

Reward and prize - gain or loss?

A notoriously emotional member of the congregation approached the pastor after an evidently inspired sermon.

'Oh pastor, your message really moved me this morning,' was the effusive compliment, accompanied by copious tears.

'Good,' replied the man of God, '- where to?'

The word of God always demands a response. It comes to produce not just feelings but faith leading to action. But we are all prone to be carried away by emotion. Perhaps there has been a television appeal for aid following a recent disaster. Stirred to compassion by the grim pictures of people who have lost everything - home, business, maybe even family - we determine to give generously.

If we don't really have the means at the time, we decide, after the first rush of enthusiasm, to wait until we next get paid. But by that time, although we still feel sorry for the people involved, our compassion has cooled. Either we send less than we originally intended or, more likely, we send nothing at all. After all, we reason, we have our own needs to consider, and so many others are sending money that our little contribution won't make much difference anyway.

What has happened? What we saw stirred an emotional response but the image wasn't sufficient, or sustained long enough, to produce action.

That is what often happens with the word of God. We read it, or we hear it, and we receive it gladly, marvelling at its wisdom and its potential for success if applied in our lives. But, as with the seed sown on rocky places or among thorns, we quickly forget about it. We allow the cares of the world to take priority, never giving it a chance to take root within us (see Mark 4). What had once so gripped us has now been lost.

It is vital, therefore, that the word we hear or read be allowed to move us to *action*. When it does, there are great benefits to be reaped.

King David focuses our attention on two opposite motivational forces of God's commands: 'By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward' (Psalm 19:11).

God's Word gives *warnings* to prevent us from rambling the wrong way, but at the same time offers *rewards* to propel us into running the right way.

Reward is a motivation

This is where many of us have to change our thinking. The idea of actually being rewarded for our faithfulness is by and large foreign to evangelical believers. It smacks of 'salvation by works', which is anathema to us all.

But that isn't what God has in mind. True, once we are saved, we are saved, and that's it - just as being our parents' child is a biological fact which nothing can ever change. It is a gift of God's grace. But once saved, we have a choice to make. We can try to ignore the fact and carry on much as we did before, settling for a half-hearted, compromised sort of Christianity which never requires a move out of the comfort zone. Or we can decide to go one hundred percent for God, abandoning ourselves to him completely. Reward is one significant motivation to choose the latter.

Using the imagery of the athlete and the winner's prize, the Bible shows us that reward has been a strong motivating factor in the life of all the great servants of God - and that it should be in ours, too.

The writer to the Hebrews urges us to 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us', looking to Jesus, our example, who, 'for the joy set before him', was able to endure the horrors of the cross and win (Hebrews 12:1-2). Paul reminds Timothy that 'if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules' (2 Timothy 2:5). And he encourages the church at Corinth to 'run in such a way as to get the prize' (1 Corinthians 9:24).

The apostle himself lived in the light of that prize, boldly practising what he preached. 'I press on towards the goal,' he stated, 'to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3:14).

To that end, Paul kept himself under a strict regime of godly discipline, constantly bringing himself into submission to the purposes of God, 'so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize' (1 Corinthians 9:27).

He wasn't afraid of losing his salvation, but he was conscious that he could lose his prize.

Watch over yourselves

The weeks before exam time are always critical. We study and sweat, and we study some more, and if we haven't done much work through the year, late nights and bleary eyes become a regular feature.

There are a few who sail through their exams and, with no apparent effort, get a grade 'A' every time. But for most of us it means a lot of hard work. Yet it's worth it. What a shame it would be if we were to throw away all the years of school or college which have led up to this, simply because we weren't willing to put in the time, discipline and hard work when it was needed.

Why risk getting only a grade 'E' when you could achieve a grade 'B' or higher? And why increase the pressure upon yourself at exam time by failing to work diligently throughout the year? Rushing around copying other people's notes from lectures you failed to attend and had totally forgotten about until now does nothing either for your confidence or your prospects.

Or look at it in terms of your employment. You have ability, drive and experience. Success in your job will mean promotion opportunities, handsome increases in your salary and generous year-end bonuses. Not to mention a company car and regular business trips abroad.

If that's what you want you won't turn up late for work every morning, shout at the boss and go all-out to lose the company valuable contracts, will you? No! You'll work long and hard to achieve your goal. Like Paul, you'll run the race to win.

That is exactly how it should be in the kingdom of God. Once we are convinced that there is a race to run and a glorious prize to win, we should be running diligently. Like Paul, we will discipline ourselves so that, having started out well, there may be no reason to be disqualified later on.

Disqualification is possible. One fails his exams through lack of study. Another fails to get his promotion through lack of diligence. And, spiritually speaking, we can nullify what we have achieved in the past by our actions today.

'Watch out,' warned John, 'that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully' (2 John 8). And Jesus urged, 'Hold on to what you have, so that no-one will take your crown' (Revelation 3:11).

So let's heed the warning and be like Paul who, when his earthly life was reaching its end, was confident he had made it - he had won! 'I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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 Timothy 4:7-8).

For those who seek him earnestly

Let's be clear, however, about the attitude we should be taking towards this reward issue. The great pull on our hearts of the expectation of reward should not be a worldly, carnal matter. If we are genuine Christians we will not be going after God simply for what we can get; it will be a fundamental part of our relationship with him.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that 'without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him' (Hebrews 11:6). There is nothing wrong in going for the reward but, in doing so, we must be earnestly seeking God.

Abraham continued faithfully in his pilgrimage, and in his utter dependence upon God, spurred on by the promise of a 'very great reward' (Genesis 15:1).

Moses gave up position, prestige, possessions and pleasures to take his stand with the people of God. Refusing the natural, he chose the spiritual. Weighing up the options - treasures of Egypt or reproach of Christ - he concluded that commitment to the purposes of God was worth far more than any comfort in the palace of Pharaoh, 'because he was looking ahead to his reward' (Hebrews 11:24-26).

As for us, the choices we make, the lifestyle we embrace and the ministry we undertake all contribute to the prize we win. We will be rewarded not only for the way we have lived, but also for the work we have done: 'Each will be rewarded according to his own labour' (1 Corinthians 3:8). So it is vitally important that we build the right way. It's not a question of 'Will I be lost?' but of 'Will I suffer loss?'

All this is vitally relevant to the church loyalty question. How can I reconcile going for the prize with a local church life which is hidebound and restrictive? I want fellow-Christians in my church to be cheering me on in the race, not trying to trip me up or, at best, shouting, 'Slow down a bit!'

'Each man must be careful how he builds'

Urging the Corinthians to build correctly on the foundation of Jesus Christ, Paul said: 'If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved' (1 Corinthians 3:10, 14-15 NASB).

Just as disastrous as working hard, only to let it all go at the end and losing our reward, is putting our life's energies into constructing a building that is destined only to be burned up. How tragic if, after having a lifetime to accumulate treasure in heaven, we eventually stand before the Lord with no reward.

It's like the do-it-yourself man who invested a lot of time and effort in building a home extension only to watch it gradually fall apart because he had built it the wrong way.

The Lord may be a rewarder of those who earnestly seek him, but *he isn't necessarily a rewarder of those who attempt to serve him without first enquiring how or where to serve him*. Our number one responsibility is to seek the Lord in faith, expecting him to direct us into ways of profitable service and successful work.

We only have one life to live, and one life to give. We must redeem the time while it is today so as to qualify to reap the rewards in eternity. For when the Lord comes he will bring the rewards with him (see Isaiah 40:10; 62:11; Revelation 22:12).

Whatever you do, don't give up in despair and write yourself off as just another also-ran in the race to fulfil God's purpose in your life and generation. It may seem like an impossible task. The warnings may sound rather intimidating, and you may feel that you have failed so many times in the past. But all you need to do is keep your eyes fixed on Jesus – and determine to walk in faith and obedience only to him.

He doesn't intend us to fail. He intends us to succeed, and in our times of weakness he has all the strength we need.

And be encouraged by the fact that this is a unique race in that there isn't just one winner. In the race set before us, *all*

can win, not just Abraham and Moses, apostles and prophets and other prominent Christians.

The Word of God describes a great presentation day that is coming, a prize-giving jubilee that will shame the piffling ceremonies and perishable crowns of this world into utter insignificance. Yes, kings will be there. And yes, there will be prophets, apostles and all the great and mighty men and women of God. But right there, among all the greats, will also be the small - you and me. We too have our indispensable part to play, and our individual prize to win (Revelation 11:18).

Reward and prize - gain or loss? It's up to you. Can you allow *anything*, least of all a misplaced local church loyalty, to hold you back?