

Rewards in the Teaching of Jesus

by David F. Wright

Mr. Wright, editor of *Themelios* and lecturer in Church History at New College in the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, examines the misleading opposition to all thought of rewards which masquerades as a higher spirituality but which really is unbiblical.

A consistent tradition running through Spinoza¹, Leibniz, Schiller and Kant down to A. E. Taylor has indicted Christian ethics, and supremely the teaching of Jesus Himself, on the charge of self-interest. «At first sight it would undoubtedly appear that the ethics of the synoptic gospels are dominated throughout by the idea of recompense. Each of the beatitudes receives its sanction in a promise; many of the parables are parables of judgment... Even the most fundamental and far-reaching precepts of Christian duty are commended by the hope of recompense... If ever moral pronouncements were dominated by the motive of recompense — if ever mercenary considerations, albeit of a spiritual kind, have held the centre of the stage — if ever purely

¹ Cf. Goethe's approval of Spinoza's dictum, «He who loves God truly must not desire that God should love him in return» (apud G. W. Stewart, «The Place of Rewards in the Teaching of Christ», *Expositor ser. 7, no. 56 (Aug., 1910), p. 103.*)

external sanctions, hopes and fears were summoned to the aid of virtue — if ever, in short, a system of ethics was self-centred in its hopes and aspirations — surely, it might be said, it is so with the gospels.»² Such might surely be the impression gained from more than a superficial reading of the gospels. We do not well in denying all substance to such a criticism, however much its philosophical form is inspired by a belief in the possibility of a total disinterestedness which turns out to be a chimaera.³ Popular Protestantism is always in danger of shutting its eyes to the teaching of the synoptics at this point. «Under the influence of Paul and of Luther and of other teachers of the Reformation period, there is no doctrine against which many Protestant theologians fulminate more violently than the doctrine of reward... they hate what they call eudaemonism — so much good action paid for by so much reward — and they assert that reward is the sheet anchor of Judaism, and especially of the Rabbis. Man *earns* his reward in Judaism: the grace of God *gives* undeserved and unearned beatitude in Christiani-

² K. E. Kirk, *The Vision of God (Bampton Lectures, 1928)*, London, 1931, pp. 140-1.

³ «Plainly the temptation to pride oneself on one's virtue in following virtue for its own sake is likely to be very strong... We cannot escape the tendency to self-concern». L. Dewar, *An Outline of New Testament Ethics*, London 1949, p. 49. Even in Spinoza the «effort after self-preservation» is present — cf. Stewart, *art. cit.*, p. 103.

ty... Legalism, the hated red rag and unclean thing to Lutheran theologians, involves reward. Legalism and eudaemonism go together. It was necessary to smash Legalism to get rid of the bribery and degradation of reward.»⁴ What evangelical preacher of justification by faith has not at some time used words like these? On the one hand, the prominence of the reward-motive is asserted to be central to Jesus's ethical teaching, on the other hand it is execrated as utterly alien to the gospel of Jesus. The problem is set; what may we say in reply, in the elucidation of the true nature of Jesus's ethical appeal?

WITHOUT THOUGHT OF REWARD

We may take our starting-point from Bultmann's oft-repeated dictum, «Jesus promises reward to those who are obedient without thought of reward.»⁵ The truth of this is vividly depicted in the surprise of those pronounced blessed in the parable of the Last Judgement: «Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee

⁴ C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, London 1927, Vol. II, p. 40.

⁵ Jesus and the Word, London 1935, p. 79. Cf. G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London 1960, p. 141: «In Jesus' teaching... reward and punishment never determine the content of the moral demand itself»; and for a Rabbinic parallel, «Be not like servants who serve their lord on condition of receiving a reward; but rather be like servants who serve their lord under no condition of receiving reward» (Pirke Aboth 1:3 — Rabbi Antigonus of Socho).

drink?» (Mt. 25:37). Similarly, those who are bidden to invite to their table only those who cannot repay them in kind are promised, «You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just» (Lk. 14:14). To Peter declaring as the spokesman of the disciples, «Lo, we have left everything and followed you», Jesus replied, «Truly, I say to you, 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 hundredfold 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» (Mk. 10: 28-30). The reward is promised not to those who seek it (in any case it must be metaphorical, and has added to it the significant qualification «with persecutions»), but to those who act «for my sake and for the gospel». The reward is «so coupled with self-denial and suffering for the gospel's sake as to prevent a mercenary attitude».⁶ In fact, the disciple has no need to aim at the rewards; the promise *guarantees* them, thus providing the conditions upon which a man may have nothing more to do but go about the business of obedient love. «Just as «for my sake and the gospel's» interrupts any prudentially dependable connexion between «losing

life» and «finding it» («Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it», Mk. 8:35), so it indicates what monopolizes the disciple's orientation, engrossing his whole subjective intention».⁷ Sayings of like character abound in the teaching of Jesus: «He who receives a prophet *because he is a prophet* shall receive a prophet's reward... And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water *because he is a disciple*, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward» (Mt. 10:41-42); «Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink *because you bear the name of Christ*, will by no means lose his reward» (Mk. 9: 41). In each case, the saying promises nothing at all to the man who acts for the sake of the reward.

SPIRITUAL REWARDS

Jesus definitely discouraged the seeking of base material or earthly rewards, and lifted men's desires to the spiritual and eternal. «It is no Mohammedan paradise which He promises them».⁸ «Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish» (Lk. 6:35). The hypocritical parade of piety with a view to

the plaudits of men receives its reward in full (*apechousi*) but forfeits all divine recognition. True piety is rewarded by the Father who «sees the secret things» or «in secret», which in the context (Mt. 5) must refer to the disposition of the heart. The rewards offered are only of value to people in a high moral and spiritual state.⁹

Often what is promised as reward is simply an inevitable consequence flowing out of the nature of the moral and spiritual world. A certain line of action, a certain disposition of mind, brings blessing *intrinsically*, now and hereafter; the result follows from the cause by a spiritual law. We immediately think of Jesus's frequent use of metaphors of growth — e.g., the nature of the tree determines the nature of its fruit (cf. Gal. 6:7-8). The reward or penalty is not arbitrarily added *ab extra* but represents the result already implicit in the premiss. Some examples of this type of teaching have already been given: those who love their enemies have the great reward of being sons of the Most High — their advancement in love for the ungrateful and selfish will progressively declare their filial relationship to the Father. The Beatitudes

fall into the same category, except that here more emphasis is placed on the givenness of the rewards as the fruition of the present spiritual disposition. «The reward is conceived as belonging to the same order of spiritual experience as the state of mind and heart which ensures its bestowal».¹⁰

CONSEQUENCES OF CONDUCT

Thus promises of reward and threats of punishment call attention to the consequences of our conduct, to the fruit our deeds inevitably bear. Bultmann expresses this in his existential fashion: «The motive of reward is only a primitive expression for the idea that in what a man does his own real being is at stake — that self which he not already is but is to become».¹¹ «Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever

⁶ Article on «Reward» in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas, London 1962, p. 1095.

⁷ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, London 1953, p. 134.

⁸ G. W. Stewart, *Expositor ser 7 no. 57* (Sept. 1910), p. 229.

⁹ «The rewards Christ promises are not such as to appeal to the cupidity of human nature» (Stewart, *art. cit.*, p. 231); «Morality motivated by reward is inferior only as the reward is arbitrary and external» (A. N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*, revd. ed., New York 1950, p. 89).

¹⁰ G. F. Barbour, *A Philosophical Study of Christian Ethics*, Edinburgh and London 1911, p. 231. Marriott has suggested (apud Montefiore, *op. cit.*, p. 42) that *hoti* in the Beatitudes, normally translated «for», has the force more of «and the proof of it is» than of «and the reason of it is». Cf. likewise Wilder (*op. cit.*, p. 113), «The blessings assigned... are not so much held out under conditions as they are immediately declared... They are in the form of condition and reward, but all desert is precluded and the reward is gift» (so Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, p. 140); and Stewart (*art. cit.*, pp. 234-5), «So much is it true that the reward is but the fuller realization of blessedness sought after in the striving for righteousness, that it is sometimes difficult to say whether the future or the present life is in mind».

¹¹ *Theology of the New Testament*, London 1952, Vol. 1, p. 15.

loses his life will preserve it» (Lk. 17:23). It is also interesting to find A. E. Taylor acknowledging that the Christian doctrine of final salvation and reprobation springs less from theological hardness than from seriousness of moral conviction, that choice is real and determines character, on which in turn is based happiness; happiness may be lost beyond recovery by persistence in evil leading to inability to choose the higher.¹² In Paul's words, «If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live» (Rom. 8:13).

REWARD BECOMES GIFT

But not all the synoptic sayings concerning rewards are covered by the above categories. Bornkamm draws attention to the relationship of the master and the slave in which context no idea of reward obtains. «When you have done all that is commanded say: «We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty» (Lk. 17:10). Rewards promised in parables to slaves do not possess the character of payment owed but are marks of distinction with which the faithful servant is rewarded as a sign of even greater trust. They are *praemium*, not *pretium*.¹³ (Cf. Lk. 12:35 ff., Mt. 25:14 ff., Lk. 19:11

ff.). And even when our Lord employs the illustration of labourers in a vineyard, He does so in such a way as to slay the idea of payment in the realm of God's gift of the Kingdom (Mt. 20:1-16). God's sovereignty is declared in His generosity in contrast to all human conceptions of work and wages. (Do we not evacuate the parable of meaning if we hold on to an interpretation which stresses that the labourers who were hired first *had* in fact earned their pay?) Reward has become grace, gift. «Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them» (Lk. 12:37).

THE ABOLITION OF «REWARD»

In many sayings of Jesus the reward has become grace through being so far in excess of the work done. This emphasis is maintained in sayings that leave the granting of rewards to the sovereign decision of God. «To sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father» (Mt. 21:23). Certainly, Jesus unmistakably repudiated a «contract» idea of piety, the ability of man to claim from God reward tit-for-tat, proportionate to his virtue. Sayings which in form imply an equivalence of reward to work often on closer inspection reveal the exceeding abundance of the gift. E.g., «Blessed are the merci-

ful, for they shall obtain mercy» (Mt. 5:7), and of course the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt. 18:23-35).¹⁴ There is some truth in the point made by some writers¹⁵ that Jesus found the idea of rewards current among his contemporaries, and made use of it but in such a way as to abolish it. In this connexion, Bornkamm remarks that «the origin and place of the idea of reward in Christ's teaching are to be found neither in reflection upon God's justice in history — just as the perplexing problem of «theodicy» is altogether foreign to his thinking and teaching — nor in reflection upon the merits of those who have observed the law, and their reward in the life beyond». The idea is now absorbed into the message of the coming of the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom is the treasure in heaven for which all earthly ties must be given up.¹⁶ «Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves

with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail . . .» (Lk. 12:32-3).

THE TEACHING IN CONTEXT

The situations in the ministry of Jesus when rewards are mentioned may have some significance. First, one writer has observed that when addressing possible disciples Jesus never mentioned rewards — in fact of the whole body of teaching a much larger part is taken up with the costliness of discipleship than with its favourable prospects. It is certainly remarkable that all the sayings inculcating disinterestedness in Christian discipleship given by Kirk¹⁷ occur in this setting, viz. Lk. 9:57-62 (=Mt. 8:19-22), 14:26-7, 33 («Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, «If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother . . . etc.»). The case of the Rich Young Ruler might seem to present an exception to this («Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven», Lk. 18:22), but the challenge to seek such a reward could not have been accepted without the total transformation of his values in conversion. Secondly, Jesus's «promises of reward to His disciples belong for the most part to a later phase of His relation to them, when it was before all things needful that they should be sustained under disap-

¹⁴ Cf. also Lk. 13:1-5, where Jesus repudiates the idea of the calculation of a man's sinfulness from what he suffers: no more than blessings are misfortunes in strict correspondence with deserts.

¹⁵ E.g., J. Stalker, *The Ethics of Jesus according to the Synoptic Gospels*, London 1909, p. 36; Stewart, *arts. cit.*, pp. 108-9 (quoting Holtzmann: the parable of the Labourers «kills the idea of recompense even while it applies it») and pp. 238-9 (on the inadequacy of the idea of recompense to convey Christ's thoughts).

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 141-2.

¹² Apud L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics*, London 1946, pp. 204-5.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 138-9.

pointment». Cf. Mt. 10:28,33 («Do not fear those who kill the body... Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven»), Mk. 10:28-31 («... with persecutions» — quoted above), and also Mt. 5:10-12 (the blessedness of being persecuted for righteousness' sake). In these contexts, both assurances that present suffering and trials were not the last word and warnings that the hour of judgment was not yet come spoke to the disciples' needs. (We might compare the place of the hope of glory in Paul, e.g., 2 Cor. 4:17, Rom. 8:18). In such circumstances a summons to disinterested discipleship is not enough — the assurance is needed that all their strivings and endurance will finally be crowned. «Hope of continuance and progress in the good life is freely recognized as a powerful aid to virtue». ¹⁸ God will not disappoint the earnest efforts of those who strive to advance the Kingdom. Thirdly, Wilder notes that the negative emphasis on vivid eschatological punishments and the invocation of these as sanctions for conduct, seem to increase when the rejection of Jesus by Israel becomes more and more clear. ¹⁹

ESCHATOLOGY AND REWARDS

This brings us to take notice of the prominence of eschatological considerations. Wilder writes: «The coming of the Kingdom in its as-

pects of promise is a sanction for ethics as well as in its aspects of peril... The positive sanction is the more fundamental (for Jesus came to bring life), though the negative sanction is the more prominent... Imperatives of ethical requirements... are normally uttered in inseparable connexion with eschatological warning or promise». ²⁰ This is the case even when appeal is made to the consequences of an action or attitude as its necessary outflow in the present, for often there is ambiguity and the *ultimate* issues of life and death are always in sight (e.g., «Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied».) Wilder would claim that Mt. 4:17 («The Kingdom of heaven is at hand: repent» justifies our regarding the eschatological sanction as at least implicit everywhere, even where it is not explicit (e.g., the parables of the Builders, Mt. 7:24-7, and of the Fig-tree, Lk. 13:6-9). Moreover, metaphors like harvest, treasure etc. had eschatological associations in late Judaism. There is thus a twofold eschatological reference: «Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come» (Mt. 12:32). Repentance is both present and future: cf. Mk. 10:28-31 («houses etc. hundredfold... and eternal life»). So to sum up, Wilder writes: «We

observe that with whatever sanction drawn from present satisfactions, the strictly eschatological sanctions do not fade into unreality in the least. The twofold considerations of blessing are retained: God's kingdom and His righteousness beyond; and all things added, here. In the world to come life everlasting; and in the present world, one hundredfold return for all renunciation. Here, mercy, comfort and satisfaction; in the new age, the eschatological salvation and vision of God». ²¹ It is surely in the light of the urgent eschatological note of Jesus's ministry that we are to understand the pervasive strand of His teaching in which He appeals to the deserts of a line of conduct, especially disobedience and unbelief, in order to turn people from it. For such a strand refuses to be explained away, even though our survey indicates that rewards occupy a much less prominent place in His teaching than a first glance suggests. Wilder quotes a Rabbinic saying, «Let a man always occupy himself with diligence with the study of the law and the doing of the commandments, even if not for their sake; for out of doing it not for its own sake comes doing it for its own sake», but this does not meet the «critical» nature of the challenge. Paul spoke of «knowing the fear of the Lord» (for «we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ», 2 Cor. 5:10-11) as

an impetus to the ministry of persuasion. It is the cruciality of Christ's coming and the division He makes for life and for death that justify His repeated use of reward and punishment language.

DISINTERESTEDNESS

From this angle, it soon becomes clear that disinterestedness cannot be the whole story in the realm of moral and spiritual appeal. «Disinterestedness is not a mark of Christianity or of the New Testament», says J. C. Fenton bluntly; «Christianity is about salvation, and it offers salvation to people as something that is to their advantage». ²² Apart from the inherent inadequacies of ethical disinterestedness in general terms, the believer in Christ is in no position to retreat from the light of the revelation brought by Christ into the darkness of the humanist's ignorance of the eternal issues of the character we form here and now by repeated moral choices. Jesus's teaching provides both the challenge to goodness which lays aside all thought of personal advantage, and the ground of belief that virtue will in the end triumph over evil. If righteousness and felicity will in the end be united, it does not follow that this is the only or even the strongest motive for righteousness. To seek one's own salvation is not selfish unless one's own salvation means another's damnation. H. H. Farmer has summed it

¹⁸ *Barbour, op. cit.*, pp. 237-9, 251.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-3, 86.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6, 112.

²² *Pelican Commentary on Saint Matthew*, p. 25.

up superbly, in a sermon on Hebrews 12:2: «To affirm that reward in heaven awaits all faithful discipleship to Christ is simply one way of saying that in Christ there has been given in very truth the final revelation of the eternal, unchanging, finally victorious purpose of the Most High. If it be said that I ought to seek the good for its own sake, and its own sake alone, the reply is: How can I seek the good for its own sake alone if at the end for all I know, it may prove to be only a will-of-the-wisp dipping and dancing prettily over the bog? Before it can command my utmost allegiance I must know that it transcends myself; that it has within it the promise of something even more lovely and even more worth while; that it is not subject to this corroding tooth of time, but is of the eternal. I must know, in short, that the faithful pursuit of the things of Christ runs out into what is not illegitimately called «reward». It is surely part of Christ's work for us that He is able continually to renew in us the assurance that there is ultimate victory for that divine love and holiness which He now asks us to serve . . . So far from it being selfishness to look for future reward in this sense, it is the only thing that can lift us above selfishness, and enable us to give ourselves without reservation and without calculation to following Him come what may».²³

²³ *The Healing Cross, London 1939, pp. 147-8.*