

## *Heavenly Rewards*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 3, 2020.

Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, 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 children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first (Matt. 19:27–30).<sup>1</sup>

In his interaction with the man commonly referred to as the rich young ruler, Jesus reveals what Paul would later summarize: We are saved only by God’s grace, not our works, “so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). He boasted that he had kept the commandments (Matt. 19:20), but he was blinded to God’s perspective, that we are all “like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away” (Isa. 64:6). Sadly, the young man’s wealth took him away, leaving him sorrowful and without a Savior.

Perhaps forgetting that apart from God’s grace he too would be sorrowful and without a Savior, Peter attempts to differentiate himself and the other disciples from the rich young ruler. He claims, “See, we have left everything and followed you” (Matt. 19:27). Jesus will in part address Peter’s claim in the following chapter, but in the moment, he graciously answers his question, “What then will we have?” In summary, Jesus explains that there will be heavenly rewards for those who sacrifice and serve for his sake.

How then are we to understand heavenly rewards? By desiring heavenly rewards are we disparaging God’s grace? Are heavenly rewards means of merit? How can we say we are saved by grace alone *and* pursue heavenly treasure? Because there is confusion or a lack of knowledge of this topic, I want to approach our passage today first with a clarification: Heaven is not earned by good works but is inherited by God’s grace.

### **Grace for Heaven**

Contextually, our passage is sandwiched between the rich young ruler’s failed attempt to merit eternal life and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. In both accounts, we see that heaven is given according to the sovereign grace of God. Attempts at being good enough and working hard and long enough always fall short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23) and merit nothing more than temporal benefits in this life.

There are indeed benefits to living a good life, and we certainly want to encourage personal and civic morality. We should never encourage immorality in person or polis. We should encourage high moral standards in our secular leaders and society. As the proverbs says, “When the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan” (Prov. 29:2), and “By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown” (Prov. 11:11). Personal and civic morality, integrity, hard work, these are all benefits to a society. Just as the rich young ruler was likely successful because of his moral integrity and likely a blessing to his family, friends, and community, neither his good works nor any other son or daughter of Adam’s good works merit heaven.

There is only one whose good works earned heaven, the Son of God. Tempted in every way as we are, Jesus never sinned (Heb. 4:15). He never spoke a deceitful word or did a sinful deed (1 Peter 2:22). And, unlike the self-deceived rich young ruler, Jesus kept the Law of God perfectly and completely, even fulfilling it (Rom. 8:3-4).

He came and did what no one could do, but he did so with intent: “to take away our sins” (1 John 3:5). Because of our inability, “[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). This great exchange enables sinners like you and me to inherit heaven, a gift received by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. Heaven awaits us not by works but by God’s grace!

But what is the connection between life today and heaven tomorrow? Have we been saved by God’s grace to spurn it with sin of thought, word, or deed? Have we been adopted as a child of God, heirs with Christ (Eph. 1:5) to live as disobedient children? Have we been baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3) to continue to walk in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked (Eph. 2:1)? No! No! No!

Here is the way Paul explains it to the Ephesians: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:4-10). Because we are saved by God’s grace, God gets the glory. Because we are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), God gets the glory. Because our good works were established by God and enabled and empowered by his Spirit, God gets the glory. And, he rewards those good works in heaven for his glory and our good.

### **Rewards in Heaven**

That rewards await us in heaven is certain. What those rewards are is not. The speculations of what these rewards are abound. Here we should heed Calvin’s caution: “Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends.” What then does the Word of God teach?

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says we should rejoice and be glad when we are reviled and persecuted, not because we enjoy persecution but because our “reward is great in heaven” (Matt.

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5:12). We are to give to the needy secretly and pray privately because our Father “who sees in secret” will reward us accordingly (Matt. 6:3-6). According to Jesus, rewards await the one who “receives a prophet,” the one who “receives a righteous person,” and the one who gives “even a cup of cold water” to a fellow-disciple (Matt. 10:40-42). It appears that what we do in the church and how we serve one another yields rewards in heaven. Indeed, Jesus promises that he will not only return “with his angels in the glory of his Father,” but he will “repay each person according to what he has done” (Matt. 16:27), which refers to the judgment of the unregenerate but may also include the promise of rewards for the Christian. Therefore, when Peter says to Jesus, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus is not introducing anything new but is elaborating on what he had taught before.

What then does Jesus teach? Jesus graciously answers Peter in two ways. First, he specifically foretells what awaits the twelve apostles, the twelve disciples minus Judas plus Matthias: “in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Heaven, as we will know it, will be a “rebirth” of this world, referred to in Isaiah as “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17). In this new world, the prophecy of Daniel will be fulfilled (Dan. 7), in which the Son of Man, King Jesus, will sit upon his “glorious throne.”

King Jesus, however, will not be alone in his regal judgment. The twelve apostles likewise will be seated upon twelve thrones. They who were reviled and persecuted for the sake of Christ will be elevated to thrones of honor. They will not sit passively but actively “judging the twelve tribes of Israel,” constituting a new Israel in Christ from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 7:9). In Revelation, John describes this in figurative detail, where the apostles serve as the foundation of the heavenly city gates (Rev. 21:14). “What then will we have?” Peter asks. The honor and authority of kings.

Jesus then adds to the twelve “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake.” This description may be understood in contrast to the rich young ruler, who would not heed Jesus’ call to sacrificial discipleship but instead “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matt. 19:22). All of Christ’s disciples may be called to sacrifice property or family relationships or leave their homelands simply for following Christ. Sacrifices made for Christ’s sake may vary widely, a seemingly higher cost for some than for others, requiring us to trust the providence of God. What we know is that there is *always* a cost for following Christ, and we are promised manifold recompense in heaven. And so, we do not live for Christ to wallow in self-pity but rejoice today, for great is our reward in heaven. Calvin writes, “Though persecutions always await the godly in this world, and though the cross, as it were, is attached to their back, yet so sweet is the seasoning of the grace of God, which gladdens them, that their condition is more desirable than the luxuries of kings.”

Antithetical to the health and wealth gospel of our era, Jesus teaches us that heavenly rewards are exceedingly more valuable than the treasures of this life, and what we pursue reveals the devotion of our heart. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your

treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). In contrast to worldly wealth, the Christian’s rewards are eternal, secure, and abundant.

### **The Abundance of Heaven**

Let us be careful then in our age of affluence to compare the toys and trinkets of this present darkness with the rewards of heaven. And let not what we do for Christ’s sake be undervalued, “for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). While we do not know specifically what will constitute rewards in heaven, we do know that they will substantially exceed what we sacrifice for Christ.

I know not, O I know not,  
What joys await us there;  
What radiance of glory,  
What bliss beyond compare.<sup>2</sup>

How shall we then enjoy our rewards? Because we will be free of sin in heaven, we will enjoy our rewards in community with our brothers and sisters without jealousy, coveting, or pride. Nor will any be lacking, as we will be “with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). This we will enjoy in communion with one another and the Lord forever.

The eternal life that the rich young ruler sought to inherit could not be received as he understood it. As Matthew Henry clarifies, “The heavenly inheritance is not given as earthly inheritances commonly are, by seniority of age, and priority of birth, but according to God’s pleasure.” And this is where we live out our Christian faith, loving God and our neighbor by God’s grace and for Christ’s sake, living as those who await their heavenly rewards according to God’s pleasure and for his glory. Or, as Augustine puts it, “Our rewards in heaven are a result of God’s crowning His own gifts. *Sola gratia.*”

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<sup>2</sup> From the twelfth-century hymn “Jerusalem the Golden,” by Bernard of Cluny, trans. John M. Neale (1858) in Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 904.