

Matthew 10:40-42

We all like to be rewarded for our efforts. Gold stars on our school papers as children. Praise from parents and teachers as we get older. Money as payment for our expenditure of our time and talents in our work. Perhaps being recognized publically with a plaque or round of applause for our community service. We all appreciate recognition and benefits from our actions.

Jesus is promising a reward for those who welcome prophets and righteous persons to the community, and for those who offer small kindnesses to the vulnerable in their midst. That reward is participation in the kingdom of God, which has both a present and a future component.

This text comes after Jesus' promise that those who lose their life for his sake will find it (Mt. 10:39). It's an answer to the question, "What is our reward for risking the loss of our lives as we know them for you?" Or, as Simon Peter so pragmatically puts it, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

His question and Jesus' answer show up three times in almost exactly the same wording in Matthew 19:27, Mark 10:28, and Luke 18:28. In Matthew 10:42, Jesus refers to "the reward of the righteous." It appears to be a bountiful compensation for the sacrifices we have made in this life, one that has both a worldly and eternal life component (Mt. 19:29; Mk. 10:29-30; Lk. 18:29-30).

What are those addressed by this text going to be rewarded for? Since Jesus sends his disciples to act on his behalf, those who receive them also receive Jesus (10:40a). And in receiving Jesus they also receive God, the one who sent him.

Underlying this saying is the *shaliach* conception of ancient Jewish law, according to which a man's duly authorized messenger "is as the man himself". The one sent out represents the one who sent him, so that to receive a disciple of Christ is to receive Christ and to receive Christ is to receive God.

There is much scholarly debate about the identity of the persons referred to in this brief passage: *righteous ones*, *prophets*, and *little ones*. In Matthew's gospel, the disciples themselves embody all three identities. Matthew emphasizes that disciples serving as Jesus' agents are his righteous ones and prophets, even greater than the prophets of old (Mt 5:11-12, 11:9, 13:17). For him, disciples were also little ones (10:42), the easily oppressed and powerless who depended solely on God (18:3-6, 10). The disciples are prophets (10:41a); they are the righteous (10:41b) who "let their light shine before men (5:16) as they minister to the towns and villages of Israel (10:11-14). And they are the little ones. They have nothing and might even be in need of a cup of cold water (10:42).

Those who receive the disciples also receive the same benefits or reward they receive, the blessing of participation in the kingdom of God as outlined by Jesus by way of Matthew in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-10). The Beatitudes have a future, but also a present reference. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake—all participate in the present in the blessings of divine presence, comfort, wisdom, forgiveness, which are the realities of the reign of God now and forever.

Participation in the kingdom of God is the reward of the righteous person. It is not wholly extrinsic like the gold stars and the round of applause. The righteousness Jesus is talking about in Matthew carries with it an intrinsic reward, one that is an integral part of the action of welcome and kindness. Such righteous acts participate in and point us toward God.

I became intrigued with this notion of intrinsic reward for kind and positive deeds and began collecting a number of affirmations from a variety of historical and current figures.

* "The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process is its own reward."—Amelia Earhart (American aviation pioneer and author and the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, for which she received the U.S. Distinguished Flying Cross, 1897-1937)

* "If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed."—Albert Einstein (German-born theoretical physicist who developed the general theory of relativity, and one of the two pillars of modern physics, best known for his mass–energy equivalence formula $E = mc^2$, 1879-1955)

* "The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more."—Jonas Salk (American medical researcher and virologist who discovered and developed the first successful inactivated polio vaccine, 1914-1995)

* Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved. It leaves all the other secondary effects to take care of themselves. Love, therefore, is its own reward."—Thomas

Merton (American Catholic writer and mystic, Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, poet, social activist, and student of comparative religion, 1915-1968)

* "The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it."—John Ruskin (British art critic, artist, social thinker, and philanthropist, 1819-1900)

* "Happiness is a virtue, not its reward."—Baruch Spinoza (Dutch philosopher, 1632-1677)

* "There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward."—Khalil Gibran (Lebanese artist, poet, and writer, 1883-1931)

* "To give without any reward, or any notice, has a special quality of its own."—Anne Morrow Lindbergh (American author, aviator, and the wife of fellow aviator Charles Lindbergh, 1906-2001)

* "Love is love's reward."—John Dryden (English poet, literary critic, translator, and playwright, made Poet Laureate in 1668, 1631-1700)

* "A kind and compassionate act is often its own reward."—William Bennett (American conservative pundit, politician, and political theorist who served from 1985-1988 as Secretary of Education, 1943-)

* "To live for results would be to sentence myself to continuous frustration. My only sure reward is in my actions and not from them."—Hugh Prather (Writer, minister, and counsellor, most famous for his first book, *Notes to Myself*, first published in 1970, 1939-2010)

* "An act of goodness is of itself an act of happiness. No reward coming after the event can compare with the sweet reward that went with it."—Maurice Maeterlinck (Belgian playwright, poet, and essayist, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911, 1862-1949)

Reading these quotes, I get the feeling that these people are not doing good things for others solely for the resulting pleasure of feeling good about what they've done and about themselves. They are talking about giving one's life away for some purpose beyond oneself that, paradoxically, results in a gain. As Christians we would call that the reward of the righteous.

In Matthew 25 (parable of the sheep and the goats) Jesus teaches us that showing kindness, providing hospitality, to strangers is the same as giving kindness and hospitality to Jesus himself. If we want to see Christ in the world, we only have to look at our neighbours. We will see the face of Christ in the faces of the people around us. When we care for them, we are caring for Christ.

Today's reading tells the other side of the story "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." We find Christ in the world. And the world finds Christ in us.

The world finds Christ in us. Whoever welcomes us welcomes the one who sends us. Whatever kindness and hospitality we receive, that same kindness and hospitality is given to Jesus our Lord.

I love how these two passages in the gospel of Matthew fit together. If we want to know where to see Christ in the world, we should look in the face of a stranger. And if the world needs to know where to see Christ, Christ is found in us.

These two texts show us two sides of hospitality—the calling to provide hospitality to the stranger, and the challenge of accepting hospitality from the world.

I think you all are pretty good at providing hospitality. You provide hospitality here at church on Sunday mornings, over in the lounge for Coffee Call each Wednesday (before lockdown), by contributing to FoodBank, supporting our Mission Partners. You show hospitality to other community groups that use our facilities such as the uniformed organisations. You offer hospitality in your own homes.

This week, I want to challenge you to take on the other side of the equation. Instead of being the one who stays in your own space and provides hospitality to others, when this lockdown is over try to see where God is calling you out—out of your comfort zone, out of your space, out of the familiar things you can control.

As disciples of Christ, sometimes we are the ones who provide a welcome and hospitality. But we can't stop there. We can't sit in our comfortable homes and cook meals we know we like and invite other people to come to us. We have to also go out, be the ones who are strangers in an unfamiliar place. We have to be willing to risk discomfort, rejection, even danger. We have to be willing to receive hospitality as well as give it. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Let's take a chance and let the world welcome Jesus through us.

Amen.