

Principles of Life After Death
The Spiritual Meaning of Reward & Punishment

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, the theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven...” (Matthew 5:10-12).

Delayed gratification. Enlightened self-interest. Putting off what feels good now for what will certainly feel even better and be more enduring later. Is this what heaven is all about?

It definitely seems that way from many passages in the New Testament. And there is a certain logic to it, as we know from our ordinary life experience. Work hard now so that you can live off your savings later. Invest today, even though you have to scrimp and save, and you will be better off tomorrow. Eat less junk food, even though it tastes great, and you will be healthier and happier as you get older. In short, sacrifice now and you will benefit later.

The reward of eternal life is a huge selling point in the Gospels. It comes up again and again. And there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Christian men and women have made the ultimate sacrifice in the hope of eternal life after death. In fact, the principle of it solves a major philosophical problem. For if God does *not* reward those who live according to His Word in this life, surely He must reward them after death, or there is no justice! But if He does so reward them, then we can have confidence that He does really care and provide for us. We can also find strength to resist the temptations and physical threats of this world in the hope of better things to come. (Of course, the down side of this is that zealous martyrs may go so far as to commit suicide in order to hurt others if they think they will be rewarded in heaven.)

Still, when we look more deeply at this whole idea there is something unsettling about it. For if a person does what is good mainly for his own sake is he not acting primarily from a selfish motive? And if he is essentially selfish can he live in heaven? The two great commandments – that we should love the Lord above all things (with *all* our heart, and soul and strength) and the neighbor as ourselves – certainly argue against it, as do many other teachings in the Word.

Perhaps this is the root of the idea that good deeds contribute nothing to our salvation, but that faith, and faith alone, prepares us for eternal life. But this is unsettling, too, as it seems to suggest that it doesn’t matter how we live, when the Lord plainly teaches throughout the Gospels that it *does* matter how we live, indeed that if we love Him we will **keep His commandments**.

Fortunately there is a simple solution to all these problems – beginning with a deeper understanding of reward and punishment, and of course a more spiritual understanding of heaven. For a start, despite the physical imagery often used in Scripture, heaven is not a place in time or space. It is *a state, a way of life*, a way of *being* spiritually, *apart from time and space*. Once we get some grasp of this concept we can begin to appreciate how rewards and punishments work – not as judgments granted or imposed by forces outside ourselves, but as *consequences* or *extensions* of our own attitudes in our relationships with God and other people.

What, then, are physical deeds or works really all about? Spiritually speaking, it is important to recognize that good deeds, or any deeds for that matter, are not merely actions, since animals, robots or other machines can perform actions as well or better than people can. So when Jesus referred to people being rewarded according to their deeds or works He was not just referring to their actions alone but to *the internal or spiritual quality of their actions*. Indeed, He was very clear that we are not to judge according to the appearance but according to the inner reality of the person (as much as that is possible), and in making that point He very often condemned those who were hypocrites, that is, whose “good” deeds did not truly represent good internal states. (In this light those who say we are saved by faith and NOT by works actually have a point, but it’s a point that must be handled with great care and understanding.)

And what is reward, spiritually speaking? Is it wealth or luxury, prestige or the freedom to loaf around in a perpetual state of rest as compensation for all the hard work you’ve done before? Is it the power to rule over others, to be in control, to get other people to do all the work? No, of course not. We touched on this two weeks ago in the parable of the talents. The point is that when we see the real nature and quality of heavenly life as loving others *more than ourselves, and the Lord above all things*, then it is clear that in striving for a life in heaven we are simply striving for the opportunity to be of service without worry or fear, to be fulfilled in the expression of our talents, *to please the Lord and to benefit others*. And the *reward* for such a life is the joy itself of *being* that way and of being able to do these things without external limits or constraints.

In contrast, then, consider hell, and the punishment of hell. People everywhere struggle with the idea that the Lord – or anyone, for that matter – could be so cruel as to inflict *eternal* punishment on people for the sins of a relatively few years on earth, no matter how grave. We think of eternity as such a *long time*. In fact, recent surveys have shown that although most people still believe in heaven, many Christians don’t believe anymore in hell. It just seems so unfair.

But are they missing the point? If heaven is the joy of serving God and others, then hell is the opposite, which is the pleasure of serving one’s self above all. In and of itself it is utterly contemptuous of others; it doesn’t care about anything unless it contributes to our individual comfort, pride or control. Of course in this world this is moderated by our need to look good, get along, earn a living, and so on. But inmosty it is what it is. And if it were not for mitigating outside factors it would create nothing but conflict. Why? – because the people it affects are all aggressively competing for the same things, trying to get as much as possible for themselves.

This is not a place but a state of mind, an attitude. And yes, of course, as the days and seasons change in this world our attitudes also change as we learn by experience how each state feels and what its consequences may be. But gradually, day by day throughout this life, year by year, little by little we establish what we call a ruling or dominant love, a habitual or characteristic way of responding to the people and things around us. So we “settle,” our identity is defined, and we become more and more “ourselves.”

And then we die and enter into the spiritual world, which is *the timeless world of who we really are – who we really have become*. The outside mitigating factors fall away, we lose our natural inhibitions and we simply clamber for what we want. And we’re never satisfied! The love of self always want more. Its very nature is to despise others. So what happens? We find ourselves in constant conflict with others. And that is hell. Yes, we may have success in getting what we

want for a while (and that is of the Lord's mercy), but as soon as we run into the inevitable competition from others we are thwarted and we have to compromise or back off. And if we don't do either of these things we are "punished" – not by the Lord but by a more powerful adversary who puts us in our place. The situation is neatly summarized in a passage from the book, Heaven & Hell, where Swedenborg reports what he observed there: –

"Evil spirits are severely punished in the world of spirits in order that by means of punishments they may be deterred from doing evil. This also appears to be from the Lord; and yet *nothing of punishment there is from the Lord, but is from the evil itself; since evil is so joined with its own punishment that the two cannot be separated.* For the infernal crew desire and love nothing so much as doing evil, especially inflicting punishments and torment upon others; and they maltreat and inflict punishments upon everyone who is not protected by the Lord. When, therefore, evil is done from an evil heart, because it thereby discards all protection from the Lord, infernal spirits rush upon the one who does the evil, and inflict punishment. *This may be partly illustrated by evils and their punishments in the world, where the two are also joined. For laws in the world prescribe a penalty for every evil; therefore he that rushes into evil rushes also into the penalty of evil.* The only difference is that in the world the evil may be concealed; but in the other life it cannot be concealed. All this makes clear that the Lord does evil to no one; and that it is the same as it is in the world, where it is not the king nor the judge nor the law that is the cause of punishment to the guilty, because these are not the cause of the evil in the evil doer" (HH 550).

So what is life in hell, or heaven, really like? What goes on there from day to day? Or is there even such a thing as a day? The Bible doesn't say much about the details except in parables or metaphors. But common sense and logic tell us that what really happens is – *we simply don't really change from what we are becoming inwardly, spiritually now!*

So... will we live in houses like our houses here? Will we "go to work" or play games or sleep at night? *Is* there night in heaven? Will we be male and female, and live together as couples? Will we enjoy the senses we enjoy now? – taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing? Will we eat, drink, drive cars, or ride horses, or maybe just walk, or fly? What will our clothes, if any, be like?

The answers to all these questions hang on the same premise, namely, that we will not really change from the way we are inwardly today. The biggest difference between the natural and the spiritual worlds is that in this world the objective, concrete reality of the environment around us provides the stability we need *while we are growing and changing*, but once our identity and character have been defined the stability of our lives comes from within, not outside, and actually, as you can see with many older people, the physical environment can then be more of a burden than a help. Remember, it is the mind or spirit that truly hears, truly sees, or tastes or touches or smells. It is the mind that "creates" our environment (absolutely!) when it is free to do so. (Just consider how you arrange things even now in your home, shop or office as much as possible to reflect your own needs and wishes. This is *your* mind creating *your* environment....)

So in heaven if we want cars we'll have them – as long as they serve a legitimate use there. If we want horses, or fine china, or a certain kind of job, so be it. This is, after all, the world of the

spirit – the mind – and the mind unfettered can take us where-ever it has the knowledge and the inclination to go! Children often ask, “Will my pet go to heaven?” Well, no, not literally; not exactly. But if you love a pet you will have that pet in heaven because it will be a form of the love that is a part of you. And food and drink? – of course! But it will be spiritual food and drink, thus forms of love and wisdom that are delectable to you. And yes, despite the appearance in the literal sense of the Word, there is marriage – and even sex – in heaven. We are not men and women just because of our natural form. We are male and female from the inside out, and we will remain such in the spiritual world, serving, complementing and gratifying each other if that is our wish.

As for day and night, or seasons, what uses do these serve in the natural world? Day brings light for work and play, night brings darkness for rest and reflection. So these alternations will occur as well in the spiritual world, *but there the environment will change according to the mental state, not the reverse*. And it will of course be the same with many other things. So if we’re in a hellish state, well, we’ll be in hell: angry, frustrated, fearful, jealous and so on, working not because we want to but because we have to in order to get what we really want for ourselves.

Finally, it is worth noting that the kingdom of heaven is organized. It is not a random universe of independent minds. And the organization resembles that of the human body – not in shape but in form – so that groups of like-minded people gather in communities that may be compared to the various organs of the body, for mutual support and to perform related uses. What uses? – whatever uses we have the skill, the insight and the desire to perform! Why not? Every orderly and constructive thing that a person may do has the potential to benefit someone else, and to improve the “economy,” the welfare of his or her community. And the like-mindedness of the people in each community provides for the stability and continuity of that whole world.

The book, “Heaven & Hell,” is, literally, full of information about the spiritual world that you can read if you want to follow up on any of this. And based on that book there are many others available, even a couple of novels that summarize, illustrate or expand on the main points. But for now we will conclude with one simple question and one important answer. The question: – What good is all this talk of the spiritual world? Of what practical benefit is it to us in our present lives? (Might it not, in fact, distract us from rather pressing concerns for justice, prudence and good will on earth?)

The answer is that our idea of heaven – our ideal world – will qualify everything we say or do, not just as a preparation for the life after death but as an expression of our efforts here and now to live according to that ideal. Thus in response to the challenge, “Where will you spend eternity?” we may well ask ourselves, “What is the real quality of our present lives?” Are there things we need or want to improve? If so then let’s get on with it. If not, why not? The rewards of heaven and the punishments of hell are ALL about our present attitudes and ways of life.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 13:selections; children’s talk on Parables about Heaven
Revelation 22:1-14 & Heaven & Hell, selections from #499-507