



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Rewards

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Insofar as I know, there is nothing wrong with rewards. In fact, rewards may be highly desirable. They certainly serve to provide incentive for achievement. For instance, if winning were the only motive for entering into the competition, probably only a few would take part. If I don't get something for trying, I usually don't try very hard. I like rewards.

However, I wonder if the reason for being Christian is to get rewards.

The messages I hear from the church and read in religious literature seem to me to offer the inducement of rewards as the reason for joining the church, or becoming Christian. A visitor attends Sunday morning worship and shows some interest in joining the church. We tell him all that the church has to offer him should he decide to join – the excellent worship services, the fine music, the Church School that provides quite adequate Christian Education for all ages, the warmth and friendliness of the congregation, the variety of activities in which to be involved, and more. These, it would seem, are the rewards to him if he joins. We tend not to talk about the work that needs to be done, nor the money needed from the members to finance the program. And maybe we don't even talk about what it means to be a Christian – in or out of the church.

Typically, the message I hear most often from people devoted to winning others to Christ either focuses on the terrible things that will happen to the person who refuses to accept Christ – unhappy life not and the horrors of hell – or on the wonderful things that will happen if one accepts Christ – good things in this life and heaven in the hereafter. This suggests to me that the appeal centers in the rewards to be gained. I really wonder if these are the reasons for accepting Christ.

I remember an oft-repeated message that I heard in the church when I was a youth. It was designed to persuade me to tithe my income. I was assured that, if I did so, I would have more money (as well as receive other blessings) than if I kept my entire income to use for myself. Despite the reality of the Great Depression, I, teenager though I was, did earn an income of my own. I recall one persuasive fellow who offered a virtually unassailable argument by laying ten potatoes on the pulpit before him and then taking one away. He pointed out that the nine potatoes left were more than sufficient for my needs, so I could afford to give that one to God to feed the hungry. And who would know in what other ways God would reward me.

Then there was the man who told story after story of the fine clothes, cars, and other possessions God gave him because he was a faithful tither. In addition, he quoted the testimony of dozens of other people with similar stories of all that they received because they tithed.

But it wasn't just the promise of bounteous return for tithing that I heard. Over and over, I was told that if I were Christian – if I faithfully kept God's Laws – I would be rewarded in all sorts of ways, including, of course, being received into Heaven when I died.

Even oft-repeated words from scripture seem to offer rewards as the motive for aligning with God and with Christianity. Words like, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:31) Or the quote attributed to Jesus, “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (Jn. 11:26) Then there is the quote from the Sermon on the Mount, saying, “Give your alms...in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt. 6:4) There are many more in the Bible, too numerous to quote here.

I still wonder if the appropriate reason for being Christian is to get the promised rewards.

I think about my life. It was given to me. I didn’t earn it. One day, according to the processes brought into being by Creator God, I was born to loving parents. During my growing up years, they took care of me. In keeping with the resources available to them, they provided for me – body, mind and spirit. I had adequate shelter, food to eat, medical attention as needed, involvement in community, school, and church, attention and love from my family and others. My essential needs were met. While there were some rough times, the over-all of my growing up years was quite satisfactory.

What I received was not to reward me. Insofar as I know, I did nothing to deserve or merit my life, my loving family, and all that my parents did to provide adequately for me. I did not earn it. There wasn’t anything for me to do to have it. My parents wanted me. Through them, God brought me into being. At no point did God, nor my parents, say to me, “You have to earn being, and you have to earn being provided for. You have to believe the right things. You have to make the right commitments. You have to do the right things.” Their activities on my behalf were acts of love. In no way can I see them as rewards, either for my being or my doing.

It seems to me that being – my being – is a gift from God. Why would God give it to me as a reward?

And why would God give me talents and abilities and suggest that they, also, are rewards? I do have talents and abilities. Whether few or many doesn’t matter. They are what God gave me to enter into and live this life. There aren’t many requirements I must meet to have them.

It occurs to me that rewards are for achievements. In school, the best student got the highest honors, including scholarships to pay for further schooling. The best athletes both enabled the team to win and got the most recognition. Hard work to sharpen and use skills usually paid off with achievements that were recognized and rewarded.

The same thing appears to be true throughout life. Successful effort brings success. Recognition is in response to doing, not being.

I can’t imagine my parents saying to me, “You have to abide by our rules if you want to be our son.” I can’t imagine God saying to me, “Obey the rules. Believe the

right things. Otherwise, I will not allow you to be one of mine.”

It is certainly true that my parents, according to their belief and understanding, took steps to teach me what I needed to know to be able to make the most of my life. What I did with my life was so important to them that they not only taught and set examples, but they gave and withheld approval. However, it was never approving and disapproving of me. It was always in terms of my doing.

Sometimes I was foolish. Sometimes I deliberately disobeyed their instructions. Sometimes I thought I was wiser than they, and that I knew better than they what was good for me. Sometimes I put my desire ahead of my conformity to what they had taught me. Sometimes there were difficult times between us. Sometimes I was punished for doing things they had expressly forbidden. Sometimes my belief that they would be upset and disapproving was enough to cause me to choose in favor of what I knew they considered best for me.

However, I never doubted their love for me. I never feared that I would be rejected, or cast out of the family. The threat of the punishment of “hell” nor the promise of the reward of “heaven” was never a factor in our relationship. I was already a member of the family, and would always be.

It seems to me that God deals with me in a similar manner.

All my life, I have been aware that I wanted my parents to be pleased with me. Somehow I got the message that their being pleased with me would not be because I tried to conform to their rules and regulations as a way to stay in their good graces. Rather, they wanted me to be my own person in every sense of the word. They wanted me to be thoroughly aware of the gifts of life and talent that were mine. They wanted me to realize that the principles by which they lived, and that they had taught me, were for me to use so that my life was satisfying to me. I was not to adhere to them so that I would have their approval, or so that I could get some kind of reward that I thought they were promising me.

I want God to be pleased with me. As was true of my parents, I believe that God is most pleased when I accept and appreciate God’s gifts to me, and when I take seriously the instructions for living that God has made known to me.

Rewards! I have already been rewarded with life, with talents, with a capacity to think and to reason, with sensitiveness, with the willingness to make decisions and be responsible for them, and with the ability to make commitments and be faithful to them. I have already been given everything I could possibly need to experience the full life God desires that I experience.

I have always been ambitious. I like to solve problems and to find answers. I set achievement goals for myself. I set about to reach those goals with determination and persistence. I expend a lot of energy in the effort. Much of the time I am successful with

what I try to do. I get lots of favorable reactions from other people. Sometimes I get unfavorable ones.

I admit that I do not like unfavorable reactions or disapproval. Often, I am tempted to modify my behavior just to get favorable and approving reactions. When I yield to that temptation, I find that I am very dissatisfied with myself. The positive responses I get under those circumstances aren't very pleasing to me. Somehow, I have acted as I have for the wrong reasons. That just never works out as I want it to. I can do without that kind of reward.

A part of the Sermon on the Mount is devoted to this issue of rewards, and to the reality that rewards are in response to the reasons for doing. Again the point is about doing, not about being.

Remember. Jesus is quoted as saying, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Mt. 6:1) "When you give alms, do not (do)...as the hypocrites...so that they may be praised by others. They have received their reward." (Mt. 6:2) "(Give)...so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Mt. 6:4)

Several times, in the sixth chapter of Matthew, the phrase, "they have received their reward" is used. Similarly, the phrase, "your Father who sees in secret will reward you." It would be easy to interpret that the message from God is, "Do all these things as I want you to and I will reward you."

Maybe God means that, when my motives are those that God has taught me, my behavior will bring much satisfaction to me, as God has created it to be. Maybe that is the reward God gives me.

I think again about my relationship to my parents. When they saw that my motives for deciding and doing grew out of my use of the principles they had taught me, they approved of what I did, and they let me know that they approved. When, for whatever reasons, they believed that the motives for my decisions and actions did not reflect my use of those principles, they let me know of their concern and anxiety. It wasn't withholding approval. It wasn't an attempt to make me conform to their wishes. It was because they believed so completely in those principles that they were worried about what would happen to me if I turned away from them.

Maybe that is how it is with God.

Rewards. I like rewards. But I do not believe that God is giving and withholding rewards as a way to manipulate me and my behavior. Surely God is not saying to me, "Please me with what you do and I will reward you with heaven." Surely God is not saying to me, "Fail to please me, and I will consign you to hell."

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It seems more likely to me that God is saying, “I have equipped you so that you can enjoy the fullness of life now. I want that for you. I grieve when you decide and act in ways that do not enable you to enjoy that fullness of life. I cannot, and do not, intervene and set aside the results of your decisions and actions. I have structured your life and your world so that you are rewarded according to what you decide and do – and why.”