

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Hebrews 11:1-6

“Rewards”

Christians in the Reformed tradition are often uncomfortable with the idea of “rewards,” having learned over and over that “it’s all about *grace*” – that God treats us better than we deserve! But the word “reward” appears frequently in the Bible, and on this “Awards Sunday” it’s worth asking how God and rewards are connected.

A *reward*, according to the dictionary, is a gift, an honor, a recognition, an appreciation. So it should be clear from the start that rewards are not things we can demand or expect: they are in fact “gifts of grace.” God does not owe anyone rewards. But according to Scripture, he does give them. Why, how, and for what?

1) *The Reward of Knowing God*

The most fundamental reward is the one described in *Hebrews 11*; the “roll-call of faith.” The writer says that “*without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*” Seekers are rewarded with the knowledge of God.

“Seeking” is now somewhat out of favor in American Christian circles, following the growth over the past 25 years of many independent, mega-sized, “seeker-sensitive churches.” The rap has been that in trying to make Christianity attractive to non-believers,

they have turned it into entertainment, a consumer-style “take the bits you like,” and have emptied the faith of most of its content. Churches that look like theaters or stadiums, the absence of crosses, hymns, or Biblical exposition – at least on Sunday mornings – may have attracted large numbers of “seekers,” but their faith proved to be shallow, with little sense of commitment or obligation. Even the best of them, like Willow Creek, are now seriously reconsidering their approach.

But *seeking* is a Biblical term, and *Hebrews* says God rewards seekers. And so it is. Many of us could testify that at some stage in our lives we were casting around, trying to find God, whatever we thought that meant. What we learned was that God hears the feeble cries of people who want to know him, and by sometimes strange paths, he leads us to a place where we can meet him. Looking back, we of course know that the Spirit of God was drawing us, that we had to meet Jesus Christ – who came looking for lost people like us.

Sometimes the seeker’s path is hard and disagreeable; sometimes it involves suffering; sometimes we agree with C.S. Lewis that “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*” But sometimes we find companions who help our seeking, and they lead us places we have never been and would not have found alone.

But meet God we did, through the work of his Son and his Spirit, and we grasp what the writer to *Hebrews* meant by God "rewarding those who seek him:" with knowledge of and encounter with himself! We recognize the words Abraham heard when he still had little knowledge of God: "*Fear not, I am your shield and your very great reward.*" Knowing God is our reward, all undeserved, but we are eternally grateful that we have met him.

2) *There is Reward in Following God's Word*

Secondly, there is reward in following and obeying the Word of God. "*The law of the LORD...the statutes... the precepts... the commands.. are right, trustworthy, joy-giving; in keeping them there is great reward.*" (Psalm 19). The Psalms and Proverbs are full of admonitions to follow the Word of the LORD so that life will be blessed.

Now it's important to say once again that Israel knew its very existence was a matter of grace: that out of all the nations of the earth, God had chosen them as a people to whom to reveal himself, and he had called them and made them a nation and given them a land and defended them and taught his ways to them. They did not earn God's favor by their righteous behavior; but in response to his grace they were called to live as befitted the chosen people of God; a people called to be holy, and to become "a light to the Gentiles" so that all nations would come to know the true God.

That Israel failed over and over to live up to their calling is well known. But they did, at their best, realize that Torah was a great gift, and that to follow it meant blessing. "*In keeping the law of the LORD there is great reward.*" It shaped their culture, it showed them how to live together, and as a marker of their identity, obeying the commands of the LORD reflected his character out into the

world. Were they guaranteed that they would prosper by obedience? No - things go wrong in a fallen world where evil is at work, and the whole OT book of Job is there to tell us that "bad things happen to good people."

But it remains true even in this era of grace that to follow God's ways brings rewards. Treat other people well and you are more likely to be treated as well as you would like to be. Love your enemies and you may disarm them. Be patient, kind, gentle, generous, thankful, and your life will contain more elements of "the peace of God" - the *shalom* of God - than it would otherwise. Act in ways that build up community rather than tearing it down, work for the common good rather than only for you own or your family's, and you will find your community a much better place to live in. Give people in need "*a cup of cold water*" in Jesus' name, and you will be rewarded.

There *is* reward in all this, but it is always an honor and not a right, an appreciation and not a payback, and nobody has the right to resent that "they are giving more than they are getting."

3) *Building a Good Life is Rewarded*

Thirdly, and connected to this, but not the same, is Biblical teaching that as we "build our lives," day by day, there will come a day when what we have built will be tested. The common Biblical concept is of test by fire or flood. Will everything we have built be swept away because it was built on sand? Will it all burn up because it was made of twigs and straw, and not stone, metal, costly materials? "*Each man's work will be shown for what it is; because the Day will bring it to light. The fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss, but*

he himself will be saved, as one escaping through the flames." (1 Cor 3).

What we make of our lives, what we build, will be tested, and there are rewards for building well. Small tests of course come in this life, and some people and families and communities emerge strengthened and reinvigorated by tests as "trash" is swept away. But there will be a "Day" (with a capital-D) when all buildings will be inspected, and some will be torn down because they were built of worthless and flimsy materials. "Take care how you build," says Paul to the Corinthians, not least because collectively you are being built into a new "temple where God lives by his Spirit." What you make of your life, your family life, your spiritual community's life, your wider community's life, matters to God because he now lives among his people by his Spirit. It is his house we are building, or not; a great cathedral with the best of materials and the most creative workmanship, or a tar-paper shed for God made of the bits and pieces of life we had left over.

Every culture confronts this command to "build well." In our society, we are very prone to build our lives around things that can't last - entertainment, sports, popularity, appearance, fame, money, sex. Even before we are old, these things have all worn out! We would be wise to build things that will last - people, the next generation, education, discoveries and inventions that will help generations to come, monuments of knowledge and devotion that will feed the lives of our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, ways of feeding the world or of preserving our planet or of healing people in mind and body or of bringing peace. Building a culture that deserves to survive.

The reward? Nothing more complex than God one day saying "Well done, good and

faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master."

4) Perseverance is Rewarded by Life With God

Finally, persevere. "Those who remain faithful to the end will be saved." "Be strong, do not give up, for your work will be rewarded." Or as Paul put it near the end of his life, "I have fought the fight, I have kept the faith. Now there awaits me a crown of righteousness which the Lord will award me on that Day."

If we persevere, our reward will be to live with God - not simply in heaven when we die - but in the "new heavens and the new earth where God dwells with his people." Our reward for all that we have built well in this life, and for not giving up, will be life in the presence of God, where we will see him clearly, face to face, and not dimly as in a smoky mirror as we do now. And we shall meet him with joy, and not with fear; his majesty will not destroy us, but his glory will be shared with us. We will stand, dressed in white, among the ranks of the redeemed in Christ.

There are rewards in this life, and in the next - not because we deserve them, but because our Maker and Father and Redeemer loves to say "Well done!" and to award crowns and prizes. Even as we say "well done" to our church children today, and honor them for their efforts (no matter how limited their achievements), let us remember that our Father in heaven is ever ready to recognize us too.

Let us pray...