

The Rewards Jesus Promised

Several years ago, a Christian friend of mine told me he did not like the song known as *The Old Rugged Cross*. Since this song is loved by so many Christians, I wondered what my friend did not like about it. He said he did not like certain words in the chorus which appears below.

*So I'll cherish the old rugged Cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down
I will cling to the old rugged Cross
And exchange it some day for a crown*

I asked him which words he did not like in this chorus and he said, “my trophies.”¹ The thought of rewards for his performance in this life seemed to contradict his understanding of salvation by grace.

I have to admit that for many years, I also wondered how the idea of rewards fit with the doctrine of salvation by grace. In the past, I wondered how passages like the two below fit with the doctrine of salvation by grace.

“We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore, we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. 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” (II Corinthians 5:8-10).

“Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (I Corinthians 3:8).

When confronted with passages like those above, I presumed that my understanding of salvation by grace was probably incomplete. I figured that God would eventually shape my thinking to bring it into conformity with His truth. I am not suggesting that all of my understanding has been perfected yet, but I now have explanations that help me reconcile these matters. Unless and until God shows me otherwise, I will rest upon the knowledge that I believe God has provided to me on this subject. This article attempts to document my understanding of this subject.

Like my friend mentioned at the beginning of this article, I believe the doctrine of salvation by grace is one of those non-negotiable doctrines of paramount importance. To me, any attack on it is an attack on the very work and person of Jesus. So, it is up to me to reconcile the idea of rewards to the doctrine of salvation by grace. To me, the idea of rewards must be somehow subordinate to the doctrine of salvation by grace. So, the verses mentioned above, when properly understood, must not conflict with salvation by grace.

On the basis of this foundation, I will begin by sighting one of the core principles of salvation and in fact, one of the core principles relating to God Himself. I believe Ephesians 2:8-9 sheds some light on this core principle.

“For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9 KJV).

It was important to God to provide a way of salvation that would prevent the one being saved from claiming credit. Below is another passage which expresses similar sentiment.

¹ Personally, I always interpreted these words in an opposite manner. (Finally, I will lay down completely all that I once thought was boast-worthy and be free of all pride once and for all.)

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (Romans 4:1-4).

According to the passage above, if salvation had a works component, then God would owe the one working for the work that he completed. God does not owe anything to anybody! The only thing humans truly deserve is hell, not heaven.

*"I am the LORD, that is My name; And **My glory I will not give to another**" (Isaiah 42:8a).*

If a person looked at the passage above from a mere human perspective, his faulty perception might lead him to think that God is some type of glory hog. Nothing could be further from the truth. (See Philippians 2:5-11.) God's absolute righteousness was at stake. Simply put, it would be unrighteous if any creature were to receive honor or glory that belongs to God alone. If God were to allow it, He would be a participant in that sin. In order to fulfill all righteousness, God created a way of salvation in which He receives all the glory. It simply had to be this way.

Using the principles discussed above as a foundation, let us consider what the Bible teaches as the basis of rewards that will be given to believers when Jesus returns. After that, we will consider how God's promise of rewards fit with the doctrine of salvation by grace in which God receives all the glory and honor.

Rewards for individual cases of mistreatment:

Blessed are you when men hate you, And when they exclude you, And revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.... But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great (Luke 6:22,23 & 35).

Christians are generally aware of these promises. I just want to point out that it appears that each occurrence of ill treatment seems to accumulate the overall total reward received in the end. Jesus said, *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy!* He tells us to rejoice IN THAT DAY. Whenever this treatment happens, it is an occasion to rejoice because there will be a reward specific to each occurrence. Conversely, a life of comfort with very little mistreatment by unbelievers will diminish the extent of our reward when Jesus comes back.

Reward for our involvement in evangelism and the salvation of others:

Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors (John 4:35-38).

The context of the passage above is Jesus teaching His disciples about evangelism. In this passage, He specifically says that when a Christian "reaps" some harvest (disciple made), he receives wages and gathers fruit for eternal life. He goes on to say that those who participated in that harvest earlier by sowing the gospel also share in the reward. This suggests that the more a person is involved in biblical evangelism, the more likely his reward will be greater when Jesus comes back.

Reward for giving material things:

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. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

According to these words of Jesus, there seems to be a direct connection between how we use our material possessions and the extent of our reward when Jesus comes back. The words, “lay up” convey the idea of storing up. The reward is being increased with each gift given or sacrifice made.

Reward for ministry in general:

In the stewardship parables, Jesus indicates that there will be greater reward for those who produce the greatest increase for their master (Him). (See Matthew 25:14-30 for example.) The parable does not specify any particular type of ministry. Its main teaching is that He wants us to be productive. Those who are most productive receive the greater reward when He comes back. Those who do not produce at all are condemned when He comes back.

In the parable below, Jesus teaches that, as the Master, He is very concerned how we treat “His brethren.” We know from the rest of the New Testament that He is talking about those who make up the Universal Church. The emphasis here seems to mainly concern caring for the physical needs of other Christians when they need our help. The word reward is not used but we can safely assume that the more liberal we are in helping others at our own sacrifice, the greater the reward when Jesus comes back. From the rest of the parable not shown above, we also learn that those who only look after their own interests are condemned when Jesus comes back.

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me' (Matthew 25:34-40).

The extent of reward will be directly proportional to the extent of the fruits of righteousness in our life.

All of the categories mentioned above may be classified as works of righteousness. As already seen, unless a person has produced such works that God classifies as righteous, they will not be saved when Jesus comes back. Also, the more one's life is filled with such works, the more he will receive reward when Jesus comes back. These works of righteousness clothe the one who produces them at the wedding feast when the Lamb returns:

*'Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has **made herself ready.**' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints (Revelation 19:7-8).*

To **make ourselves ready** for our marriage to the Lamb, we must cooperate with God as He works in us to produce righteous character and righteous works. In Jesus' heavenly Kingdom, there will be no sin, only righteousness. *Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (II Peter 3:13). The Holy One cannot tolerate sin and will not have any sin in His presence. To dwell in His presence, all sin must be eradicated. So, His plan from the beginning was to remove it. This is why Jesus came in the first place. John introduced Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We all thank God for the remission of sins brought about through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross (to all who believe). But His purpose for this was not mere legal justification. It was in order to produce a holy people whose lives are filled with righteousness. *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed* (I Peter 2:24). The extent of our reward on that day depends on the extent of the righteousness produced. Some will have very little. Some will have much. Those who have none will be cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In addition to quantity of work, the degree of reward also depends on the quality of the work.

Paul provides principles of reward relating to ministry in the following passage:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 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 (I Corinthians 3:10-15).

From his many letters, we know that Paul's concern for the people themselves was much greater than his hoped-for reward. (See Romans 9:3 & II Corinthians 2:4; 11:28.) But the people and the reward associated with the ministry seem to be inseparable from the standpoint of the Scriptures. According to Paul, only ministry that produces enduring righteousness in those receiving the ministry will yield a reward. Because he believed this, he was very concerned that those who had benefitted from his ministry continued in the faith as they underwent suffering and persecution. In other words, their faith had to be proven as real and enduring or he would not receive reward in regard to it. Paul prayed and labored diligently as "a wise master builder" because he valued his promised reward.

According to Paul, the quality of the work varies. The work that will last is characterized by materials such as gold, silver and precious stones. The work that will not hold up under the test of fire are materials such as wood, hay and straw. So, he warns, *take heed how he builds on the foundation which he laid which is Jesus Christ*. Rather than spend much time here trying to instruct how we should build, let me suggest that since the foundation is Jesus Christ, we must preach Christ crucified (I Corinthians 1:23). Whether we are doing the work of evangelism out in the streets or teaching our children at home, let this general guideline be our "true north" on our ministry compass. Tell them about Jesus. Exalt Him highly in harmony with the whole counsel of God provided in the Scriptures.

The I Corinthians 3:10-15 passage provides solid information about how we must minister if we hope to receive a reward for it. But we can extrapolate from the basic principles it teaches how the quality of "non-

ministry” work relates to reward. For example, if an unbeliever curses us because we follow Christ, and we receive it humbly, we will receive reward. *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great (Luke 6:22,23 & 35).* But if instead, we slash his tires and paint profanity on his car, not so much. (Although the Bible does not mention tires.)

If by faith we give with a cheerful heart as unto Jesus so that a person receives what he needs, we will receive a reward. (See Matthew 6:19-21.) But if we give in such a way so as to receive recognition from other people, we will not receive reward from God.

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 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 (Matthew 6:1-6).

Our future attitudes, behavior and ministry can negatively impact our reward when Jesus comes back.

Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward (II John 1:8 NASB).

Reconciling our reward with salvation by grace.

As established at the beginning of this article, our understanding of rewards that will be given when Jesus returns MUST be subordinate to the doctrine of salvation by grace. So, let us try to harmonize these two doctrines.

First, any work that God considers righteous is born out of faith. This is a big subject in itself but I will point out a key aspect of faith that I believe relates to this subject. Any work not done in faith is one that is done in our own power. The engine of such works is the flesh and the flesh always wants to take credit for its accomplishments. Pride is at the root of the desire for credit. The natural man thinks he merits a right standing with God on the basis of his own goodness. The Christian sometimes resumes this way of thinking when he thinks his own accomplishments of life style make him pleasing to God. So, if he has not committed any major sins this week and he is praying, reading his Bible and attending church, he is in good standing with God. But when he sins, he must do penance and wallow in guilt for a time before he can approach God. Whether it is the natural man or a Christian that is living the way I describe here, the problem is the same. Both are relating to God on the basis of their own performance instead of the finished work of Jesus.

Whenever a person is relating to God this way, he considers his own works to be worthy of God’s acceptance. But these are not works born out of faith. The Bible says that whatever is not done in faith is sin. (See Romans 14:23.) They are not righteous works. Faith always accompanies humility that says, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Faith at its core is believing God. We acknowledge that we are unworthy in ourselves to merit a righteous standing before God. Faith believes Jesus’ words, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Where there is faith, there is no boasting whatsoever before God. Where there is faith, the righteousness of God is being revealed. *For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith (Romans 1:17).* Where there is faith, a person is simply believing God. And because he believes God, he acts according to God’s desire and righteousness is produced.

God considered it righteousness when Abraham believed Him. Abraham did not think God owed him anything for his obedience.

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Romans 4:1-5).

So, we see that faith always operates in humility and the one exercising it considers God the One to whom all glory belongs. Anyone who observes faith in action gets a much clearer view toward God's glory. Because of these things, we understand that without this faith, it is impossible to please God. (See Hebrews 11:6.) But all works done in faith do please Him and glorify Him. They are the works that receive a reward. They are works that are "wrought in God." (See John 3:21.)

Those who do these works of faith give all glory to God. They do not take credit for them and do not keep tabs on them. Their mind is not set on such carnal things. *Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' (Matthew 25:37-39).*

The book of Revelation pictures those who receive crowns (depicting rewards) casting them at His feet instead of taking credit.

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created (Revelation 4:9-11).

If any human had something to boast about concerning his works, it would be Paul. But Paul possessed the attitude of those described in the passages above. *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase (I Corinthians 3:6-7).*

Though he had this attitude of humility, in the very next verse he said, *Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.* So, Paul was able to reconcile the concept of rewards with salvation by grace because he viewed all works that God considers righteous as works that have been wrought in God. He gives Him all the glory. If it were not for Him, none of the righteous works would ever be accomplished. Yet, God has included us in His plans and purposes to produce a people He calls righteous. He wants us to be fellow laborers in this righteous work. *For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building (I Corinthians 3:9).*

God promises rewards as part of His means to motivate us to produce righteousness. The natural man view such promises not through the prism of faith. So, he does not understand that he has nothing to boast about. But when we view the promise of rewards through the prism of faith, we do works of righteousness out of a heart of humility. We expect our future reward because Jesus promised it, not because we deserve it. With obedient hearts, we serve Him gladly with thanksgiving knowing that we don't deserve any of the manifold blessings He lavishes upon us, including our future rewards.

Before concluding, I should point out that it is wrong for us to downplay the importance of the rewards that Jesus has promised. First, Jesus often promised that rewards will be given. Obviously, He wanted us to know about them and value them, otherwise He would not have promised them. So, let us not despise (take lightly) them.

Second, Paul valued his future rewards very highly. *I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the*

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faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day (II Timothy 4:6-8). As we noted from the I Corinthians 3 passage, he worked as a wise master builder because he wanted to receive his full reward. Paul instructed us to imitate him. (See I Corinthians 4:16.) If Paul valued the promised rewards and considered them as God's means to motivate him, then we should also. May God give us a similar, healthy perspective that values the rewards He has promised to those who faithfully serve Him.

Thomas Bear, 9/3/2018

Οὐαὶ μοί ἐστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)

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