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Do we serve for reward?

Initially the idea of God blessing us for serving him appears to be out of keeping with the call to sacrificially follow Christ. Christians have no need to constantly look for rewards for the sacrifices we make. Reward (be that money or recognition or achievement or affirmation or pleasure or experiences) is not our driving motivation. We are not serving because of what we will get but because of what Christ has done. It is enough to know that we are faithfully pleasing our Lord and blessing him.

There is a challenging little story that Jesus told (Luke 17:7-10) about a slave who worked all day in the fields, but still expected further work not rest when he returned home. Jesus' conclusion was, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" As slaves, we serve because this is our calling. There is no expectation of reward.

So any strong emphasis on great earthly blessing that will come our way if we just trust in and serve God is actually **twisting the gospel**. It takes the focus off Christ and what he has done and is doing, and puts it on us and what we are doing. It changes our motive for service from our blessing Jesus to Jesus blessing us. It tends to make Christ our servant more than our master. We clearly need to be very careful about looking for reward for following Jesus.

But this cannot be the whole story, because both in the Gospels and Epistles there is such a strong emphasis on reward for service. **Much of this reward will come at the return of Christ.** Jesus often mentioned the reward that faithful servants will receive. For example, in teaching his disciples, Jesus explained that they should rejoice in persecution because "great is your reward in heaven" (Luke 6:23).

Similarly, Paul challenged the Corinthian leaders to teach faithfully because "the Day" would bring to light the quality of their work, and rewards would be distributed accordingly (1 Cor. 3:12-14). In his last letter, Paul reflected on his own faithful service and concluded, "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Tim. 4:6-8). The hope of a future reward from Jesus is meant to keep us going when service becomes demanding and difficult.

But should we expect any reward now? Here is Jesus' response to Peter's claim to have left everything to follow him.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mother, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

In encouraging the Corinthians to be generous in their giving to the distressed Christians in Jerusalem, Paul describes what God does for those who generously plant seed (= give money).

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. (2 Cor. 9:10-11)

It appears that both Jesus and Paul are emphasising that our blessing (reward) for sacrificial service isn't confined to the future but at least partly occurs in the present. Of course, much of this reward will be in spiritual blessing (e.g. fruit of the Holy Spirit) in our lives, but the point is that we don't have to wait until heaven for God's reward to start. We are already getting a foretaste.

So what does all this mean for Christians?

FIRST, WE NEED TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE REWARD TO COME FROM CHRIST.

If a future reward was important for Jesus (Heb. 12:2) and Paul, it certainly is vital for us in the stresses and demands and many challenges of serving Christ. You will be rewarded and it would seem that the more costly and humble the service, the greater the reward. It's easy to lose hope when there are no obvious immediate results from all our effort and sacrifices. Lack of hope has a deeply detrimental impact on our spiritual health. So the reality of personal future blessing from Jesus does need to pervade our thinking.

To be honest, I'm not exactly sure how to do this. We find it easiest when we are surrounded by suffering and are in deep pain ourselves. At these times, the reality of our future reward shines much brighter. But in the humdrum of our relatively comfortable Western lives and materialistic thinking, it's easy to lose sight of the wonder of what God will do for us. Soaking in Scripture certainly helps us get God's viewpoint as does taking time to retreat to gain perspective. Perhaps it is a matter of taking some regular time to focus on the future and what it will hold; to anticipate our reward.

SECOND, WE NEED TO BUILD REWARD INTO THE RHYTHM OF OUR LIVES.

Last week, I helped build a ramp and set of stairs in our two-tiered back yard. It took three days of hard labour. But the satisfaction I feel as I reflect daily over "my" achievement is immense. It is a reward for all my work and makes it worthwhile. This is also important in my spiritual service.

We do get rewards from God for our service now. For example, we receive words of encouragement. We are involved as people come to Jesus and become real disciples. We see ministries we are involved in have an impact. We live for God at work and get a chance to pray with a colleague. I'm not talking about the general blessings that God showers on us, but the rewards for sacrificial service.

But because of our understanding of grace (it's God's work not ours), our commitment to humility and servanthood, our focus on the continuing challenges we face, our awareness of our deep flaws, and the fact that our work is never really finished anyway, we easily gloss over these rewards. We may not value them or celebrate them. We may not savour God's present blessing for service. Consequently, serving God begins to feel like one continual, demanding ordeal. Now that's a recipe for disillusionment.

So we need to find ways to value and relish the rewards; the blessings from God here and now that are a small foretaste of what is to come. Maybe you could keep a record of the words of encouragement you receive and read them through each month. Maybe you could take an hour every three months to reflect on what God has done through your life. Maybe you need to plan a church party each year to celebrate what has been achieved through God's power and the sacrificial service of the church family.

One church annually asks their people to reflect on what God has done in their lives and communities over the previous 12 months and for their church anniversary publishes their reflections in a book of thanks. Now there is a reward from God that the whole church can enjoy.

Christ's gracious reward doesn't drive our service, but it certainly is an important encouragement!