

81 – The Greatest Reward

John 14: 19-24

When people talk about serving the Lord, when they try to convince us to selflessly minister to others, they often assure us that our service will bring with it a deep sense of fulfillment. We will feel good about ourselves knowing that we did something meaningful and helpful. But in practice, such feelings may boost our self-esteem for a moment, but they rarely make up for the level of personal sacrifice that was required of us. So those who serve in order to get those good feelings, soon discover the result wasn't worth the effort, those feelings aren't worth the cost. Which, I think, is why some people start out with the best intentions of helping others but quickly grow weary of it. What they got wasn't worth what they gave.

But there is a reward that's worth the cost. Like a mother who quickly forgets her labor as she holds her new baby in her arms, there is a gift of God so wonderful that it outweighs the suffering we had to endure to gain it. This reward is seldom, if ever, mentioned. In fact, it's hard to think of anyone but Jesus and Paul (2Co 12:9, 10) who talk about it. But it is the greatest reward a human can receive this side of heaven. It is the gift of God's presence. It is that incredible feeling of knowing that He is there with us, helping us, guiding us, protecting us, providing for us, working miracles for us so that we can do what He has called us to do. There is nothing this life can offer that is sweeter. His presence is unlike anything else. And that evening, as Jesus prepared His disciples for the new season ahead, He explained to them that if they loved Him they would obey Him. Which, of course, meant that they would seek to live according to the truths He had taught them, and on a day to day basis, would try to do what they "saw" Him doing and speak what they "heard" Him speaking. They would enter into a submitted relationship with Him like the relationship He had modeled, for the past two and a half years, between Himself and His Father.

Let's hear His words again, but this time let's listen not only to the command, but also to the promise that goes with it. "The one who has My commands and keeps (obeys) them, that is the one who loves Me. And the one who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will reveal Myself [in him] to him" (literal) (v21).

And again, "If someone loves Me, he will keep (obey) My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and We will make a dwelling place with (beside) him" (literal) (v23).

Later that evening He added this statement, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and [that] your joy may be made full" (Jn 15:10, 11).

His logic is straightforward and easy to understand. He says, in effect, "If you love Me you'll obey Me, and if you obey Me the Father and I will be with you. And when We are with you, you will be full of joy." He laid out the conditions and stated the results. If we do this, He will do that, and if He does that, the effect upon us will be this. He is showing us the path that leads to the greatest reward of all.

Love and obedience

• DBS (Sun-Wed, Fri)

Where love leads

Love always leads to obedience. The person who loves Jesus, naturally wants to please Him. They want to do what He asks them to do. And, inevitably, what He will ask them to do will include some form of selfless service to people. Whether it's serving those in the church or those outside the church His will always leads us to people, and it's always costly. Once we start loving and obeying, He immediately recruits us into His great work of redemption. He loves, saves, heals, teaches and trains people through us. And there are so many who need Him, and so few who truly love Him, that there's no time to waste. He quickly draws us into situations which are too hard for us, that require much more knowledge than we possess, that have impassable obstacles in front of them, that demand time, energy and skills we don't have to give. But it is that very desperation that comes when we face those challenges that drives us to find His presence. We need Him, and we know it. We can't do what He's asked us to do unless He goes before us and makes a way. So, in our desperation, we seek Him, earnestly, sincerely, and with a focused mind. And when we do that, we enter into another promise,

"You will seek Me and find [Me] when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13).

When we seek Him that way, with all our heart, He always comes. What started out as an overwhelming problem, a scary step of faith, turns into a moment we will never forget.

The cycle of ministry

Why does a person have to love Jesus to obey Him? Because what He asks us to do is so hard we won't do it for any other reason. And what makes His will so difficult, is that it can't be done unless He shows up and does a miracle. Not just once. Not just the first time, but every time for as long as we do it. Time after time we are confronted with feelings of inadequacy, yet have to step out and obey Him anyway. And then, as we do, we experience the fulfillment of His promise. His presence comes, and we feel His love for us.



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You would think that after watching Him faithfully come to help us a few times we would no longer struggle with the question of our own inadequacies. We would boldly step out knowing He was sure to meet us. You would think that after His presence surrounded us and the joy of the Lord flooded our hearts we would never again pity ourselves for the level of personal sacrifice we've been required to make. But that's not usually the case. We seem to need to wrestle with our flesh each time, and I think there is a reason for this.

The alabaster vial (Mk 14:1-9)

What's surprising is that Mary of Bethany had to break the alabaster vial in order to pour the oil on Jesus. One would have expected her to pull out a stopper and drip a small portion onto His head. But she broke the container, probably by snapping the elongated neck in half, and then poured out an entire pound of perfume. As Jesus later explained, she was prophesying. She was preparing His body for burial. The Jewish custom was to clean the body, cover it with perfumed oil, and then wrap it with linen strips filled with layers of spices before placing it in a burial chamber.

The breaking of that vial of oil illustrates a profound spiritual truth. Like that vial, God needs to "break" us before His Holy Spirit can minister through us. We must be humbled and brought to a point of desperation. But being broken is always an unpleasant experience. It causes us to cry out to God for help, and really mean it. It brings intensity to our prayers. It focuses our attention upward. And again we become aware of how much we need Him, so we search for Him with all our hearts until we find Him. And then the sweet aroma of His presence becomes so beautiful we forget the struggle that brought us to that place. We become full, whole, at peace. Jesus called that feeling "joy," and the person who experiences that joy will always long to return. It's addicting. It's like a breath of fresh air. It's a moment of sanity in a world that's gone crazy. It's Him. He's with us, and His presence is so wonderful we're willing to go through the process again and again and again. The psalmist described it this way.

"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good" (Ps 73:26, 28).

Faith does grow. As we develop a history of seeing God's faithfulness, of having Him "show up" and replacing our inadequacy with His adequacy, those fears do grow less, or at least become more familiar. It does become easier to remind ourselves that He has never failed us, and then push aside the doubts. But the process itself of breaking and pouring out never completely goes away because you and I need to be humbled again and again. If we aren't, pride rises. We begin to think that it's our wisdom, our power, or our goodness that brings life to others, but those thoughts must never be allowed to remain. They are deadly, both to us and to those we serve. The alabaster vial must be broken over and over again in order to pour out the sweet oil it contains.

Reflection

Think about your own life. If you've walked with Jesus for any length of time you'll recognize the process we've described. You've been through that painful preparation and then felt Him strengthen you as you took that first, obedient step. You know what it feels like to be in the middle of a situation and then suddenly realize that God has come and is doing a great work. You've stepped aside after ministry or a mission and asked yourself, "How did we do that? It's just not possible!" You watched a meal you cooked feed more mouths than it should feed. You called out to God and someone just happened to drop by, the right person just happened to be on duty, the rain ended just in time.

And in those moments you knew He was with you, and you knew He was pleased. That's the reward! You had the privilege of being part of a miracle. You were there when His power came. You watched Him care for someone through you when you knew you had nothing to give. You were overwhelmed and yet it turned out so well. Nothing builds faith like that. Nothing washes away our loneliness and fear like that. Nothing brings a joy like that.

Jesus said those who love Him will obey Him, and obedience to Jesus will always lead us into selfless, costly, scary acts of service. But when we take those obedient steps He promised that His presence will always come to us in tangible, recognizable ways. We will feel His love and recognize His pleasure, and that's the greatest reward this life has to give.

Questions

- 1) Think of a time when you were present when God did a miracle. What did He do? How did that event affect your own heart?
- 2) Do you struggle with a sense of inadequacy or fear before having to minister? How do you deal with your fears? Describe a step of faith you've had to take.