

THE CAPITAL REWARDS PROGRAM

Sermon, June 14, 2020

Texts: Matthew 10:40-42, Romans 5:1-8

"And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, Whom He has given us. At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." -- Romans 5:5

That verse relates to one final thought left off last week due to time constraints (*and due to my impromptu decision to read my policeman friend's letter*): When we speak of the Trinity, we normally use the order of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul's Trinitarian benediction/valediction we reviewed last week (*from II Corinthians 13:11-14*) switches this order a bit when he writes, "*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*" He puts Jesus first, perhaps to better express how we personally experience the Divine. Jesus Christ comes first. For it is *through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*, through His life, death and resurrection, that we may come to know *the love of God* and then go on to enjoy the family *fellowship of the Holy Spirit* who makes us family. When we baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, that is not some sort of incantation; it is a *naming* rite. We welcome the person being baptized into the Family, giving the person the Family Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the name we all bear, the name of Christian. And from that day forward we aim to raise and treat that person as a member of the family, which is what we are to do as a church family. Thus Paul's exhortation to "*Greet one another with a holy kiss*" which is a family kiss, a familial kiss to show we are family. I also meant to close last week by saying relax, don't worry, I'm not going to require we kiss each other. We're not even supposed to stand too close to each other these days (*unless, apparently, we are out protesting and/or rioting in the streets*). It's believed the heartfelt handshake or gentle hug became the equivalents of the holy kiss sometime during the sixteenth century. But the principle remains: Greet and treat one another like family, for that is who we are. Testify to your affection for one another. As you might do in a kiss, always look each other face to face, eye to eye; don't ever go behind each other's backs. Respect and honor each other as family, as equal heirs of the grace of God, and thus demonstrate to a watching and love-starved world "... *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*"

I've always liked the story of a Sunday School teacher who couldn't open the combination lock on the supply cabinet. She went to the pastor for help. The pastor came to the room, put his fingers on the dial of the combination lock, looked up serenely to heaven, moved his lips silently, looked back at the dial, and turned it to a certain number. He stopped, again looked up toward heaven, again moved his lips silently, looked back at the dial, and turned to the next number. He repeated the process a third time ... looking up and moving his lips, then turned to the third and final number, opening the lock to the cabinet. The teacher whispered, "*I'm in awe of your faith, Pastor.*" He smiled, and then replied, "*I have to be honest. The three numbers are written on a piece of tape up there on the ceiling.*"

Sometimes things are surprisingly simple when you know where to look.

Sometimes Christian faith and living is surprisingly simple, too, when you know where to "look." Let's look at our short Gospel reading from this morning. Christian faith and living might be radically summarized by the two statements, two principles, contained in those Gospel verses we just read: **NUMBER ONE: When you see Jesus, you see God.** When you see Jesus, you see God. "*He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.*" In the life and teachings of Jesus we can discover everything we need to know about God and His ways. **NUMBER TWO: When you see your neighbor, look for Jesus.** When you encounter another person, look for Jesus in that person. Ask yourself this question as you interact with other people: If this person was Jesus, how would I treat him/her? Ask that question, and then act accordingly! Respond to others with respect, with consideration, with honor, with compassion, with caring, with affirmation, with encouragement, with appreciation.

We've all seen the old TV commercials for the Capital One credit cards, with variously Samuel Jackson or Alec Baldwin or Morgan Freeman or a big hairy Viking asking us, "*What's in YOUR wallet?*" And the implication is if what's in your wallet is not a Capital One credit card, well, you are missing out on all the *rewards* you could be getting! Every credit card company out there tries to convince us that running up more debt is somehow a "rewarding" thing to do. Discounted merchandise, frequent flyer miles, room upgrades, cash back formulas, are all promised as our "reward" ... our reward for basically jacking up our already-huge monthly bills. For the record, let me state the obvious ... increasing debt usually means increasing *burdens*, not rewards. Now, I use credit cards and find them almost indispensable in today's economy and extremely convenient ... sometimes too convenient. But for the most part, all those perks and presents are dangled before our insatiable appetites and desires in order to draw our attention away from our ever escalating debt as we carelessly indulge and dig our credit holes even deeper. Ever increasing debt that's your **real** "reward" for what's in your wallet (*or. more*

accurately, for what's increasingly NOT in your wallet, i.e., real money!). A “reward” shouldn’t punish you; a reward shouldn’t add to your already difficult burden. A “reward” should *reward* you, lift you, elevate you; not further crush you.

Jesus promises rewards, real rewards, “capital” rewards (*“capital” as in the definition of that word: excellent, foremost, highest*), rewards that will bless and not further burden, rewards that come not because of what is in your *wallet*, but because of what is in your *heart*. And Jesus intimates you can tell what’s in a person’s heart by the way they treat others, and especially by how they treat His disciples. There are two implications given here: (a) those who receive you because you represent Jesus also receive God Himself, and (b) the kindnesses you receive, AND the kindnesses you give, will somehow, someday, in some way ... be rewarded. That’s the promise of Jesus.

The background of our short Gospel selection is that Jesus is preparing His disciples to go out on their first missionary trip. He didn’t sugar coat what they would be facing. They were about to go out into the world, and that world was full of *people*. Jesus warned His disciples pain and persecution, criticism and complaints, disgrace and even death would accompany their efforts to go out and serve as His representatives in that people-filled world. Author John Ortberg has a book entitled Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them, which he opens by taking his readers into a department store and walking us down an aisle where there's a section of merchandise marked, *“Damaged Goods. Reduced prices. All sales final.”* He draws the analogy that when it comes to the human race we have reached the Damaged Goods Department of this world ... every single human being has something that isn’t quite up to the original Manufacturer’s specifications. In short, there really is something “damaged” in each and every person in the Damaged Goods Department that is this world. Ortberg goes on to write we’re going to find a flaw in every “item” ... a zipper that won’t zip, a button that won’t butt, a mind that won’t open, a mouth that won’t shut, a backbone that won’t hold firm, a knee that keeps jerking, a stiff neck that won’t yield. That’s the “Department” of this world into which Jesus sends His disciples ... but He also promises rewards as they go out in faithful and loving obedience to Him.

First, He promised a reward for those who receive a prophet because he/she is a prophet; such people would receive a prophet’s reward. At first glance, this might not seem like much of a reward ... if you are familiar with your Old Testament, you know that prophets were “rewarded” by getting kicked out of their homes, swallowed by whales, suffering exile ... some were even killed. But here’s a short list of rewards received by prophets and those who receive them: Dynamic encounters with the living God. Contacts with angels. Profound times of joy. Real wisdom. Clear direction and purpose. Eternal blessing. And Jesus also promised rewards for those who welcome a “righteous person;” a “righteous person” is one who is simply trying to consistently do what is right. Welcome those who are doing right, welcome those who are encouraging and promoting what is right and good and true. Encourage them, cheer them on, receive them into your company; and you will be rewarded! Now, there is a sense in which righteousness is its own reward. When we manage to do something right the sweetness of that moment is its own reward, but isn’t that sweetness enhanced when others recognize it, welcome it, encourage it, affirm it? Yes, it feels good to do something right; it is good to do good, it is good to do well. And I think we can all attest that it also feels REALLY good to be affirmed by someone else when we do good! It is good to have your “right-ness” recognized, appreciated, affirmed, encouraged. When you do that, when you affirm someone for what they are doing right and good, well, you *welcome* a righteous ... a right-doing ... person.

We all enjoy rewards. Sometimes it is the smallest of rewards that can give us the biggest boost. If we are truly acting as Christ’s representatives, we will inevitably find ourselves resisted in this increasingly secularized world. Sometimes when we bend over backwards, we get pushed over. Sometimes when we turn the other cheek, that one gets slapped pretty hard, too. It’s at such times that we really need someone or something to bring a moment of refreshment into our lives; it is at such times the “cup of cold water” of affirmation and encouragement goes down really, really well. And if nobody is forthcoming with any such refreshment, well, sometimes you just need to reward yourself! Go buy yourself a donut, or go get yourself some flowers to put on your table. In short, give a cup of cold water to yourself! But also determine to take time and effort to reward others, to appreciate others, to encourage others. “Welcome” and refresh those who are trying to follow Jesus, those who are doing what is loving and right. Offer them the cup of cold water, the “reward”, of a genuine word of appreciation, of a “thank you;” offer them the refreshment of encouragement, offer them the “pick-me-up” of praise. Too many people go to bed at night thirsty ... thirsty for a thank you, thirsty for some recognition that he/she is working as hard as he/she can, thirsty for some encouragement. Offer a cup of cold water. Find ways to make somebody’s day and refreshing others just because they are being faithful to Jesus.

(1) *When you see Jesus, you see God.* (2) *When you see your neighbor, look for Jesus.* And act accordingly.

In so doing, show the world what's in YOUR heart ... and enjoy reaping the real capital rewards.