*GOD’S REWARDS PLUS PROGRAM*

Revelation 22:12-14; 16-17; 20-21

May 29, 2022

Who doesn’t like to be rewarded? You work hard. You go to the office every day. Even if that office is in your kitchen, and you’re wearing a lovely top with floral accents by Louis Vuitton and pajama bottoms by Walmart plastered with tiny elephants.

We love being recognized for our achievements, and when these efforts are rewarded with cold, hard cash, or something that increases our discretionary time, we’re thrilled.

 This is why the business world is deep into “loyalty” programs. Would it surprise you to learn that 90% of companies have some sort of rewards program? Of course, all major airlines and hotel chains tout their loyalty plans: “fly (X)-number of miles on an airline and get a free roundtrip flight to Disneyland.”

But smaller fish in the consumer pond are busy, too. Shoppers needn’t look too far to find “rewards” just for buying things, even necessities. Buy groceries at Costco and get cash off your next gas purchase. Buy three grande, iced, sugar-free, vanilla lattes with soy milk, or versions thereof, at the coffeehouse, and get one free.

Well, OK. Since the text before us includes some of Jesus’ last words to the church and comes at the end of a biblical revelation – chapter 22 of The Revelation to John – and since in these words, Jesus explicitly mentions a ceremony in which rewards will be distributed to loyal “consumers” (those who have been “flying” with Jesus) let’s look at these loyalty programs and see which ones apply to us.

“See,” Jesus says in v. 12, “I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work.” This is the text, so let’s get started.

A points-based loyalty program is the most common, and perhaps popular of the rewards programs. Expedia uses it, as well as United Airlines and a host of other major businesses. The more one uses the product, the more points accumulate—points that can be used for free hotel stays or flights, for example.

In this text, we have the last words of Jesus to the church, and the first thing out of his mouth is something about rewards. “See, I am coming soon, *my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work”* (v. 12). Rewards, by definition, are favors or perks bestowed based on performance. Jesus says as much when he says that his rewards program is based on “*everyone’s work*.”

So it would appear that some tallying system is in place in the marketing department of heaven whereby points accumulate for each of us, and these points are directly tied to our “work” on earth.

We don’t know the nature of these rewards, but we do know, based on the words of our Lord Himself and the abundance of biblical citations, that the rewards are coming.

Consider a small sampling:

“For He will repay according to each one’s deeds” (Romans 2:6).

“For the Son of Man is to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay everyone for what has been done” (Mt. 16:27).

The question for those who work on incentive programs for the public is, “Will this points-based program attract and keep customers?” If you apply this query to the flight toward your future heavenly home, how would you respond? Does the promise of an as-yet-unidentified reward encourage you to be faithful in your work and service while here on earth?

If not, perhaps you might be interested in a different program.

There are tiered loyalty programs. A tiered loyalty program is a type of membership that offers customers different benefits depending on their rank or the value of the reward. These rewards give customers a goal. The higher their tier, the more exclusive and valuable are the rewards.

Jesus seems to indicate that some rewards will be greater than others. And throughout Scripture, this reward seems to be linked to *suffering.* Those who undergo suffering for Jesus’ sake are, *ipso facto*, members of a unique club: to these sufferers, Jesus will offer “crowns.” There seem to be several tiers or types or levels of crowns, too, surprisingly!

There is the *Crown of Righteousness*: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. For from now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day” (2 Tim. 4:7,8). Here, the link between suffering for the sake of the gospel and the reward of a crown is explicit.

There is the *Crown of Life*: “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1”12).

And the crown is *imperishable:* “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one” (1 Cor. 9:25). This crown, or garland, is given to the spiritual athlete who has strained, suffered, and sacrificed to win the race. Paul reminds his readers in the previous verse that not everyone wins this prize. The winners of an imperishable crown have suffered much.

And finally, there is a reward level that involves great *administrative* responsibilities: “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.’” (Mt. 25:21).

In the early 1500s, Johann Tetzel, A Dominican monk, used to wander from village to hamlet in rural Germany selling indulgences. He would set up a theatrical stage and urge the folk to buy the indulgences to get their relatives out of purgatory, or in some cases, to pre-pay for their own sins. He had a little jingle that was so popular, it caught the attention of Martin Luther: “When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

It doesn’t work this way in God’s Kingdom, and Marin Luther began a whole Reformation of the Church against such paid indulgences. Paid rewards is the one loyalty program that Jesus doesn’t offer. Neither you nor I can pay for better customer service, a bigger mansion in glory, nor the best rewards once we meet our Maker.

Paid loyalty, or fee-based loyalty programs, give customers immediate and ongoing benefits for a participation fee. Amazon Prime is the most well-known of the paid loyalty programs. But it’s not offered in the Kingdom of God.

Entrance into heaven is solely a faith-based, grace-driven gesture originating in the heart of God. Any rewards offered to those already working for the Lord are also offered according to the grace of God who doesn’t need to offer any rewards at all. The bottom line is that we cannot buy a reward. Jesus’ comment about being rewarded “according to everyone’s works” notwithstanding. Rewards are initiated by God. God offers what God offers. God is not compelled to do anything. We receive our reward according to the grace of God.

So, we have points-based rewards; tiered rewards programs; and paid rewards like Amazon Prime . . . and indulgences. And then there are value rewards. According to one source, “The idea behind a value-based loyalty program is to connect with customers on a deeper level. It involves donating a percentage of purchases to charity or welfare programs. The company can offer you multiple options of charities to choose from, or have one that genuinely aligns with your customer’s values. This program doesn’t actually reward customers. But it holds a special place of connection for them, as the rewards are used to benefit society.

This type of customer reminds us of those who labor in the vineyards of the Lord and do so with no financial interest whatsoever. They toil and work in their corner of the world for no other reason than to improve the lot of their fellow humans and to serve Jesus, motivated by love and gratitude. These are the nameless and faceless who serve God in anonymity in soup kitchens, missions, food banks, hospitals, neighborhood watch groups, and more. They model altruism at its finest and seek no reward. In so doing, they may be in line for the greatest rewards of all: the heaven of heavens, an eternity with our Saviour; a place just for you!

Amen.