

SERMON – PASTOR GREG
26/09/2021

REWARDS. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. WHAT MOTIVATES YOU? The CARROT or the STICK? Let us pray.

Since the beginning the Church has often fallen into the trap of seeking to motivate Christians to be who they are- God's holy and chosen people- His representatives here on Earth by either punishment or rewards.

From Rick Warren's 'The Purpose Driven Life': From the Bible we can surmise that God will ask us two critical questions: "What did you do with my Son, Jesus Christ? Did you accept what Jesus did for you and did you learn to love and trust him? The second question, "What did you do with what I gave you?" What did you do with your life-all the gifts, talents, opportunities, energy, relationships and resources God gave you? Did you spend them on yourself or did you use them for the purposes God made you for? The first question will determine where you spend eternity and the second question will determine what you will do in eternity. At the end of your life on earth you will be evaluated and rewarded according to how well you handled what God entrusted to you. Rick Warren seeks to motivate Christians by the promise of rewards- here on earth and later in heaven.

From the CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name PURGATORY to this final purification of the elect (Christians). This is a purifying fire. This teaching was declared at two Church Councils in 1440 and in 1540. I think it was developed to motivate Christians to live holy lives so as to reduce their time in Purgatory.

Holy Scripture speaks of punishments and rewards both of the now and in eternity. In the farewell sermon from Moses to the Jewish people who were about to enter the Promised Land, God said: *If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God...**However**, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all His commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you... (Deut 28).* But as wonderful and holy the commandments of God are they could not keep the Israelite people from sinning against each other and against God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ also seems to speak of both of punishment and rewards.

PUNISHMENT: Mark 9:42: *If anyone causes one these little ones who believe in him to sin, it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck...If your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin cut it off/pluck it out. It is better to enter life/the Kingdom of God (maimed) than to be thrown into hell.*

REWARDS: From our Gospel reading this morning: *I tell you the truth, anyone who gives a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.*

Matthew 5:11: Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you...Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.

Matthew 6: Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before all the people, to be seen by them. If you do you will have no reward from your Father in heaven...But when you give to the needy (do it secretly) then your Father in heaven will reward you.

Matthew 16:27: For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

Matthew 25:28f: Take the talent from him and give I to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who had will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will e a weeping and gnashing of teeth.

See also 1 Cor 3:14; Eph 6:8; Col 3:24; Heb 11:6; Rev 22:12.

So it seems that Jesus does promise rewards to those who do good and punishment for those who don't. But a closer examination of all these texts indicate that they all proclaim something far more profound than what is first suggested.

For example, in our Gospel reading this morning we heard: *If anyone causes one these little ones who believe in him to sin, it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin cut it off/pluck it out. It is better to enter life/the Kingdom of God (maimed) than to be thrown into hell.* The Greek word, which is translated as SIN, really means 'to cause someone to lose their faith'. The Greek word is SKANDALIDZO from which we get the word SCANDAL. It is not the usual word for SIN. So our reading would be better translated as: *If anyone causes one of these little ones to lose their faith in me.... If your eye causes you to lose your faith in me, it would be better to pluck it out.* And as our reading tells us- the result of faith in Jesus Christ is life forever with him and the Father and the Spirit and all the Christians of all time in heaven. This is our ultimate reward. And the consequence of rejecting Jesus Christ or losing one's faith in him is eternal separation from all of this- and eternity in hell- where the fire never goes out and the worm does not die. This is the ultimate punishment.

But of course there are other blessings that flow from a life of faith and obedience. In Ps 19 we hear: *The Law of the LORD is perfect, REVIVING THE SOUL, the statutes of the LORD are worthy of our trust, they make the simple person WISE. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving JOY to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving LIGHT to the eyes...The ordinances of the LORD are sure and righteous, they are more precious than gold; they are sweeter than honey, by them your servant is WARNED, in keeping them there is great REWARD.*

But never forget that to follow Jesus Christ is to follow him through the valley of the shadow of death. He suffered and so will we. But great is our reward in heaven. And what is that reward? To be in heaven. To be free from sin. To be freed from guilt and shame. To be free from Satan. To be free from the fear of death. To see Jesus Christ- face to face.

What is your motivation to follow Jesus Christ? 1 John 4:10: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Let us continue to follow Jesus not to earn rewards or to avoid punishment but out of love for all that He has done, is doing and will do for us and for all who simply trust his words: I AM THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. Amen.