Eternal reward

www.generouschurch.com/205

**Will God reward Christians in heaven for good works done on earth?**  
Yes. Although this theme has received little attention in Protestant churches, it is the consistent teaching of the New Testament that, as part of His gospel of grace, God promises to reward believers for their good works (Ephesians 6:8), including perseverance under persecution (Luke 6:22-23), caring for the needy (Matthew 25:34-36), treating enemies kindly (Luke 6:35), prayer (Matthew 6:6), fasting (Matthew 6:18), and generous giving (Matthew 19:21).

**Are these rewards earned or deserved?**  
Eternal rewards are gifts of divine grace, having no human merit of their own. Far from contradicting God's grace, eternal rewards are the crowning piece of salvation by grace. Having freely forgiven our sins, God goes on to empower us for good works (Philippians 2:13), then to reward us for the good works that He has brought about in us (Romans 8:30). In themselves, our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6), but God chooses to purify them in His own sight and honor them with reward. The whole sequence is of grace.

**Why does God promise rewards to believers?**  
The purpose of eternal rewards is to encourage Christians to persevere in obedience. Whenever promises of reward appear in Scripture, they are intended not to incite Christians to selfishness but to encourage us lest we become discouraged (Galatians 6:9). The obedience to which God calls us involves poverty, persecutions, loneliness and other difficult things. Christians inevitably will share with their Lord in His suffering (Matthew 10:21-25). For those who suffer because of obedience, God comforts them with the assurance that their work for His sake will not go unrewarded. If we seek eternal rewards apart from painful obedience, we miss the point.

**What rewards does God promise to give to His people in heaven?**  
The Bible is not particularly clear on the specifics of rewards. The phrase "in heaven" is based on a misconception: Although heaven does serve as a "storehouse" and as a place to dwell with the Lord while we await the final judgment after we die, the Bible teaches that the ultimate home for redeemed humanity is not a "spiritual heaven," but a physical new creation, a new earth. God has given us bodies for a reason: We are meant to live forever in physical, human form, though without the pain and suffering that we experience today. That is the ultimate reward—a full life in union with God in an eternal earth that doesn't pass away, a place that is described as follows in Revelation 21:3-4: "The dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Hebrews 11:16 calls this a "heavenly country". On the basis of Scripture's depictions, it is reasonable to think that such a country—like the Garden of Eden—will be a place of bounty and peace and blessing. We only will access this reward when heaven finally comes down to earth, to make earth like heaven. In the meantime, we must pursue it by not grasping for present, earthly rewards (Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16).

**Are there different degrees of reward in heaven?**  
This is unclear. That God will reward us for good works is certain, but the Bible says very little about what we will receive in relation to each other. God's reward is "according to what we have done" (Matthew 16:27), so there seems to be a principle of correspondence. But the parable of the vineyard workers (Matthew 20:1-16) makes it clear that the divine economy is no mere tit-for-tat calculation. Some who work less will be rewarded as if they had worked more. We are assured that our own hard work will not go unrewarded, but we may not grudge the Master's generosity toward others.

**What is the greatest reward a Christian can receive?**  
Whatever other rewards He gives, God Himself is the Christian's one great reward. While God does choose to bless His people with riches both here and in the world to come (Mark 10:30), the greatest and most desirable reward is God Himself. The "pearl of great price" is no mere piece of jewelry but the very Kingdom of God (Matthew 13:46). To pursue God's many rewards over God Himself is to misunderstand and forfeit those rewards.

**Why should God get all the credit for my generosity and for my good works?**  
Because it's God Who gives us the ability to do these things—even the desire to do them in the first place. Astoundingly, Scripture never once asks us to thank other people for what they give us. Of course, in our culture it is appropriate and polite to express gratitude to others. But the apostle Paul goes to great lengths to insist that our goal in giving is increasing the praise of God's glory, not our own (2 Corinthians 8-9), so that people would thank God, not us. After all, everything that we have—even the desire to do good works—comes from Him, not ourselves. Therefore, ultimately the credit belongs to the One who redeemed us, provided us the means to do good, and even "works in us both to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). If we forget this, then we are probably guilty of assuming that we or others deserve the credit that only properly goes to God. Having this perspective makes it far easier for us to let go of things like money, girlfriends or boyfriends, comfortable life in modern America, or whatever else God might have us give up. If we take the credit for these blessings instead of recognizing that God is the source of all blessings, we'll have a difficult time opening our hands and letting these things go when God asks (for instance, when we're dating the wrong person). But if we know God is faithful and generous to meet all our needs as we seek His righteousness and His Kingdom, we surely will find ourselves not only "biblically correct," but profoundly more effective in our giving and obedience as well (see 1 Timothy 6:17-19).

**What do you mean by "investing in eternity" and "storing up treasure in heaven"?**  
This is a fancy way of saying, "Invest in things that will (1) pay off forever and (2) never go sour." The idea of "investing in eternity" means that we should invest with a view to maximum return in the long run. It is an axiom of wise investment strategy that long-term growth is best. If we pull our money out early, we are generally worse off than if we had given it time to multiply. Savvy investors take the long view; they plan for five, 10, even 50 years down the road. But the Bible challenges us to think 1,000, 10,000 and 100,000 years down the road. Similarly, "storing up treasure in heaven," a phrase Jesus used in Matthew 6:19-21, means that we relocate our possessions from our temporary earthly accounts to a permanent heavenly account, where records are perfectly kept and disaster cannot strike. A common investment axiom is that investors want to make sure their valuables are located in a good place. Jesus encourages us to follow precisely this advice: "Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted" (Luke 12:33b). After all, things on earth can be stolen, broken, lost in lawsuits or obliterated in natural disasters. Even our bodies will succumb to cancer, accidents or old age. So how can we store up lasting treasure? What kind of investment pays off even in heaven? The same verse explains, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Luke 12:33a). In other words, when we give to the poor for Jesus' sake, we make an investment that will generate returns forever. Elsewhere in Scripture, it is written, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 19:17). We might think of our gifts as loans to God, who will certainly not default on what we lend Him. So in summary, the way to invest in eternity is to give your money to God and His purposes, especially to help the poor; this strategic giving has eternal significance, not only for those to whom we give, but also for us (see also Mark 10:21; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; 2 Corinthians 9:9).

**Isn't it presumptuous to expect rewards from God?**  
If we imagine that we are righteous enough to merit God's approval, or if we suppose that we have a right to divine rewards, then yes, that is presumptuous. But if we understand divine rewards as the Bible does (i.e., as the icing on the cake of God's grace, as rewards for good deeds that God Himself causes us to do), then no, that is not presumptuous. We cannot expect divine rewards if we think God owes us something. But we can expect God to keep His promises, one of which is to reward us for the good deeds that He Himself works in us (Ephesians 2:10). The whole process is of grace, from beginning to end. That's the gospel. It may be scandalous, but it is not presumptuous.