

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

## FAITH AND ITS REWARDS

*"For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Hebrews 11:6*

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THE RIVERSIDE  
CHURCH IN THE  
CITY OF NEW YORK

MAY 5, 1974



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## FAITH AND ITS REWARDS

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*Hebrews 11:6*

In recent weeks a religious advertisement appeared twice in our city's papers. The wording represents an inducement to try a particular brand of faith that purports to have connections with the Bible.

This is how it reads: "You will never be the same again. It will make you rich, happy, healthy, successful, loving and beloved! Don't wait for pie in the sky by-and-by when you die. Get your pie now -- with ice cream on top." 1

\* \* \*

This is by no means the first time the Christian faith has been transmuted into a Success Cult. Over and over the four gospels have been plundered for principles that could be wrested out of context and used for personal advantage. Jesus has been variously represented across the years as a master salesman, a peerless psychologist, a proponent of rugged individualism, an invaluable guide for anxious men and women in search of a formula for beating the system, and a model for those who would win friends and influence people.

Look again at the claims made in the ad: Rich, happy, healthy, successful, loving, beloved. Only two of those conditions have any claim to legitimacy; happy and loving. The Beatitudes begin with a word in Greek that could very well be translated "happy." "Happy are the poor in spirit...." Likewise, God's love begets in us a love for others. An experience of Christ should make us happy and loving.

As for the others, certainly Jesus was not rich nor were many of his followers. Paul was not a completely healthy person. He was forever being aggravated by his thorn in the flesh. Successful? Jesus was crucified at the age of thirty-three and most of his disciples died a martyr's death. Beloved? "The world will hate you because it hated me," said Jesus. (John 15:18) "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you." (Luke 6:26) "You will never be the same again. It will make you rich, happy, healthy, successful, loving and beloved! Don't wait for pie in the sky by-and-by when you die. Get your pie now -- with ice cream on top."

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In responding to this distortion of the Gospel, we must not overlook its merits, of which there are at least three. The appeal is to the individual's desire to lead a full life. Frequently in the church the individual gets lost in the shuffle. Too often the gospel is spoken of in the generalities of a diffused theology. Huge social, economic and political programs are tackled but not enough attention is given to individuals and their personal quest for happiness.

Moreover, the appeal focuses on temporal conditions. Only a myopic faith would deny that financial capacity and physical health are important factors in determining human happiness. Most of those who claim to be indifferent to health and wealth have both. The church has served up too much pie in the sky by-and-by.

Thirdly, the appeal is bold enough to promise specific benefits. It is important in advertising that the promised benefit be clearly stated. If I use this soap how will it help me in a way that no other soap could match? The promise must be specific.

I sometimes worry about our friends in advertising who have to single out one product in a given field and make it appear distinctive. Most dry cereals taste the

same, don't they? Yet the ads for a particular cereal will suggest that this product keeps fresh longer, has a different taste, and is easier to pour.

The question suggests itself: What is the Christian promise? With all of our multiplied thousands of churches, with all of the time that we preempt or pay for on the air, what is the claim we make? Granted the advertisement we have alluded to is uncomfortably crass, how would we prefer to have it worded?

In the Epistle to the Hebrews it is written, "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Let not any of us say when we worship that we do so for God's sake alone. Let us not look down snobbishly on those who are honest enough to acknowledge that they seek benefits from their faith. Whoever would draw near to God must believe not only that he is but also that he rewards -- that is, that he cares, that he is responsive, that he relates to us in our need.

Even Jesus was not beyond speaking of rewards. "Truly I say to you," he said, "there is no one who has left house, or brothers or sisters or mother, or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundred-fold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29,30)

Wayne Oates quotes approvingly in his recent book, The Psychology of Religion, a statement by George Vetter that warns against the assumption that people should come to God without thought of benefit. "The attempt to rarify religion apart from any tangible consequence, practical result, or end aimed to benefit us as persons is (a) the way to make religion insipid and uninteresting to people, and (b) the way to encourage people to go off after cults and sects that are predominantly focused on providing health, wealth, and freedom from undue anxiety for persons." 2

The fact is that we do nothing from an altogether pure motive. Even our coming to God is not altogether pure and altruistic. To expect it to be so is to confuse agape and eros.

Back in the 12th Century Bernard of Clairveaux, a respected and venerated monk, described the four degrees of love. The first is when a man loves himself for his own sake. The second when a man loves God not for God's sake but for his sake. The third when a man loves God not for his own sake but for God himself. The fourth when a man loves himself for the sake of God alone. The French mystic was honest enough to acknowledge that he had never met anyone anywhere who had reached that fourth degree in which a person simply loves himself for the sake of God.

There is always an element of "What's in it for me?" in religion. We ought not to torture ourselves unduly about the presence of self-interest in our commitment. Faith promises some rewards. Surely we would not wish that ad with which we began to be stated in opposite terms: "You will continue to be the same. It will make you poor, sad, sick, failure-prone, hating and hated. Wait for pie in the sky by-and-by when you die. Forego your pie a la mode for the time being."

\* \* \*

This leads to the question: What are the proper rewards of faith? It is good as we approach the Lord's table to reflect on the benefits that Christ has prepared for us. The Psalmist exhorted us to bless the Lord with all our souls and forget not all his benefits. (Ps. 103:2)

I would say, in summary fashion, that the rewards of faith are four. The first benefit is the assurance that we are held by a love that will not let us go. Have you ever noticed how those religious sects that meet in hotel ballrooms almost invariably speak of God in impersonal terms -- God as mathematician, God as

truth, God as first principle, God as life force, God as creative energy. Any who have known the warmth of God as person in Jesus Christ would find all of these disappointingly insufficient. He is more than mathematician or truth or principle or force or energy. He is love. At the end of the day there is no statement that the soul could more laudably make than the one Paul uttered in his letter to the Romans: "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, or principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38)

A second benefit is membership in a community. Religious experience is personal but it is not private. We all need to be part of an extended family, if for no other reason than to have our idiosyncrasies corrected. Most of us need our personal ambitions not fulfilled but challenged.

Dan Williams spoke to this in a convincing way in his book, The Spirit and the Forms of Love: "The meaning of sin is usually not that we try to make ourselves the centre of everything. That may happen, but it is a monstrous perversion. We are usually more subtle. We make our present state of selfhood the meaning of existence, and thus refuse the deeper meaning which lies within and beyond this present. When that refusal becomes refusal to trust in the giver of life and the greater community he is creating it is sin." 4

A third benefit is participation in a cause that is larger than ourselves which we generally refer to as the kingdom of God. Our participation in that kingdom is authenticated by the presence of God's spirit in our hearts. The intention of this kingdom is to join all things in heaven and on earth. It aims for the enthronement of justice and the establishment of peace, not just for me and mine but for all. God is willing in his grace to connect us with the Big Story. Instead of staying in the back waters of mere personal

ambition we may join him in his work. The exciting thing about faith is not what we get out of God but what God gets out of us!

The fourth benefit is an awareness of God's providence over our lives. There are three levels at which we are open to a knowledge of God. We are open to a knowledge of God in the physical world round about. We are open to a knowledge of God in the historical process. We are open to a knowledge of God in personal experience. Unless we know God in personal ways, the other modes hardly matter.

The person of faith lives with a sense of being guided and directed. Those who are closest to God never tire of telling of instances in their lives that can only be described as divinely wrought coincidents. These same people are quick to say that when they stop praying these coincidences stop happening. Presently, they moved back to a steadier trust in his providence. There are people within reach of this message who have stood at critical watersheds involving the choice of a life partner, a vocation, or a mid-career correction in vocation and who could rise to testify to the leading of the Lord.

But the important thing, even about this providential leading, is that it is always balanced by an awareness of God's actions in the world at large!

John Baillie was saying something utterly profound when he said, "I believe the view to be capable of defense that no one of the four subjects of our knowledge -- ourselves, our fellows, the corporeal world, and God -- is ever presented to us except in conjunction with all three of the others." 4

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"For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." These rewards are both material and spiritual, both present and to come, both personal and corporate. But



they are not to be identified with the dream world of any Chamber of Commerce. We must stand on guard against reducing God to a vending machine to which the act of faith is as the dropping of a coin.

I close with a word that I wish you to meditate upon as we near the table of our Lord. It comes from a perceptive prophet of the church who deserves to be better known, the Rev. William Dixon Gray of Nashville, Tennessee. "The man who believes in God because God has blessed him has the same estimate of God as the man who does not believe in God because God has not blessed him. Lost from truth by way of his conceit is the man who believes that it is his good life that has induced the favor of God. What does he say of people better than himself who have suffered many things, from whom, apparently, the favor of God has been withheld? Is he saying that God takes bribes, has his price, can be bought? The man who praises God simply because God has blessed him provides the man warrant who curses God because he has not blessed him. The man who stands in the midst of plenty and makes no provision for the poor already is separated from God and cannot know him. The man who lived to make God known died on a cross." 5

"Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. "The New York Times," April 26, 1974
2. Vetter, George, quoted in The Psychology of Religion, by Wayne Oates, p. 154, Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1973
3. Williams, Daniel Day, The Spirit and the Forms of Love, p. 207, Harper & Row, New York and Evanston, 1968
4. Baillie, John, Our Knowledge of God, p. 178, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1939
5. Gray, William Dixon, "The Gray Sheet," June 29, 1969



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