

Heavenly Rewards. No Sixteen

Christians confront, in the modern world, the first powerful truly global culture in all of history. This culture has proved far greater a malice to the Gospel than all of the Christ-hating persecutors from the emperor Nero's time to today's communist Chinese regime. The church's greatest challenge in our time is neither political nor ideological. It is intensely spiritual and comes to the surface where behaviour and words express faith. As Francis of Assisi said well, "Preach the gospel constantly and, if necessary, use words." Are we meeting the challenge? Are we different from our unbelieving neighbours? Or do we watch the same TV shows, nurse the same grudges and share the same secular dreams of success and of material wealth? In today's world we cannot afford halfhearted Christian living. The church will not affect society if her members don't live with integrity and demonstrate their commitment to Christ in their private lives and in the public square.

Faith without works is dead (James 2:14ff.). Works do not save. We cannot present to God a balance sheet of meritorious deeds. The works James refers to are "works of faith." They reflect our beliefs. A faith that is not practiced is not faith. And the work we do for the Lord has eternal consequences. There is a saying that contains a great deal of truth: "Only one life, t'will soon be past; Only what's done for Christ will last." And what is done for Christ will last. The apostle John heard a voice from heaven say, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."

"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them"(Rev. 14:13). Whatever we have done in this world in the name of Christ will be remembered. We will even be rewarded for our deeds! Reformed theologians call this reward a "reward of grace." We don't deserve a reward but God gives one anyway. We should not be surprised about this teaching. Our Lord Himself frequently spoke about rewards in the life to come. "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."(Matt.5: 12) He also commanded us to store up treasures in heaven (Matt.6: 19). And He said that "if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward"(Matt.10: 42). Did Jesus teach a doctrine of salvation by works? Not at all! He calls us heirs of the kingdom, children of the heavenly Father who have been given salvation. But He does reveal a strong and vital connection between faith and works, between work and reward. A heavenly reward is promised to encourage us to greater obedience and faithfulness, to make a real Christ-like difference in our world. All the saints in heaven are perfectly blessed. But not all have reached the same state of glory. Whoever received much and did much will be given much.