

# REWARDS IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

## **Introduction**

I have written elsewhere on this subject with a view to exhorting believers to serve the Lord with gladness, but here a different approach is required on the same subject. Many godly brothers teach that there are no personal rewards in heaven, only the reward of gaining Christ, but I fear that they misrepresent scripture while meaning well. There can be no escaping clear texts which state that God gives rewards for faithful obedience, for our work. This has nothing to do with any personal merit contributing towards salvation; such an idea is preposterous. It has everything to do with the faith-work of the new man and nothing to do with the flesh. My brethren seem to forget that we are now new creatures who do not just have new appetites, but new abilities empowered by the Spirit of God. It is the theological implications of the new man that undergirds the Biblical teaching on rewards, and it is this which I want to expound here.

### *The flesh can profit nothing*

First I want to emphasise that man contributes nothing to salvation. The concept of synergism is Arminian / semi-Pelagian and has nothing to do with Biblical theology. Justification, being declared righteous by God, is only by faith and even this faith is a gift of God. Only God is glorified in man's salvation:

*Salvation and glory and honour and power belong to the Lord our God! [Rev 19:1]*

No good works can contribute to man's righteous standing before God. The prize of the Gospel is being *in Christ*, where the Lord Jesus Christ is our all in all. Our final presentation to God will be as perfect, but only in Christ:

*Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. [Col 1:28]*

We only find our completeness in Him [Col 2:10].

### *The new man and faith works*

None of this has anything to do with the principle of rewards, which is clearly enunciated by the Lord Jesus himself and taught by all the apostles. Works which merit rewards are not the works of the old man towards salvation, but the good deeds of the new man expressing faithfulness. Furthermore, we were saved in order to do these good works which God predestined us to perform. God does not redeem us in order to achieve nothing for eternity, but to serve him wholeheartedly and thus manifest his divine character and glory. We begin doing this now, but will continue throughout eternity in fellowship with the Lord. To encourage us in these endeavours the Lord graciously tells us that what we achieve in this life, by obeying God's instructions, will receive specific rewards in the New World. Many of these appear to revolve around the concept of levels of delegated authority in God's administration.

## **Biblical teaching on rewards and faith work**

By the time of the New Testament it was an established pattern that saints have rewards as an incentive to greater service. Moses knew he was in the book of life (Ex 32:32) but went on to greater sacrifices because he looked to the reward (Heb 11:26). He knew he had a redeemer who would save him but he knew about promises of rewards as well. All the patriarchs lived in the good of promises to an inheritance in the land even though they expected to partake in a glorious resurrection; that's why they wanted their bones buried in their homeland (Gen 50:25; Heb 11:22). They knew, from Abraham onwards, that God was

their exceeding great reward and that life was in him (Gen 15:1), but above this they treated expectation of other rewards seriously, especially of citizenship of an eternal city (Heb 11:10,14,16). Although God is under no obligation to give any merit to human service in his name, he nevertheless decided to grant this out of his sovereign good pleasure.

### **Rewards in general**

Everywhere the Bible teaches that every man will be justly rewarded for his deeds, either for good or bad (Mt 16:27; Rm 2:6-11; Rev 22:12). The word 'reward' in the Bible has a variety of implications based around the idea of 'wages'. They include the concepts of: gifts (1 Kg 13:7), punishment (Ps 91:8), punishment in this life for evil deeds (Mt 6:5), or in the future (Ps 91:8); as well as recompense for faithful service (Rev 2:26-28). In general, the reward for all saints is eternal life, the inheritance of Christ (Rev 2:10); however, scripture shows that there are variations in rewards for the saints over and above eternal life and these rewards form an incentive for sacrificial service. These rewards still flow from Christ (all our treasures are in him). Some writers (e.g. A. Kuyper) believe that these rewards are to do with a greater enjoyment of glory for some. I maintain that the enjoyment of glory appears in scripture to be equal for all saints, but there are differences in positions of authority.

### **God expects faithful service**

Everywhere, the Lord exhorts his people to lead faithful and obedient lives of service [Eph 2:10; 1 Tim 6:18; Titus 2:7,14, 3:8]. We must add virtue, moral energy, to our faith (2 Pt 1:5). The actual performance of this duty varies from Christian to Christian and it is a performance which is judged.

God's expectation is singled out by two parables covering: our use of the gift of new life (putting on the new man); and our use of the gifts of the Spirit which God severally gives.

*The parable of the pounds* (Lk 19:11-27) ['Pound' = *mina*, a weight or measure of money.]

- All are given an identical unit to use – this refers to the gift of new life which is equal in all converts.
- The main point of the story was to encourage proper use of that life. Faithfulness results in authority.
- The prevailing contemporary view was that God's kingdom would appear very shortly in fulness (v11). Jesus is here preparing people to work and not waste time because the kingdom is not round the corner.
- The citizens are enemies who are destroyed, the servants are those under the reign of the nobleman – believers. While their master is delayed away, the gift he has given must be used effectively. [A pound was about three month's wages.]
- The rewards have to do with authority when the master returns.

*The parable of the talents* (Mt 25:14-30) ['Talent' = a weight for commodities.]

- The unit is varied; people receive different values. This represents the gifts of the Spirit which are given sovereignly as he chooses. We do not all have the same gifts in this life.
- This is about the kingdom (v1). While the master is away in a far country, his goods are divided amongst his servants. Compare that Jesus in heaven sends his Spirit to take what is his and declare it to us (Jn 16:7-15), he also gives gifts to men (Eph 4:8).
- The gifts of all must be used and not hidden. The worst thing is to do nothing. Even a little use is rewarded.
- The rewards have to do with authority when the master returns.

At the very least, these parables signify that God expects us to use our new nature effectively, living a right life but also to use the gifts which he has given everyone in the church (Eph 4:7; 1 Pt 4:10). The efficient use of these things is rewarded.

### **Conversion is the start, not the end, of new life**

When we are born again, we begin our new lives as immature children of God who need to grow up. Regeneration is not a final state for the believer but the origin point. Once we become God's children, we gradually learn how to mature as sons by discerning good from evil (Heb 5:12-14). The development unto maturity varies with each believer; consequently every son must *'give account of himself to God,'* (Rm 14:12). Believers differ in their use of grace and each one of us will give an account of how we used the gift of new life as a son. At the tribunal of Jesus, our performance will be assessed (Rm 14:10).

Every believer is equal at regeneration (they are all new-born babies), and of equal standing before God – being declared righteous according to the imputation of Christ's righteousness. However, believers are not equal in the performance of their duties. This is a plain fact and in accord with New Testament scriptures about rewards and judgment – hence apostolic warnings.

### **Scriptures which state that rewards will be given to the faithful**

Rewards are promised to believers in order to excite their efforts to diligently serve God. In a sense, God uses this human way of thinking in order to help us poor weak sinners in getting our goals correct. Rewards are called 'rewards' or 'wages';<sup>1</sup> but there is no sense of merit in the statements about them (in the sense of being earned by the flesh). The rewards are a free gift sovereignly distributed by God for fulfilling our obligations in God's plan.

If we ignore the statements about rewards in the Old Testament, which are open to debate as to what those rewards refer to, we find the following sources of information in the New Testament (amongst others):

- *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]*
- *Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. [1 Cor 4:5]*
- *And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. [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]*

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<sup>1</sup> We could argue that 'crown' is another word used, but I think that a good case can be made to show that crown always refers to the future, heavenly experience of salvation in Christ. Some would argue that 'crown' may refer to positions of authority in the new world.

- *Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. [Phil 3:13-15]*
- *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] ('Reward' here is a word meaning 'recompense, which only occurs here in NT.)*
- *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]*
- *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. [Heb 11:6]*
- *Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. [Heb 10:35]*
- *[Moses esteemed] the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. [Heb 11:26]*
- *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]*
- *The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth. [Rev 11:18]*
- *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. [Rev 19:8]*
- *And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. [Rev 20:12]*
- *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]*

There can be no doubt that the believer is to receive rewards; the question is what these rewards are.

#### *The words used*

REWARD (S)	[ <b>misqo,j</b> ] <i>misthos</i> , (Strong's 3408); dues paid for work, wages, the fruit of toil.
	[ <b>avpodi,dwmi</b> ] <i>apodidomi</i> , (Strong's 591); to pay off, discharge what is due, a debt, wages, things promised under oath.
	[ <b>katabrabeu,w</b> ] <i>katabrabeuo</i> , (Strong's 2603); to decide as umpire against someone, to defraud or beguile of the prize of victory, to cheat of a reward (Col 2:18).
	[ <b>avntapo,dosij</b> ] <i>antapodosis</i> (Strong's 469); recompense, to reward or repay someone, (Col 3:24).
WORK (S)	[ <b>e;rgon</b> ] <i>ergon</i> , (Strong's 2041), work, employment, enterprise, act deed.

LABOURS	[ <b>ko,poj</b> ] <i>kopos</i> , (Strong's 2873), lit. a beating, hence toil, labour, intense labour united with trouble and toil.
RIGHTEOUS ACTS	[ <b>dikai,wma</b> ] <i>dikaioma</i> , (Strong's 1345), righteousness, what is deemed right as under law, a righteous act or deed.
TREASURES	[ <b>qhsauro,j</b> ] <i>thesauros</i> , (Strong's 2344), a place for good and precious things, receptacle for valuables, storehouse, treasury, collected treasures.

The words used in these passages cannot be made to say something other than what they actually say. The rewards are meritorious, are wages. The labours are real toil, the work is our deeds on earth and the righteousness is our righteous acts. These lead to a storing of precious things in a storehouse (heaven).

### *Observations from the texts*

- 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. This does not suit the text at all.
- Saints receive praise from God for works performed in obedience [1 Cor 4:5].
- The prize of the upward call of God is a motivating factor to serve the Lord [Phil 3:13-15]. If there are no rewards this exhortation is a lie and Paul's' point is destroyed. Furthermore, Christ is not given as a reward for service, but is given as a result of faith. The prize is 'in Christ Jesus' but is not said to be Christ Jesus.
- 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.
- Faith has a reward [Heb 11:6, 10:35]. In this case the reward could point to Christ.
- There is a full reward as well as a reward [2 Jn 1:8]. This implies more than one item or varieties of reward.
- Righteous acts have a repercussion in heaven [Rev 19:8].
- The works of the saints have a result in heaven. [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 is that rewards are linked to authority in God's future kingdom.

### **Rewards in church service**

*Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. 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. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? [1 Cor 3:8-16]*

Nothing could be clearer than the statements of this passage.

- There are rewards according to one's labour. From the context (3:6) we see that Paul particularly has in mind here preaching and teaching. Those who plant churches with the Gospel and those who edify believers in the fulness of the Gospel.
- The work of men is like that of a farmer who does the right things to propagate crops (planting and watering); but the real impact of life is not from the gifted men but from God (sun, rain, physical laws, energy in the seed etc.). Genuine growth is heavenly.
- The planter and the irrigator are united, the work of both is vital; one is not more important than the other and God rewards both justly.
- The work of godly men is co-working with God. The men are nothing but servants, it is God who empowers the work. The fruit of the men's work is really fruit of the Spirit working through them.
- The church is God's building – he is the architect of it; Christ is the foundation – the support of it. The foundation is the life of Christ; as people are converted they are joined to this building and are part of that foundation. Nothing changes the foundation, it remains the solid base of all future work and it is this later work that assumes more visibility.
- There are two types of work that people contribute to the building of the church upon the foundation of Christ: that which is of spiritual value, lasting and eternal, or that which is superficial, temporary and worthless. The fire of God's judgment at the end will test the real value of all church contributions.
- The worker who contributed spiritual value to the church will receive a reward.
- The worker who merely built superficially will suffer loss. However, this loss does not mean the loss of salvation. The worker is not an unbeliever but someone who worked unwisely. His life's work is burned up because it had no spiritual power.
- The church is God's temple, the Spirit dwells in the gathered community of saints. This passage, therefore, specifically applies to the work of leaders and those who contribute to church building. It is Jesus who builds the church, leaders must focus upon him always and do what he says, not what they think best. Work that is not focused upon Christ will vanish.
- In 1 Cor 6:19-20 Paul teaches that our body is also the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the principles that are valid corporately in 1 Cor 3 apply individually in 1 Cor 6. We must '*glorify God in our body*' and take care how we build in our lives.

### **Paul's expectation of a reward**

*For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.*

*Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that*

*you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. [1 Cor 9:16-27]*

Paul was the hardest working of all apostles and as an emissary from God was required to preach the Gospel, that was his job. By doing this willingly he was assured of a reward – notice here he does not mention that Christ was his reward, he is speaking entirely in a neutral manner; the reward is an object not a person here.

Then Paul explains that the key difference between him and other ministers is that he laboured with his own hands while serving God. He did not expect a financial reward on earth but laid up his own expenses (how rare is that today?). For this he expected a special reward – he was laying up treasure in heaven and suffering discomfort on earth.

Finally, Paul uses the analogy of the Greek games in this context where athletes competed for a reward, a prize. The prize for Paul was not a laurel wreath that faded, but an imperishable crown – an expectation of real authority. So, he disciplined himself hard so as not to lose the reward (be disqualified).

### **Interim Conclusion**

There is no getting around the simple and oft repeated statement that: *He [the Son of Man] will reward each according to his works; [Mt 16:27] and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour [1 Cor 3:8].* A very solid case must be made to overturn clear scriptures.

### **The Judgment seat of Christ**

*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]*  
*For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. [Rm 14:10]*

The word used here for judgment seat is (**bhma**) *Bema*, only used of believers. This word refers to the raised platform from which the magistrate passed sentences (Mt 27:19), however it is more used by Paul in connection with his constant allusions to the Greek games for the Christian life: running the race and competing for the prize. This was the original use of the word by the Greeks. In the Isthmian Games athletes competed for the prize and were judged, the victor being given a special laurel wreath on his head (Paul refers to this in 1 Cor 9:24-25). This ceremony, the highpoint of the game took place on the *Bema*, rightly considered as a place of rewarding, not a place of condemnation.

The word 'bad' in 2 Cor 5:10 does not imply condemnation; it here rightly means 'worthless', 'not as it ought to be'<sup>2</sup> i.e. a believer who has not been faithful in much fails to receive a full reward. 'Worthless' applies to the actions of the flesh. Whatever the flesh does is worthless, bad, and not worthy of a reward. It is unbiblical to suggest that the believer could be sentenced to wrath: *For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, (1 Thess 5:9).* The rejection Paul mentions in 1 Cor

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<sup>2</sup> There are different words used in the Received Text and the UBS text; however, the difference is merely one of intensity. The UBS uses *phaulos*—'unacceptable' or 'worthless'; while the RT uses *kakos*, 'bad' or 'evil'. It matters little. The flesh is evil in itself and not worthy of rewards, it is worthless – good for nothing. What is done by the flesh is burned up.

9:27 (trans. 'disqualified' NKJV or 'castaway' KJV) is the rejection from participating in the *Bema*; this is clear from the context of Greek games. Without personal discipline we will fail to qualify for rewards. It does not mean that Paul feared losing his salvation.

If there are no rewards for the Christian, why do believers face this judgment seat (tribunal) of Christ? If we will stand in Christ's righteousness at the last day, and if our bodies have been changed, there is nothing to judge. All accept that Christians do not face the holy wrath of God exhibited at the final judgment, they are also separated from the wicked before the final judgment. So what is this judgment if not to ascertain faithfulness of service?

Furthermore, if Christians only have Christ as their reward, how can they suffer loss? What are they losing, what is deemed worthless? Every believer expects to lose his sinful nature, his weak body, everything except Christ – that is the norm, no one expects otherwise. If there is not something else to lose Paul's exhortation here is meaningless. There has to be something we could gain or lose above eternal life in Christ to make this passage make sense.

There is no sense here of a separate Day of Judgment for believers and the wicked. At the end the righteous and wicked are separated like flocks of sheep and goats. The wicked go to give a full account of their lives as the books are opened and they will concur with God's just judgment that they deserve punishment for their sins. The righteous in Christ will stand before the tribunal of Christ (*Bema*) to give an account of their faithfulness. It is not wicked sins that are under view since these have been judged at Calvary and forgiven in Christ's atonement, the scrutiny is of stewardship. Were the gifts of salvation utilised as they should have been. It is the opportunity decreed by God to reward faithful sons.

There is every reason to believe that this is a celebration not a wringing of hands. All believers on facing heaven will be in a state of rapturous joy, not one will be sad:

*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. [Rev 21:4]*

At the rewarding of saints for service, all will rejoice and be happy to serve their king under the allocated delegated authority of rulers over cities.

### **God's reason for instituting rewards**

Biblical and church history shows that even good believers face the continual temptation of looking to the earth while building for the Lord. Some leaders who avoid the pitfalls of becoming centred upon money or sinful temptations often seem to fall foul of thinking in worldly ways to build the church. Over and over again good evangelical leaders tend to become focused upon membership numbers, on strategies for success, or dominated by the subjective needs of the flock, become desirous of academic approbation, fall into ambitions for the preaching circuit, or wrongly focused upon building structures and maintenance, and so on.

In the early church the apostles were immediately faced with being diverted from the best (preaching, teaching and praying) by providing for the needs of the saints (Acts 6). The material need of the flock is a valid and worthy work, but not if it distracts leaders who are called to do something else. A new layer of delegated authority was required to cater for the saint's needs while the apostles taught and prayed and immediately there was a new surge of growth.



The temptation to look downwards, even at good things, is a besetting sin of church leaders, despite precise teaching and godly exhortations in scripture not to do this. Furthermore, there are the model examples of the Lord himself and Paul in how to do the job right - only doing what God does and saying what God says. The fact is that the glory of salvation and union with Christ, while held dearly in quiet moments, is often lost in the daily miasma of a busy life. This is true for all believers not just for leaders.

To encourage a focus upon right principles of obedience God gives an additional motivation by repeatedly stating that actions performed to specifically glorify God will be rewarded over and above the glory of salvation. We can build upon the foundation of Christ in our lives.

For example: there have been some missionaries in the past with great natural talents and accomplishments. One I recall was a concert pianist of great esteem. There is nothing wrong with being a concert pianist, and one could argue that playing to the glory of God is a good thing. He could have stayed at home, served the church and played concerts occasionally. Instead he became a missionary to China and virtually never played again (he did once at the ambassadors house). Only a musician can know what a huge sacrifice this was. The reason he did it was partly because he felt called to preach the Gospel to the Chinese, but also because he knew that serving God in this way would receive a reward that far outweighed the benefits of playing piano. The highest reward the world could give was nothing compared to God's reward. The principle of rewards in heaven helped him to focus upon eternal treasures and not earthly ones. This swayed his decision to become a missionary and helped the pain of his great sacrifice.

Rewards are an additional motivation to put God first. However, there is a second reason, this is the principle of God's eternal justice. In the area of eternal life, all God's servants labour for different amounts of time under different constraints but all receive the same gift - everlasting life. Jesus told a parable to illustrate this; the mention of being called and chosen shows that this refers to the Gospel and salvation, not work in the kingdom (Matt 20:1-16). Some believers labour in the Gospel for nearly a lifetime, while others are saved on their deathbeds, but all get the same life in Christ.

Because God is a just judge, he ensures that those who spent their lives in sacrificial service will receive a reward. If this were not the case justice would not be served and there is no answer to those who may claim that, once converted, a believer needs to do nothing above the minimum in order to get gain the same heavenly advantages of Paul the apostle.

Finally, the matters singled out by Jesus which warrant a reward are the mundane charitable works of love available to everyone. Raising the dead or preaching to 5,000 is not mentioned, but giving someone who is thirsty a drink is. Righteous deeds not powerful deeds are rewarded. Love not eloquence is rewarded. This encourages the ordinary believer to live a good life, not just to express thanks to the Lord for the gift of life, but also to lay up treasures in heaven and think spiritually instead of in an earthly fashion.

## The Theology Behind Judgment and Rewards

### **We are called to perform God's good works, decreed from eternity**

*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. [Eph 2:10]*

Immediately after explaining that salvation is by faith and not by human works (v8-9), Paul declares that once we are saved we learn that we have works to fulfil - that we were created for. Good works are vital in the believer's walk, and these works were decreed from eternity. These works can only be done by the power of God's Spirit (Eph 2:10; Gal 5:22; Ezek 36:27; Phil 1:6, 2:13) and his grace (1 Cor 15:10, Jn 15:5). Even the best believer is merely an unprofitable servant (Lk 17:10).

So, after conversion the believer is God's handiwork, a work of God's hands, and is called to be the expression of his divine character. This necessitates the performance of good works, according to the purpose of God. These works have nothing to do with the flesh but are performed as the handiwork of God, resulting from the new man. These works also have no contribution to gaining salvation; salvation is already assured. There is no suggestion that these works have any meritorious benefit in affecting the gift of eternal life; rather they are the outflow of an existing eternal life.

'Workmanship' is *poiema* [**poi,hma**], something that has been made. It is the source of the English word 'poem'. Perhaps it is not straining the sense to suggest that believers are God's poem, are the expression of the heart of God, and that this is revealed to men when Christians perform good works.

Believers are not only called to show their faith by doing good works (Jm 2:17) but have been called from eternity to perform the works which God has decreed. Our purpose in Christ is to do good to all, and especially to other believers (Gal 6:10). It is these works which God sovereignly chooses to warrant a reward. Since the works vary from person to person, the rewards vary also.

### **Faith works are the outworking of salvation**

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I laboured even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. [1 Cor 15:10]*

*And for this purpose also I labour, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. [Col 1:29]*

We must differentiate between works of the flesh, which profit nothing to salvation, and what Paul calls 'faith works'. When we become Christians we are called to do the works that God planned before we were born in his service. These works are the works of the new man, not the old man. God empowers these works that are done by his Spirit in us to glorify Christ and manifest the divine character of God and it is this work that God sovereignly chooses to reward (Jn 15:4-5).

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. [Phil 2:12-13]*

Salvation must be outworked, that means the life resident in the new man, created according to the likeness of Christ, must be manifest in words and actions. To do this God energises us and supplies the will. Though the will and the energy are all of God, we are

employed in this work to bring physical reality to the life of God. We can claim no credit for it, and yet God chooses to reward it.

*... remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father. [1 Thess 1:3]*

Here Paul mentions a faith work of the Thessalonians as well as their labour of love. He juxtaposes words that do not seem to mix well in our thoughts. We recoil at the idea that faith can be a work, or that love is labour; but that is what Paul says. There are works that result from an outworking of faith and are energised by God, which have spiritual value and are rewarded. But other seemingly similar works that are not produced by faith have no value at all. Similarly, love (especially love for God) can produce toil that selflessly works for others and glorifies the God that prompted the love in the first place.

*Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him. [2 Thess 1:11-12]*

Faith works fulfil the pleasure of God's goodness and glorify the Lord Jesus. Remarkably, they also result in the faithful believer being glorified in Christ as well. A faith work may result in some expression of power.

*Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe -- and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? [Jm 2:17-20]*

The life of the believer is intended to be full of works that demonstrate his faith. If a professing Christian does not demonstrate his faith by works, he is not a believer. The salvation we experience in our hearts must be worked out into the realm of life around us.

*I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. [Rev 2:19]*

The Lord knows our works that are done in faith. Here he credits the church at Thyatira for these works, even though he has later criticisms about their toleration of false teaching and sexual immorality.

So, the Christian life is founded upon the life of Christ which dwells within the heart of a believer. But that is not enough to glorify God in this world, there has to be a demonstration of his character through the church. The life of God must be outworked from within, through the energising of God, in works of faith and love that manifestly speak of God's character. The result of this operation are the fruit of the Spirit, expressions of the life of Christ in the world:

*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. [Gal 5:22-23]*

There is no law against these works because they are not performed by the flesh, but are faith works, the outworking of the life of Christ within. It is these works that God chooses to reward. The works that God rewards are on the other side of the cross where the law does not apply for they are works energised by God himself, performed by his Spirit through men.

### **Following Christ**

The believer in the New World will finally be like Christ (I Jn 3:2) and although we are hindered by the old nature and the body of sin, we are called to follow Christ now in this pilgrimage. Despite our weaknesses and failings, we are still called to follow the master and

walk as he walked (Jn 14:12). The more we walk in the Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit, the more we are like Christ (1 Jn 4:17). In this all are agreed.

The way Jesus walked was in complete harmony and obedience to the Father in the nth degree:

- *Then Jesus answered and said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner'. [Jn 5:19]*
- *Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. [Jn 14:10]*
- *For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak. [Jn 12:49-50]*

Jesus only said what his Father said and did what his Father did. In this he is our great example, we are called to act like Jesus in this world, in doing this we shine out God's testimony (Phil 2:15). It is these outshining works that God states he will reward. Such works are nothing to do with meriting eternal life, they are the rewards, or even the wages (*misthos*), of manifesting the light of Christ. The Father does not need to do this, but does so out of sheer grace. He has set up a kind of law, the more we represent Christ (as he represented the Father on earth) the more we receive the due wages of that testimony. God is so pleased when we behave like this that he even states that he praises us: *then each one's praise will come from God.* [1 Cor 4:5; praise = *epainos* (**e;painoj** Strong's 1868), approbation, commendation, praise.] This praise from God is not for believing in Christ, since he gave us that faith in the first place, it is for being faithful servants.

### **Rewards are not our inheritance of gaining eternal life in Christ**

An inheritance is something bequeathed by our Father, it is not something we work for. Our inheritance is in Christ, God's only eternally begotten Son. He alone has earned the inheritance promised by the Father; but because we are in Christ, we share in this inheritance. This is why there is a glory to be revealed in us (Rm 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17).

Our inheritance in Christ is eternal life and adoption into God's family, which includes a resurrected body given at the end. Then we will be like him (1 Jn 3:2). Every believer will receive this same inheritance.

The passage in Col 3:18-25 is not about rewards but about the inheritance of eternal life in Christ. Paul is exhorting Colossian believers to live correctly, not to do works of charity. Wives should submit to husbands, slaves to masters, husbands must love wives and children; freedom in Christ does not change earthly responsibilities. The Gospel is not a get out clause for slaves, or husbands – all must obey those to whom they are responsible. So, instead of seeking personal freedom believers must work even better ('heartily'). As a result, they are assured of eternal life, will receive the recompense of the inheritance. Those that fail will be disciplined by God (v25).

Rewards are different to the inheritance. They are treasures laid up in heaven.

Jesus, talking to disciples in Lk 12, differentiates between the wicked who lay up treasure on earth for themselves – which is lost (v16-21) - and his followers who must lay up treasure in heaven. They were not to concentrate on earthly needs, God their Father will provide these for them just as he provides for animals, they were to concentrate upon the

kingdom (v31). Their behaviour in the kingdom should include ignoring their own comforts and providing for the poor (v33-36):

*Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master.*

This harps back to the parables of the pounds and talents; believers need to do charitable works. These works provide a treasure in heaven and this motivates the heart and demonstrates faithful waiting for the master. This treasure is not eternal life and Jesus is talking to disciples not the crowds. The treasure results from giving alms.

Finally, in Matthew 19 :28-29 we read:

*So Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life'.*

Jesus here makes a distinction between the inheritance of eternal life and what is received as a reward for suffering. This is obviously said in the context to encourage and create an incentive those who had forsaken everything to follow him.

### **Rewards are still part of Christ**

Nothing God gives us is apart from Christ; all the spiritual goodness that is ours is from Christ and in Christ: *'blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ'*, (Eph 1:3). There is no spiritual blessing that is apart from Christ. Without him we can do nothing at all (Jn 15:4-5).

The scope of the rewards are good works that arise from life in Christ; these are the fruit of the Spirit of Christ. When we give a thirsty man a drink we are showing the love of Christ; expressing a fruit of the Spirit. The texts on rewards seem to imply that the more a person manifests the fruit of the Spirit, the more rewarded they will be in the New World. In this world everyone is the same in essence – they are all equal in Christ, they all share the life of Christ, but not everyone is equal in authority; some are rulers over one city while others rule over ten cities. The use we make of God's grace affects the role we have in the New World. Our essence isn't changed (some are not better than others) but our responsibilities differ.

An analogy here might be wives and husbands. In the kingdom, both are equal in Christ, both are justified, both blood bought, both have the same hope and the same future. However, they have different responsibilities and differing authority. The husband is the head of the family while the wife must submit. This is balanced by the husband being exhorted to love his wife as Christ sacrificially loved the church. While they are essentially equal, as regards life in Christ, they are relationally and functionally different as to their servant role before God. One isn't better than the other, the roles simply differ.

In the New World it is the same. Everyone in the kingdom is equal as regards status – they are all in Christ, there are no second class citizens. However, it is clear that there are differing functions and different types of authority in the administration of that kingdom. My contention is that the rewards are connected to this authority.

*Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. [Mt 25:21]*

### **Conclusion**

Strange as it may seem, to those of us who love to glorify the free grace of God in salvation, and while we expressly claim that the flesh profits nothing in gaining eternal life, the Bible is very clear that there is a concept of rewards for faithful service. It repeatedly states that our work of faith (not work of the flesh) or our labour of love are not only expressions of the life of Christ, are not only fruit of the Spirit, are not only the outworking of our salvation by God, but in the sovereign good pleasure of God will be rewarded with positions of authority in his eternal kingdom.

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## Appendix One

### Questions for apologists of the usual Reformed position on Rewards

#### Question 1

Why is the doctrine of rewards resisted when the number of scriptures explaining it are many?

#### Question 2

At the very least, theologians have to accept that gradation of rewards is clearly taught, unbiased sound exposition must acknowledge this; why then is this also resisted?

#### Question 3

Since the NT uses words that definitely imply merit being given to the faith works of believers, what explanation is there for such terms if there are no graduated rewards? If treasure in heaven only ever applies to the inheritance of eternal life in Jesus, why does God use terms that mean merit?

#### Question 4

What is the judgment seat of Christ if not to apportion rewards for faithfulness? Believers do not undergo judgment for sin so why do we face this tribunal?

#### Question 5

When defenders of grace force words like *reward*, *labour* and *work* to apply to the gift of eternal life in Christ, do they not jeopardise the very doctrine which they seek to defend? If rewards are according to each man's work, and the reward texts apply to every man wicked or righteous, then the clear implication is that eternal life results from work.

#### Question 6

How do we explain the selection for the gradations of authority that clearly exist in the New World if we are all equal in Christ? God is not arbitrary and does nothing without purpose.

#### Question 7

Is it not an offence to reason and justice that many Reformed writers suggest that a believer who has wasted much of his life and served but little will be equally rewarded with great saints and apostles who led sacrificial lives for decades?

## Appendix One

### Supportive quotes from some Reformed theologians

Not all Reformed theologians deny or ignore the question of rewards for faithful service.

Salvation ... is entirely of grace, the rewards of the heavenly state are all purchased by the merit of Christ alone; but the proportion in which the rewards will be administered to individuals will be determined by fatherly justice in accordance with the fidelity of the saints on earth. In this paternal rule over God's own house there is no element of retribution. The government is wholly disciplinary. Punishment gives way to chastisement. The Ruler and Judge is both Father and Saviour. ... Justification is presupposed. Nor is it in order to salvation. It is in order to the degree in which glory shall be experienced.

**John L. Girardeau**, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism*, Sprinkle, (1984) p464-65

While it makes void the gospel to introduce works in connection with justification, nevertheless works done in faith, from the motive of love to God, in obedience to the revealed will of God and to the end of his glory are intrinsically good and acceptable to God. As such they will be the criterion of reward in the life to come. This is apparent from such passages as Matthew 10:41; 1 Corinthians 3:8-9, 11-15; 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:7. We must maintain therefore, justification complete and irrevocable by grace through faith and apart from works, and at the same time, future reward according to works. In reference to these two doctrines it is important to observe the following: (i) This future reward is not justification and contributes nothing to that which constitutes justification. (ii) This future reward is not salvation. Salvation is by grace and it is not as a reward for works that we are saved. (iii) The reward has reference to the station a person is to occupy in glory and does not have reference to the gift of glory itself. While the reward is of grace yet the standard or criterion of judgment by which the degree of reward is to be determined is good works. (iv) This reward is not administered because good works earn or merit reward, but because God is graciously pleased to reward them. That is to say it is a reward of grace.

**John Murray**, *Collected Writings*, vol II, Banner of Truth (1977) p221

'Another book' shall be 'opened, which is the book of life' (Rev. 20:12). In this the names of the elect are written, as Christ said to His disciples (Luke 10:20), 'Your names are written in heaven.' This book contains God's gracious and unchangeable purpose, to bring all the elect to eternal life ... Then shall the Judge pronounce this blessed sentence on the saints, 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Matt. 25:34) ... This sentence is passed on the saints, 'according to their works' (Rev. 20:12); but not for their works, nor for their faith, as if eternal life were merited by them ... They were redeemed by the blood of Christ, and clothed with His spotless righteousness, which is the proper cause of the sentence ... And the saints will so far be judged according to such works, that the degrees of glory amongst them shall be according to these works. For it is an eternal truth, 'He that soweth sparingly, shall reap also sparingly' (2 Cor. 9:6).

Thus shall the good works of the godly have a glorious, but a gratuitous reward; a reward of grace, not of debt; which will fill them with wonder at the riches of free grace, and at the Lord's condescending to take any notice, especially such public notice, of their poor worthless works.

**Thomas Boston**, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, Banner of Truth, (1964) p415-18



We learn that there will be gradations in the reward of glory. Not all the saints in glory will be alike. They shall not occupy the same place. All the saints will be completely filled with blessing; but one has a greater capacity for blessing and glory than another. And also these gradations in glory will be according to each man's work and suffering for Christ in the world.

The hope of the reward may indeed encourage us and spur us on to greater faithfulness, especially as we must suffer for righteousness sake in the midst of a hostile world.

**Herman Hoeksema**, *Reformed Dogmatics*, RFP, (1985) p516.

Concerning the doctrine of justification, Bradwardine teaches 'justification by grace alone without preceding works.' This flows out of predestination, in the way of grace, not because there is cause in man. God determines the works they will do, gives them the grace to perform the works, and then rewards them in heaven. This is language that sounds like the cry of the Reformation of Luther almost 200 years later.

**Russell J. Dykstra**, Thomas Bradwardine: Forgotten Medieval Augustinian (3), *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, November 2001, Volume 35, Number 1.

There can be no doubt that the Lord Jesus Christ teaches rewards for faith-works. Nor can there be any doubt that it is *not* the Roman doctrine of justification by works, and is the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone ... rewards in heaven for imperfect works on earth is perfectly compatible with the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. Imperfect works (or even perfect works) could never remit guilt or earn justification. But imperfect works can merit the rewards in heaven that the Lord Jesus Christ says they will receive. Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name will have its eternal reward—deservedly! Why deservedly?

Christians will receive rewards in heaven for every one of their imperfect "good" works for a very good reason. Those post-justification good works are not necessary for heaven because Jesus Christ purchased heaven for those in Him by faith. The works are necessary to prove the genuineness of professed faith but they are not necessary for earning heaven. They are real "works of super-erogation," if you wish. Anyone who goes to heaven does so for the merit of Christ's work alone, apart from any merit in any and all of his own works of obedience. If faith could exist apart from works, which it cannot, the believer could go to heaven without ever doing one good work. As it is, he goes to heaven without one iota of merit in anything and everything he does. But every post-justification good work he ever does will merit, deserve, and receive its reward in heaven.

You protest, "But post-justification works have sin in them, and therefore cannot *merit* any reward." You forget that their guilt of sin *has been removed*. Moreover, do you dare impugn the justice of God by saying that He would "reward" what did not deserve reward? (P.S. I confess my own and Augustine's past error in using the oxymoron: "rewards of grace.")

In conclusion, faith, as union with Christ, possesses Christ's righteousness which justifies perfectly forever. Being true faith, it is inseparable from works which contribute zero to justification. But being unnecessary for heaven (which Christ's merit alone purchases), works are meritorious and the Christian is now to leap for joy because every one of his weakest of works will deservedly receive an everlasting reward in heaven.

**John H Gerstner**, *Justification by Faith Alone (The Nature of Justifying Faith), Affirming the Doctrine By Which the Church and the Individual Stands of Falls*, Soli Deo Gloria Publications; Morgan PA, (1995), chapter 4.

[It is] not to be doubted but that the faithful may encourage themselves. In their well doing, by looking on to the reward set before them.

**Andrew Willet**, *Hexapla: Romanes*, p137.

Whatsoever God propounds as a motive to Duty, and whatsoever God promiseth as an encouragement or reward, on that the soul may most lawfully fix the eye.

**Obadiah Sedgwick**, *Anatomy*, p245,246

Is no infringement of our Christian liberty to do duty with an eye to the recompense of reward.

**Samuel Bolton**, *True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, Banner of Truth, (1978), p165

[Regarding the *Bema*] The first purpose or reason is that the believer must be vindicated. The second purpose of the judgement seat is to stimulate Christians to faithfulness. Thirdly, it is the examination of the lives and service of believers, and the rewarding of them for what God considers worthy of recognition. And finally it is to give assignment in the kingdom. There are degrees of rewards in the language employed by our Saviour when he talks about those who are the least in the kingdom and those who are greatest. Some will rule over a few cities and some over many. Others again though saved, will not reign over any cities at all.

**Theodore Epp**, Theodore Epp, *Present Labour and Future Rewards*, Nebraska: Back To the Bible, (nd) 73-81.

Here there is no dispute between us as to the necessity of exhorting believers to good works, and even stimulating them by holding forth a reward. What then? First, I differ from them in this, that they make eternal life the reward; for if God rewards works with eternal life, they will immediately make out that faith itself is a reward which is paid, whereas Scripture uniformly proclaims that it is the inheritance which falls to us by no other right than that of free adoption.

**John Calvin**, Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote, *Selected Works of John Calvin*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1983), 144-145.

It is part of his justice to make good his word; by promise God hath made himself a debtor. . . . It is just with God to pay what he oweth, and God oweth what he hath promised; and so it is a crown of righteousness which God the righteous Judge will give us at that day.

**Thomas Manton**, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, James Nisbet & Co., (1872), vol. VIII, p. 441.

But though no primary and original obligation rests upon the Creator, to reward a creature made from nothing, and continually upheld and helped in the service which he renders, yet he can constitute a secondary and relative obligation. He can promise to reward the creature's service; and having bound himself to reward obedience, his own word establishes a species of claim. Obedient man, or angel, may plead the Divine promise as the ground of reward. . . . In the words of Witsius (*Covenants*, I. i. iv.), 'God by his promise, has made himself a debtor to men. Or, to speak in a manner more becoming God, he was pleased to make his performance of his promise a debt due to himself.'

Since God and redeemed man are two distinct agents, there is a personal quality in man's obedience whereby it is truly rewardable.

**WGT Shedd**, *Dogmatic Theology*, Thomas Nelson (1980), Vol 1, p368-9.

God became our debtor, not by receiving anything, but by promising what he pleased.

**Augustine**, *Sermons* 16 (quoted by Witsius/Shedd above).