

God's Rewards Plus Program  
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Who doesn't like to be rewarded? You work hard. You go to the office every day — even if that office is in your basement.

We love being recognized for our achievements, and when these efforts are rewarded with cold, hard cash, or something that enhances our financial opportunities, or 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 percent of companies have some sort of rewards program? Of course, all major airlines and hotel chains tout their own 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 grandé, iced, sugar-free, vanilla lattes with soy milk at the coffeehouse and get one free.

But not all loyalty programs are created equal. Most of them fall into four types: Points-based rewards, tiered rewards, paid rewards, and value rewards.

Our second reading today from Revelation 22 includes Jesus' last words to the church and comes at the end of a biblical revelation. 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 verse 12, "I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work."

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 business enterprises. 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.*" 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 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” (Matthew 16:27).
- “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10).
- “Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward” (2 John 8).
- “For he will repay according to each one's deeds” (Romans 2:6).

The question for those who work on incentive programs 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.

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 the rewards.

Jesus seems to indicate that some rewards will be greater than others. Speaking to the farmers and townspeople in the area of Tiberius, Jesus said in his “Sermon on the Mount,” “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, *for your reward is great in heaven*, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

Jesus could have said that those who are persecuted and reviled will receive an unspecified reward on judgment day. But instead, he explicitly says that the reward will be a tier above, a step above — a reward unlike the typical reward received by those who have merely been faithful.

Throughout Scripture, this reward is linked to *suffering*. Those who undergo suffering for Jesus' sake are members of a unique club. To these sufferers, Jesus will offer “crowns.” There are several tiers or types of crowns:

*Imperishable crown*: “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one” (1 Corinthians 9:25). This crown, or garland, is given to the spiritual athlete who has trained, 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.

*Crown of rejoicing*: “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). The apostle Paul expected the Thessalonian church to be his “crown of rejoicing” when he gets in line to receive his reward.

*Crown of righteousness*: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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 Timothy 4:7-8). Here, the link between suffering for the sake of the gospel and the reward of a crown is explicit.

*Crown of glory*: “And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away” (1 Peter 5:4).

*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).

Other tiers might include something the apostle Paul called an *inheritance*. For example: “Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24).

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

But there is another kind of rewards. In the early 1500s, Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk, used to wander from village to village in rural Germany selling indulgences. He would set up a theatrical stage and urge the people to buy the indulgences to get their relatives out of purgatory, or in some cases, 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. Paid rewards is the one loyalty program that Jesus doesn’t offer. Jesus is not going to pay for your loyalty. Or, conversely, we cannot pay for better customer service, a bigger mansion in glory, and 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 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. We cannot offer our influence, financial portfolio, even good works in order to get in line for a reward. Rewards are initiated by God. God offers what God offers. God is not compelled to do anything. We receive our reward according to our works by the grace of God.

There is one more type of rewards program: 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. You can offer multiple options for different charities to choose from or have one that genuinely aligns with your customers' values. This program doesn't actually reward customers. But it holds a special place 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.

Here's the fine print: The topic of rewards in heaven is a gray area. There is not much we know for certain, except that there will be a reward for God's faithful. So, at the very least, the idea of rewards should give every committed Christian pause. How loyal have I been? What is the value of the work I've done? What will be my final evaluation?

The apostle Paul addresses this in his first letter to the Corinthian church: "If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:14-15).

What Paul is saying here is a sobering thought: He knows that there are many Christians who will stand in line at judgment day with very little to show for the time they spend on earth. "The builder will be saved, but only as through fire." In other words, like a person fleeing from a burning building, he or she will have nothing more than the smoking clothes upon their backs.

We can do better than this.

We can do better than wasting our time, resources, and lives on things that do not matter.

We can build now on a solid foundation, with our eyes on eternity. And someday, we may hear our Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:23).

Amen