

Toxic Faith (Part II - Messed Up Spirituality)
“Charity Is Its Own Reward”
February 13, 2011

Good morning everyone.

As Brad said, today we're starting the second half of our *Toxic Faith* series but, before we do, I just want to say "thank you" to everyone who has gone out of their way to tell me that this series has been helpful to you in some way. It's been encouraging to me to hear people say "I've never heard it put like that before" or "I've never thought of it that way" and more importantly "this is going change the way I think about this issue or about God or myself or other people in the future."

It's encouraging to hear that because that's what Jesus was hoping would happen when

he went around preaching "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe this good news."ⁱ

And I know I talk about that scripture all the time but that was Jesus' main message. "Stop believing and thinking about and relating to God in ways that make Him seem dead and distant from your life. Repent – change your thinking – and believe the truth that He is nearer to you ... more loving towards you ... more gracious towards you ... than you would ever imagine. Believe it," Jesus said, "because I am here as living proof that it really is true."

It's always encouraging to me when people get hold of that truth because that's how our lives change. We begin to think in new ways and then we act in new ways. We begin to trust God more, so we listen to God more, we obey God more and, as a result, we

experience God more.

And, with that as our context, I want to talk to you this morning about a belief that many of us have when it comes to this issue of charity and good deeds; a belief we just saw illustrated in the clip from *Friends* (and I must say it blew my mind when, in a planning meeting a few weeks ago, Rob said, "Hey, I remember an episode of *Friends* that was about this exact issue." Who'd a thunk it?)

Anyway, I want to talk to you about this particular belief because it's a way of thinking that negatively affects how we look at giving and serving. And it's a way of thinking that many of us need to change because it's simply *not* what God says.

Here it is: “Charity is its own reward (or, at least, it ought to be).”

Have you ever heard anyone say that? Ever thought that yourself?

Now, you may not have heard it expressed in those exact words. You might have heard it in phrases like ...

“You ought to do what’s good and right, simply because it *is* good and right, not because it benefits you in some way.”

Or ...

“Any good deed that furthers your own self-interest isn’t true benevolence” ...

... which, in essence, is what Phoebe was saying to Joey in the *Friends* clip: “This isn’t a good deed; you just want to get on TV.”

Or ...

“If you get something in return, it might be a good deed, but it doesn’t really ‘count.’”

When I first got out on my own in my early 20s and did my taxes for the first time, I discovered something quite amazing. The government of the United States of America and the government of the Great State of Texas were actually going to allow me to reduce my taxable income by the amount I had given ... out of the goodwill and kindness of my heart ... to my church!

At first, I was thrilled. “This is too good to be true,” I thought. I mean, who doesn’t want to pay less in taxes? But then it hit me. “Wait a minute. I gave that money to God with no strings attached. Does claiming it on my income tax somehow ‘ruin it’?”

And I asked some friends, who were a little older and wiser in the faith than I was, what

they did about their contributions and their tax forms and they had no problem with it. So, I went ahead and claimed the deduction, but, for several years, I can remember wondering "what if it doesn't really 'count' with God?"

Though I wouldn't have expressed it as such, I believed "charity ought to be its own reward."

Why We Believe It

Of course, the question is ... where do we get this idea? Why do we believe it?

I suppose the simple answer is that we've all been indoctrinated in the thinking of 19th century western philosophers like Immanuel Kant ...

... who held that ...

“An action is moral only if one has no desire to perform it, but performs it out of a sense of duty and derives no benefit from it of any sort, neither material nor spiritual. A benefit destroys the moral value of an action.”ⁱⁱ

But I think there are more practical reasons we believe that charity is (or at least ought to be) its own reward.

1. The first is that bad things can happen when it isn't.

When too much self-interest gets mixed up with something that's supposed to be for someone else's benefit, some kind of abuse often follows.

And if you've turned on the TV in the past couple of days you've seen a great example of this. The big issue in Egypt – the problem

the people had with Mubarak – was this: He assumed power over 30 years ago – supposedly for the good of the people – immediately following the assassination of Anwar Sadat. It was a perilous time in Egypt and what he did as a high-ranking military officer was probably the right thing to do at the time for the country.

But, eventually, Mubarak discovered that power could also benefit himself, his family and his friends. And he took advantage of it. He began serving his own *selfish* interest at the same time he was proclaiming that he was working for the benefit of the people.

And 30 years later, he had amassed billions of dollars in personal wealth that had come at the expense of millions of people he was “serving”; millions of people who were living in poverty because of his policies. And that was a bad thing. He was selfish.

I think another reason we believe that charity is or ought to be its own reward is that ...

2. We can feel deceived or manipulated when it isn't.

When something that seems like it's motivated by benevolence turns out to be more about self-interest, there's often a big letdown, isn't there.

One of the things that everyone worried about in the Egyptian crisis was what would happen to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel if Mubarak left. So, it was a great relief to many when the Egyptian military announced that they intended to honor that treaty, which, of course, seems like the right thing to do no matter what.

And I was pretty impressed by that until I read this little blurb in the Kansas City Star:

“Egypt's military strongly supports the peace deal, not in small part because it guarantees U.S. aid for the armed forces, currently running at \$1.3 billion a year.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, I'm not saying that it's the *intention* of the Egyptian military to deceive and manipulate. I'm just describing a little bit of the letdown in discovering that it's not all about “just doing the right thing.”

The same kind of feeling happens when corporations combine business with charity. You wonder, “do they really care or is this just another way to make a buck?”

I recently read an article that talked about how, in 2008, *Applebee's* restaurants nationwide held more than 15,000 fundraisers for charitable causes. The

executive director of corporate communications for Applebee's was quoted as saying ...

"Franchisees hold fundraisers for all the right social reasons but we also think there's a *very strong strategic business reason* to be involved."^{iv}

And that reason, of course, is they want your money. They want your money. And participating in charitable causes is a roundabout way for them to get it. It feels a little manipulative when you realize that.

Now, again, I'm not saying it's the *intention* of Applebee's or any other corporation to do that. But if charity truly was its own reward – if that is the rule that we all play by - if there was nothing else for them to gain by doing good, then you might not have that little doubt.

But there's one more reason we believe that charity ought to be its own reward. And this is a big one especially for people who follow Christ.

3. The Bible seems to tell us so.

The Bible seems to agree with Phoebe (and with Kant for that matter) – that if a good deed has any personal benefit to it, then it really doesn't count as a truly good deed.

After all, didn't Jesus say ...

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? [You're just serving your own self-interest]. Even sinners love those who love them.

And if you do good to those

who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that.

And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.

Instead, Jesus said, you ought to ...

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Luke 6:32-35 (NIV)

It sounds like Jesus is saying that the truly good deeds are those that are totally devoid of any form of self-interest whatsoever.

And then, of course, Jesus had a lot to say in his Sermon on the Mount about the

motivation behind a good deed.

For instance he said ...

*When you give to the needy,
do not announce it with
trumpets, as the hypocrites
do in the synagogues and on
the streets, to be honored by
others ...*

In fact ...

*... do not let your left hand
know what your right hand is
doing, so that your giving is
done in secret.*

For instance, he said ...

*When you pray, do not be like
the hypocrites, for they love
to pray standing in the
synagogues and on the street
corners to be seen by others
...*

In fact ...

... when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Matthew 6:1-5 (NIV)

It sounds like Jesus is saying “make sure that giving or praying – or anything else you do – doesn’t serve to make you look good in front of others” ... which, of course, would be in your self-interest.

And a lot of Christians take that pretty seriously. In fact, when I first became a Christian (at about 15 years old), my family wasn’t a church-going family, so I wasn’t used to the whole “church experience.” And the first couple of times I was in a church service and the choir or an individual did some type of special music, I was very

confused because no one applauded when they were finished! I thought, "Wow, tough crowd. I didn't think it was *that* bad!"

So, I asked some of my friends "why does no one ever clap in church?" and they told me "well, if you applaud, you're giving glory to the person instead of God. And they don't want you to do that. They don't want to be recognized for what they just did because it might look like they were doing it to make themselves look good."

I said, "Oh, OK" although I couldn't quite connect the dots, especially because, even though you couldn't *clap* for someone, you *could* say "amen" really loud if you wanted; twice if they were really good. After a while it seemed to me that the effect of a person getting a lot of "Amens" wasn't much different from getting applause.

Anyway ... it was like that in every church I was part of right up until we started NHCC back in 1994. In the very first service we had – and for the few weeks that followed – I made it a point to tell people that “if you like something you hear or see in this service, it’s OK to applaud” because *that’s what people do in this culture when they like or enjoy something.*

But, I’ve got to tell you: I was secretly worried that lightning was going to strike because I was saying that! That’s how ingrained this idea was in me.

- If you get something in return for your good deed, it doesn’t really ‘count.’
- You ought to do what’s good and right, simply because it *is* good and right, not because it benefits you in some way.
- Charity is or ought to be its own reward.

Maybe that idea is ingrained in you, too.

Why it's Toxic

So, what's wrong with it? Why is it toxic? And how will it mess up the way we live out our faith?

I think there are three reasons:

1. This kind of thinking leads us to live in ways that are emotionally unsustainable.

And most of you know that last fall we spent quite a bit of time talking about how to live an emotionally *sustainable* life, and the fact that a lot of us *don't* because of what we believe.

- A lot of us believe that “loving and caring about others” and “loving and caring about self” are two mutually

exclusive values.

- We think of giving and serving as a win-lose proposition: “I have to lose if others are going to win.”

And both of those thoughts come from this belief that we shouldn't get anything back; that we should run ourselves ragged in serving and giving to others. “Serving is supposed to cost,” we tell ourselves. “Giving is supposed to hurt. That's what makes it count.”

But, as we learned last fall, that's just craziness. And it's emotionally unsustainable.

The second reason this kind of thinking is toxic is that ...

2. It produces a “pretentious piety.”

And what I mean by that is that you *act* like you're "spiritual" on the outside even though you're pretty sure that you're not on the inside.

Pretentious piety says that "even though I really would *like* to get something out of giving or serving – and maybe not even money or recognition – I need to *pretend* that I wouldn't want anything out of it." You deny that such a longing exists which makes you look really spiritual.

Pretentious piety says that "even though I do feel really good about giving or serving, I have to pretend I don't." That was the trap Phoebe fell into at the end of the *Friends* clip.

Pretentious piety says that "if I've learned something from obeying God; if I've been blessed in some way because of it, I really can't tell anyone about that, I can't really

give a testimony because people might think I just want them to think how great I am, that I'm just patting myself on the back." I've seen that happen a lot in ministry whenever I ask people to talk about how God has blessed them because they've become generous givers like the Bible tells us to be. People are very hesitant to do so because by looking like they *might be* really spiritual, in the end, it might make them look like they're *really un-spiritual* because they're showing off.

Do you see how crazy the thinking gets?

But there's one more reason why the belief that "charity is or ought to be its own reward" is toxic. And this is the biggest one:

3. It completely devalues the greatest incentive the Bible presents for doing what God says to do: the promise of *reward*.

And because that incentive is devalued we don't give and serve as we could, and we end up losing out on the blessings that God desires for us both in this life and in the life to come. And we'll see that in just a minute.

It's kind of like saying to someone, "you know, you really don't need water. It's not all that important. In fact, if you really had your act together, you would try to live without it." But because water is one of the most basic needs of the human body – we have an intrinsic motivation to seek water – if they believe you and follow your advice to the bitter end, they're going to die!

The same thing is true concerning the need to be rewarded, not just for giving and serving, but for doing *anything* ... because human beings are intrinsically motivated to seek some kind of reward in every area of life.

As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal put it:

"All men seek happiness. There are no exceptions. However different the means they employ, they all strive towards this goal ... *This* [happiness or some kind of positive payoff] *is the motive of every act of every man*, including those who hang themselves."^v

In other words, if there's not something in it for us, we're not going to keep doing it no matter what "it" might be. That's just how human beings are. If you don't believe that being charitable and doing good deeds will produce some kind of positive payoff or reward, eventually, you'll stop being charitable and doing good deeds. And if you do, you're going to miss out on the blessings God promises.

What The Bible Really Says

So let's take a look at what the Bible really says about this issue. Three things I want you to see:

1. God knows that we're motivated by reward. That's why He repeatedly appeals to that motivation (in scripture) instead of condemning it.

In fact, the Bible never condemns "self-interest" – acting in ways that benefit our own self. What the Bible condemns is "self-centeredness" and "selfishness" – acting in ways that benefit self to the exclusion or to the detriment of others.

Instead, the Bible teaches that acting in ways that benefit others and God is one of the most self-interested things we can do.

Remember that passage I read earlier where Jesus said ...

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Luke 6:35 (NIV)

The very next statement Jesus makes is the motivation for doing so. I didn't read it to you before (because I wanted to set this up right), but here it is.

He said, if you do that ...

Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Luke 6:35 (NIV)

"Do this – love your enemies," Jesus is saying, "not only because it's the right thing to do but because it's in your self-interest to do so. God will reward you."

And this theme – this idea, this promise – of reward runs from beginning to end in the Bible.

- Genesis 15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward [for doing what I tell you to do] shall be very great."
- When God encouraged King Asa to destroy the idols in the land of Israel, 1 Chronicles 15:7 tells us that He said, "Be strong and do not lose courage, for there is reward for your work."
- In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." (Mt 5:11-12)

- Jesus also said "the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." (Mt 16:27)
- Once, Peter said to Jesus, "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?" Jesus replied, "I assure you that when the world is made new and the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have been my followers will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life.

Matthew 19:27-29.

- When James and John come to Jesus and ask about being seated in the most privileged places in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus doesn't rebuke them. He essentially says "Go for it! Here is how you do it. Exceed all others at putting everyone ahead of yourself and you will be given the privileged positions. It was in their self interest to become the servant of others. It was not in their self interest to be selfish.
- Paul told the Ephesians to "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Eph 6:7-8)
- Hebrews 11:6 "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who

comes to God must believe that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

- Hebrews 11:24-26 “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God ... [Why?] because he was looking to the reward.”
- Even Jesus, the book of Hebrews tells us, gave his life and endured the cross “for the joy set before him.” See, when Jesus gave his life, there was a reward. The Father gave it back to him, raising him from the dead on the third day. Beyond that, the reward was the joy of saving and restoring and redeeming his creation, including everyone who would believe in him.

One author sums it up like this:

The amazing paradox of Christian teaching is that losing one's life is the way to save it (Mt. 16:24-27). Spending one's goods on others is the way to pile up treasures of much greater value that will last forever (Mt. 19:21). Altruism is in one's own interest – including God's own interest.^{vi}

God knows that you and I are motivated by reward. That's why He repeatedly appeals to that motivation instead of condemning it. And when you read the Bible, you can overlook it, but you can't miss it; it's right there.

The second thing the Bible teaches about this is ...

2. You can seek the applause of people or the applause of Heaven. Whichever reward you seek, that's what you'll get.

Remember that passage in Matthew 6 where Jesus says to give in secret; to not let one hand know what the other one is doing when it comes to the offering plate; to pray in secret. Remember that passage?

Here's how he sets up that whole thought, he said:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do (if that's your motive), you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
Matthew 6:1 (NIV)

That's the principle.

And then he applies it to people who give and pray solely for the purpose of man's applause.

He says ...

*Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
Matthew 6:2,5 (NIV)*

On the other hand, to people who give and serve for the applause of Heaven, Jesus says ...

Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:4,6 (NIV)

And the way we apply this is to think about serving and loving your spouse – so, if I'm doing this because I want my spouse to pat me on the back and say what a wonderful husband or wife I am, then Jesus says, you've got your reward. But sometimes your wife, your husband, your children, your parents, they are not going to say thank you. You're not going to get any appreciation, but

you do it, knowing that God is watching and God is going to give you your reward.

When I preach a sermon and my motivation is just to hear people say “dang, that’s the best preacher I’ve ever heard; that’s the best sermon I’ve ever heard.” If that’s my motivation, the Bible is saying that’s the reward you’re going to get. Now, I can’t help it if people say, “hey, that was a really good sermon; that was really helpful.” I can’t help that, but, if that’s my motivation, Jesus is saying “you’ve gotten your reward.”

The taxes and the giving thing, what I finally realized is the real question was “would I do this even if there wasn’t an earthly reward?” Even if the government didn’t say “we’ll let you take this off your income,” would I do it anyway? If I would, then I’m doing it for the right reason. But if I said, “no, I know the church needs money, but I’m not getting a

tax deduction so I'm not giving it." Or, if I give it just because I'm getting a tax deduction – God says, that's your reward. Thank you Uncle Sam.

The final thing the Bible teaches on this subject (at least, the final thing we have time for) is that ...

**3. Charity and good deeds earn *rewards* ...
*not salvation.***

This is very important. Salvation is always by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Heaven is a free gift that cannot be earned or deserved. We learned that last week. And we surely can't lose sight of that.

Unfortunately, however, I think that Christians are sometimes so afraid of getting those two confused that we don't want to talk about the fact that when Jesus returns, we who are "saved" are going to be judged on

the basis of the life we live after coming to Christ. On that day, the Bible says that some followers of Christ will see all that they have lived for, all that they invested their time and money in, go up in smoke, though they themselves will be saved. They never knew of or believed God's promises of reward and so they never gave or never served others like they could have.

Others, the Bible says, understood this truth, understood this principle. They took the action that makes sense and will receive great rewards.

In which group will you be? In which group am I going to be?

Conclusion

Now, after hearing all that, some people still don't feel good about the idea that we can

do good works while being motivated by a reward from our Father.

You could say, "Well, maybe Jesus and the Bible say that we will get a reward, but maybe we shouldn't think about that. Maybe we shouldn't focus on that." Please don't do that to God. Don't make God out to be a person who says, "You'll get a reward, but you better not think about it." That's doubletalk. The reason that these passages we just read say that we'll get a reward from God is to encourage us to not to fear or do good to our enemies or to give to the poor or whatever. It's meant to be an encouragement, so dwell on it.

Or, you might say, "Well, maybe some people need to look for a reward from God to do good works, but for those of us who are really spiritual, we do it without expecting any reward from God!" To which I say, "Are

you more spiritual than Moses or Jesus?" Because the Bible tells us that both of them were looking to the reward.^{vii}

Friends, it's time to repent of thinking this way. It's time to change our minds and start believing what God says. It's time to give and serve the best we can, looking forward to the day when the Master will say:

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Matthew 25:21 (NIV)

Let's pray together.

Endnotes

ⁱ Mark 1:15

ⁱⁱ Quoted at <http://www.joshhunt.com/mail230.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.kansascity.com/2011/02/12/2650769/obama-welcomes-commitments-from.html#ixzz1Dmp1OXv1>

^{iv} <http://www.nm.com/article/operators-find-giving-more-its-own-reward-charity-tie-ins-also-boost-sales>

^v Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

^{vi} John Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It*, quoted at <http://www.krusekronicle.com/2009/08/theologians-and-economists-selfinterest-versus-selfishness.html>

^{vii} From www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/whats-in-it-for-me-levi-durfey-sermon-on-giving-general-43353.asp?page=3