

# **Our Exceeding Great Reward**

*Three Studies on Proper Motivation for Christian Service*

*David Gooding*

Myrtlefield Sermons



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## Reward for What?

*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:10–15)*

This is considered to be the ultimate quality control to which all our work must one day be submitted. Each one's work will be shown for what it is, for *the Day* will make it evident. The Day is revealed in fire, and the fire shall test the quality of each one's work.

The Day refers, of course, to the coming of the Lord, as we learn from the following chapter: 'Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes' (4:5). But Paul uses the term 'Day' not simply as a synonym for the coming of the Lord, but as a metaphor calculated to help us to understand and take in what it will mean for us to have our work submitted to its quality control.

### **God's Day in contrast to man's day**

In the first place, that day will be God's Day, and it stands in contrast with man's day. So, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 4:3 Paul says, 'But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.' The Greek literally says, 'judged by you or by man's day'. The KJV paraphrases it, 'of man's judgment'; the NIV, 'by any human court'.

Man's day is transitory: 'Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day'.<sup>1</sup> Then comes eternity. Anticipation of God's Day will urge upon us the importance of seeing to it that the work we do is of such quality that it will abide the Lord's criticisms and last eternally: 'If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward' (1 Cor 3:14).

Man's day is also a time of change; and of course change is sometimes necessary. Refusal to change in light of changed conditions is not necessarily a sign of wisdom or of godliness; it can be a symptom of death rather than of life. But in all our change we must keep our eye upon the eternal day; this will remind us to distinguish between those things that can and must rightly be changed, and the principles and the revealed truth that by their very nature

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847), 'Abide with me' (1847).

are unchanging. We must cling tenaciously to them if we are to produce work that will last eternally.

Again, when we contrast man's day with the eternal day, we are reminded that the opinions and values and fashions of the present do not necessarily coincide with the values and standards of God's Day. Paul reminds us in this very passage that what bulks large in this world's estimation may in fact prove ultimately to be mere wood, hay and stubble; while what seems small and insignificant by the present world's standards can have the lasting value of gold, silver and precious stones, when submitted to Christ's quality control. We must therefore always scrutinize carefully the world's standards, and not be too easily impressed by what are often simply the philosophies and social theories that happen to be currently popular in the world.

The church has too often been inclined to identify monarchy or aristocracy or socialism or existentialism, or some other 'ism', with the gospel, simply because that 'ism' is for the moment the currently acceptable philosophy. We need always to remember that the gospel deals with God's revealed unchanging truth, and only by adhering to its standards shall we be able to build for eternity.

The contrast between man's day and the Day reminds us that our judgment of ourselves, even as believers, is not the final verdict, nor is it necessarily correct. 'For I am not aware of anything against myself,' says Paul, 'but I am not thereby acquitted' (1 Cor 4:4). The final assessment of our work must await Christ's quality control on the Day. This of course is not meant to tease and frustrate us by forcing us to make decisions in the dark under the threat of being judged eventually by criteria that we could not have known at the time. But it is meant to induce in us the humility to recognize that our motives are very often complicated and, in part at least, obscure even to ourselves; and that, therefore, we are always to keep a heart open to the Lord in the light of his word and open also to the advice or sober criticism of our Christian colleagues. None of us necessarily sees the whole picture. It is a healthy thing for me to remember that I could be wrong in some details.

### **God's Day in contrast to the world's night**

And then, of course, the Day of the Lord's coming stands in contrast with the night that prevails in this world. In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul points out that, as far as eternal realities are concerned, the world at large is asleep and abandons itself to behaviour that is appropriate to its 'night life'. Christians, by contrast, who are aware of the coming Day, must live already in its light. They must, as our Lord said, be like servants who are expecting their master to return from a wedding banquet so that when he comes and knocks they are dressed, ready for service and able to open the door for him immediately (see Luke 12:35–44). If we keep our eyes upon the coming of the Day, we shall resist the temptation of going to sleep on the job and the consequent embarrassment of being unprepared to meet the Master when he returns.

The Day shall show our work for what it is, says Paul, for the Day is revealed in fire. There will be no avoiding its scrutiny. The Lord will not only assess our work, he will 'bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart' (1 Cor 4:5), that is, our motives and intentions. The value of an act consists not merely in the act itself, valuable as the act might be in and of itself, but also in the intention that lies behind the act. So Paul

reminds us that, 'if I give all my goods to feed the poor . . . but have not love, it profits me nothing' (1 Cor 13:3 RV). It may well profit the poor, of course; but as far as I am concerned it will profit me nothing.

The best interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:13 seems to be that 'it', i.e. the Day, will be 'revealed in fire'. Already heaven is judging what we do. First Peter 1:17–19 reminds us that the Father judges our work in the light of the fact that he has bought our lives with the precious blood of Christ, and is therefore understandably critical of the way we spend them. Similarly, in Revelation 1–3 we are reminded that the risen Lord even now walks among his people, assessing the state of their hearts and the quality of their work. But the judgment that now goes on behind the scenes will then at last be revealed. If we desire a favourable verdict then, we must look carefully to our work now.

### **The incentive of reward**

First Corinthians 3:10–15 reminds us that there will be two possible results of the Day's judgment. If our work passes the Lord's scrutiny, we shall have the joy of seeing our work and its results last for eternity. And in addition we shall be given a reward. On the other hand, if our work does not pass the Lord's scrutiny, we shall suffer loss: the loss of seeing all our work burned up with nothing to show for it for all eternity, and in addition the loss of not being given any reward.

It is obviously important then to be sure exactly what the reward will consist of. It is not a question of salvation, for Scripture everywhere makes it clear that salvation is not a reward for work done: it is not a reward at all. It is given to us as a gift. And our passage explicitly states that even if our works are burned up we ourselves shall be saved, 'but only as through fire': like people who escape by running out of a burning building, though everything else in the building is burned up. Grasping this fact is important, not only for our security and peace of mind, but also for the quality of the work we do. There is a total difference between work done to gain acceptance and salvation—which is the wrong attitude—and work done because one has been accepted and is assured of eternal salvation.

But the certainty of our future salvation should not lead us to carelessness. It would be a sad and serious thing indeed to receive no reward. Heaven is not a place where workers who have done their stint in this life may gracefully retire into the inactive rest of an eternal eventide home. In heaven everyone wants to work. God himself works, obviously not because he has to work to make a living, but for the sheer joy of working. He will have unimaginably great and attractive schemes for us to be involved in. Do remember that the last vision of the eternal city that is given to us in the Revelation pictures it, not as rushing up to heaven waving a glad goodbye to earth and all its concerns, but as coming down from heaven towards the new earth. Our work in this life is but schoolwork. Real life and real work lie ahead. And, therefore, not to be given a reward—not to be given responsibility in God's future schemes of development—would be a very grave loss indeed.

## What Reward?

*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. (Col 3:23–24)*

Some people have objections to the whole idea of rewards. Evangelists have often objected that the doctrine of rewards is dangerous because it obscures the basic fact of the gospel: that salvation is given as a gift altogether independent of our works. But if there is such a danger, it arises from a failure to take notice of what Scripture plainly declares, as we saw in our first study.

Christians also, and famous saints, have felt that to seek for reward is a very unworthy motivation. According to Ignatius of Loyola, we ought rather 'to labour and not to seek reward, except that of knowing that we do your will'. Our love for Christ should be so strong and pure that we need no further incentive of reward.

But the plain fact is that both Christ himself and his apostles spoke, and spoke frequently, about rewards. It will not do, therefore, to say that the quest for reward is an unworthy motive. Christian slaves, for instance, at their back-breaking work, were encouraged by Paul to 'work heartily, as unto the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that from the Lord you shall receive the recompense of the inheritance' (Col 3:23–24 RV). We should not suppose that our love for Christ is so wonderfully strong that we do not need any further incentive. Christ, who reads our hearts, knows better.

### **The motivation of reward**

We should, of course, make sure that the reward we seek is an appropriate reward for the work in which we are engaged. In order to encourage her seven-year-old child to practise the piano, it might be necessary for a mother to offer the child the reward of an ice cream at the end of the session. So the child practises in order to get an ice cream, which is hardly the real reward for playing the piano. At eleven years old the same child may practise the piano because he has discovered that he gets a lot of praise from the grown-ups when he is asked to perform at parties. At twenty, the now grown up child may pursue music in order to make money and become famous. None of these rewards is of course sinful in itself; but none of them is germane to music. At fifty-five, after a busy day the grown man may be found all by himself playing the piano for the sheer joy of the music. Now his reward is the truly appropriate one. There is, of course, a higher reward even than that: he will get it when he learns to play his music for the enjoyment of other people who cannot repay him.

Let us consider, therefore, what, according to our Lord, are the appropriate rewards for two major activities in life.

### *1. The reward for prayer (Matt 6:5–15)*

It is possible to seek the wrong reward in prayer: to pray in order to impress people around us and gain their admiration. If we seek that kind of reward we shall get it, but no other. We are rather to pray in secret to our Father, and then he will reward us with what? Well, in the first place with the answers to our requests, when such answers would be according to his will and for our good. But beyond this, the greatest reward for praying is God himself and the relationship that prayer nurtures and develops between us and God. We do not need to give God information: he knows already, but still he wants us to come and ask him for what we need.

A mother foresees that Jonny would like a bumper ice cream for his birthday, and so she buys one in for him long before he asks for it. But still she does not allow him to take it without asking her for it; not simply in order to teach him socially acceptable manners, but in order that in asking her, and being given the ice cream by her in response to his asking, the child may come to know his mother and experience the delight of her loving nature. And forty years later, when the ice cream has long since been forgotten, the impression of his mother's personality and her love for him will persist in his memory. Indeed, it will form a very important part of his subconscious personality and contribute to its mellowness. So it is with us and our relationship with God in prayer.

### *2. The reward we should seek as we go about our daily work (Matt 6:31–34)*

'But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness' (v. 33). This does not mean that before we go about our daily work we should give priority to God's interests and to the work of his kingdom. It means that our prime motivation for going to our daily work should be the kingdom; that is, the kingly rule of God in our lives. The world's prime motivation for going to work is to get food and clothes and other good things of life. But that is a very low estimate of what life's work is really for.

These things are good in themselves, but for followers of Christ they cannot be the prime reward for daily work. That prime reward is the formation of God's righteousness; that is, a godly, righteous character, which is gradually built into us as we practise the principles of God's rule in the situations we meet in daily work.

For instance, the Bible tells me that I must be honest; but just reading that exhortation in the Bible does not make me honest. To become honest, I need practice at being honest. I need to be put into practical situations where I must consciously make the choice between being honest and being dishonest. Only by consciously choosing to be honest, do I become honest in character. And the same goes for all the other Christian virtues of love and kindness and unselfishness and courage, and so forth. And this, therefore, is why God sends us to our daily work: to form within us a truly Christian character. Food and clothes, necessary though they are—and God himself knows that they are necessary—are only the secondary dividends. We must never make them the prime dividend, for if we do we shall be in danger.

A Christian man in the course of business may be faced with pressure to engage in a slightly shady deal. If food and clothes, and the money to pay the mortgage and to keep his children at boarding school and to have a decent home and car, are his prime motivation for going to work, the danger is that he will succumb and do the shady deal. Then he will have

lost the very purpose for which God sent him to work in the first place, which was to develop righteousness of character in him. And what is more, if the man pursues that line he will progressively become a slave to mammon instead of remaining God's free man.



## The Quest for Reward

*Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1–2)*

The quest for reward is not only a worthy and appropriate motivation for the Christian; it is a very necessary motivation. It often acts as an important corrective to false and unbalanced attitudes that can arise from a one-sided interpretation of the gospel.

Let us consider five examples of this:

### *1. The parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–13)*

It has been a notoriously difficult parable to interpret, but it helps if we compare its message with the parable of the Prodigal Son, which immediately precedes it (Luke 15:11–32). The prodigal wasted his goods; but when he repented and returned to his father, it made no difference to the forgiveness and to the welcome that his father gave him. This parable teaches us that if we waste our lives up to the last five minutes and then in repentance return to God it will make no difference to his welcome of us either. We shall be completely forgiven and accepted. But the parable of the Unjust Steward is calculated to correct an unbalanced attitude that might arise from a misreading of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The parable of the Unjust Steward teaches us that if as Christians we waste our resources it will make an eternal difference to us.

What we are urged to do is to use our resources in order to make friends, so that when our resources fail we may have friends to welcome us into the eternal tabernacles. Notice that it is friends that we have to gain by our use of resources, and not salvation. All believers will be saved. All believers will be in heaven. All believers will be equally accepted, but not all believers will have the same amount of friends in heaven. It startles some people to think that they will have very few friends in heaven. They would like to think that, since everybody in heaven is by definition perfectly loving, there will be no special friendships. But there will be. The common virtue of gratitude to those who have helped us will not disappear in heaven. If we have used a spare £5 to send Gospels to some mission fields in Britain or abroad, and at the judgment seat of Christ it is revealed that those Gospels led to the conversion of one hundred people, will those people not feel a special gratitude towards us? They will be our special friends for all eternity. If, on the other hand, we used the spare £5 simply to buy ourselves a monster ice cream, when it comes out at the judgment seat of Christ, that that is what we did with our £5, no one will blame us, maybe; but then no one will feel eternal gratitude towards us for having spent our money on ice cream.

### *2. Paul's attitude in 1 Corinthians 9*

Here he explains why he has chosen not to use the enjoyment of rights to which he was entitled as an apostle. He will work with his own hands to supply the cash necessary to maintain both himself and his team in his pioneer evangelism, rather than being dependent on the financial resources of the rest of the church. His motivation, he tells us, is reward: the reward of being the gospel's fellow worker (1 Cor 9:18, 23). The gospel was abroad in the world, gaining many victories and winning many converts to Christ. Paul wished to have a share in these great results that the gospel was achieving—the maximum share possible. Quest for reward, therefore, saved him from becoming overly dependent upon other people's financial support, and turned him into a rigorous self-denying, self-supporting initiator of new projects in pioneer evangelism. The lesson for us all is obvious.

### *3. The parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30)*

We all have different gifts according to our different abilities. Our wisdom is not to grow envious at other people's gifts, but to aim to please to the full the one who has given us the particular gifts we have.

The more we have been given, the more will be required of us (Luke 12:48). On the other hand, a cup of cold water given to a prophet as an expression of cooperation with him in his work as a prophet will get, so we are told, a prophet's reward (Matt 10:41). This should remind us that we are not, any of us, to act as isolated workers in competition with others, maximizing our private profit and concentrating simply on our own speciality regardless of the needs of other areas of work. Rather, if we would maximize our reward, we must view the whole field of the Lord's work and learn to subordinate our own efforts to the progress of the whole.

### *4. The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16)*

Here we can learn that there are two possible attitudes to adopt to reward. We can, if we will, strike a contract with the Lord, undertaking to work on the strict condition that he will give us so much reward for so much work done. If we take that attitude, we shall certainly get a just reward—but probably not a penny more.

On the other hand, some workers will get more than they strictly deserve, since in bestowing rewards our Lord reserves to himself the right to be not just righteous but positively good, and to be merciful in his assessment of what has been done. So for instance, some who were converted only late in life, but spent the five years from their conversion to their death working flat out for the Lord in sheer love and gratitude to him, are liable to get more reward than those who spend the first twenty years of Christian life dilly-dallying and not working for the Lord with any true resolve or diligence, and the last twenty working as they should. If, like Onesiphorus, we would have mercy shown to us in the day of rewards, we must show the same willingness to go 'the extra mile' as he did (2 Tim 1:16–18).

*5. The request of James and John (Mark 10:35–45)*

Finally, the awareness of what high reward means will put a curb on false ambition. It is possible for sacrifice and energy in the work of the Lord to be a channel for thinly disguised ego-boosting ambitions. It was so at one stage with James and John. We, like them, can be helped to overcome and eliminate such unworthy motives by remembering what obtaining the highest reward will mean. The highest reward is to be given the task and privilege of serving not ourselves, but the maximum number of others. That is why our Lord shall always have the topmost place, because he ever and always will serve all his people unreservedly.

May the Lord Jesus inspire us with the same quest for reward as he showed: ‘. . . who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb 12:2).

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.