



Title: Heavenly Rewards: What Will Rewards Be Like?

Text: Various passages (listed below)

Date: May 29, 2022

Main Idea: In heaven, God will unpack everything we've done on earth and reward us for our obedience and efforts.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXTS: VARIOUS PASSAGES (LISTED BELOW)

***This sermon series will be different since it covers a topic, not one specific text. These lessons will still be text-based but we will also focus on theological themes and ideas throughout the lessons as well.**

Highlight – What stands out?

What Is Promised?

Read Matthew 5:1-6:21

1. What do you notice about rewards in these passages?
2. Is there anything new or surprising to you about our rewards?

What Gets Rewarded?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Ephesians 2:20-22, Hebrews 11:6

1. Based on these passages what do you notice about what gets rewarded? Make a list of what actions lead to reward and who those actions are for.

Explain – What does this mean?

Read Matthew 25:14-46, John 17:3, Philippians 1:19-23 and 3:7-12

1. What earthly choices lead to heavenly rewards?
2. What is the reward?
3. How is this different than what you have previously thought about heavenly rewards?

4. What is the connection between our salvation being by grace alone (our works don't save us) and the expectation that our works on earth will be rewarded in heaven? Are these competing ideas? How would you explain the connection to a friend?

Apply – How does this change me?

Read the following verses:

- *1 Corinthians 10:31*
- *Matthew 5:11-12, Matthew 20:26-28, Matthew 6:6,18, and Matthew 10:12*
- *Luke 21:3*
- *1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, 1 Thessalonians 2:19*
- *Hebrews 6:10*
- *Luke 14:14*

1. Based on these verses, what gets rewarded? What is easy for you from this list? What is hard for you from this list? What do you need to do more of from this list?

Read John 3:21, 15:5; Romans 11:36, Revelation 4:4-11

1. How will we celebrate rewards in heaven? Will we be jealous of the rewards of others in heaven? How do you explain your answer?

2. Andy Davis says: “We should think of rewards as varying degrees of capacity for heavenly glory.”¹ What do you think this looks like?

Respond – What’s my next step?

Andy Davis says (in connection with 1 Corinthians 3:12-15):

“the ‘wood, hay, [and] straw’ refer to any works Christians do that are not worthy of reward. The fire represents God’s actions on judgment day in either purifying our good works or destroying our worthless works. But there is no doubt that this passage teaches the reality of rewards in heaven tied directly to our actions on earth. The lasting challenge is to maximize our gold, silver, and costly stones, and to minimize our wood, hay, and straw.”²

1. We aren’t saved by our works, but our works matter for eternity. Think about your life. Is there anything in your life that can be categorized as wood, hay, and straw? What about as gold, silver, and costly stones? What can you cut? What can you add?

¹ Davis, 71.

² Davis, 64.

Commentary: Chapter 5 from “The Glory Now Revealed”

CHAPTER 5 Rewards

Unequal Capacities for Heavenly Glory

In the movie *Patton*, based on the life of General George Patton, ends with the flamboyant WWII general speaking these words:

For over a thousand years, Roman conquerors returning from the wars enjoyed the honor of a triumph, a tumultuous parade. In the procession came trumpeters and musicians and strange animals from the conquered territories, together with carts laden with treasure and captured armaments. The conqueror rode in a triumphal chariot, the dazed prisoners walking in chains before him. ... But a slave stood behind the conqueror, holding a golden crown and whispering in his ear a warning: “All glory is fleeting!”³

Ironically, General Patton's own glory would prove extremely fleeting. He was relieved of his command and soon after died in a tragic road accident in December 1945. The Roman slave spoke the truth, just as Isaiah said: “All flesh is grass, and all its glory is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades” (Isa. 40:6-7).

Yet as transient as earthly glory is, heavenly glory is eternal. And the crowns of honor God will bestow on his faithful servants will never lose their luster. Their rewards will shine undimmed for all eternity.

Squeamishness about Rewards

Many Christians are squeamish about the topic of rewards. Perhaps this comes from the deplorable pride that accompanies most honors given in this world. This pride is inherently self-seeking, for our flesh yearns to make a name for ourselves. We know that Christians should seek that God and God alone be glorified: “Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name give glory” (Ps. 115:1). As Keith Green put it, “And when I'm doing well, help me to never

³ *Patton*, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner (Twentieth Century Fox, 1970).

seek a crown, for my reward is giving glory to you.”⁴ However, the scriptural teaching about rewards should drive out our concerns about pride as we understand what heavenly rewards really are, and how saturated in the glory of God they will be.

God Will Reward His Servants

The Bible teaches that God will reward his servants for works they have done on earth. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages three good works: giving money to the needy, praying, and fasting. For all three, he urges his disciples to do them in secret so that their Father, "who sees what is done in secret, "will reward them (Matt.6:4,6,18 NASB). He then gives this powerful conclusion:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt.6:19-21 NASB)

The command to store up treasure in heaven cannot refer to good works done before conversion, for the only thing that unregenerate people are storing up by their works is the wrath of God (Rom. 2:5). And since we are justified by faith alone apart from works (3:28), this “storing up” of good works cannot refer to earning our salvation. Therefore, the treasures we are storing up in heaven are rewards for works done after conversion.

In the same way, 1 Corinthians 3 gives strong proof of rewards given on judgment day:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw-each one's work will be-come manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (vv.12-15)

The “gold, silver, [and] precious stones” refer to various levels of quality in work done in building up the “holy temple, “which is the church (Eph.2:20-22).The “wood, hay, [and] straw” refer to any works Christians do that are not worthy of reward. The fire represents God's actions on judgment day in either purifying our good works or destroying our worthless works. But there is no doubt that this passage teaches the reality of rewards in heaven tied directly

⁴ Keith Green, “Oh Lord, You're Beautiful,” *So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt* (Pretty Good Music, 1980).

to our actions on earth. The lasting challenge is to maximize our gold, silver, and costly stones, and to minimize our wood, hay, and straw.

Required to Believe in Rewards...and to Seek Them

The book of Hebrews asserts that it is essential to believe that God rewards us, and that we should be zealously looking forward to his rewards at every moment: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists *and that he rewards those who seek him*" (Heb. 11:6). Putting it another way, it is impossible to please God if we don't believe that he rewards people who seek him. This statement is toward the beginning of a marvelous chapter, sometimes called the "Hall of Faith," in which great men and women of God are put on display for their acts of faith. One of those great heroes of faith is Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mis-treated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, *for he was looking to the reward.* (vv.24-26)

It was because he wanted an eternal reward that Moses turned his back on a life of worldly pleasures. A continual focus on heavenly reward for earthly sacrifices is not only acceptable but essential to a life that pleases God. Looking ahead to heavenly rewards is not a guilty pleasure for Christians; it is what the life of faith is all about.

Paul Fully Expected His Rewards in the Next Life

Undoubtedly the apostle Paul was mindful of his heavenly rewards during his great suffering. Probably no one in the history of the church endured as many afflictions and such prolonged suffering for the gospel as he. His astonishing catalog of sufferings is recorded for us in 2 Corinthians 11: eight savage beatings, one stoning, three shipwrecks, and continual attacks from his own fellow Jews and from high-way robbers. Paul survived three riots caused by his enemies, was in prison countless times, and lived a life of physical privation. "Rejoice and be glad," Jesus said to those persecuted for his name's sake, and he promised, "your reward is great in heaven" (Matt. 5:12). Paul's life of service to Christ resulted in so much suffering that he considered himself the most pitiable man on earth if there is no resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:19). He knew that God was able to guard his precious store of good works that he had entrusted to him for the day of judgment (2 Tim. 1:12).

Crowns in Which We Will Glory

Crowns awarded to servants of the Lord will be the honor and glory of those servants in heaven. Sometimes crowns simply represent the honor of salvation itself (James 1:12; 2 Tim.4:8). But other crowns are tied to our works on earth. Paul compares his evangelistic efforts to an athlete seeking to win a crown. He strove to become "all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor.9:22). He was extremely strict in his lifestyle, disciplining his body like an athlete so he would not be disqualified for the crown he was zealous to win (v.27). However, his goals were unlike those athletes: "They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (v.25). Paul's eye was always on the future glory that would come to him as a result of his zealous efforts. He referred to the Thessalonian Christians as his hope, joy, and crown "of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming" (1 Thess. 2:19). The saints will rule with Christ (Dan.7:27; 2 Tim.2:12; Rev.3:21). However, there is special authority granted to a select few. In Revelation 4, the twenty-four elders are clothed in white, seated on thrones, and wearing golden crowns. Their thrones and crowns represent their rule under the ultimate government of the King of kings. They are honored, sitting in close proximity to the throne of God (Rev.4:4). Jesus alludes to the privileged few (Matt. 20:20-23) who would sit at his right and his left in the kingdom of heaven. James and John sought those places of honor. But Jesus said that they belonged to those whom the Father prepared them for. Jesus then went on to instruct his disciples on how such places of honor would be granted (vv. 25-28).

What God Will Reward

So, what does the Bible reveal that God will reward for all eternity? Let's walk through some of the various categories

1. *Anything done for the glory of God (even simple daily tasks).* "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). To do something "to the glory of God" means to put him on display before a watching world, even in the most menial actions of life.
2. *Humble servanthood.* Jesus said, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26-28). Every act of humble servanthood toward others will never lose its reward.
3. *Sacrificial giving.* The Old Testament sacrificial system was based on something costly given up for God and others. David said, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24). The more something cost us on earth (whether time, energy, money, or other), the greater the reward in heaven. Yet even a small

gift, like the widow's two copper coins, can be more valuable than another's gift because sacrifice is measured proportionally (Luke 21:3).

4. *Suffering for the kingdom.* No sacrifice is greater than one's own life laid down for others (John 15:13), so the martyrs who die for the kingdom give more than anyone else. Similarly, people who suffer pain physically or emotionally for the kingdom will be rewarded in proportion to their suffering (Matt.5:11-12). When James and John seek the place of honor, the first thing Jesus asks them is, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" (20:22). That was the cup of suffering on the cross. Positions of honor are given in his kingdom based on the degree to which people suffer for Christ's name's sake.
5. *Advancing the gospel.* Other people won to Christ are "[crowns] in which we will glory" in heaven (1 Thess. 2:19, NIV). Any soul-winning effort is rewarded in heaven, but those who venture forth boldly in some courageous pattern of missionary work are especially honored. Paul said, "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named...but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand'" (Rom. 15:20-21). Paul's word translated "ambition" literally means "love of honor." Paul yearned for the *honor* of going into an unreached region of the world, to pioneer the church of Christ. This reminds me of David's "mighty men," warriors who vied for the honor of doing great deeds of valor on the battlefield (2 Sam. 23:8-39). How much more will a missionary pioneer who ventured forth into a hostile land for the gospel of Christ be honored!
6. *Giving to the poor.* Jesus said people who feed the poor in this world will be "repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14 NIV). We should seek out people who cannot repay us in this world, as though there is a heavenly ledger with "debts outstanding" that God will not fail to repay in heaven.
7. *Secret acts of piety: fasting and prayer.* When we go into a room, close the door, and pray to our unseen Father, he sees what is done in secret and will reward it. So it will be with private acts of fasting or self-denial done for the glory of God (Matt.6:6,18). In this way, quietly faithful servants have stored up vast quantities of treasure in heaven.
8. *Anything done to help those advancing the gospel.* This is the "'cup of cold water" teaching in Matthew 10:42. Jesus said that anyone who supports gospel workers will receive the same reward as those who do the actual preaching.
9. *Anything done to help other Christians in any way.* Hebrews 6:10 says, "God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. "This is the reward of godly widows who "washed the feet of the saints" (1 Tim. 5:10). And it is the framework of the judgment day "sheep and goats"

teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (v. 40 NIV). Included are works of love such as those of Dorcas, who made robes and other garments for Christians (Acts 9:39).

10. *An honorable life of hard work.* Paul uses the same word as in Romans 15:20, translated “ambition” or “love of honor,” in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 for the ordinary lives of Christians all over the world: “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we instructed you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need” (NASB). Christians who work at a job to earn enough money to feed, clothe, and house their family, who conduct their affairs with dignity, and who shine the light of Christ whenever they can will have an eternal reward in heaven. That is the honor we should seek, and it will never be taken from us.

The Reward: Personalized Heavenly Experience of God

If we have any discomfort when contemplating heavenly rewards and honors, it should melt away with this consideration: the essence of the rewards and honors is God *himself*. God is the essence of heaven, for that is what it means when we say that the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem are all completely illuminated by the glory of God. Psalm 16 asserts that resurrection joy will consist of the presence of God: “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (v.11). Paul traded everything of worth and value in this world—money, power, worldly honors—for one thing: “the surpassing worth” of knowing Christ. Everything else was as rubbish to him (Phil. 3:8-10). And though Paul knew Christ well, he also knew he was just beginning his journey of discovery. For “in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). That is why Paul said, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). That would be blasphemous if he meant “For me to live is Christ, and to die is something better than Christ.” But death is a gateway into infinitely increasing knowledge of Christ: “To live is Christ, and to die is more Christ!” Jesus said to his heavenly Father, “This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

Therefore, heaven itself is all about knowing God, for our eternal inheritance is God himself. As he said to Aaron and the Levites, “I am your portion and your inheritance among the Israelites” (Num. 18:20 CSB). Or again, to Abraham, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1). The essence of the reward is God, not something other than God. For as Hebrews 11:6 says, we must believe that God exists, and that he rewards those who diligently seek *him*. How could God give something other than himself to people who spent their whole lives diligently seeking him? The reward is in

some sense a deeper revelation of God himself. God will give a unique share of himself to each person he desires to honor. It is not idolatrous to seek rewards, because the reward is an extension of seeking God himself.

This will differentiate one redeemed person from another in heaven-an individualized portion of God given to him or her in a way directly tied to that person's life on earth. The heavenly reward is "more of God" than others receive. Therefore, we should think of rewards as varying degrees of capacity for heavenly glory. Perhaps we may think of it as access, proximity, or closeness to God. Although all of the redeemed will see God's face, some will enjoy deeper intimacy with God. I believe all the redeemed in heaven will be perfectly happy, but not all will be equally happy. Rewards are an increased capacity for absorbing and comprehending the glory of God.

Similarly, this reward is an intimate connection between us and our heavenly Father related to specific works we did on earth. God will express a unique pleasure to the son or daughter who did this or that work on earth, speaking words of praise. Of course, heaven will resound with redeemed people and angels giving praise to God, and that will be our greatest delight. But the Bible also speaks of *praise from God*, expressing to us and others how pleased he is with our actions.

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their *praise from God*. (1 Cor.4:5 NIV)

[Some] loved human praise more than *praise from God*. (John 12:43 CSB)

On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart-by the Spirit, not the letter. That person's praise is not from people but *from God*. (Rom. 2:29 CSB)

God can and does praise people, and we should earnestly the praise he will give us for faithfully serving him. In Jesus's parable of the talents, the master, having entrusted his servants with his property, says to those who were diligent and skillful, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master"(Matt.25:21,23).This commendation from God should mean everything to us. Any dutiful child constantly seeks to please his or her parent. No one did this more than Jesus, for he said, "I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29 NVIV). Our reward is God expressing that pleasure back to his faithful

children: "I was so pleased with what you did!" God opens the door of his soul to us so that we might know his heart pleasure over our good deeds ("Enter into the joy of your master"). Heavenly rewards and honors are truly God-centered. They have no existence apart from God. Unlike worldly ambition that drives people to pursue their own glory, holy rewards are all about God expressing personal delight in what we have done.

When we are commanded to give secretly to the needy, not letting our right hand know what our left is doing, we are promised that our Father who sees what is done in secret will reward us (Matt.6:3-4). How? With a lavish experiences of his pleasure in that gift to the poor. He will say, "Let show you how delighted I was, my child, in that sacrificial act of yours. Enjoy my happiness in that specific moment."

I used to think of "Well done, good and faithful servant" as something God would say once, on judgment day, and never again. Now I realize that God will allow us to relive his pleasure in our specific actions again and again in eternity. Our good deeds will never die but will be rehearsed in heavenly delight forever. There is no limit to how much of this praise we can have from God. Christ commanded us to store up treasure in heaven (v.21). We can and should store up as much *praise from God* as possible.

Unequal in Glory

There will be distinctions between the redeemed in heaven, as Paul said of the resurrection from the dead, "Star differs from star in glory" (1 Cor. 15:41). The redeemed will all see God's glory (absorb it, take it in, experience it, understand it) but not all will see God's glory equally. Some will have a greater capacity for the infinite glory of God. We will be finite, limited creatures. None of us, no matter how glorious, will be able to comprehend completely the infinite glory of God. But some will have a greater capacity than others.

Think of it like an infinite ocean of glory with a vast number of submerged vessels. The various vessels have larger or smaller dimensions: a thimble, a bucket, a vat, a water tower, an oceangoing supertanker. They are all submerged and 100 percent full, but they have vastly different capacities. So it will be with rewards.

And I believe our earthly lives will determine the size of our heavenly capacity. Jesus reminds us of this reality: "Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you"(Luke 6:38 CSB). Our rewards for earthly generosity are not of this world; they will be "at the resurrection of the righteous"(14:14 CSB).

Delighting in Each Other's Rewards

The varying levels of reward in heaven will not cause any jealousy or difficulty among the redeemed. As Jonathan Edwards said in his masterpiece "Heaven Is a World of Love," "All shall have as much love as they desire and as great manifestations as they can bear; and so all shall be fully satisfied, and where there is perfect satisfaction, there can be no envy."⁵ Imagine heaven as an immense banquet in which there are innumerable dishes, each differently spiced. There is a limitless supply of each dish. Each person at the banquet can eat as much or as little of each dish as they wish. Some like a little of this and a little of that and some of that too; others have a smaller appetite; others like just one dish and eat a lot of it, but there's still plenty of that dish for everyone else. At the end of the meal, after everyone has eaten their fill, there is still plenty of each dish left. How could there possibly be envy or jealousy? In heaven, each will have as much of God as he or she desires.

Furthermore, we will not be jealous of the greater glories and accolades lavished on other Christians in heaven. There are three reasons this is so, according to Edwards:

1. Because the love between the saints will be perfects and we will truly delight in each other's blessedness.
"There is undoubtedly an inconceivably pure, sweet, and fervent love between the saints in glory... without limit or alloy or interruption; and no envy or malice or revenge or contempt or selfishness will ever enter there, but all such feelings will be kept as far away as sin is from holiness and as hell is from heaven."⁶
2. Because we will so completely trust God that we will think any honors he has chosen to give to another are perfectly merited and ultimately display God's glory:
"It will not be a grief to any saint to see another saint elevated and honored above himself."⁷
Actually, the elevation of another will draw forth greater love and admiration and honor, because God has done it and God is revealed and glorified by that person.
3. Because the most glorious will also be the holiest and most aware of their own limitations before the infinite God, they will also be the humblest:
"And there will be no temptation for any to envy those that are above them in glory on account of the latter being lifted up with pride; for

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, "Heaven Is a World of Love," in *Charity and Its Fruits* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 336.

⁶ Edwards, "Heaven Is a World of Love," 336, 338.

⁷ *Ibid*, 336.

there will be no pride in heaven. We are not to conceive that those who are more holy and happy than others in heaven will be elated and lifted up in their spirit above others; for those who are above others in holiness, will be superior to them in humility. The saints that are highest in glory will be the lowest in humbleness of mind, for their superior humility is part of their superior holiness.”⁸

“Though all are perfectly free from pride, yet, as some will have greater degrees of divine knowledge than others, and larger capacities to see more of the divine perfections, so they will see more of their own comparative littleness and nothingness, and therefore will be lowest and most abased in humility.”⁹

Edwards was merely expanding on what Paul said of the perfect unity of the body of Christ: “If one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:26 CSB). In heaven, we will be so delivered from selfishness that we will love to hear the exploits of those greater than ourselves, to learn how God used their extreme devotion and costly sacrifice to establish the kingdom of heaven in the lives of the elect. Their honors will in some sense belong to all of the body.

Casting Our Crowns

Our rewards in heaven will be given solely by grace. Only because Jesus Christ died on the cross for us do we escape the eternal torments of hell. Beyond this, every good work we do in this world, we do by the power of Christ working in us by his Spirit:

Anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be *accomplished by God*. (John 3:21 CSB)

I [Jesus] am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for *apart from me you can do nothing*. (15:5)

By the grace of God I [Paul] am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though *it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*. (1 Cor. 15:10)

This is why the twenty-four elders are continually casting their crowns before the throne of God, declaring he alone is worthy of worship (Rev. 4:9-11). Those with thrones and crowns are intensely aware that God's throne is the loftiest;

⁸ Edwards, “Heaven Is a World of Love.”

⁹ Ibid, 337.

it is only by his grace that they have any honor. All rewards will return to the God who gives all good gifts. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever" (Rom.11:36).