

THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Believers' Reward

As was stated in the previous issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, this section is devoted to “the word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13), the deeper, lesser known biblical truths related to the Christian life under the government of God and to our accountability to Him at the judgment seat of Christ. We hope to present these truths in a progressive way, with each issue dealing with a particular aspect of these truths.

In this issue we examine the concept of the believers' reward in general, as found in the New Testament. A fair, objective examination of this matter in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation should do much to expose the leaven of the erroneous teaching that a person's final accountability to God is satisfied in full upon his decision to receive salvation by grace through faith. To be sure, our entrance into God's New Testament economy is by grace through faith, and our continued participation in His economy is also by His grace. Moreover, once we have been saved, we cannot be lost, and those who have been saved by grace through faith will never perish (John 10:28-29). Thus, the landmark revelation of the Reformation is secure, and it is affirmed in these pages.

However, the truth in the Bible is balanced. After the issue of a person's eternal salvation is satisfied, he, as a believer in Christ, remains ultimately accountable to God for his living and work, following his justification by faith, for which he will receive either a reward or a punishment. Whereas the believer's eternal salvation is a matter of grace through faith alone, his reward is based on righteousness and works, and whereas the believer's eternal salvation can never be lost, his reward can be forfeited.

A Brief Definition of *Reward* in the New Testament

We must first examine some of the overwhelming evidence in the New Testament that there is a reward for believers, which is distinguished from salvation by free grace. We shall do this by means of a brief word study, beginning with a definition: A reward is not a free gift; it is a wage. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as *reward* is most often *μισθός*, which means “primarily wages, hire, and then, generally, reward” (Vine 294). The American Heritage Dictionary defines *reward* as “something given or received in recompense for worthy behavior or in

retribution for evil acts” (1546). Similarly, it defines *wage* as “payment for labor or services...a fitting return; a recompense” (2007). These definitions are well borne out in the New Testament usage of the words. Romans 4:4 says, “Now to the one who works, his wages are not accounted according to grace, but according to what is due.” Here, *wages* (*μισθός*) is translated as *reward* in the King James Version. In establishing that justification is by faith and is not a reward, Paul gives us a working definition of *μισθός*. It is something accounted “to the one who works...according to what is due.”

We find a similar usage for *μισθός* when referring to the wages of a laboring workman. Matthew 20:8 says of the laborers in the vineyard, “Call the workmen and pay them their wages.” Likewise, Luke 10:7 says that “the worker is worthy of his wages.” First Timothy 5:18 and James 5:4 use *pay* and *wages* similarly. This is the sense of *reward* as used in its negative aspect by the repentant thief on the cross: “We receive the due reward [*ἄξια*] of our deeds” (Luke 23:41, KJV). Similarly, Balaam received wages (*μισθός*) for his unrighteous prophecies (2 Pet. 2:15), and Judas received wages (*μισθός*) of silver for his treachery (Acts 1:18).

The corresponding verbs in the New Testament are *ἀποδίδωμι* and *ἀνταποδίδωμι*, which are translated as *re-pay*, *pay back*, or *recompense* (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18; 16:27; Luke 10:35; 14:14; Rom. 12:19; 2 Tim. 4:14; Rev. 18:6). Hebrews 11:6 combines *μισθός* with *ἀποδίδωμι* to render the metonymy *μισθαποδότης*, unveiling God as a rewarder, a payer of wages.

By all of the above, the New Testament meaning of *reward*, or *wage*, is clearer. It is that which is fittingly and equitably due a person for his works, deeds, or service rendered for an agreed price.

Now we may examine the use of the above words as they pertain to the believers in particular. The concept of a reward for the believers is found throughout the New Testament, but it is most pronounced in Matthew, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and Revelation. We find the following references to the word *reward*:

Rejoice and exult, for your reward is great in the heavens

(Matt. 5:12; cf. Luke 6:23). This reward is reserved for the believers who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and reproached for Christ's sake.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? (Matt. 5:46; cf. Luke 6:35). The reward here is for those who live according to the new law of the kingdom of the heavens, as presented in Matthew 5—7, in the kingdom's reality in the present day. Whereas the reward of the hypocrites is in the present time (6:2, 5, 16), the reward of the righteous believers is in "the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

But take care not to do your righteousness before men...otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in the heavens (Matt. 6:1). This reward is a repayment (v. 4) for the righteous deeds of the kingdom people, such as giving alms (vv. 2-4), praying (vv. 5-15), and fasting (vv. 16-18).

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward (Matt. 10:41; Mark 9:41). This is the reward given in the coming kingdom age to those who receive the Lord's sent ones.

Each will receive his own reward according to his own labor (1 Cor. 3:8). This reward is an incentive to the ministers of Christ who labor by planting or watering on God's cultivated land. It will be awarded to the faithful laborers at the Lord's coming (4:5).

If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:14). After being tested by fire, the believers' work of building with gold, silver, and precious stones (v. 12) will be rewarded by the coming and judging Lord.

If I do this of my own will, I have a reward (1 Cor. 9:17). This refers to the reward for Paul's faithful stewardship of the gospel.

Do not cast away therefore your boldness, which has great reward (Heb. 10:35). The great reward is the enjoyment of Christ and the reigning with Christ in the coming kingdom, the coming "Sabbath rest" (4:9), for which the Hebrew believers were charged to endure and be diligent.

For he looked away to the reward (Heb. 11:26). This is the reward of the kingdom which will be enjoyed even by Moses, because he was willing to suffer the reproach of the Christ.

There is a significant aspect of God's government and economy, above and beyond the free gift of grace. The believer's reward is not a free gift; it is a wage awarded for his living and work following his justification by faith.

The time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to give the reward to Your slaves the prophets and to the saints and to those who fear Your name (Rev. 11:18). This reward will be given by the Lord to His faithful ones at His coming back.

Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to render to each one as his work is (Rev. 22:12). This is the reward rendered, based on works, to each of the believers at the Lord's coming. This is the

final warning at the close of the Bible.

That the word *reward* is applied to the believers, as in the verses cited above, demonstrates that there is a significant aspect of God's government and economy, above and beyond the free gift of grace, which is related to the just recompense due to each believer. The believer's reward is not a free gift; it is a wage awarded for his living and work following his justification by faith.

The Time of the Reward

It is possible to interpret the reward spoken of in certain portions of the New Testament as a result or blessing enjoyed by the meritorious believer in the present age. According to the context of 2 John 8, for example, the "full reward" must refer to the Father and the Son as the full enjoyment, even today, to the faithful believers who abide in the truth concerning the person of Christ. And in 1 Corinthians 9:18 Paul indicates that the reward for his stewardship of the gospel was his ability to present the gospel without charge to the Corinthians as his spiritual children. However, to thoroughly interpret Paul's word in this latter chapter, we must go to verses 24-27. Here Paul speaks of his desperate endeavor to "lay hold," run his course, and receive the prize. This, of course, is directly parallel to his pursuit for the prize in Philippians 3:11-14, which he associates with "the out-resurrection from the dead" (v. 11), and of his receiving the crown of righteousness after the end of his course and his departure through martyrdom (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Thus, Paul's pervading and underlying thought concerning the reward was his hope of approbation by the Lord at His judgment seat.

Clearly then, reward in the New Testament mostly refers to a reckoning in the future. That the reward is not bound to the present time is further indicated by Luke 14:14. Concerning giving to those who cannot give in return, this verse says, "And you will be blessed, because they do not have anything with which to repay you; for it will be repaid [ἀνταποδίδωμι] to you in the resurrection of the

righteous." This places the time of the reward at the resurrection of the believers. The prophecies of Revelation very markedly place the time of reward. In 11:18, the voices in heaven proclaim "the time to give the reward to Your slaves the prophets and to the saints and to those who fear Your name." This proclamation takes place at the time of the seventh trumpet near the end of the great tribulation, the time when "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ" (v. 15). According to this sequence, the reward will be given by the Lord to His faithful ones at His coming back. After the resurrection and rapture of the saints, Christ at His judgment seat will judge the prophets and the saints (2 Cor. 5:10) to determine who among the saved persons is worthy of a reward and who needs further discipline. This will be the time when the Son of Man comes in the glory of His Father to repay ("reward," KJV) each man according to his doings (Matt. 16:27). Concerning that time, we have a final warning from the Lord: "Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to render to each one as his work is" (Rev. 22:12).

The Reward Being according to Work

Perhaps the most striking conclusion we may draw from the verses cited in this article is that the reward spoken of in the New Testament is a wage based on deeds. Clearly, this reward is not our eternal salvation, which is a gift appropriated freely by grace through our faith in the gospel. That the reward is for works is clearly seen in 1 Corinthians 3, which says that each will receive his own reward "according to his own labor" (v. 8), based on his work of building upon the one foundation (v. 14). On the positive side, the reward is an incentive to the ministers of Christ who labor on God's cultivated land. But on the negative side, verse 15 solemnly testifies that one who destroys the church by building with worthless materials will suffer loss, passing through the fire of God's judgment even though "he himself will be saved."

Second Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done through the body according to what he has practiced, whether good or bad." Clearly, the things done through the body are the works of the believers. In the same vein, Matthew 16:27 says that the Son of Man, at His coming, will repay each man "according to his doings." Revelation 22:12 likewise says that the Lord will come with His reward to render "to each one as his work

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is." The same reference to "each one" is made in 2:23, to the church in Thyatira in particular, confirming that "each one" in 22:12 refers to believers, not unbelievers.

The Possibility of Losing the Reward

Finally, the New Testament speaks of the conditional nature of the reward. Matthew 10:42 and Mark 9:41 say that he who receives one who is Christ's shall by no means

"lose his reward," implying that indeed some may lose it. Hebrews 10:35 says that the believers' great reward is bound to their boldness, which they were in danger of casting away. If the Hebrew believers were to cast away their boldness, they would also cast away their great reward, as no doubt some did. Paul himself considered the prize of his calling something that only "perhaps" he may attain to (Phil. 3:11); otherwise, he would be disapproved (1 Cor. 9:27) "and so rejected from present testimony, with loss of future reward" (Vine 173). Concerning the uncertainty of the believers' appropriation of the promise of the coming kingdom, Govett reminds us that there are many promises which are suspended on conditions:

The Son of God would quicken by the hope of 'wages' or 'reward' the diligence of His workmen....While then the gift of God conferred on His elect is certain to faith, reward and the prize are uncertain. They are to be sought with diligence; the danger of loss is to affect us in the way of caution, the desire of glory is to nerve us to exertion. (44-45)

In future issues, we will examine more of the numerous clear words, parables, and indications that a believer may receive or forfeit his prize when the Lord, the righteous Judge, comes to reward, recompense, and repay each of His workmen for the deeds done in his body.

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