



Part 2

The Reward Trap

When we have grown up learning and believing there is no such thing as a free lunch, one of the hardest things to do is receive something without having worked for it. We think a gift always requires a pay-back in kind. Anything of value has to be earned. We don't understand having someone else pay a price and freely give us a thing of value. Therefore we persist in trying to gain the grace of God by feverishly working for Him, hoping to gain the favor which had already been given to us.

John 1:12-13

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

When we lose our awareness that we are a delight to God and that the love of God is the very reason we do things, then we revert to striving, serving to earn that which is so freely available and can *never* be earned.

As we do so, our relationship with God becomes corrupted.

When we lose sight of the fact that we are loved because of who we are, we will revert to our habitual way of relating to others, working to earn love and acceptance.

If our serving does not come from a place of restful acceptance and confidence in who we are in God, we will operate from a place of anxiety, fear and striving.

Why can't we rest in God? What has caused this? The answer is often in the very culture we grew up in: home, church, school, and society.

As children we soon learned to associate performing well with receiving love, and we learned to link failure with rejection: "If I don't do "it" right, my mother and father will be upset and won't love me."

Where does this drive to perform begin?

It can begin as early as conception; the very first awareness by the mother that she may be pregnant creates a response, which will echo through the life of the yet unborn person. It is either exhilaration or fear; the responses are written on the spirit and soul of the child.

If our conception was not a joy to the parents we may come into the world believing that:

"I am not wanted."

"I must earn my acceptance."

"If I do not do it right, I will not be loved."

"If I don't live up to their expectations I will be rejected."

"If I do not live up to the family standards, I will not belong."

"I must do well to be loved."

We have learned to do for others before we can expect to be rewarded. When someone gives us love or acceptance that "we haven't earned," we become confused and suspicious, often feeling that since we haven't worked for it, it is undeserved. Or we may feel guilty for receiving, since we have not done anything to earn it.

When others do for us, we want to balance the books and return the "favor." We expect them to expect it from us. We live with the belief that "One good deed demands another in return."

It may become a cycle that seems normal, but in reality it is deadly, since it leaves no room for grace.

Once caught in the trap it seems normal and right but it is deadly; it keeps us in bondage and isolation. The reward trap is driven by the ungodly motivation that keeps us in a constant state of striving; it has nothing to do with the work we do, or the things we accomplish. Once we deal with this ungodly mind-set, we may still do exactly the same work in much the same way, but our motive will be from an entirely different heart.

The most persistent, vicious lie undermining all our actions is this:

"If I don't do right, I won't be loved."

This belief may start innocently enough, beginning when our parents delight in and praise our success, or on the other hand criticize us when we fail. At that moment we begin to equate being loved and valued with doing something well and we are caught in a trap.

When our parent's discipline or call for better performance is not tempered with love, acceptance and encouragement when we fail, a pattern of reward and punishment is easily established. Very quickly the heart connects performing well with being loved and valued; therefore, "...if I behave well, I will be loved; if I fail I will be rejected."

When poor performance becomes associated with punishment and rejection, the need to perform well, to avoid the pain, is sealed in our hearts.

The consequence for bad behavior needs to be separated from the identity of who we are. We need to have our actions corrected, but doing a bad thing and being bad are two very different and distinct things that need to be well and clearly defined. Otherwise we become easily confused and locked into a pattern of behavior that we cannot maintain.

Parents often make statements such as; "I am so proud of you for doing...!" or, "You are such a disappointment...", or even, "You should be ashamed of yourself."

We translate such statements to mean that we have met, or failed to meet the parent's or caregivers standards, which are often driven by rigid demands for behavior, enforced without affection or understanding.

So the hard work to please, to fit in, begins—trying to be that which we cannot be. This drive to be accepted and valued can easily continue into our adult lives.

It does not mean that we shouldn't praise or correct, but we need to do it in a way that separates who we are from what we do.

*"I am so proud of you in so many ways; this is another one."
"I love you, but this is unacceptable."*

When behavior and value are closely linked, the child (you and I) may soon believe that if they don't behave or do well, then who they are is unacceptable, when in reality it is the behavior that is not acceptable.

For the child, fear of failing, doing something that keeps us from being accepted begins to strike our heart. The dread of being lost, rejected by others, quickly and easily locks us into performing, doing the 'right' things to get the love and acceptance we need and crave.

An attitude of "needing to do well" takes over and good acceptable behavior now defines us.

Once we accept the lie that our behavior defines us, it becomes the governing force that rules our lives, and from then on all our actions flow through that understanding.

In the school system the rewards are for those who are gifted academically or in athletics. The rest must come to terms with their inadequacies to the best of our abilities, accepting that we have less value than others and no ability to satisfy the demands that are put on us to perform well in certain areas.

In our world the identity of a person is often directly connected to their performance; we honor and reward those who perform well and look down on or even cast aside those who fail to live up to our or the world's expectations. And so we find that even in the work place we reward the performer much more than the one who is able to bring life and vitality into the environment.

It truly is a trap, set up to create in us a sense of falling short of the mark no matter where we turn.

The Reward Trap is that constant striving, doing the right thing for the wrong motive, believing that:

"I am loved and valued for what I do."

"If I can't do it, I am not valuable or lovable."

Rather than:

"I am loved and so I can do these things without having to worry about what 'they' will think of me."

When anxiety and the fear of punishment drive us to perform we are

captives who need to be set free.

Hebrews 2:15

"...Who through fear and dread were subjected to slavery all their lives."

John 12:43

"...for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God."