Section 2 - The Rewards of Self-Sacrifice


Jesus’ remarks about the temptations that come from riches seemed extremely discouraging to all the disciples except Peter. The words had a different impact on him. They caused him to feel a measure of personal satisfaction. For he compared his and the other disciples’ conduct to that of the young man who came to ask about eternal life. He thought to himself, “We have done what the young man could not do. According to the statement just made by the Master, we have done what rich men find very hard to do. We have left everything to follow Jesus. Surely there must be some reward for doing something so difficult and so rare.” With his characteristic frankness, he spoke what he thought. With a touch of pride in his tone and manner, he said, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” (Mt. 19:27).

Jesus gave a full reply to Peter’s question. It is full of encouragement and also issues a warning for the Twelve and for all who profess to be servants of God. First, noting the subject matter of Peter’s question, Jesus used glowing language to set forth the great rewards that would be in store for him and his fellow-disciples; and not for them only, but for everyone who made sacrifices for the kingdom. Next, He referred to the complacent or calculating spirit which, in part, had prompted the inquiry and added a moral reflection. Then, He added a parable to illustrate it and to convey the idea that rewards in the kingdom of God were not determined simply because someone made a sacrifice or because of the amount of the sacrifice. Many who were first in these respects might be last when it came to real merit. They may have lacked another element which formed an essential ingredient in the equation, namely, the right motive. Others who were last in these respects might be first in receiving rewards because of the spirit which moved them to act. We will consider these two parts of the reply in order. Our present topic is the rewards of self-sacrifice in the divine kingdom.

The first thing that strikes us about these rewards is that there is a stark difference between them and the sacrifices that are made. The Twelve had forsaken fishing boats and nets, and they were to be rewarded with thrones. Everyone who forsakes anything for the kingdom, no matter what it may be, is promised a hundred-fold in return. In this present life, his return will be on the very thing he has renounced. And in the world to come, he will also obtain everlasting life.
These promises illustrate in a striking way the generosity of the Master whom Christians serve. How easy it would have been for Jesus to devalue the sacrifices of His followers and turn their glory into ridicule! “You have forsaken all! Please tell me, what was your ‘all’ worth? If the rich young man had sold his possessions as I counseled him to do, he might have had something to boast about. But as for you poor fishermen, any sacrifices you have made are hardly worth mentioning.” But these words could not have been spoken by Christ’s lips. It was never His way to despise small things or to belittle any service that was done for Him as if He were trying to diminish His own obligations. Rather, He loved to make Himself a debtor to His servants by generously exaggerating the value of their good deeds. He also promised them their proper recompense - rewards that exceeded (beyond measure) their claims. This is the way He acted in the present situation. Though the “everything” of the disciples (Matt. 19:27) was a very little one, He still remembered that it was their all. Having an earnestness that was full of passion and speaking a word that was full of tender, grateful feeling - the word truly - He promised them thrones as if they had been fairly earned!

If we believed them, these great and precious promises would make sacrificing easy. Who would not part with a fishing boat for a throne? And what businessman would not stay committed to an investment which would bring a return - not a 5% return, or a 100%, but the investment times the factor of 100 (a hundred-fold)?

The promises made by Jesus have one other major impact when they are carefully considered. They tend to humble the ones who hear them. The very magnitude of the promises has a sobering effect on the mind. Even the most vain person in the world cannot pretend that their good works deserve to be rewarded with thrones, and their sacrifices ought to be recompensed by a factor of one hundred. So, with this rate of return, everyone must be content to be debtors to God’s grace. All talk about our deserving anything must be out of the question. That is one reason why the rewards of the kingdom of heaven are so great. God bestows His gifts so that, at the same time, the Giver is glorified and the receiver is humbled.

These remarks have all been about rewards in general. Now let us look at the ones specifically made to the Twelve. On the surface, Jesus’ words seem calculated to awaken or foster false expectations. No matter what they were intended to mean in reality, there is little doubt as to the meaning the disciples put on them at the time. The “regeneration” and the “thrones” that their Master spoke about (Matt. 19:28) would bring to their imaginations the picture of a restored kingdom of Israel (“regeneration” understood in the same way that people spoke about a regenerated Italy) where the yoke of Roman domination would be thrown off, alienated tribes reconciled and reunited under the rule of Jesus, proclaimed by popular enthusiasm as their hero King, and themselves, the men who had first believed in His royal
claims and shared His early fortunes, rewarded for their faithfulness by being made provincial governors, each ruling over a separate tribe. These romantic ideas were never to be realized. And we naturally ask why Jesus, who knew that, expressed Himself in language that could encourage such baseless dreams. The answer is this: He could not accomplish the purpose He designed, which was to inspire His disciples with hope, without expressing His promise in terms which involved the risk of misunderstanding. Any language which is chosen in order to prevent all possibilities for misunderstanding would have had no inspiring influence at all. To have any charm, the promise must be like a rainbow. It must have bright colors and be solid and substantial in its appearance. This remark does not only apply to the particular promise we are now considering but, more or less, to all of God's promises in Scripture and in nature. In order for them to stimulate us they must, to a certain extent, deceive us, by promising that which, as we conceive it, and cannot at the time help conceiving it, will never be realized. The rainbow is painted with a variety of colors as to draw us (children that we are!) irresistibly on. Then, having served that purpose, it fades away. When this happens, we are ready to exclaim, “O Lord, You have deceived me!” Ultimately, however, we find that we are not cheated out of the blessing. It comes in a different form from what we expected. God's promises never lead to delusion, though they may be illusive. This was the experience of the Twelve and the dazzling promise of thrones. They did not get what they expected. But they got something comparable, something that their mature spiritual judgment told them was far greater and more satisfying than that on which they had first set their hearts.

What, then, was this something? It was a real glory, honor, and power in the kingdom of God. It was conferred on the Twelve as the reward for their self-sacrifice, partially in this life, perfectly in the life to come. Note the promise as it pertains to this present life. This situation signified the judicial legislative influence that the companions of Jesus had as Apostles and founders of the Christian church. The Twelve, the first preachers of the gospel who were trained by the Lord for that purpose, occupied a position in the church which could not be filled by anyone who came after them. The keys of the kingdom of heaven were put into their hands. They were the foundation stones on which the walls of the church were built. They sat, so to speak, on episcopal thrones, judging, guiding, ruling the twelve tribes of the true Israel of God, the holy commonwealth which embraces all who profess faith in Christ. This was the sovereign influence the twelve Apostles exerted in their lifetime and continue to exert today. Their word was, and still is, law. Their example has always been binding in every age. From their letters, as the inspired expositions of their Master's sayings, the church has derived the system of doctrine that is embraced in her creed. All that remains of their writings forms part of the sacred canon; their recorded words are accepted by believers as “words of God.” Surely here is power and authority that is nothing short of regal! The reality of sovereignty is here. But the trappings of royalty, which the natural eye looks for, are lacking. The Apostles of Jesus were, in fact, princes. But they
wore no princely robes. And they were destined to exercise a more extensive influence than any
king of Israel ever had, not to mention governors who ruled over individual tribes.

Without a doubt, the promise Jesus made to the Twelve referred to their position in the church
in heaven as well as in the church on earth. We do not know what they will be in the eternal
kingdom any more than we know what we will be. Our understanding of heaven is very hazy.
We believe, however, on the basis of clear Scripture statements, that people will not be on an
equal level in heaven any more than on earth. Political liberalism is not the law of the heavenly
commonwealth, just as it is not the law in any well-ordered society in this world. The kingdom
of glory will be nothing more than the kingdom of grace which has been perfected. The
regeneration that was begun here will be brought to its final and complete development. But the
regeneration, in its imperfect state, is an attempt to organize people into a society which is based
on the possession of spiritual life. All are included in the kingdom who are new creatures in
Christ Jesus. The highest place is assigned to those who have attained the highest stature spiritu-
ally. This ideal has never been more than somewhat realized. The “visible” church is the product
of the attempt to realize it. But it is, and always has been, a very disappointing representation
of the ideal city of God. Ambition, selfishness, worldly wisdom, and refined arts have too often
secured thrones for false apostles who never forsook anything for Christ. Therefore, we still look
forward and upward with longing eyes for the true city of God. It will exceed our greatest dreams
as much as the visible church comes short of them. Perfect moral order will prevail in that ideal
commonwealth. Every person will be in the place where he ought to be. No vile people will
occupy high positions. No noble people will be held back or doomed to obscurity and neglect.
On the other hand, the most noble will be the highest and first, even though now they are the
lowest and last. “There shall be true glory, where no one shall be praised by mistake or in flattery;
true honor, which shall be denied to no one worthy, granted to no one unworthy; nor shall any
unworthy one ambitiously seek it, where none but the worthy are permitted to be” (Augustine,
de Civitate Dei, xxii.30.)

Among the noblest in the supernatural kingdom will be the twelve men who cast in their lot
with the Son of Man and were His companions in His wanderings and temptations. There will
probably be many in heaven who are greater than they in intellect and otherwise. The greatest,
however, will readily concede to them the place of honor as the first to believe in Jesus, the
personal friends of the Man of Sorrow and the chosen vessels who carried His name to the
nations and, in a sense, opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe (see Revelation 21:14).

We believe this is the main point of the promise that Jesus made to the Apostles, who were lead-
ers of the white-robed band of martyrs and confessors who suffered for Christ's sake. The next
thing we notice is the general promise that was randomly made to all the faithful. Mark tells
us, “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or
farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the world to come, eternal life” (10:29-30).

This promise, like the special one to the Twelve, has a two-fold reference. Godliness is presented as being profitable for both worlds. In the world to come, believers who make sacrifices for Christ will receive eternal life; in the present, they will receive, along with persecutions, a hundred times more than the very things which have been sacrificed. Eternal life is to be understood as the minimum reward in the great Hereafter. All the faithful will get that, at the least. What a maximum is that minimum! How blessed we are to be assured by Christ’s own words that there is such a thing as eternal life which is given as a free gift, irrespective of the sacrifices made. We may conduct ourselves in truth and maintain a clear conscience, and fight the good fight of faith, when, by doing this, it is possible for us to gain such a prize. “A hope so great and so divine may trials well endure.” To win the crown of an imperishable life of bliss, we should not think that our Lord has made an unreasonable demand that we be faithful even if it costs us our lives. Any life which is sacrificed on these terms is nothing more than a river which empties itself into the ocean or the morning star losing itself in the perfect light of day. If only we could lay a firm hold on the blessed hope that is set before us here, and through its magic influence become transformed into moral heroes! In these days, we only have a feeble belief in the life to come. Our eyes are dim, and we cannot see the land that is far off. Some of us have become so philosophical that we imagine we can do without the future reward that was promised by Jesus. We think we can act the part of a hero by adhering to the principles of the atheists. That remains to be seen. The ancient books about the martyrs tell us what people have been able to achieve who earnestly believed in the life everlasting. Up to this time, we have not heard of any great acts of heroism or sacrifices that have been made by unbelievers. The list of the martyrs of skepticism has not yet been written.

The part of Christ's promise that concerns the hereafter must be accepted by faith. But the other part, which concerns the present life, can be tested by observation. The question, therefore, may be stated this way: Is it true - is it a fact - that sacrifices are rewarded by a factor of a hundred (a hundred-fold)? Is there a manifold (many times; Luke 18:30) return in kind in this world? To answer this question, we first suggest that the promise will be found to be as good as any law if we do not limit our understanding to the individual life but include successive generations. When providence has had time to work out its results, the meek inherit the earth and delight themselves in the abundance of peace. If they don't personally, at least their heirs and representatives do. Those who are persecuted finally conquer the honor of the world and receive from it the rewards that it can grant. Then the words of the prophet are fulfilled: “The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, ‘This place is too small for us; give us more space to live in’” (Is. 49:20). In another reference, Isaiah says, “Lift up your eyes and look about
you: all assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on
the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth
on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. You will drink the
milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your
Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. Instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and
silver in place of iron. Instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and iron in place of stones” (Is.
60:4-5,16-17). These prophetic promises, even though they seem to be extravagant, have been
fulfilled again and again in the history of the church. They were fulfilled in the time of Constan-
tine. The fires of persecution were kindled by the zeal that unbelievers had for superstitions and
idolatries. Then they died out. The promises were again fulfilled in Protestant Britain. It was
once popular for men to be prepared to lose all. In fact, they did actually lose much for the sake
of Christ. Britain became the mistress of the seas and heiress of the wealth of all the world. The
promises, once more, were fulfilled in the new world across the Atlantic with its great, power-
ful, populous nation rivaling England in wealth and strength. It was built from a small band of
Puritan exiles who loved religious liberty better than their own country. They sought refuge
from despotism in the savage wilderness of an unexplored continent.

Still, it must be confessed that if one takes the promise of Christ strictly and literally, it does not
hold good in every situation. Multitudes of God’s servants have had what the world would say
were miserable lives. Does the promise, then, simply and absolutely fail in their case? No. For,
secondly, there are more ways than one in which it can be fulfilled. For example, blessings can
be multiplied by a factor of a hundred without their external size being altered. This can hap-
pen very simply by the act of renouncing something. Whatever is sacrificed for truth, whatever
we are willing to part with for Christ’s sake, becomes immeasurably increased in value from
that moment on. Fathers and mothers, and all earthly friends, become unspeakably dear to our
hearts when we have learned to say: “Christ is first, and everyone else must be second.” Isaac was
worth a hundred sons to Abraham when he received him back from the dead. Or, think of John
Bunyan in jail grieving over his poor blind daughter whom he left behind at home. “Poor child,
thought I,” as he describes his feelings in that inimitable book, Grace Abounding, “what sorrow
art thou like to have for thy portion in this world! Thou must be beaten (down), must beg, suf-
fer hunger, cold, nakedness, and a thousand calamities, though I cannot now endure the wind
should blow upon thee. But yet, thought I, I must venture you all with (turn you over to) God,
though it goeth to the quick (to the heart of my feelings) to leave you. Oh! I saw I was as a man
who was pulling down his house upon the heads of his wife and children; yet I thought on those
two milch kine (milk cows) that were to carry the ark of God into another country, and to leave
their calves behind them” (I Sam. 6:7). If the power of enjoyment is the measure of real posses-
sions, here was a case in which forsaking his wife and child had the effect of multiplying them
a hundred-fold. He found rich consolation for his sacrifice and persecutions in the multiplied
value of the things which he had to renounce. The Bedford prisoner’s (Bunyan’s) words are the
very poetry of natural affection. What passion is in that allusion to the milk cows! What a depth of tender feeling it reveals! The power to feel this way is the reward of self-sacrifice. The power to love this way is the reward of “hating” our loved ones for Christ’s sake. You will find no such love among those who make natural affection an excuse for moral unfaithfulness. They think they have an adequate defense for their disloyalty to the divine kingdom by saying, “I have a wife and family to care for.”

Without over-spiritualizing the matter, then, we see that we can assign a valid meaning to the strong expression – “a hundred-fold.” And from the remarks just made, we see further why “persecutions” are thrown into the account (Mark 10:30). It is as if they were not disadvantages, but a part of the gain. The truth is, the hundred-fold is realized, to a great extent, because of the persecutions - not in spite of them. Persecutions are the salt with which things sacrificed are salted, the condiments which enhance their flavor. Or, to put the matter arithmetically, persecutions are the factor by which earthly blessings given up to God are multiplied a hundred-fold. If they are not multiplied in quantity, at least they are in virtue.

Such are the rewards that are provided for those who make sacrifices for Christ’s sake. Their sacrifices are only seeds that are sown in tears. Afterwards they reap an abundant harvest in joy. But what about those who have made no sacrifices, who have received no wounds in battle? If this has happened because they didn’t get the opportunity to sacrifice, they will get a share of the rewards. David’s law has its place in the divine kingdom: “The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike” (I Sam. 30:24). But everyone must make sure that they are not staying with the “supplies” because they are cowards or lazy and self-indulgent. The ones who act this way - the ones who refuse to put themselves out, to run any risk, or even so much as to part with a sinful lust for the kingdom of God - cannot expect to find a place in heaven in the end.