



Dear Phil

DEGREES OF HEAVENLY REWARDS?

Do degrees of holiness here on earth result in degrees of reward in Heaven? —Anonymous from California

Dear Anonymous,

First, are there degrees of holiness? Consider the tabernacle. The courtyard and all its equipment were holy, but the “holy place” was more holy than the surrounding tabernacle, and the “holy of holies” was the most holy of all. Scripture indicates the same is true of persons. When we are saved, we are made holy (1 Cor 1:2). This holiness is real, but it is limited. It has not been integrated into every facet of our thoughts and behavior. Thus, it is often the case that new believers, who are holy, act unwittingly in unholy ways. The Corinthians are a classic example (1 Cor. 3:1–3). The more our minds are transformed to think as God thinks, the more holy our lives become (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1). Holy living flows from holy thinking that is motivated by love for God.

Are there degrees of rewards, and are they connected to degrees of holiness? Let’s examine the New Testament’s teaching about rewards. Jesus taught that God rewards those who love those who do not love them (Mat. 5:46–48), do what is right without seeking to be noticed by men (Mat. 6:1), give to the poor without public acclaim (Mat. 6:3–4), pray in private (Mat. 6:6), fast without calling attention to their fasting

(Mat. 6:16–18), receive a prophet or a righteous man (Mat. 10:41) or give even a cup of cold water to a child (Mat. 10:42; Mark 9:41).

Jesus promises “great reward” (degrees of reward!) to two groups: those who are persecuted, lied about, hated, ostracized, insulted or scorned as evil for Christ’s sake (Mat. 5:12; Luke 6:23); and those who love their enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return (Luke 6:35).

Jesus also teaches that those who make profitable use of the capacities God has given them will be rewarded proportionally. The parables of the talents and minas (Matt. 5:14–30; Luke 19:11–27) are interesting because the master rewards faithful servants with administrative responsibility—“I will put you in charge of many things” (Matt. 25:21); “you are to be in authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:17). I infer from these passages that the rewards of Heaven are not primarily, if at all, monetary. Jesus rewards faithful servants by increasing their responsibility and breadth of service. Eternity is not about sitting on clouds or strumming harps, nor is it simply an endless praise service. Earthly work is preparation for eternal service for our King on a much grander scale.

Work in Heaven?! Don’t be disheartened! You can be confident that our Designer will so fit our heavenly service to our design that we will find it incomparably enjoyable and satisfying.

According to Paul, God rewards believers according to their works: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Rom. 14:10). The word “bad” in 2 Cor. 5:10 does not mean sinful. It means worthless or unprofitable. God will test the produce of our entire life by fire in order to reveal its quality (1 Cor. 3:13).

Those whose works survive the fire of Divine scrutiny will receive reward (1 Cor. 3:14). Those whose works are burned up will “suffer loss,” i.e., loss of rewards. They will, however, be saved (1 Cor. 3:15).

My favorite passage on rewards is Ephesians 6:5–8: “Whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.” In other words, everything you and I do as to the Lord, even if it’s slave-labor, will be rewarded in Heaven! (See also Col. 3:22–24.)

When we understand that holiness involves not only the absence of that which is sinful, but also the presence of that which is godly, then, yes, degrees of holiness here affect the level of our reward in the next life. The more our lives are filled with the fruit of holiness, the greater our rewards will be.

Sincerely,
Philip

P.S. For more, see my blog:
exegeticalthoughts.blogspot.com/ ■

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