



Rewards of Sin

Psalm 13; Jeremiah 28:5-9; Mat 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23

There is a difference between what we want to happen and what we can expect to happen. We want a rapid turn-around in our economy. We want gas prices to decrease. We want life as we knew it, but we know that the causes of our economic woes have not yet been addressed. While we look for a quick fix we know will solve nothing. We can deny reality, but denial will not prepare us for a future we desire to see. We reap what we have sown, not what we wish to have sown. Is it any different if we pretend that wanting God's blessings is the same as living so as to receive them?

Jeremiah was not a very popular guy. Somebody listened to him. At least enough people heard his message that it was recorded and preserved for us as a verifiable word from God. That did not mean his preaching drew a large crowd. The largest crowd was composed of those who ridiculed and mocked what he had to say. They took delight in telling Jeremiah and the rest of the population that his words were not very patriotic, not very encouraging, and not what they wanted to hear.

Unfortunately, our wants cannot change the truth. Jeremiah understood that the people did not want to hear the message God had for them. Jeremiah himself did not like the message he was given to share. There were plenty of other more comforting messages out there. There were those who said there was no way God would allow the nation to be carried off into captivity. The same God, *Yahweh*, who had brought the nation out of Egypt, into the Promised Land, and built it into a kingdom through David and Solomon would keep them from such a disgrace. It would look bad for *Yahweh* to allow the nation to be dragged off under the banner of the gods of Babylon. Surely, God would not close the doors to the temple in Jerusalem. It would send the wrong message—that *Yahweh* was impotent against Babylon. No way would God let that happen!

It was a convincing argument. For the sake of *Yahweh's* name and reputation, it behooved God to protect them from exile. Forget the little details about how Judah was supposed to live up to its own name as *Yahweh's* people. Forget about their responsibilities under the covenant promise. Forget about the fact that they served *Yahweh* in name, but not in deed and not in life. They wanted all the blessings of God's protection without worrying themselves over their responsibilities.

Jeremiah did not like the message he had to share. We call him a depressed prophet, for he spoke of gloom and doom and seemed to live beneath that aura. He wished, however, for a different message. He desired to speak of glory and blessing for Judah. Such words, however, would have been empty, for they did not match the irresponsible living of the people.

Sin kept them from seeing reality. Sin kept them from recognizing their responsibilities. Sin kept them imprisoned to a false sense of security against which Jeremiah's words came in warning. God did not desire to send them into exile, but they were not heeding their responsibilities before the covenant. They were not living according to the name by which they called themselves. They were not being honest with God or with themselves. The natural result of their actions was to separate them from the blessings of God's promise, presences, and covenant provision.

Sin is not one of those things we like to talk about—at least not our own sin. It can get depressing. We would much rather reflect on God's mercy, love, and forgiveness that mess with the

issues of our failures before God and others. Perhaps in part, we react to some who would overemphasize the question of sin to the point of reducing Christianity to a list of rules to be followed in fear, anxiety, and guilt. In part, we react in step with our society's denial of personal responsibility for our actions and advocate freedoms to live as we please. Between the extremes, however, Paul writes of freedom and grace, as well as responsibility for our actions.

Our traditions do not prepare us well to grapple with sin. We don't have a good handle on reconciling grace, mercy, and forgiveness with a sense of definite limits to our behavior. Either we condemn people outright for not meeting our accepted standards, or we deny the fact of any standards, whatsoever. Jesus walked a wholly different line. He never condoned sin. He never accepted that the lower standards we would choose were sufficient. Neither did he condemn people for failure to live up to his example. Somewhere between condoning and condemning, Jesus granted grace, mercy, and forgiveness in an effort to raise us from the lives of our choosing. Love and grace had the purpose of redeeming and enabling people to live according to a higher standard.

Freedom is not the absence of a standard. Freedom is the ability to live according to the highest standard of all. It is to live beyond condemnation, yet beyond settling for just any manner of living. True freedom is freedom from the bonds of sin with its natural rewards. Lives lived according to sin's lesser standards are lives enslaved. Paul would say that sin is slavery to empty passions. It is in Christ that we can be freed from sin's slavery to choose a better way.

Sin is not something to avoid because it is on some arbitrary list. God has a better way for us to live. Freedom and life are so much more than those things for which sin would have us settle. Paul says that sin pays its wages. He calls them death. We might phrase this in some other ways, but it is the same thing: emptiness, loss, separation, destruction, and slavery to uncontrolled passions. Its positive rewards are fleeting. They pass away into nothing more than the vapor from a steam kettle. When the moment is over, the pleasure is ended.

Jesus speaks of a different kind of reward. He calls us to living according to a pattern with rewards of eternal consequence and value. He speaks of a reward that is not lost and does not dissipate as a passing mirage. The life to which Christ would call us is of a wholly different character. It is not life according to the things we tend to hold so dear. It is not about personal advancement, personal benefit, financial stability, and risk avoidance. It is about living on behalf of others for a different kind of reward than we would naturally seek.

This is God's call to the church. It is God's call to the world. We are challenged to live beyond our selfish patterns of existence. We are called to more than seeking after the fleeting pleasures of the world. We are called to live for much deeper and fulfilling rewards than that which our failure to follow God's standards can offer.

We want God's blessings, but to enjoy them, we must be willing to live according to the higher standards of those blessings. We must become the people God has called us to become. When we refuse to shoulder our responsibility before God's call we deny the blessings God has in store. What kind of reward will we live for? God's standards are higher than our own, but so are the rewards. Which will we choose to live for?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*