

“The Prophet’s Reward”

“Virtue is its own reward, and brings with it the truest and highest pleasure; but if we cultivate it only for pleasure's sake, we are selfish, not religious, and will never gain the pleasure, because we can never have the virtue.” John Henry Newman

What does it mean to be virtuous? Let’s test a few examples.

Actress Angelina Jolie has been held up as an example of virtue because she promotes humanitarian causes, and is noted for her work with refugees as a Special Envoy and former Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Virtuous?

NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell, this past week encouraged the teams in his league to consider hiring quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who had been banned ever since he took a knee during the national anthem in 2016. Virtuous?

I heard on a radio interview a person make this claim: *“Once I knew I was in, I gave it my very best, I aimed for perfection.”* Virtuous? [That was Kevin Weeks, professional killer for Whitey Bulger, convicted Boston crime boss]

What are we saying is virtue? And what does it mean to accept that it is its own reward?

Jesus tells us today, ***“. . . whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous”*** That word, “righteous” (δικαιος dikaios in Greek) comes very close to what we mean by virtuous . . . but not quite. The root meaning of δικαιος is (*get ready for it*) is “just” (*boy, now that’s a great word!*)

So what does it mean to act justly? (*besides acting “just like me”*). Jesus tells us: ***“. . . whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple”***

Quickly on that last bit, a more understandable translation might be that whoever does such a thing “*because she is my disciple . . .*” So acting as Jesus’ disciple, would you . . . here’s a case:

Suppose you are walking down the street in downtown Akron. Perhaps, you’re going to dinner or to a ball game or shopping; maybe you don’t know where you’re going and decide it would be easier to park your car and find someone to ask for directions. At that moment, you are approached by someone who—let me use the phrase—“looks like a homeless person.” This “homeless person”—and let’s be clear, you do not know the status of this person with regard to home or anything else; he just “looks like a homeless person,” what ever that might mean to you—this “homeless person” approaches you and says, “*Excuse me, could you spare a dollar?*” Maybe he says, could you spare a dollar for the bus; or I need a dollar to buy a hamburger; or I just need one more dollar to get a bed in the shelter; or maybe he just says could you spare a dollar, giving no explanation.

Do you? The question is simple: Do you give him a dollar? You don’t know what he will use it for. It might be drugs or alcohol. Can you even get a hamburger for a dollar? Are you really helping him? I read nowhere in the Bible that Jesus ever gave any person money. So, if acting as a disciple of Jesus means acting like Jesus, we have a problem to solve.

It can be solved by the phrase “*a cup of cold water.*” Could it be that simple? I think it could. The ethics of the Kingdom of God are concise, elegant, pure, freeing—and practical. It addresses our situation on the downtown street; but it also has larger implications. It answers the greater question: “*How then shall I live?*” You should be . . . nice.

If it is embraced, this simple little instruction, takes us out of the realm of moral law, or intellectual, ethical philosophizing, and puts us on that street—with that other person. It does not start at the top with a grand notion of how the Kingdom of God should restructure society; it simply says, in the most mundane of situations—give a cup of cold water. Offer the most basic of kindness to a stranger. Water. A cup of cold water.

Jesus is not even talking about a situation where someone is dying of thirst. It is so casual. *“Hey, would you like a drink of water?”* It tells us to treat a stranger the way we would treat someone who is a guest in our home—*“Can I get you something to drink?”* It is a way of seeing the world—seeing all people. It is about seeing the other as one of your own. It is about basic human kindness—it is just being ... nice.

The ethics of the Kingdom of God surely can have implications for global warming or may be able to address poverty and violence—but first it is concerned with being nice to people. First a drink of water then you can chat a little bit, ask the other about their family, show them pictures of your kid. Tell them a funny story about your cat—then you can move on too how going to McDonald’s is ruining the rain forest.

Why should we do this? The simple answer is because Jesus tells us to. But what we really want to know is why should I want to do this. Because hidden within our agenda—and I say “hidden” because we are likely not even aware that we are doing it—we get focused on that word “reward.”

In every episode of Law & Order (of every variety), or NYPD Blue, or any cop show, if the word “reward” is mentioned in the squad room, someone is duty-bound to say something like, *“Oh great, now all the crazies will call.”* Sure enough, the next scene shows one of the detectives on the phone line telling the person on the other end, *“No, ma’am, I understand the picture may look a little like your cousin, but we can’t send you the reward money just yet.”* Then he’ll address his partner on the other side of the desk with something like, *“I told them this reward crap doesn’t work.”* (If it’s a show on HBO, the language will be a tad more coarse.)

“Reward” has the sound of “easy money” — just ever-so-slightly behind the Publishers Clearing House. Jesus uses the word “misthos” μισθος. Generally speaking, that word has the ring of “getting what one deserves” (and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, it is used just that way).

But that would go against everything else Jesus taught about God's grace and mercy, that totally rules out merit as the cause of blessing. Blessing comes solely by God's grace, not because you deserve it. For Jesus, *"the idea of reward arises with faith in the consummation of the Kingdom of God. In His love the Father God gives His children the greatest gift there is, namely the kingdom of God."* [Kittle, TDNT, IV, 719] So reward, for Jesus, does not come because of something we do, it comes because of something He makes us to be.

But then it gets a little more muddled. Jesus also says today, *"Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward . . ."*

Some years ago I wrote a poem on this:

THANKS (I THINK)!

*"Whoever honors the prophet shall have the prophet's reward."
Whooppee!
Why would anyone want to honor a prophet ?
Who needs rejection,
Struggle, Pain, Death?
A prophet's reward? Bah !
Now, a king's ransom? That's more like it!
Honor. Prestige. Power. Riches.
Even a priest's accord:
Embroidered pageantry, Centered attention, Enacted plentitude of
a people's life — That's more to be sought.
But, there is no promise or reward for honoring kings ,
No I.O.U. for priestly adoration.
"A prophet's reward" ?
Big deal! . . .
How do you respond to the only game in town?*

We listened once again this morning to Jeremiah, but we were not given the context within which these words were spoken:

Hananiah, a “professional prophet” (*read there “royal flunkie, toadie, and suck-up”*), had chastised Jeremiah for his doomsday prophecies, insisting that his own prophecies were God-given which said that the enemy, Babylon, was already being dismantled. Jeremiah replies that he would like that to be so, and if it proves to be the case, then we will know that Hananiah is truly a prophet of God.

Later, Jeremiah issues this edict, ***“Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie.”*** Who do you think people wanted to hear? Hananiah? Or Jeremiah? Oh, I neglected to bring in a little something of this scene — Jeremiah says this to Hananiah: ***“Therefore thus says the Lord: ‘I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord.’ In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.”*** Okay . . . but there’s more. In spite of the death of Hananiah, the people still would not believe Jeremiah!

Before this, God had told Jeremiah to fashion and then wear a wooden yoke whenever he prophesied. This is what is known as a “prophetic ‘ot” — an enacted word (we may be inclined to think of it as an object lesson, but it went much deeper than that). These were acted-out messages that also informed the prophet — today we would call it “right-brain engagement” — helping him not only understand but begin to live out the message.

Isaiah was told to strip bare and walk into Jerusalem to announce that God saw the people standing with all their sins bared before Him. Hosea was told by God to marry a prostitute, a woman with whom he fell deeply in love, who broke his heart when she continued in her profession — just as God was heart-broken when His people ***“went a-whoring after other gods.”***

This is a prophet’s reward! I wasn’t quite sure how to accent that line. It leaves us wondering where the reward is to be found? Is it that virtue is its own reward?

Which takes us to St. Paul. It is obvious from Paul's letter to the church at Rome, that Paul had received some communication about opinions, attitudes, and behaviors within that congregation. He felt compelled to address them — and here again he is holding forth on their idea that we can sin because we have grace. No! Paul says. That would be like being a slave to two masters — you cannot have grace dominant if you allow sin to rule.

He caps that off thus: ***“The wages of sin is death . . .”*** This is the law of sin and death — if you sin, you die. Jesus cancels the law of sin and death with His death and resurrection, so if you sin, you don't die.

Now, pay attention to the concept of wages (οψωνια hopsonia in Greek); it comes very close to what is meant by “reward” — getting what you deserve. When you think reward, therefore, be careful. You don't want wages or reward, you want gift (χαρισμα charisma) — a free gift, a grace-filled gift. ***“. . . the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

Unfortunately, that sounds a tad too eschatological for our ears; our gift comes only after we die, and maybe not then, but only Jesus returns, and who knows when that will be? Remember what Jesus said: ***“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”*** [John 10:10] And John wrote of Jesus, ***“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”*** [John 1:3b-4] So this gift is a very here and now situation. With the gift, here and now, comes the reward — the prophet's reward. Old Testament prophets faced many hardships, much rejection, a lot of pain, and many were killed.

Jesus throughout the discourse in Matthew 10 is preparing the disciples as they go out to witness and minister in His name. He warns them, as we heard last Sunday, that there will be opposition. He wants them to recognize that even their own households will be agitated by this inbreaking Kingdom of God. So He teaches them to care for one another, in simple acts of kindness, and to support one another.

In a short while you and I will go out into our world. That same Kingdom is breaking in, and many are set free. There remains opposition, rejection, disruption — count on it. But do not let that dissuade you, discourage you, or lead you to despair. You have the gift, the free gift, and Jesus has given us each other, as well.

That is reward enough.

Amen.