

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
THE CENTENNIAL YEAR  
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“REDEEMING THE REWARD MOTIVE”  
JANUARY 30, 2011  
Matthew 5:1-12  
All SERVICES**

It has a name and it is a religious belief held by millions; they call it “**prosperity gospel**” or “**prosperity theology**”. But I assure you, whatever good things come our way are God’s gifts. We have not earned nor do we deserve the many blessings of life that we enjoy. John Newton, the great hymn writer called it “**Amazing Grace**”. These things have come to us from God as gifts of grace.

It is disturbing to see churches being influenced by the values and views of our surrounding culture, measuring their success in monetary terms, and equating God’s blessings with material abundance. If you want to experience unspeakable joy, try Jesus. Christ has shown us that loving God and serving our neighbor provide absolutely incomparable rewards, even beyond our imagination.

Of course, religion can sometimes seem to be all giving and no receiving. But our lesson today from the Sermon on the Mount reminds us that everything we do for God has its own reward. Every sacrifice you make is compensated by making you stronger in your faith.

As Americans we are hard wired into this concept of the “**reward motive**”. It’s a part of the American psyche. In our American culture, where freedom is the highest virtue, people are expected to use it to their own advantage. Here there is no class system where one is expected to accept one’s place. We are told that “**any child born in America can grow up to be President.**” The real message is that hard work and honest effort will be rewarded, but the more subtle message is that rewards are the only reason for hard work and honest effort. Thus, the reward motive is accepted as normal.

As a matter of fact, the reward motive, it seems, has attracted more people to religion than any other interest. For a long time the appeal was of avoiding hell and being assured of heaven. Now that's a hard sell today. Up against the appeal of the so-called "**health and wealth gospel**" it wouldn't stand a chance. No wonder that the media peddlers of this kind of message stay in business! Sure, other appeals may be less crass and more subtle, but there is something inconsistent, if not even fraudulent, in inviting people to follow the loving and suffering Savior for what they can get out of it. We all know that there are some people who will risk everything to follow Christ, in our culture today, but there are fewer individuals who are eager to take up a cross and follow Jesus when they know it may lead to suffering or a painful death.

We redeem the reward motive as Christians by our unqualified commitment to Jesus Christ. We come to Christ, not because of what he can do for us, but because of his unique and compelling worth. Don't come to worship thinking you have come to "**Let's Make A Deal**". Christ is not a deal-maker. Christ does not entice us, nor does he appeal to our lower nature. He invites us to become a part of his mission and movement, not for his own self-aggrandizement, but to help accomplish God's purposes in the world. Any "**rewards**" come as a by-product of our commitment to him alone, a commitment that seeks no rewards.

Among the things most people want most is happiness. Jesus didn't promise happiness, but he had a great deal to say about it. The "**beatitudes**" are a primary example. "**Blessed**" means "**happy**," not frivolous gaiety, but sublime happiness. "**Blessed are**" might be translated "**Truly happy are.**" This is what Jesus had to say about true happiness:

***Blessed are the poor in spirit.*** The poor in spirit are those who know they must have help from God. The Psalmist said: "***My help comes from the Lord.***" I like being reminded that all my help comes from God. By sensing our great need for help, we receive it. The poor in spirit are those who are not prideful. When one's pride is gone, blessedness becomes possible. Trusting in God puts one in God's kingdom.

***Blessed are those who mourn.*** We cannot understand the evil and suffering in the world, but we can grieve over it. We can identify with another person's suffering. We can allow ourselves to feel and to care, as Jesus did. In caring for the suffering of others, we grow in our understanding of God's love.

***Blessed are the meek.*** The meek shall inherit the earth! The meek are not the cowardly or the weak. They are humbly trusting, as opposed to those who are arrogantly independent. The earth does not belong to the selfish and self-assertive who seek to possess it, but to those who receive all things as gifts from God.

***Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*** This beatitude speaks of craving goodness and holiness in the same way that needy people want water and food. They are blessed who yearn for the victory of right over wrong. They are assured that the holiness of God will ultimately prevail.

***Blessed are the merciful.*** The merciful know that justice is not the answer to every need. Sometimes what we need is God's mercy. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that save a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." We show mercy when we put our own concerns aside and focus compassionately on the needs of another. What we extend to others is often what we receive from others.

***Blessed are the pure in heart.*** The word "pure" here means "clean." Purity of heart is contrasted to the ritual cleansing of hands and body. Jesus had no patience for such superficial religion. The heart is the inner self. Purity or cleanness of heart is marked by simplicity and integrity, as opposed to duplicity, and is the way to God.

***Blessed are the peacemakers.*** Peacemaking is not merely the absence of conflict. Peacemaking is positive and active. Jesus taught that God's true children are those who are joined with God in the tasks of making peace. Yes, peace includes the ending of war and strife, but it also seeks harmony between persons, through harmony with God.

***Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.*** Make no mistake about it, persecution is not a blessing, neither is abuse. But there is great blessing in suffering for Christ or with Christ. A heavenly reward is not simply a future blessing, but a promise for those who suffer for what must ultimately prevail.

Happiness, it's a universal desire, but only a few possess it. The paradox is that those who seek happiness are the least likely to find it, while those who give themselves to causes and challenges worthy of their lives no longer seek happiness. They discover that happiness is a by-product. Jesus called on his hearers to take up their crosses and follow him. Some did and some didn't. Those who did often

paid with their lives, but a pagan observer wrote of how these followers of Jesus went to their burial grounds **“with a little clapping of the hands and dancing of the feet.”**

Nature is fairly predictable. Jesus said we reap what we sow. Of course, he meant that we tend to get out of life what we put into it. If we spend our time and energy trying to make money, then money is probably what we will get. If we sow discord and strife, we will reap a whirlwind. On the other hand, if we sow love, peace, and hope, we will reap a harvest of love, peace, and hope.

Jesus did not promise us physical comfort or material wealth. But what he did promise us was to be present with us and to guide us. **“Guide me o thou great Jehovah.”**

I invite you in this centennial year to help us sow love, peace, and hope. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church where, we will reap a harvest of love, peace, and hope in this centennial year.