
Awards Ceremonies

When I was in Bible College there was a student who repeated most of his courses because he had failed them. He had difficulty learning, and when he did pass a course, he did so with a C or a D. I don't think he ever received an A on anything that he did. If you wanted to find him, all you had to do was visit the library, and there he would be at a table, books surrounding him, reading and writing. The amount of effort he put into only just receiving a passing grade was astounding. He worked twice as hard as I did, but with much poorer results. When the awards ceremony was held at the end of the school year, he never was called forward to receive recognition, but eventually he graduated, not with a degree but a diploma, and for him that was a tremendous accomplishment.

I attended the Awards Ceremony at Immanuel last week, and it was good to be there. A number of students received awards, some of them receiving several. The vast majority of the students, however, received no rewards and no recognition. That is to be expected at an awards ceremony, for not every student excels. But, as I watched the awards being handed out, it struck me that those who received those awards generally have a natural talent. Most of the awards were given for either athletic or academic excellence, and the students who received them were obviously gifted in those areas. In fact, although I am quite certain that though they were diligent in their field, they didn't have to put all that much effort into their studies or their sports in order to receive an award of excellence. They probably didn't work nearly as hard as some of the students who received an average grade or lower but who never receive recognition.

I'm not against awards ceremonies, but I find that they can be artificial and misleading. They don't measure the true value of one's work because they often just award natural talent. We would be shocked if those students didn't excel. Perhaps the only award that truly impressed me was the ones given to the students who volunteered in their community and at the school. This was something that they did not have to do but did anyway, going above and beyond what was expected of them.

As I reflected on high school awards ceremonies, I asked myself, "What categories would God choose if he were hosting an awards ceremony?" It's a question that is impossible to answer, of course, but I expect that my fellow Bible College student would have received the award for the greatest effort in his studies. Or, as Jesus taught in the gospels, it would be widow who gave a few pennies in the collection plate who would be acknowledged as sacrificially generous. We would never name a building after her as we often do for the wealthy family who donates millions of dollars to build a new hospital wing. While we can appreciate the donations given by the rich, their sacrifice is often not nearly as great as the poor person who gives beyond what they can afford. Of perhaps God would give the award to the person who could have become a CEO of a multinational corporation but instead chose to direct a small charitable organization which provided affordable housing for the working poor.

One other thing that I noticed about the awards ceremony: few were surprised when the winners of the awards were announced. In fact, one of the students I talked to was fairly confident that he was going to

win a couple of awards, and he would have been surprised if he had not. That won't be true of those who would awards if God held a ceremony. If God would announce the award for the most sacrificial giver or the hardest worker, they would be surprised by the recognition. They would even be surprised by the fact that there was such a thing as an award, for their work would be done out of love. Just as parents don't expect to an award for loving their children, those whose actions arise out of love believe that what they are doing is appropriate, and they don't expect recognition. I doubt that there will be an awards ceremony in heaven, but if there is, the recipients will be completely unprepared when their name is called.

A number of years ago a man in my church was killed in a car accident. He was a good guy, well-liked, but he had a number of struggles that some might label as disabilities. He didn't see himself in that light; rather, he simply used the gifts God had given to him to serve others. As I talked friends and family, it became evident to me that the way to conclude his funeral message was with the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I'm sure that when he entered into glory the day that he died, those were the words he could have heard from our Lord and God. It wasn't his good deeds that got him into heaven; it was the fact that he knew that Jesus had died for his sins. But he was faithful with what he had, and he gave to others from what God had given him, and he did so without thinking he was doing something special. Again, I doubt it God gives awards, but he would have received one if he did.

At this time of year, we have awards ceremonies, and it is good to honour those who have accomplished much. But let's remember more those who may not get top grades or play multiple sports but who, with deep love, serve others as they follow their Lord. Although they go unrecognized at the ceremonies, these are truly the ones who should also be receiving an award.

Pastor Gary