I am a Christian. Sharing my testimony at church despite my shyness. Praying regularly for someone I don't like.

It is fatal to try to emulate someone else's gifts and then be condemned because I can't attain them. It is folly to think that your prayer for a person has failed because they have not fallen over for instance. A pastor's motivation should be to shepherd his sheep not produce a large work. A leader of a large church will receive a similar reward to a leader of a small church if they have worked equally hard at fathering their people.

Jesus singles out everyday items as being worthy of a reward. He does not say you will be favoured for raising the dead but rewarded for giving a drink to a thirsty person. Giving money to someone in need. It is the outworking of love that produces the commendation of God. God is thrilled when something of his son is expressed in the life of a person who is unlovely by nature but becomes the personification of the love of God in Christ. Our motivation is to show love. We are to inspire one another to love and good works not miracles and power (Heb 10:24). We are to abound in love (Phil 1:9; 1Thess 3:12), walk in love (Eph 5:2). Paul specifically tells us to demonstrate:

compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another ... and above all these put on love. [Col 3:12-13]

The fruit of the Spirit, the very character of God is:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. [Gal 5:22]

These are the actions God will reward. The common prevailing view at the moment seems to be that the fruit of the Spirit is: power, miracles, faith, healing, falling down, laughing, supernatural gifts, shouting and no control. Should we not fear to lose our reward?

We will be identified in heaven by the effect of our righteous deeds. The heavenly saints are seen in fine white linen symbolic of our righteous deeds, righteous through Christ. It is righteous deeds not powerful deeds. It is good works which God desires not force works. God loves sacrifice not strength; meekness not might. Be encouraged weak saint. God not only loves you but he loves you where you are. He knows you can't match these wonderful workers who boast of their miracles. He perhaps hasn't even healed your persistent need, but he offers rewards to you also if you obey him where you are. Many fine saints have had profound effects upon the church from their sick beds. They touched the world by their prayers and intercession. More than once a couple of old ladies have fostered revival through their prayers. Don't be conformed to this world in your thinking. Escape and let God use you to the full.

Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. [2 Jn 8]

Our reward may be lost if we become unfaithful and disobedient. We must examine ourselves regularly. This must not develop into a morbid introspection. It is only in his light that we see light. We must allow the Holy Spirit to shine into our lives, give him freedom to test us, and obey his corrections.

See also: Matt 5:12,46, 6:1-6,16,18, 10:41-42; Mk 9:41; Lk 6:23,35; 1 Cor 9:17-18; Col 2:18, 3:24; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 11:18, 22:12.

Need for good works to follow faith in Christ

Gal 6:7 *Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*

Eph 6:8 *Doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same again from the Lord.*

Eph 2:10 *For we are his workmanship (literally: poem), created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Gal 6:9-10 *Let us not grow weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

We become God's poem, God's work of art in this world, not as we demonstrate power, but as we do good even in our weakness. Take every opportunity to do good to someone, especially your brothers and sisters in Christ.

PARABLES

THE PARABLE OF THE POUNDS [Lk 19:11-27]

Note: The unit is the same throughout. All were given an identical unit. This refers to the gift of new life which we all share in the same way.

We must be careful in interpreting parables not to read more into them than God intends, but we must also avoid missing what God wants us to see. This parable was told because people expected the kingdom to appear immediately. We must wait for it.

There is a difference between the citizens and the servants. The citizens are enemies who are destroyed (v27). The servants are those whom the nobleman does indeed reign over. During his absence, he expected his servants to use the gift he had given them all. A pound was about three months wages so there was plenty of scope for choices of investment. The important principle is, faithfulness in a little results in a position of authority. Positions of authority in the new world arise from faithfulness in our circumstances, not trying to escape those circumstances.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS [Mt 25:14-30]

Note: Here the unit is varied. Different people are given different values. It refers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are apportioned as he wills. Everyone receives a different measure.

Again this is about the kingdom (v1). Jesus has entrusted his church to his people (not just a few special people). We know that the gifts of the Spirit and the ascension gifts of Christ (Eph 4) are to be used to equip the saints and build up the Church of God.

These gifts are to be used and not hidden. The church cannot afford to be without anyone's gift. The flamboyant gifts of a few is not enough. We all have a part to play. Again the importance is placed upon being faithful in a little resulting in positions of authority. The one who traded less was still set over much.

Although we should be careful in drawing too many conclusions from parabolic teaching, it seems fairly clear, taken with everything else, that rewards have to do with functions and authority in the new world.

I suspect that there will be a great many surprises when we get there.

ANALOGY

CROWN(S)

- Jm 1:12 *Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.*
Reward for enduring trial.
- Rev 2:10 *For 10 days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*
Reward for martyrdom.
- 1 Pt 5:4 *When the chief shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory.*
Reward for faithful shepherding.
- 2 Tim 4:8 *Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*
Reward for faithful service performed in the expectancy of Jesus' return.
- 1 Thess 2:19 *For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?*
Reward for soul winning, building the church and caring for people.

What is this crown?

Well no one can be certain. The NT writers, particularly Paul, have in mind the running of a race aiming at a prize (see Phil). Unbelievers are not in the race at all. Believers may win crowns or not, but all can if they run well. They don't have to win in front of others, they just have to finish the race, looking to Jesus as the prize and the motivation. The crown may well suggest the positions of authority seen in the parables earlier.

DOCTRINE

- We are to express the character of God
- We must put Jesus first in all things
- We must use the gifts God has given us
- We are to be faithful where we are, however small it seems
- We are to meet people's needs
- We are to help our brothers and sisters grow
- We are to lay hold of eternal life
- We are to put the kingdom first
- We must not be moulded by the world's ideas of success
- We must not be tricked into using worldly methods to achieve God's goals
- We must not be intimidated by the powerful gifts of others, nor try to copy them, we must receive our service orders from God alone
- We must resist temptation and the evil one

- We can lose our rewards but not eternal life (Jn 10:28-29, Rm 8:30, Heb 10:14 etc)
- We are to perform well at work
- We are to practice hospitality

PRACTICAL

Am I motivated to help people ?

Do I have a high opinion of the value of people like God has? He loved his elect people from before the creation of the world and gave his son's life for them. He values all his people. I cannot afford to ignore any of them. Do I stick with the usual friends who I find easy to get along with? Are there folk in my church who seem lonely or miss out in fellowship? What can I do to help?

Am I focused upon the inheritance of God or are my efforts based upon worldly perceptions of building ?

Am I content in my trials that God is in control? Do I have faith that God is working his purpose out in me for eternity or do I want to see everything 'fixed' now? Do I believe that my weakness is God's opportunity to show his grace or am I continually trying to avoid facing my weakness? Do I keep seeking miraculous answers to my needs more than I listen to God? God is working in my life now in order to develop character for an eternal purpose. This may well include suffering, disappointments and even tragedy. I must believe that God is sovereign in my life and that he is working his purposes out for good in all things. [Rm 8:28; 1 Thess 5:18]

Are my priorities aligned to God's ?

Do I seek what God's priorities are? Do I know what the will of God is for me? Do I study the Bible to understand more of God's character and purposes? Do I know my place in the body or am I aspiring to things that are not for me? Am I satisfied with God's provision in my life? Is my fellowship with God foremost in my life? Does my family have a higher priority than lesser things (that includes church and career; the family is the first place the kingdom is to be seen after my own life)? Does the church have a higher priority than my job, in my intents as well as in practice? Do I look after my body which is God's temple for which I will give an account?

Is my life based upon the truth, or is my experience dependent upon my subjective feelings, or do I trust all I hear and read without discernment ?

God expects us to use all our faculties to test what we hear preached. He gave us a mind to examine the Bible for ourselves. The Bereans were commended by the Holy Spirit and called honourable because they examined the scriptures to test what Paul had said (Acts 17:10-11). The truth of God's word sets us free. The heresy of men bind us up.

'The true prosperity of a church ... (is) inseparably connected with a fearless and holy maintenance of the doctrines of grace. The preaching of false doctrine may build up a church composed of 'wood, hay, stubble,' but the preaching of truth alone can rear a church composed of 'gold, silver, precious stones.'

Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and revival of religion in the soul*, p122-3.

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