

## Three Myths About Eternal Rewards

-Sam A. Smith

There are three common myths concerning eternal rewards. Let's take a brief look at each of those myths.

*Myth #1: Rewards in Heaven are merely "tokens" of appreciation*

It is true that the Bible refers to some rewards as "crowns," and Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 refers to rewards of gold, silver and precious stones. But since the streets of Heaven are said to be made of gold, and the foundations and walls of the city are said to be made of all sorts of precious stones, we have to wonder what the value of a crown, or gold, or jewels would be in such a place; and because of this, many people have gotten the idea that eternal rewards are little more than "tokens" of appreciation, and therefore will be relatively unimportant in eternity.

Are rewards in heaven merely symbolic gestures of appreciation? The Lord, in several of His parables, as well as more direct statements has given us the key to understanding the nature of eternal rewards. Look's look first at Jesus' response to a question posed by Peter in Matthew 19:27-30.

(Matt. 19:27) Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us? (28) And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (29) And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last first.

Jesus' disciples had made many personal sacrifices in following Him. On one occasion Peter's practicality got the best of him, and he blurted out what was probably on the minds of all of the disciples; he said something like this: "Look, we've given up quite a lot to follow you—so what's in this for us?" Interesting, Jesus did not rebuff Peter's question, he simply answered saying that those who have gone without in this life, in order to follow Him, will be rewarded many times over in the regeneration (when Christ rules upon the regenerated earth, *cf.* Rom. 8:18-25); and He further stated that the circle of twelve, of which Peter was a part, would sit upon twelve thrones judging (ruling) the twelve tribes of Israel.

In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus told a parable of three servants, two of these servants were faithful to serve their Master to the extent of their varying abilities, and a third servant was lazy and wicked, and completely failed to render any service at all to his Lord. Focusing on the first two servants (*i.e.*, the faithful servants), we notice that they had varying abilities and capacities. In both cases they were faithful to the extent of their capacity, and they were both rewarded, and the principle element of their reward was that they received places of honor and authority in the kingdom of their master—commensurate with their faithfulness. This certainly fits with Revelation 20:4, which makes reference to the faithful martyrs of the tribulation ruling and reigning with Christ in His kingdom. There is also a parallel to this teaching in Matthew 24:45-47, and so we can see that Jesus unmistakably taught that there is a connection between eternal rewards and positions of authority within the kingdom of God. Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:12, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us...." It's true, there

may very well be tokens associated with rewards—for instance a certain type of crown may signify a particular position in the kingdom; nevertheless, it seems equally clear that rewards are far more than simply the tokens themselves. Salvation, which is a free gift, determines whether a person will enter the kingdom of God, but it appears that faithful service will determine whether or not one will rule with Christ, and where and how he or she will fit in the governance of Christ’s eternal kingdom.

When the Church stands before the judgment seat of Christ, there are likely to be many shocked Christians who thought that all they needed was their “ticket” to get in the door—and some are going to discover that they’ve blown a lifetime of opportunity that could have paid an immense eternal reward. Of course they will still have their inheritance, but they could also have had an eternal reward. [Perhaps this is a good place to make the distinction between “inheritance” and “rewards.” An inheritance is what one receives by virtue of being related to the grantor. Inheritances are granted, not earned; and every redeemed person has an inheritance in Christ that can never be taken away. That inheritance belongs to the believer because he or she is a member of the family of God. At the very least, that inherence includes an eternal home in Heaven and the privileges and status accorded to a son or daughter of God (1 Pt. 1:3-5). However, rewards differ from inheritance. Rewards will be given on the basis of faithfulness. Strictly speaking, they are not earned in the sense that wages are earned—since there is no obligation on God’s part to dispense any reward; nevertheless, God is pleased to reward those who serve Him faithfully, and those rewards will be in proportion to the faithful service and obedience of each individual. While everyone in Heaven will receive an inheritance, undoubtedly there will be some, perhaps many, who will receive little or no reward. The great consequence of this can only be appreciated when we understand the true eternal significance of these rewards.]

*Myth #2: Rewards in heaven are only temporary*

It is commonly taught that at some point in the future, the redeemed will give up their rewards and return them to God by casting them at Jesus’ feet. Of course when some people hear this, they rationalize that since rewards are only temporary anyway, why bother? This myth is based on a misinterpretation of Revelation 4:1-11, which describes the worship of the twenty-four “elders” before the throne of God in Heaven. The often-heard—and incorrect—interpretation of this passage is that the twenty-four elders represent the Church in Heaven (in the future), and their crowns represent the believer’s rewards; since the picture given is of these elders “casting” their crowns before the throne of God, it is often assumed that any rewards believers might receive will be returned to God, perhaps as an offering. So, what’s wrong with such an interpretation? The short answer is that this simply isn’t what the passage teaches. In fact, there is no passage of Scripture anywhere that teaches that the redeemed will return their eternal rewards to God. With regard to Revelation 4:1-11, we don’t know who these twenty-four elders are, or whom they represent (they could even be angels); and the passage says nothing about their crowns being relinquished. The NIV translation does a little better job of capturing the sense of this passage. It says:

(Rev. 4:8) Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ (9) Whenever the living creatures give glory, and honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, (10) the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord

and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’ [NIV]

Do you see what’s being described? This is a picture of worship in heaven. The four living creatures (undoubtedly angelic beings) continually praise God; each time the four living creatures get to a particular point in their praise, the twenty-four elders fall down and worship God, and as part of their act of worship, they lay, or “place” their crowns before His throne. This pattern of worship is repeated continually before God’s throne, but how could this pattern be repeated if they gave up their crowns? Whoever these elders are, they are acknowledging in their act of placing their crowns before the throne, that they owe everything to God—but there is nothing here to support the idea that the redeemed will give up their rewards. In fact, quite the opposite is clearly implied. If these crowns represent rewards, the picture we get from this passage is that rewards will somehow factor into the eternal worship of God—making them all the more significant. Many people, Christians included, view the world as a “playground.” It isn’t, it’s a “proving ground,” and we should all be concerned for what it is proving about us! Our life here will determine our reward in heaven, and according to Christ’s own teaching, a part of that reward involves the position each of us will occupy in the government of God’s eternal kingdom.

*Myth #3: All believers will have equal status in Christ’s kingdom.*

Where does this myth come from? Unfortunately, the mistaken idea that many Christians have is that since salvation is all that counts, and since everyone in Heaven will be saved, then everyone in Heaven must be on the same level, but this is not what the Bible indicates. Jesus on numerous occasions said that some would be honored over others in His kingdom, and that privilege, authority, and honor in the kingdom will be given to those who serve Him faithfully in this present. Matthew 20:17-23 says,

(Matt. 20:17) Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, (18) “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death (19) and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” (20) Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. (21) “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” (22) “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. (23) Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

Did you notice the nature of the request? The mother of James and John came with her sons and together they requested of Jesus that in His kingdom one son would sit on Jesus’ right and one on His left. This request wasn’t made just so these disciples could be near Jesus. The request was that these sons be given positions of honor, power, and authority in the kingdom. Now it’s very important to notice how Jesus responded to this request. He didn’t deny that there are to be such places of honor and authority in the kingdom. In fact, He affirmed this to be true when He said that such positions are “for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” It’s worth noting that Jesus wasn’t critical of the two disciple’s desire to be great in the kingdom; he

was critical only of their selfish motivation (*i.e.*, how they sought to attain that greatness). Jesus never said that greatness in the kingdom isn't something to be desired; he simply said that the way to attain it is through faithful and selfless service.

In this world people often become great through self-promotion and by stepping on others, but greatness in the kingdom of God is attained not by self-promotion, but by true humility and serving others, and allowing God to elevate us. What does this mean? Not everyone in the kingdom is going to be seated in the first seat. Some will be first, and some will be last, and many will be arranged in the middle; but the important thing to recognize is that rewards matter, and consequently so does faithfulness.

Now, what's the practical application of this? First, we need to consider the fact that since Jesus and his apostles had so much to say about eternal rewards, maybe the subject is important after all, and maybe Christians ought to take the matter of rewards far more seriously than is common to do. Second, if the few years we spend here are going to set the stage for what we will be doing for eternity, doesn't it make sense to make the most of every opportunity that God puts before us? We had a teacher in one of the school's that I taught at that had a sign below his wall clock. The sign read, "Time is passing—but will you?" Perhaps we should put one under the clock of every sanctuary that says something like this: "Time grows short, life is not about me, when my work is put to the fire, what will be left to see?" Let us hope when each of us stands before Christ at the judgment seat we will hear him say, "Well done thou good and faithful servant. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your Master."

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