



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Rewards!!! Punishments!!!

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I don't believe God rewards people for their good behavior, nor punishes them for their bad. I don't believe God chooses to exercise that kind of control over people.

I guess that means that I am out of step with the beliefs of a lot of people, if I understand what they tell me they believe. Maybe it would be helpful for me to explain.

In any situation where one person rewards – or punishes – another, the relationship is one of master and servant. The servant conforms to the requirements of the master and is rewarded. Or he does not and is punished. Inevitably, the servant is fearful and uncertain. He has good feelings when he is rewarded, but cannot escape feeling anxious about his ability to continue to please his master. He knows that, when he does not, he will suffer some punishment.

If, by any chance, the master isn't explicit about the requirements, yet holds the servant accountable, the servant's level of anxiety simply increases. And, if the master withholds information about the requirements and still expects the servant to be accountable, the situation is even worse. Even in a master-servant relationship, it seems unfair to hold the servant accountable if the requirements are unknown to him. It happens, though.

Think about situations common to our experience. The Law, for instance. The Law is the master. The main reward for obeying the Law is that a penalty does not have to be paid. The strength of the Law is in both the threat of punishment and the punishment. One example will suffice.

There is a stop sign at the end of the street where I live. It is there to let me know that the Law requires me to bring my car to a full stop before proceeding on to the adjoining street. If I obey and stop before proceeding, the Law does nothing to commend or reward me. If I don't, and am caught by an enforcer of the Law, I am punished.

I fear the Law. Sometimes I will proceed without coming to a full stop when I see that it is safe to do so. When I do, I also keep a watchful eye to make sure an enforcer is not there to see and catch me. I don't want a ticket, and I don't want to have to pay a fine. Since I don't want to be punished, I usually obey the Law.

Sometimes, though, I don't know what the Law is, or, at best, I am uncertain about it. I am told that ignorance of the Law is no excuse. My anxiety level increases. I feel even more uncertain. I become more guarded and fearful. I don't know what charges may be brought against me for what offenses, nor what punishment I will have to bear. And I frantically look for ways to protect myself and to restore my sense of well-being. Only I can't find them. I am left with my anxiety and fear.

Perhaps the illustration is overly dramatic.

In an orderly society, there must be rules and regulations for the well-being of all, and they must be enforced. But if the rules and regulations become the master, and the

people are the servants trying to gain approval and avoid disapproval, then the rules and regulations no longer serve their appropriate purpose.

The illustration is applicable to our understanding of God, and of God's Law.

If God is master, giving and withholding approval on the basis of how well the servant obeys the requirements, whether known or not, the servant can only be anxious and fearful. There can be no real love between them.

You might choose to point out that a dutiful parent rewards and punishes the child so that the child can learn right from wrong, and that God has such a parent role. I am well aware of that method of parenting. I'm not sure it is the best method. In it, the parent is the master, and the child is the servant. The main message of that method, no matter the intent of the parent, is that the child is to obey the parent to gain approval, and that failure to do so will result in disapproval. Reward and punishment, it seems to me. There is a high degree of possibility that the child will be anxious and fearful and/or rebellious and disobedient. There may not be much of love and comfort and security in the relationship. And the child doesn't learn right from wrong. He or she learns how to gain approval and avoid disapproval – and to worry a lot about the degree of success. Find out what the rules are. Obey them. Or figure out ways to get around them. Maneuver. Manipulate. You may get away with it. Master and servant. Work the angles to become master. Don't yield to the effort to control you.

As I remember, my father didn't use rewards and punishments to control me. He didn't put me in the position of having to figure out how to behave to get his love. He didn't set requirements for me if I wanted his favor. He didn't have a set of rules and regulations – only some of which I knew – that I must keep if I wanted his approval. He didn't promise me rewards for good behavior, and punishment for bad.

I knew my father loved me. I knew he wanted very much for me to reach my potential as an adult. He was wise enough to know that the best way to help me was to guide me as I made my own decisions. When the decisions I wanted to make weren't wise in his eyes, he would warn me of possible consequences, but he didn't intervene to keep me from experiencing those consequences. Nor did he offer me "goodies" nor threaten me – to get me to make the decisions he wanted me to. And he certainly did not give and withhold his love in an attempt to control me.

I have been in relationships where the attempt was made to manipulate and control me by the promise of rewards and the threat of punishments. If I wanted to keep the relationship, I must yield to the manipulation. When I did, I might succeed in avoiding the punishment and gaining the reward and so keep the relationship, but it was never really satisfactory.

Rewards and punishments are a part of living. I have had my share of each. I have achieved and I have failed. Mainly, either way, they have been the product of my decisions and my actions. More often than I like, I have fallen victim to my need to win

favor and approval and have made decisions accordingly. I haven't liked the result – not even when I got the favor or approval. I felt as if I had sold myself. Relinquishing myself to the control of another to get rewards and avoid punishment just doesn't work. Not for me.

Fairly frequently, I have contact with people who live in fear lest they have violated a law of God – whether or not they know what it is. Their every action and attitude reflects their anxiety. They agonize over decisions. They worry incessantly over whether they have decided correctly or have done the right thing. Ultimately, they anguish over getting to heaven and avoiding hell.

These people are afraid of God. Their picture of God, it seems to me, is of an ogreish being, evil leer on his face, gleefully rubbing his hands together in anticipation of the terrible things He is going to do to his subjects who disobey Him. They tend to deny this picture and to put in its place one of a loving, compassionate, and merciful God. But they continue to be afraid of what God will do to them if they don't obey.

Many passages in the Bible seem to reinforce such a view of God. The sheep and the goats. Being cast into outer darkness. The lake of fire. Gehenna. Judgment. Terrible and wrathful God. Using Bible texts, I can make a strong case for the belief that God rewards and punishes. It seems obvious that belief in a demanding, punitive God is widespread.

There are plenty of passages in the Bible that seem to indicate that God gives and withholds God's favor in response to the obedience or lack of obedience of God's subjects. We read of God's wrath and of the terrible manifestations of it. The requirement that one be obedient to avoid death or hell seems to be there.

There are also plenty of passages in the Bible that tell of God's love and mercy and forgiveness. How can God love so completely, and, at the same time, give and withhold favor to control people?

The real point is that God does not give and withhold favor to control us. God certainly does not dangle the reward of heaven and the punishment of hell before us like a carrot to try to keep us in line.

Oh, yes, God longs for us to obtain heaven. But heaven is not a reward for obedience or good behavior. Heaven is the joyous state of loving relationship with God. And hell is the absence of that relationship.

Of course, there are rules and regulations given to us by a loving God who longs for us to enjoy the rewards of life, and wants to protect us from that which is destructive to us. God cares enough to make them known to us.

Oddly enough, we seem to need to create a picture of God as one who makes demands, rewards, punishes, gives and withholds favor, and is generally pretty conditional and arbitrary. I wonder why.

It just may be that we create such a God to try to escape the responsibility for our own decisions and actions. If I do what God commands, then I am not responsible for what I do, nor its outcome. God is. If I faithfully do what God tells me to do, I have a right to expect to be rewarded. If I fail to do what God tells me to do, I can expect to be punished. Furthermore, I can use my fear of what God will do to me if I am disobedient to deter me. Either way, I have not accepted my full responsibility for my own life. I have shifted it over to God.

I am glad that my father did not use rewards and punishments to control me. Under his loving guidance, I learned to take responsibility for myself. I developed confidence and self-esteem. I was not afraid of him. I didn't worry about incurring his disfavor. I didn't look to him to assure my future. I felt secure in the relationship and comfortable with myself. His legacy to me is a value system of my own, and my willingness to be in control of my own life. I take full responsibility for my decisions and actions, and the outcome of them.

In a much more inclusive sense, I am glad that God does not use rewards and punishments to control me. Under God's loving guidance, I have the opportunity to learn to take responsibility for myself. I develop confidence and self-esteem. I am not afraid of God. I don't worry about incurring God's disfavor. I don't look to God to assure my future. I am secure in the relationship, and comfortable with myself. God has provided me with a value system. God has entrusted me with the control of my own life. God has released me from God's control so that, in this life, I take full responsibility for my decisions and actions, and the outcome of them.

No, God does not use rewards and punishments, nor the promise or threat of them, to control me. I do not fear but joyously accept the challenge to be about the business of living the life God has entrusted to me.