

A MOTHER'S REWARD

Matthew 10:40-42; 25:21, 40; 1 Corinthians 3:6-8; Galatians 6:9

Like many parents this time of year, Amy and I attended last weekend the graduation ceremony of one of our children. I'm the photographer in our family and was characteristically annoying by insisting that people pose for a variety of commemorative shots. But I took one picture that was entirely unposed and will rank among my most favorite images in our family album. It was this one. *[Picture of PhD graduate hugging his mother]* If I could caption it, it would be entitled: A MOTHER'S REWARD.

My wife has been the hero of our family's life. I know I've played SOME part in our three boys becoming the people they have. But Amy has invested in our kids at a different level. She's loved and encouraged them from her breast to her knee. She made a point of establishing predictable daily rhythms for them. She read more books and did more Lego's and sponsored more Nerf and water pistol wars with them than I can count. When I was often occupied with work, Amy was the one who brought our children to church each week and prepared the Christmas stockings and presided over the Easter Egg hunt. She wore out tires driving them to sporting activities and tutoring appointments and music lessons. To use an agricultural metaphor, if I was the guy who got his name over the gate of the Meyer Family Farm; our boys' mother was the Lead Farmer. She sowed into and watered and fertilized our children in a pretty amazing way.

As for any mother, I suppose, it was very hard and unpredictable work. In various seasons, all three of our kids crashed academically, became angry and sullen, and drifted from the faith. Like their father in his youth, they displayed considerable hygiene deficiencies, played loose with the truth, experimented with dangerous things and got into trouble with the law. In the darkest moments, Amy wondered (as did I), what's going to be the fruit of all this? After all the effort, will there be a REWARD?"

This may not be your experience at all. I pray that you're in a season where you can hardly believe how effective and fruitful your parenting is. Your kids or grandkids are mostly Eagle Scouts or Pageant Winners or on the Honor Roll. They are accomplished athletes or artists, actors or models. Maybe you're getting tired of hearing from friends and teachers and coaches and bosses how PERFECT your children are. They love Jesus and are bringing their friends to faith. They are overwhelming you with Mothers' Day presents. You are embarrassed by ALL those effusive cards. Maybe that's you.

Or maybe not entirely. It could be that you have happy memories to draw upon and some clear wins along the way. But – like in my family -- you've also had long periods of parenthood where you feel like you are constantly sowing seeds or wearing yourself out weeding and hoeing, and not sure what's coming up from this ground. There are moms who work extremely hard but whose kids disappoint them, or drift from them, or

reject them altogether. There are mothers whose children are challenged by severe health issues or wind up on drugs or in jail or don't make it at all. I have a heart for those moms whose kids are caught up with bad friends or a partner she worries is not right for them. There are mothers and stepmothers and wanted-to-be mothers and people with a mother-wound for whom today is a hard day, even as for others this is a very joyful day.

Here's the truth for all of us: **To love well is to sometimes be discouraged.** Or, as Jesus famously said: No matter how hard you try... No matter how careful and conscientious you are... **In this world you will have trouble (John 16:33).** That's true in spheres beyond parenting too. In marriage, in friendship, in co-working, in church-life: To love well – to have our heart really in it -- is to sometimes be discouraged and start questioning the REWARD. Maybe you're there right now or will be soon or know someone who is.

So, what's Jesus' prescription for a discouraged, uncertain or imperfect parent – or for any of us? I believe the first thing he might say is: Keep doing small creative acts of love. "Wait a second," you may say. "The problem in my kid's life... What's going on between us... the issues my boy or girl has... are so HUGE!" I think Jesus gets that. You can have confidence that Jesus sees it ALL. Whatever you see, He sees MORE of it – the scale, the complexity, the weight of the problem (and the world's problems). But, still, his prescription in the face of all that is: ***Do small creative acts of love.***

There are so many places in the gospel where Jesus emphasizes the significance of this kind of action and the REWARD attached to it. In Matthew 10, Jesus says: **If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their REWARD (Matt 10:42).** Mothers, how many of you have given a cup of water to a child? Later on, in Matthew 25, Jesus lists five additional creative acts to which he also promises a REWARD to the doer. Those acts are feeding someone, clothing someone, welcoming someone to come in from outside, nursing someone when they are sick, and visiting someone when they are in prison (or maybe Time Out).

Think about this. How many of you moms or grandmothers have ever done acts like that? How much do you think those little acts mattered? Please hear this: Whether or not you got a thank you for doing those things... Whether or not you got a Mother's Day card that mentioned those sort of things... God saw EVERY ONE of those acts. Jesus specifically says: **Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me (Matt 25:40).**

And, you know what, there is a REWARD for this. Jesus makes that very clear at the close of this teaching. When you do these small creative acts of love, you enter into **"eternal life" (Matt 25:40),** says Christ. Let me press pause here and speak to a common confusion about this term "eternal life." A lot of us have been taught to think

of “eternal life” as a superabundance of time. The thought we’ve absorbed is that if we do acts of love or virtue, the REWARD is that we get to live forever. How many of us have bought that idea?

My study of the New Testament, however, convinces me that everlasting life is NOT the *ultimate* reward for OUR good deeds. We CAN receive everlasting life by putting our faith in Christ’s great deed upon the cross. But when Jesus spoke of the “eternal life” we enter when we do good deeds, he was not talking about a *quantity of time*, so much as a *quality of being*. The greatest reward that a mother gets (or any of us get) from DOING small acts of creative love is that our BEING is improved by them. Whether we see the fruit in our kids or not, by doing these acts, the REWARD is that we become more like God himself. We align ourselves further with the character of his coming Kingdom. When she waters and feeds and clothes and welcomes and visits and nurses the “**least**” or “**little ones**” around her, a MOTHER’S REWARD – greater than any Mother’s Day Card or gift certificate -- is that she is serving Jesus, becoming more like God, and living more in concert with his Kingdom.

So, mothers and grandmothers, whether or not any human being sees it or celebrates it... when you stop to pray for your children... when you write them a note of encouragement... when you speak the word of truth that helps your child face something that must be faced for them to become all they can be... you are entering and expressing that quality of love that eternity is all about. No reward is more valuable than this – to have Jesus smiling at you and God saying: *"Yes, you are indeed my daughter; you have a heart after my heart. You are bringing forth my Kingdom.*

As I think back on it, I realize that my own mother was often eclipsed by my father. I mean no criticism here. My dad was a charismatic public figure. My mom was a quieter, lower wattage kind of light, but equally illuminating. My mother’s light lay not in the *immensity* of space she filled but in the *intensity* of the space on which she focused. I will be ever grateful that my father taught me how to honor and help *public institutions*. But I know how to honor and help *particular individuals* because of my mother. Every time I pray with someone in a time of turmoil or stand by the graveside with a family or talk with a skeptic about the mystery of God, it is my mother’s gifts I am channeling. She was and still is, by God’s grace, someone who showed me what it means to do **small creative acts of love** that mediate the reality of the Kingdom of God. What have you learned from YOUR mother and father?

Do you ever wish you could script the future for your family members? Do you ever think: “I know what this child should do with his or her life. I know the path she or he should pursue.” Being as bright as we are, we are naturally and understandably focused toward designing the future. *"I want my child, my community, my church, my country to be like THIS."* But here is a brutal fact the Bible underlines often: Only God knows what WILL BE. Abraham did not anticipate that he would be called to sacrifice Isaac. The prophet Samuel did not anticipate that God would anoint an after-thought kid

named David as king over Israel. The Israelites did not understand how their exile was an essential part of their spiritual formation. The Pharisees and Sadducees never saw Jesus coming. Mary and the disciples did not foresee Easter. The first disciples had no idea that Jesus' earthly departure would lead to the era of the Holy Spirit and how that would alter history. And you and I do not fully understand all that God is doing in the crazy circumstances of our time.

God's purposes are inscrutable, but they are also unstoppable. I hope that will encourage us. He is GOD and we are not. He will get his plan done. Along the way our job is to focus on the INPUTS not the OUTCOMES. The commendation we will hear one day from Jesus is: **"Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21)**. He doesn't say FRUITFUL servant (fruit is an *outcome*); but FAITHFUL servant (faithfulness – those small acts of creative love – are about *inputs*). I love how the Apostle Paul puts this in his first letter to the church at Corinth: **I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be REWARDED according to their own labor. (1 Corinthians 3:6-8)**.

In every age, human beings want to control the future. That's not all bad. I'm confident that the Lord values the labor we exert to try to honor his purposes. But, as Paul says, at the end of the day, it is **only God who makes things grow**. He has a way of using small acts of love, and mustard seeds and tiny grains of yeast (Matt 13:31-33) and expanding their influence in ways we can't imagine in the moment. And he is always at work beyond our doing.

When Amy was faithfully investing in our so-struggling ninth-grader, she couldn't foresee this. When some of you invested so much of your heart in one of your kids and it didn't turn out like you planned or you lost them from this earth, it had to be almost impossibly hard to imagine the arms of Jesus reaching out to embrace them. But this is God's character. He is the Good Shepherd who goes in search of lost sheep. He is the Glorious Redeemer who shall one day make all things new. He is the Great Gardener and the Lord of the Harvest. So, in the meantime, our job as parents and grandparents and disciples of Jesus is to be faithful in the sowing, the watering, the tending of that part of his kingdom we can touch. If we continue to do small acts of creative love, we can be confident of the REWARD.

Please pray with me...

O God of love and wisdom, your scriptures tell us that as a mother comforts her children, so shall you come alongside of your people with strength (Isaiah 66:13). Hear once again our gratitude for those mothers and other mentors who have dared to invest in us, believing in our potential for growth. As your servant, Paul, encouraged the church of Galatia long ago: Keep us from becoming weary in doing good, trusting that by your grace at the proper time we will see a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9). In the name of Jesus we live and pray. Amen.