

“Rewards”
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
February 7, 2021
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The trouble with rewards is - - they sometimes overshadow the achievement they are intended to acknowledge. / Rewards are secondary, by definition. / Rewards are given in response to an achievement, some service, some effort - - as an acknowledgement. /

But have you ever known anyone who sat on their couch becoming more out of shape - - while their high school trophies sat on a shelf behind them? / Sometimes trophies - - or reward money - - becomes an end in itself.

When it does, problems are just around the corner.

The problems arise because - - awards are not intended to be ends in themselves.

But they often are!

From Oscars to Super Bowl rings - - to little league trophies...

We like our awards and our rewards.

In movies and in real life...

reward money for outlaws - - motivates people to take risks.

But according to Paul in the Bible - - that gets things backward. / Rewards and awards are not ends in themselves. / And Paul says that to live faithfully we should not work for earthly rewards - - but for things that are eternal.

Imagine if the Scarecrow in Wizard of Oz had decided that his long awaited diploma was all that mattered: Once he received it - - he might have stopped using his brain! / Or if the “Cowardly Lion”, so called, had put his medal on a wall - - and sat back and let the Wicked Witch go about her business. / And could the Tin Man really ever have stopped loving - - just because someone acknowledged that he had a heart?

Would Tin Man really ever have NOT loved - - if he had never met the Wizard?

Love is its own reward - - right?

According to Paul in his first letter to Corinth - - in the Bible - - preaching the Gospel is like that - - it is its own reward. / A few verses later he says that we run the race of life and faith - - for an imperishable reward - - that is - - for something that lasts forever and does not decay. / So while Paul uses the language of rewards - - he points out the limitations of rewards while doing so.

Rewards are secondary.

Effort and accomplishment and service are primary.

Many of you were probably captivated by the inauguration of President Biden and Vice-President Harris a few weeks ago. / The event itself took place first. / Within 24 hours there was a lot of work and service and effort to engage - - and there is a lot more to come. / But for a few hours on the afternoon of January 20 there were some traditions to observe - - including presenting Biden and Harris with crystal vases. / They each received one - - which was made in the Lenox factory not too far from Scranton, Pennsylvania. / They were from you and me.

These vases were presented by the inaugural committee on behalf of the American people. / A similar piece of crystal was given to George Herbert Walker Bush years ago.

They are nice vases.

But can anyone imagine Biden, or Harris, or George Bush for that matter - - saying that they ran for president because - - they hoped to receive a Lenox crystal vase?!

Rewards should not be ends in themselves.

And many times unacknowledged heroes do a lot.

Jimmy Carter has written about unacknowledged heroes in a poem...

This poem is called: "The More Things Change"

It was written by Carter in 1995 and is in his book: "Always a Reckoning"

"In a musty attic box I found
letters of my family in the War - -
from places like Bull Run and Gettysburg
and places seldom mentioned in the books.

They said Jeb Stuart had praised some of them,
who served a cause and often gave their lives...
They gave their lives
not knowing how to tell the history
they made - - except from a private's point of view
set down in a simple line or two:

"We have about a half enough to eat,
green beef and flour, but very little salt.
Our company left Savannah heading north,
there was a hundred twenty-five of us,
but since then many of my friends have died.
So now they's only thirty-six to fight.
I tell you Mother, I am well,
But I am NOT satisfied."

Well, years after those events, I thank God the Civil War ended as it did.

I give thanks that some people were not satisfied with things as they were.

So too with many other struggles - - of courage and service in the history of our nation.

And so many other struggles of faith and dedication - - in the history of the church.

Paul's words on this sound similar to those of another leader recently who said:

“We celebrate not the triumph of the person - - but the idea.”

Whether the idea is democracy or faithfulness - - it is its own reward.

So says Paul in the Bible reading for today.

So how can we live our lives in response to these lines of scripture?

How can we move ahead in life and faith...now...?

Paul described sacrifices he made for what he believed.

He said he became weak, and imprisoned - - for the sake of his faith.

He encourages us - - to run life - - like a race we intend to win.

But winning is not a personal victory - - it is the victory of what is right and true.

How can we live our lives in response to these challenging words from Paul?

It seems to me that one way we can - - is to keep our priorities in order.

Do what we do for the right reasons. / Keep things in perspective.

Live for the service and the achievement itself - - not for the reward.

I have to say that these words challenge me.

Paul seems to say that there is a reward - - in receiving no reward.

And that our true reward is eternal - - which suggests heavenly rather than earthly.

It's pretty easy for me to get caught up in day to day matters.

And then when I do to let things get blown out of proportion.

And then - - I start to think that something like my electrical power going out - -

or losing my internet connection - -

or having my car break down - -

is fairly close to the end of the world!

It's pretty easy for me to see a frustration in some little detail in the office that way too.

Or some passing disagreement with my neighbor...

Paul might suggest - - that I do otherwise.

Maybe it's as simple as - - let the big things be big things - - and the small things be small things. / Which is basically what I meant by keeping things in perspective.

James Weldon Johnson inspires me as I think about all this.

He was a writer , civil rights activist, and he wrote the words to the well known song:

“Lift Every Voice and Sing”

Johnson is known for being part of the Harlem Renaissance - - a movement in the 1920s that elevated poetry and art created by Black people in New York City.

He wrote this poem called: “The Reward”

“No greater earthly boon than this I crave,

that those who some day gather ‘round my grave,

in place of tears, may whisper of me then,

“He sang a song - - that reached the hearts of men.””

To sing a song - - that reaches hearts.

That would not be a bad way to spend your time.

And like with the Tin Man - - no reward is really necessary.

Not - - to evoke the love of a true heart.

As we prepare for Valentines Day - -

Maybe we can elevate our thoughts with the words of another old hymn:

“May true hearts everywhere - - their high communion find...

...service is the golden cord - - close-binding human kind.”

We do need communion as a people and a community.

We need some kind of better unity.

Something better than the divisions of the past.

But we need a high communion - - not a flimsy one.

A communion rooted in hearts and minds that are TRUE and value truth.

Maybe as we move forward - - life and faith can be its own reword.

Maybe we can run toward eternal things.

And maybe we can even sing.

May it be so,

Amen