

You can earn hell but cannot earn heaven

written by Bishop Anthony B. Taylor |

Many of us quite naturally think that God will reward us if we are good and punish us if we are bad. That's what the Old Testament teaches.

In last Sunday's readings, God says he will condemn to hell those who are rich but do nothing to help the poor. In today's first reading, God promises to rescue the poor from all those who exploit them. God will set things right — rewarding and punishing — in this life and in the life to come.

Unfortunately, many people distort this idea of God's justice, imagining that by being good, they can put God in their debt, earn God's blessings, earn heaven. They do things that benefit others but for the wrong reasons. They are not good merely because it is the right thing to do. They are good because that way, God will owe them a reward in heaven. He will have to give them what they want.

"In other words, if you go to hell, it will be because of what you did, but if you go to heaven, it will be due to God's grace and not because you have somehow "earned" the right to go there."

In today's Gospel, Jesus says it doesn't work that way. You can earn hell, but you can't earn heaven. Why not? Because we are not God's equal, nor do we have the same amount of authority. He is the Lord, our master, and we are his servants, literally in the Greek original of this text, his "slaves." The only thing a master owes his slave is not to punish him if he does what he's told.

Any reward beyond that won't be due to his justice but rather due solely to the master's unearned, undeserved kindness. In other words, if you go to hell, it will be because of what you did, but if you go to heaven, it will be due to God's grace and not because you have somehow "earned" the right to go there.

Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from the field, "Come here...and take your place at table?" Would he not rather say to him, "Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished"? Is he grateful to his servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you? When you've done all you've been commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obligated to do."

Jesus continues to teach this truth in other parables, for instance, the workers in the vineyard who all get the same pay. Those who worked longest got the usual salary as agreed — the master did them no injustice — while those who worked less got the same amount, not because they deserved it, not because of what they did, but simply due to the master's unearned, undeserved kindness.

If that's true, why do good at all? The reason is that God's grace by which we are saved requires your response for it to take effect. You have electrical service at your house all the time, but it has no effect until you plug an appliance into it. If you do plug it in and turn it on, the results will be obvious. The appliance will do what it is supposed to do, thanks to the electricity.

In the same way, God's saving grace — his power and light — is available all the time, but it has no effect until we plug into God, embracing his grace, his power and his light. And when we do so, the results will be obvious because, in the words of today's Gospel, we will be doing what we were obligated to do, powered by God's grace.

Notice, a living faith always produces good works, and it will be through this same grace that the Lord will welcome us into heaven — due in the end not to our own merits, our own good works, but rather solely to the unearned, undeserved loving kindness of God.