



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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"Not Reward – Not Punishment"

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God does not reward people. Nor does God punish people. I believe this to be true now, although it is contrary to what I was taught to believe in my early formative years, and different from what appears to be typical in our society today.

My decision to write this paper was triggered by an article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Saturday, August 23, 1997. It was titled, “The Riches of God,” and was about the fast growing World Changers Church, whose preachers loudly and blatantly proclaim that God rewards people who tithe (give 10% of their income to the church) with abundant material wealth and excellent physical health. However, the message of the World Changers Church is by no means a new one. Nor is it unusual for people to believe that God is the source of the good things that happen to us – and the bad; that God rewards good behavior and punishes bad.

If I believe that God rewards good and punishes bad behavior, I am faced with two dilemmas:

1. If God loves unconditionally, how can God reward and punish people?
2. If God does reward and punish, how can God be so selective? Good things (rewards) happen to people who are neither faithful nor deserving, and bad things (punishment) happen to faithful and deserving people.

The dilemmas disappear when I believe that God does love unconditionally – and does not reward and punish.

There is much of rewarding and punishing in our life, and that is as it should be – maybe. Maybe it is more cause and effect than reward and punishment. For instance:

I overeat, I get fat – and get sick. Punishment?

I don't eat enough and get too thin and get sick. Punishment?

I take proper care of myself and enjoy good health. Reward or result?

I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and find satisfaction in my ministry to those in need. Am I being rewarded?

I hoard my goods and protect myself from the greed of others. I have wealth and live in fear and anxiety. Reward? Or Punishment? Or what?

Anywhere I turn, I see the same pattern – the same belief. Make the effort. Get the reward. Don't make the effort and don't get the reward. In a sense, this is punishment. The reason for making the effort is to get the reward and/or to avoid the punishment.

Rewards provide incentive. Punishment, it is alleged, is incentive to deter people

from doing harmful things – breaking the law. Our justice system is an after-the-fact punishment system. It doesn't prevent me from committing a crime, but, if I do, it finds me guilty and punishes me – that is, if I get caught. And, maybe my fear of punishment will be powerful enough to make me decide against committing a crime. If I study hard, I make better grades. If I apply myself at work, I may get a raise and/or a promotion. If I do what is expected of me, people approve of my behavior and (seem to) appreciate me. They may even give me some special recognition to express their appreciation. In general, good behavior brings positive results, and bad behavior brings negative results, at least, most of the time. I can expect to enjoy a happy and rewarding life if I just have the right attitude and do the right things.

It is no wonder that I ask myself, “What have I done wrong?”, when things turn out badly for me. And given my experience and my teaching, it is no wonder that I believe that I have not found favor with God when something bad happens to me. If I lose my job; or a friend abandons me for no good reason; or my marriage fails; or I break my leg or I come down with a serious illness; or I lose my money in the stock market; or—any number of things, it must be that I am being punished because I have done something to displease God.

Given how our society works, it is easy for me to assume that God both rewards and punishes me – whether I can see the reason for it or not. When I make that assumption, my motive for good behavior is to please God in the hope – maybe the expectation – that God will reward me. In a similar manner, my reason for avoiding bad behavior is so that I won't displease God, or give God cause to punish me.

However, God neither rewards me – nor punishes me. God is too wise and too loving to do it that way – which forces me to raise the question, “If God is too wise and too loving to reward or to punish me, how does God respond to my good behavior and my bad?”

How does God respond? Dare I suggest that God does not respond to my behavior – certainly not in terms of rewards and punishments?

Of course, I dare to make the suggestion. However, as I do so, it becomes my task to explain what I mean by it.