

Leadership Qualities: Rewards

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Huckleberry Finn didn't get it. In the opening chapter of Mark Twain's classic tale, Huck is living with the spinster, Miss Watson, a starchy, joyless woman determined to make a Christian out of Huck if it kills them both. She tries everything from knocking the wildness out of him to stuffing him full of manners. She bludgeons him with Bible verses. She breathes threats of fiery hell. She coaxes him with fluffy promises of heaven. And then Huck tells us his impression:

She went on and told me about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it.... I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together.¹

He didn't think much of it; and who would? If that's all heaven is, why would anyone in their right mind endure everything Christianity demands in order to get there? As Mark Buchanan says, "If we are going to become heavenly-minded, we need a vision of heaven worthy of the effort.... Have any believers, anywhere, ever worked in a leprosarium or burned at the stake or been devoured by lions because images of doll-like cherubs danced in their heads?"²

The answer is: Of course not! Heaven promises to be more than we ask or imagine. The most beautiful, fulfilling, lovely thing imaginable is a poor rendering of the rewards that await us on the other side of death. Paul says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). What would motivate Christians around the world to give their lives in service, often anonymously? The God who

¹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1996), pp. 5-6.

² Mark Buchanan, *Things Unseen* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002), p. 67.

sees what is done in secret has promised that one day it will all be made right; he will reward them beyond their wildest dreams.

God Rewards

There's no getting around it: People are motivated by rewards. There may be those who think the idea of being motivated by an attractive reward is unspiritual. Yet God has filled the Bible with promises of amazing rewards. He makes these promises to keep us from giving up hope, to inspire us to persist in the face of trouble and persecution. After discussing the resurrection of the dead and the glorified bodies Christians will receive in the resurrection, Paul sums up the subject with this statement: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Rather than seeing this kind of motivation as inferior or immature, God built the desire for reward into our hearts. He created us with the desire to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matthew 25:12). Jesus seemed to think that would be something enjoyable for us to hear. Any time we get more spiritual than Jesus, we're headed in the wrong direction.

God certainly understands what makes us tick. Perhaps no chapter in the Bible illustrates the promised rewards from God better than Hebrews 11. In a chapter that has been titled by some "The Hall of Faith," the author highlights the lives and contributions of the great men and women of faith in the Old Testament and the rewards God gave them because of their faith in him.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.... And 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 11:1-2, 6

A careful reading of this chapter also reveals that many of these great men and women exercised their faith but were able only to *look forward* to their reward; they never fully realized that reward during their lifetime. Indeed, some even endured hardship in anticipation of the promised reward (vv. 32-40). “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance” (v. 13). Abraham, Noah, Enoch, Jacob, Joseph and Moses all lived a life of faith in spite of the fact that the reward was in the “distance.”

Theologically speaking, there appear to be four categories of rewards given to faithful believers. First, there will be greater responsibility in the kingdom of heaven (Luke 16:10-12; 19:17-19). We will be given different spheres of authority, based on our level of faithfulness in this world. The second area of reward will have to do with reflecting and displaying the glory, character and nature of God (Daniel 12:2-3). We aren't called to glorify ourselves, but to receive and display the glory of the majestic perfections of the infinite and wondrous God of all creation.

The third category of rewards relates to the nature and depth of our relationships with people in heaven. It makes sense that there will be some continuity between the relationships we develop with people on earth and the corresponding relationships we will experience in heaven. Those who have developed intimate relationships with people through selfless love and sacrifice will be enriched by those relationships forever (see 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20; 4:13-18).

The fourth area of rewards relates to our capacity to know and experience God himself. Just as there is a continuity between earthly and heavenly relationships with the people of God,

so those who cultivate a growing appetite for the experiential knowledge of God in this life will presumably know him better in the next life than those who kept God in the periphery of their earthly interests. As A.W. Tozer put it,

Every Christian will become at last what his desires have made him. We are the sum total of our hungers. The great saints have all had thirsting hearts. Their cry has been, "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" Their longing after God all but consumed them; it propelled them onward and upward to heights toward which less ardent Christians look with languid eye and entertain no hope of reaching.³

There can be no more compelling motivation for the God-fearing believer than the fact that God himself will be our reward. We will not be absorbed into him, but we shall be immersed in him, into his triune glory and beauty. The rewards God has in store are more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Effective leaders understand the human need for reward, and they make use of recognition and compensation to lift morale and improve performance. A reward can be as simple and effective as regular encouragement or as extensive and long-range as a profit-sharing program.

God's Compensation Package

Many people perceive God as a cosmic Scrooge who enjoys making people squirm and reluctantly dispenses rewards for good behavior. But the biblical portrait of God in both Testaments is quite the opposite. The Scriptures consistently present God as the lover of our souls who delights in rewarding us with his joy. One of his greatest promises is found in Jeremiah 29:10-14:

³ A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), p. 55.

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.”

For decades Jeremiah had been warning his rebellious fellow citizens about the impending judgment that the Lord would bring upon them because of their idolatry and corruption. Indeed, by the time he wrote the words of this passage, many of them had already been deported into Babylon. But the Lord encouraged them with this promise that, after the 70-year captivity had been completed, he would restore them to their own land.

God has plans for us in spite of our present circumstances. We work in an imperfect workplace, thus our work is imperfect. No matter how ideally suited for your present job you may be, you know that pain of unrealized potential, lost opportunity and the frustration borne of a lack of recognition. Even in the best work environments, there exists something of politics, laziness or gossip.

We also rest in an imperfect world, thus our rest is imperfect, fitful and rare. But God’s heaven seamlessly joins together work and rest, fulfillment and contentment, exhilaration and relaxation. No worries invade heaven, only an abiding sense of peace. No tension or fatigue, only harmony and laughter. This is your inheritance in the Lord. This is the reward God promises to his children.

God longs to bless and reward his people, but it is essential that they be willing to turn to him and repent of their unfaithfulness and disobedience. “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (v. 13). We serve a God who “rewards those who earnestly

seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). God actually enjoys bestowing benefits on those who turn to him in dependence and trust, and he hates the judgment that sin and rebellion entail.

Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?
Ezekiel 18:23

Say to them, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?”

Ezekiel 33:11

After outlining in Deuteronomy 28 a series of blessings that could be expected for obedience and curses for disobedience, the Lord communicated his passion for his people: “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

If God consistently reveals such a passion for our highest good, why do we so often struggle with seeking him and the rewards he offers? If the Scriptures have so much to say about rewards, why is so little attention given to this topic?

A Day of Reckoning

Incentives have always been part of the world of business. Without a motivational system, workers will likely be inclined to get by with minimum levels of effort and performance. The Bible recognizes the importance of motivation and rewards and has a surprising amount to say about this subject. Paul’s words to the Corinthian church are a central passage in this regard: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

There is going to be a day of reckoning. The Lord who gives great gifts will also return to settle accounts (see Matthew 25:19). This is going to be a performance review that will make

every other performance review you've even received seem inconsequential. We may be able to lip-sync our way through life, but we'll all sing *a cappella* in front of God. This should serve as a wake-up call for complacent Christians. We must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the things this world deems important. Most of what the world tells us to pursue is related to the opinions of others, but at the judgment seat of Christ, their opinions will be irrelevant. Only his opinion will matter.

The Scriptures teach that it is not mercenary to be motivated by reward; instead, Jesus encouraged us to long to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matthew 25:21, 23). The New Testament is replete with invitations to pursue God's rewards, affirming that they will prove to be more than worth the cost. "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

The fact that God will reward us for faithful responses to opportunities should have some motivational impact on the way we live. It clearly affected the manner in which godly people in Scripture led their lives. C.S. Lewis argued in his marvelous sermon "The Weight of Glory" that our problem is not that we want too much but that we settle for too little:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁴

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 94-95.

In comparison to what God wants to give us, the best this world can offer is toys, trinkets and tinsel. Worse, the things we most occupy ourselves with frequently turn out to be the equivalent of mud pies.

It's not that our businesses are bad. There is nothing wrong with seeking to run a profitable enterprise. But at the end of the day, we don't work to make money. We work in the marketplace because it provides us an arena of influence and a context for ministry. As we engage our world and perform our work with skill, excellence and care, God sets up divine appointments for us to allow the light of Christ to shine through us and brighten a dark world.

A Reward Bigger than a Paycheck

Few of us can afford to work without monetary compensation. But most of us would quickly become bored with our work if there were no rewards beyond the money. The subject of compensation presents a bundle of issues: balancing fair wages with the bottom line, equitable pay for all employees, defining the worth of a job. Wage or salary is only part of the reward equation, but it tends to demand the bulk of our attention. The bigger issue is whether people feel that they are being "rewarded" fairly for their contributions. The Bible broadens the picture when considering "reward." God's promise to Solomon included that larger perspective:

"As for you, if you walk before me in integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'"

1 Kings 9:4-5

God demonstrated to Solomon that his work was contributing to God's eternal plan. Solomon's reward transcended his financial compensation. In numerous passages, the Bible reminds us that the reward for our effort is eternal; the grand prize can never be limited to a mere paycheck.

We all know what happens if there is no paycheck, or if the salary is unfair. A note attached to a meager paycheck that says, “God will reward you in heaven,” just won’t cut it. But the biblical principle of rewards is that our work is worth more than money. We can actually contribute to God’s eternal work. In addition to a fair wage, we can experience the more satisfying reward of having added value to people’s lives, and the even bigger reward of participating in God’s plan for the ages. Leaders need to pay a fair wage. But godly leaders can add an additional perspective – a reward that money can’t buy!

How Abundant is Abundant Life?

Jesus described himself as “the gate for the sheep” (John 10:7). As the gate, he was the one through whom his sheep would find not merely entrance into a secure fold but into a rich green “pasture” (v.9). The promise of life in Christ is the promise of abundant life – life “to the full” (v. 10). Jesus does not promise us scarcity and meager reward; he promises us a life of fullness and abundance.

Those who come to God through Jesus will receive not merely eternal life in terms of duration; they will receive abundant life in terms of quality. Time and again, Jesus reminded his disciples about the benefits and rewards they would receive because they had chosen to follow him. Leaders who want to be effective will emulate this example.

If we could, like Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:1-6, enter into a moment’s worth of the eternal perspective, we would realize that no sorrow or adversity is worth comparing with the pleasure of eternally abundant life that awaits us in the presence of God. The real reason why heaven is insufficient motivation for many is because we lack the imagination and mental categories necessary to grasp what the Bible promises us.

For example, imagine you were to try to explain modern society to a group of people who lived hundreds of years ago. How would you explain airplanes, cell phones, computers and television? In order for them to make sense of your descriptions you would have to use words they could understand. You would need to limit the information you revealed, because you would have to use the simplest of terms. But saying that an airplane is like a giant metal bird doesn't even capture half of the idea. All you could give them is a vague idea of the concept.

Likewise, when the Bible speaks of heaven, it uses simple terms and descriptions so our primitive minds can latch on to the notion. But we're reading crude descriptions that don't even begin to tell the full story.

C.S. Lewis writes,

There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of "Heaven" ridiculous by saying they do not want "to spend eternity playing harps." The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them. All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, a merely symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible.... People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs.⁵

Richard Adams' novel, *Watership Down*, is a children's story – sort of. It truly transcends its genre. On the one hand, it is a story about talking rabbits; on the other hand, it is a Homeric epic, a story, not unlike *The Odyssey*, of exile and danger and homecoming.

A group of rabbits embark on what is meant to be a journey from danger to safety. It becomes a journey through danger and into danger. Along the way, in moments of grueling boredom or ominous threat, one of the rabbits, Dandelion, entertains his fellow travelers with stories of the legendary rabbit El-ahrairah, a trickster-hero. El-ahrairah is shrewd and brave, but he uses these qualities for the sake of the people he leads – to protect, feed and shelter them.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 120-121.

In one of Dandelion's final stories, just before the real rabbits are to face their most difficult challenge, El-ahrairah finds himself in a terrible dilemma. The rabbits he leads face certain destruction. He makes a solitary decision: to go to the Black Rabbit of Inle, the ruler of the underworld, and sacrifice himself for the sake of his rabbits. The Black Rabbit accepts the bargain, and is brutal in carrying it out. He mauls and humiliates El-ahrairah. He tears off his ears, severs his tail, plucks out his whiskers and sends him bloodied and mutilated home.

It takes a long time for him to find his way there. When he arrives home, he finds a community that is safe, thriving, living in comfort and peace. They have been saved by his sacrifice, and yet no one cares. No one even notices. They ignore him. Some even make fun of his unsightly and gruesome appearance.

In the cool of the evening, El-ahrairah stands at the edge of the field. Lord Frith, the supreme ruler of all rabbits, gently comes alongside him. This is the scene:

As the light began to fail, he suddenly realized that Lord Frith was close beside him, among the leaves.

"Are you angry, El-ahrairah?" asked Lord Frith.

"No, my lord," replied El-ahrairah. "I am not angry. But I have learned that with creatures one loves, suffering is not the only thing for which one may pity them. A rabbit who does not know when a gift has been given him is poorer than a slug, even though he may think otherwise."

"Wisdom is found on the desolate hillside, El-ahrairah, where none comes to feed, and the stony banks where the rabbit scratches a hole in vain. But speaking of gifts, I have a few trifles for you...."

And with that, Lord Frith restores El-ahrairah to a state surpassing what he ever knew before.⁶

His light and momentary troubles achieved for him an eternal weight of glory that far outweighed them all (2 Corinthians 4:17). This is the reward to which we aspire. This is the hope of abundant life promised to us in the Son.

⁶ Richard Adams, *Watership Down* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1977), 287.