

THE HUNDREDFOLD REWARD

By Andrew Wilson
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Psalm 63:1-5
Galatians 6:7-10
Matthew 19:28-30

Last week we talked the hundredfold, sixty-fold or thirty-fold returns that Christ promises when the seeds of God's Word are planted in the good soil of a faithful person's life.

This week we're talking about a similar promise. In our gospel reading the Lord promises to reward us from his throne of glory when we deny ourselves for his sake. The value of our reward, he says, is going to be one hundred times the value of what have sacrificed for him.

I got an email early in the week from the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church. They oversee the medical plan for Presbyterian pastors like me. The email invited me to take a questionnaire about my personal health.

I quickly decided I didn't want to spend 20 minutes answering a lot of personal questions for someone sitting in a cubical in Philadelphia, and I was about to delete the message when my eye caught a message in bold. If I completed the questionnaire, it said, I would receive a gift certificate for \$100. If you know me very well, you know that that was more than enough to hook me.

After I answered all the questions I was informed that if I wanted to lengthen my life and presumably save the Board of Pensions a lot of money, I needed to cut down on coffee, stop eating desserts, start lifting weights, sleep more, work less, and get a thorough physical.

Oh – and there was one more bit of sage advice that I had no intention of following. I needed to get something that starts with a 'c' and ends with '-oscopy.'

Having finished the questionnaire, all I had to do to collect my reward was log onto the dismal MyActiveHealth website two more times by the end of July. If I did that, I was told, the Board of Pensions would mail me my voucher for \$100 which could be used for any health related expense.

That last part threw me for a loop. I thought I was going to receive a \$100 *check*. I had already made plans to spend the cash at Starbucks, Maggie Moos and Ruth Cris. The site lamely suggested I use the voucher for a prostate exam or maybe for another procedure that starts with a 'c' and ends in '-oscopy.'

Most of the rewards we receive in this life are like that \$100 health voucher. We look forward to them with eager expectation, but they end up disappointing us. The rare exceptions are the rewards we work hard for. Sometimes when we make big sacrifices, and give up present comforts for the sake of long-term benefits, we end up reaping a great harvest.

But even then – even when everything goes our way and we seem to have the world on a string – our contentment often proves to be fragile. The security that we long for eludes us. Riches have to be maintained, and can be easily lost. The same thing is true of our social or professional status, our GPA, our closest relationships, and of course our health. These and a hundred other cares weigh us down, and cause the luster to wear off our worldly trophies.

The opposite is true of the rewards the Lord is preparing for his faithful disciples. We have only a dim idea of what those rewards will be like. (We'll talk about them in a minute.) But we're told they will be

100 times greater in value than everything those disciples gave up for God during their earthly lives. And, we're told, they'll be eternal.

Sometimes people talk about eternal life as though it were part of the heavenly reward that God is preparing for his children. This is a big area of confusion for many Christians. It's misleading to call eternal life a reward because it's not something we earn, and it's not something we deserve. Rather, eternal life is God's free gift to those who place their faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul helps to flesh out this crucial doctrine. He explains again and again in his letters that salvation is a work that God accomplishes on our behalf through his Son. Here's how Paul makes the point in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, starting as verse 4:

...[B]ecause of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms...

- Ephesians 2:4-6

The point is: we need to make a clear distinction between the gift of salvation and the gifts that the Lord promises to give us if we serve him well. Everyone who is saved will share in the same eternal life that flows from God.

But there will be an unequal distribution of heavenly rewards. Christ is going to recognize and honor his followers according to his assessment of their deeds. And in doing so he's going to turn the standards of this world upside down. "[M]any who are first will be last," Jesus says, "and many who are last will be first" (Matthew 19:30). Some who were richly rewarded on earth will find their stations reduced in heaven. And some who were passed over and forgotten on earth will find themselves in positions of great authority.

What kinds of actions will the Lord take into consideration in the distribution of heavenly rewards? The actions that matter the most, Jesus declares, are the ones that entail giving up something good, something that we love, for the sake of a higher good.

- One person, seeking to do God's will, might be called to take a homeless person into her house.
- Another might be called to remain single all his life.
- Another might be called to work at a low wage ministry with the poor.
- Another might be called to take a position with a high salary so he can generate riches for God's kingdom.
- Still another might be called to leave her house and family and boyfriend and everything else she holds dear to go to China and preach the gospel.

Whatever the sacrifice may be, the Lord tells us, if it is made for him, the short-term loss will be bearable, and the long-term gain will unimaginably great.

Most of us aren't very good at delayed gratification. It's hard to give up things that comfort us and make us feel secure for the sake of better things to come. But if we want to live under God's providence and care, and drink from his fountain, the Bible tells us, we have to deny ourselves. That means abandoning all hope of finding lasting peace and fulfillment in this life. It means watching and listening for signs pointing us to heaven. And it means wanting more than anything in the world to be like Jesus.

Many people think it's childish to seek a reward from God. They believe that if we truly love the Lord we won't need the promise of a reward to motivate us. We'll obey him simply because we treasure his Word.

We'll do the right thing because we want to honor God and fulfill his purposes for our life. The saying that sums up this philosophy is one that most of us believe in: "Virtue is its own reward."

The surprising thing is that the Bible doesn't seem to support this pious attitude. In his Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus talks about the kind of attitude we should take towards tithing and praying if we want to receive a heavenly reward.

The advice that Paul gives to the Colossians is consistent with Jesus' teachings. He writes:

Whatever you do, work at it with your whole heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.

- Colossians 3:23-24

In one of his best known sermons, "The Weight of Glory," C. S. Lewis points that there are different kinds of rewards. Some rewards, Lewis says, don't have an authentic or genuine connection to the things that you do to earn them. He gives two examples of rewards that don't flow naturally from a person's actions. In the first example, a man marries a woman just for her money. In the second, an army general performs well on the battlefield just so he can advance his career.

In both cases, Lewis observes, the person seeking the reward is a mercenary. The proper reward for love is marriage, not money. And the proper reward for fighting well is victory, not a promotion.

This same principle applies to our daily walk with God. Some people live as religious mercenaries. They're motivated by rewards that have no authentic connection to being a Jesus-follower. Maybe they want to be celebrated and admired for their good works. Or maybe they want to exercise spiritual power and authority over other people.

But other people are motivated by rewards that are perfectly appropriate for a God-lover. Maybe they want to grow in grace so that they'll resemble Jesus. Maybe they want to grow in their ability to do kingdom work. Or maybe they just want to hear the Lord say to them when they die and go to heaven, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come on in and sit at my banquet table."

There's nothing childish about wanting to be Christ-like, or in wanting to be strong and capable for God. There's nothing mercenary about seeking a pat on the back from our heavenly Father.

Our dog, Sam, is astonishingly lazy. On a typical day he sleeps or lounges for 16 to 18 hours. Every night at about 8:30 or 9:00 he slinks off to our bedroom and plops himself down on his special dog's bed with a contented sigh, and we don't see or hear from him until morning.

Besides watching out for ax murderers and meter readers from the Gas Company, Sam's only meaningful job in life is fetching the morning paper. But it's a job he pursues with feverish enthusiasm. He tears out the door and up the drive, grabs the paper, tears back to the kitchen, then sits by the refrigerator and waits impatiently for his reward.

I usually give him an entire piece of bread. If I'm feeling generous, I give him two pieces. Then I tell him how smart he is, and how good he is, and he believes every word of it. Mary, Hannah and Holly think my rewards are ridiculously extravagant. They think I'm spoiling Sam and that I'm going to make him fat and give him heart disease. But Sam loves the arrangement.

It's a natural and beautiful thing for dogs to want to please their masters. Their driving passion in life, when they're not sleeping or scratching, is to put a smile on your face and to get a pat on the head and an

occasional slice of bread. And what is true of canines is also true of us. If our hearts are right, we'll want more than anything to please God, and hear him tell us we've served him well, and be empowered to serve him better each day.

Some day we're all going to die and find ourselves in God's awesome presence. And on that day we're each going to learn about our eternal destiny. According to Jesus, we'll either be welcomed into the kingdom God has prepared, or we'll be turned away with those frightful words, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

So may we live our lives with that day in view. May we trust in the grace God has given us through Jesus Christ and seek the rewards of a life well lived. And may we do everything we can to win people to God's heart by loving them as Christ loves them, as though we were loving Christ himself.

Gracious God, we praise you for the promise of a heavenly reward. And we thank you that those rewards come to us, at least in part, as we surrender our lives to you and let your Spirit guide us.

Forgive us for living like religious mercenaries. Forgive us for seeking the world's approval and applause. Teach us to see the signs of your presence in the world around us. Focus our hearts on our home in heaven as we do your work on earth.

We want to be faithful, Lord Jesus, as you are faithful. We want to be filled with your passion and energy and joy as we do our Father's business.

We pray in your holy name. Amen.