

How Does God Determine Our Reward?

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Brethren, this time of year, right when we come on the fall holy days, and particularly the Feast of Tabernacles, I think our minds are obviously on what all these days picture and what we're looking forward to in the future. Particularly for us as firstfruits, we're looking forward to the time when we will hopefully be in God's Kingdom, reigning with Christ during the Millennium, and we're looking forward to that. One of the things we oftentimes think about is what our reward might be. We know the Bible talks about various types of rewards that we can receive in the Kingdom of God, and we'll stop and think, what could that be for us?

Looking at this subject, I would like to contrast two individuals I've known in my lifetime. These people are real individuals. We're going to change their names to protect their identities and a few minor details of their lives, but I assure you these individuals are real. As I said, we're going to change a few minor details to protect their identities.

We'll call the first individual Beth. Beth was someone who had a background that I think most of us, if we could choose, would probably pick. Beth was born as a second-generation Christian in a very loving family. Her parents set great examples. Her father was an elder in their congregation, and both her mother and father were very good examples. They were pillars in their congregation. They were well-respected, loving, nurturing parents, who set a good example and taught her God's way of life from the time she was young. They also set a very good example in living it.

So she really had a good foundation growing up. In addition to that, she was blessed with good health, was athletic, blessed with beauty—a very attractive girl—intelligent, well-spoken, and it could be said that life dealt her a good set of cards. As she grew into adulthood, she applied to and was accepted to Ambassador College, and when she got to Pasadena, she met her husband her freshman year. Their freshman year they hit it off with each other; they were a couple all the way through college, they got married soon afterward, and her husband went on to have a very successful career.

He did very well and this enabled them to live in nice neighborhoods; they could have whatever they wanted, they could travel the world on vacation, and when their children grew up, they could afford to send them to any college they wanted to. Their children attended private universities, because, again, her husband made a very good living and they could afford to do this. They were active in the church of God and lived out their lives serving the church. But if you look at this story, of course they had their trials, their tribulations, the issues they faced, but I think most of us, if we could choose the background that we would come from, would pick Beth's life. Compared to us, that sounds pretty good.

Let's contrast this with an individual we're going to call David. Again, this is not his real name, but David's life was one that I doubt any of us would ever pick. I'm sure if David had an opportunity to pick the circumstances of his life, he would have picked something different than the environment in which he was raised. David was not a second-generation Christian, rather, he was called into the church of God later in his adult life. He unfortunately was not born into a loving, nurturing home, with parents who really cared for him. He was born in to a poor family that really struggled, and his parents were not well-prepared for the responsibilities of raising children.

Unfortunately for him, within just a few years after he was born, his mother died due to a number of health complications. His father remarried fairly quickly because he was in a poor situation, not really adept at dealing with the responsibilities of children, and found himself, as a single parent, overwhelmed with responsibility, so he quickly remarried, you might say, the first woman who came along. Unfortunately he made a very poor choice, because it turns out that the woman he married was very cruel to David. She was very abusive and harsh with him, and was frankly sadistic. Personally, I believe, knowing some of the details, she probably had demon problems. Honestly, I think if God had not intervened on a number of occasions, David probably would not have lived to adulthood, to be called into the church later in his life.

Just to give you a few minor details—I don't want to be too graphic here—but to give you an idea of what his upbringing was like, there were times when his stepmother, in fits of rage, would throw frying pans at him, and she threw knives at him. She walked into his bedroom one morning and threw lye at his bed. Fortunately he was not burned by it, and got out of the way, but this is the kind of environment in which he was raised. There were times he was locked outside at night wearing inadequate clothing, in an area of the country where it could get really cold at night. At one point, she literally shot at him with a shotgun in an attempt to murder him. Fortunately he was not hit.

His father, through all of this, never intervened to protect him or take him out of this environment. So he is pretty much left to fend for himself as he's growing up into adulthood. As soon as he gets old enough to join the military, he does so, leaving home and getting himself out of that environment. Later he meets a lady and gets married, and as the years go by, he hears a minister on the radio, preaching about the seventh-day Sabbath. He begins receiving literature and booklets offered by the church, and later comes into the church. He and his wife are baptized and begin their journey of overcoming, towards the Kingdom of God.

I contrast these two individuals because if you think about this, obviously when they get to the point of baptism and they start their journey of overcoming as Christians, they are at very different points. Beth's background has given her a very good foundation. She's been taught God's way by her parents from the time she was a child. In addition, her parents have given her a very good example because they actively lived the things they believed, whereas David's background has been the polar opposite. Obviously they start their journey of overcoming in very different places. They end their journey in very different places.

Here's my question for you: How does God work out how they're rewarded, when the first resurrection comes and Christ returns, and they're given their reward in the Kingdom of God? How does God determine their reward? Obviously they are at very different places in their lives but this is due to circumstances over which they had absolutely no control. Neither one of them chose the family into which they would be born, nor the circumstances that they would have; they just came into the world and dealt with the hand that life dealt them. As we are presented with very different situations, how is it going to be? Does David end up, for the rest of eternity, with a lesser reward than Beth, simply due to circumstances that he could not control, that neither one of them chose? How does this work? We're going to look at this subject today. If you would like a title for this sermon, it's:

How Does God Determine Our Reward?

We know we all start at various points and we all have different circumstances because that's just how life works, but how does God sort this out? We're going to look at this subject today. First of all we need to look at a few basic principles. As I mentioned, the family backgrounds of both of these individuals I've contrasted are polar opposites. They didn't choose this but the Bible tells us our upbringing does have a very dramatic impact on the rest of our lives—that's just a fundamental fact. Let's turn over to Proverbs 22 and verse 6; we'll look at a principle here.

Proverbs 22:6 *Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.*

First of all, let's notice that this is not taking away free moral agency. Sometimes people look at this and think, well, this is the promise; if you raise your children right, they'll never leave the church, they'll never go wrong. That's not what this verse is saying. This doesn't take away our free moral agency; we all have to choose our path in life. It does illustrate a very valid principle, which is how you're raised, your upbringing, the foundation you're given, and whatever circumstances you're raised in, have a lasting effect on the rest of your life.

As I love to put it, for this verse to be true the opposite must also be true. In other words, if you train up children right, in the way they should go, that will have a lasting impact upon the rest of their life; if you train them up in a horrible background, in a way they shouldn't have been raised, that's going to have a lasting impact on the rest of their life as well.

If you look at the examples I gave of Beth and David, Beth has had this very positive foundation even before she is baptized and starts her journey of overcoming, whereas David has got one that leaves scars on his life, that he has to overcome and deal with. That's just a fact of life, of how there were raised, which will have multi-generational aftereffects. Turn over to Numbers 14 and we'll briefly look at this.

Numbers 14:17 *And now, I pray, let the power of my LORD be great, just as You have spoken, saying,*

18) The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.' (NKJV)

He's mentioning the multi-generational effects this can have. It's not saying here that God takes out the sins of the grandfathers on the children and great-grandchildren, going forward. It's not a matter of holding the children accountable for something they didn't do, it's simply the fact that that's how our backgrounds affect us. It's kind of how sin works.

The way I like to put it, it's kind of like throwing a rock into a body of water. If you've ever been to a still body of water, like a lake or a pond, on a clear day with not a lot of wind, and the water is very still, and you throw a rock in it, you'll notice what happens; when the rock hits you'll see a shock wave go out in every direction from the point of impact. You'll see the ripple in the water, as it goes out in circles, in every direction away from the rock. The bigger the rock and the harder you throw it in, the bigger the wave is that goes in every direction.

That's the impact sin tends to have. You might not be the person who committed the sin but you can still get hit by the shockwave. Someone else's actions created the wave that goes out, which you can be hit by, but you weren't the one who committed the sin; you weren't the one who made the choice. That's the nature of how this works and that's how this can affect multiple generations.

If you think about Beth's upbringing, the very positive, loving environment in which she was raised is going to affect her relationship with God in a positive way, and the reason I mention that is oftentimes you'll find that if people struggle with seeing God as a loving, nurturing Father, the parental figures in their life were not loving, nurturing individuals, because we tend to associate our concept of God with the parental figures we have experienced in our physical lives. You'll find that people who came from a loving, nurturing home have an easier time with that versus those who came from harsh, abusive parents, and they tend to struggle with that. That's an issue that will affect people's lives. Also the example of parenting that both of these individuals experienced can affect how they teach their children in generations going forward.

So this is just natural—a consequence of how this is going to work. God promises us in the Bible that He is fair, that He is just, and that He doesn't show partiality. We have to take into consideration that these dynamics definitely affect people in a fundamental way, in their whole process of overcoming, remembering also that people cannot choose their own circumstances. They are just born into such circumstances and deal with the hand that life gave them.

Let's notice also that God gives us promises and shows us how fair and just He is. Turn over to Deuteronomy 10:17.

Deuteronomy 10:17 *For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. 18) He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. (NKJV)*

He is just in how he administers things. He looks after those who are in harsh circumstances and He's fair about it. Let's notice also, in Romans 2, the New Testament promises us the same thing, and also gives us a key to how God approaches judgment. It's going to show us that regardless of our circumstances, ultimately we all stand or fall on our own choices, our own deeds, and how we choose to live our lives.

Romans 2:1 *Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.*

2) *But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.*

3) *And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?*

4) *Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*

5) *But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,*

6) *who "will render to each one according to his deeds":*

Notice when it comes down to it, we all get judged on our own deeds, our own choices, the things we were able to control. Verse 7.

7) *eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality;*

8) *but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath,*

9) *tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek;*

10) *but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

11) *For there is no partiality with God. (NKJV)*

Again, we have the same principle that God is just and fair and doesn't show partiality. We still have this issue, as we know—just common sense, really—that we all have been dealt a different hand of cards. We all have different circumstances, different strengths and talents, and different foundations from which we come into our salvational process,

and that definitely has a lasting impact on our lives. So how does God sort all of this out, to be fair and just? That's the question we're going to look at today.

Let's turn over to Matthew 25 and look at the parable of the talents. To get a clear picture we're going to have to put a couple of parables together because we have a couple of parables that deal with different aspects of this subject, and when we put them together we can see the clear picture.

Matthew 25:14 *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.*

15) And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. (NKJV)

We notice we're not playing with a level playing field here. They all have different abilities and talents from the start.

16) Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents.

17) And likewise he who had received two gained two more also.

18) But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

19) After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

20) "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.'

21) His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

22) He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.'

23) His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

24) "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

25) And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'

26) "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed.

27) So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.

28) So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

29) *'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.*
30) *And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* (NKJV)

Let's make several observations about this particular parable. Notice that with these individuals, from the beginning, it is not a level playing field. One has five talents, one has two, one is just given one—they all start at different points. If we look at the way it ends, there are only two different outcomes that are met. One is met with, well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord. The other is cast into the lake of fire. You have just two outcomes.

Let's also notice that when we read the later part, about the guy who just has one talent, let's notice the problem is not just the fact that he has one talent—that's not the issue. The issue is that he didn't do anything with it; that's where the problem lies. To understand the statements we need to look a little deeper than just the English version that we're reading.

The reason I mention that is when the guy with one talent is basically challenging the master, and says, I knew you were this unjust individual, that you reap what you have not sown, you're unfair, you're mean, you don't handle things right, and I knew that. The response was, if you knew I was this person. In English, it's the same word in both cases. It almost sounds like he's agreeing with the allegation. We have to keep in mind this wasn't originally written in English. As Rick covered in a recent sermon, there's evidence now that the book of Matthew was written in Hebrew but what has survived most often has been the Greek manuscripts. If we look into the Greek we'll see there's a distinction between the two words. That helps us clarify what's being said because the master is not actually validating the statement, because he uses a different word.

To go through the words that are used here, the source I'm going to quote from is Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words by William Vine. I'm going to give you a couple of definitions and all of this is going to come from Vine's. The word here in verse 24:

24) *"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.'* (NKJV)

The word for "knew" there is the Greek word transliterated as *ginóskó*, Strong's #1097, and this is how Vine's defines it. *In the New Testament ginóskó frequently indicates a relation between the person knowing and the object known. In this respect, what is known is a value or importance to the one who knows, and hence the establishment of the relationship. Such knowledge is obtained, not by mere intellectual activity, but by operation of the Holy Spirit consequent upon acceptance of Christ.*

So when he says, I knew you were this kind of person, he is referring to a deep level of knowledge, of intimately knowing the individual through inspiration—that's what this guy

is saying. Now let's notice that when the master replies, what he's saying "knew". This is down in verse 26.

26) *"But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. (NKJV)*

It sounds like he is kind of agreeing with this allegation, but let's notice the Greek word. This one is transliterated as *eidó*, Strong's #1492, and again, from Vine's, it means *to have seen or perceived, hence to know to have knowledge of in the case of human knowledge, to know from observation*. So we're talking about a more superficial level of knowledge.

Then Vine's goes on to tell more about the differentiation between these two terms and this will help clarify it. *The differences between ginóskó and eidó demand consideration. While ginóskó frequently implies an active relation between the one who knows and the person or thing known, eidó expresses the fact that the object has simply come within the scope of the knower's perception*. In other words, when he responds and says, you knew I was this kind of person, he's really correcting him because he's using a different term and then he turns around and challenges his logic. Okay, so if you knew I was this kind of person, then why didn't you at least put it in the bank and draw some interest off of this?—he's challenging his logic. He's pointing out to him, what you're professing that you know, your actions aren't even consistent with what you say you know. You're making excuses is basically what he's telling him. It gets down to the guy is copping a victim attitude in saying, I'm the victim, I'm mistreated, and God, it's all your fault, because you're unfair and unjust. He doesn't accept that and gets thrown in the lake of fire.

One of the things we need to notice is we have these two individuals who hear the same thing. They start at different places, they end at different places, but the way the parable is told tells us is they both hear the same thing. Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord. Let's notice from the Bible what it tells us the joy of our Lord is. Go over to Hebrews 12:1.

Hebrews 12:1 *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2) looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (NKJV)*

Notice he is saying here, this is what motivated Christ to endure the nasty trial at the end of His life when He was tortured and murdered, but what is He looking for?—the joy set before Him because He knows when this is over, He gets resurrected to go back to the Father and He's also able to be our atoning sacrifice to enable the salvation offered

to all of us. His joy is in the Kingdom of God and the plan of salvation, and all of this being offered to us. Notice also in John 17, He makes a very similar comment.

John 17:12 *While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.*

13) *But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.* (NKJV)

It's His joy in offering us salvation so that we have the opportunity to be born into the Kingdom of God. The two outcomes the parable is talking about—either entering into the joy of the Lord, making it into the Kingdom of God, or weeping and gnashing of teeth, going into the lake of fire—that's how the movie ends ultimately for all of us. There are two possible outcomes: Well done, good and faithful servant, and, I never knew you. The good news is we get to choose, by how we live our lives, which way the movie ends. But those are the two ultimate outcomes.

This parable doesn't really address the question of how does God determine different rewards for us. We know from the parable of the minas, which we're going to look at in a minute, that everybody doesn't receive the exact same thing in how that's determined. What it addresses for us is the fundamental fact, which is kind of obvious, that if we just observe ourselves and other people around us, we all have different talents, we have different abilities, we have different challenges we have to face and overcome—that's a fact of life. There's a big lesson in that for us as individuals. It's a human carnal tendency that we tend to judge others and compare ourselves among ourselves, and we have a very flawed way of doing that.

Let's turn over to Isaiah 11 and notice an important principle here. We'll start in verse 1; we're going to read a brief section of scripture referring to Jesus Christ and notice the way it talks about one of His qualities.

Isaiah 11:1 *There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots.*

2) *The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.* (NKJV)

Notice He fears Yehovah—He's not Yehovah—He fears Yehovah. Verse 3.

3) *His delight is in the fear of the LORD, and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears;*

4) *but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;* (NKJV)

Why does it make the point that He doesn't judge by the seeing of the eyes and the hearing of the ears? Because that's how we do it. When we judge other people it's what

we perceive—it's what we can see or hear, and we typically don't know the whole story or the heart. Just think of the individuals I contrast in this sermon. You have Beth, with her very positive background—not only did she come from this positive background, she was a smart, intelligent lady, well-educated, articulate, and very polished. David, on the other hand, was rather rough around the edges, and could be a little hard to take, but he'd come from a very difficult background.

Oftentimes we meet people and we don't know their full story; we don't know their background—where they have come from, how they started their journey, and what they've had to overcome. If they don't open up and tell us what's in their background, what scars they've had to overcome, we won't know the full story. When we see a Beth, who starts with her five talents and gets to ten, we're impressed with that but we don't necessarily see that if you have a David, with one or two talents, but who also doubled those talents, we're still more impressed with Beth because we tend to judge with the seeing of our eyes and the hearing of our ears. We have to realize that's not how God does it. He's going to look at us very fairly and take all these factors into consideration.

There's a key here to how He sorts out and makes this a level playing field for everybody. To understand it we have to turn to the parable of the minas. Let's turn over to Luke 19.

Luke 19:11 *Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately.*

12) *Therefore He said: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.*

13) *So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.'*

14) *But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this man to reign over us.'*

15) *"And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading.*

Everyone was responsible for doing something with what they were given, and were expected to grow it.

16) *Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.'*

17) *And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.'*

18) *And the second came, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned five minas.'*

19) *Likewise he said to him, 'You also be over five cities.'*

20) *"Then another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. (NKJV)*

Once again we have an individual who didn't do anything with what was given to him. The problem is the fact that he didn't do anything with it.

21) *For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.* (NKJV)

Once again it's a victim attitude: It's not my fault; I'm the victim, and God, you're mean and you're unfair—that's the attitude.

22) *And he said to him, 'Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow.* (NKJV)

Let me just briefly point out in verse 22 when it said you knew, that's *eidó*—the same word in the parable of the talents when the master is correcting him; this is the more superficial level of knowing.

23) *Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that at my coming I might have collected it with interest?'*

24) *"And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas.'*

25) *(But they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas.')*

26) *'For I say to you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.*

27) *But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me.'*" (NKJV)

Notice once again that the individual who didn't do anything, who didn't strive to overcome and build what he was given, gets thrown into the lake of fire.

There are some differences with the other individuals that we didn't see in the parable of the talents. In the parable of the talents it starts off as an uneven playing field and it ends as an even playing field: One servant starts out with five, another starts out with two, but both double what they had; they both grow and get significantly more than they started with, and what do they hear at the end? Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord—it's the same outcome.

In this case, with the minas, it's a level playing field starting off, then one servant grows his one mina into ten and is rewarded with ten cities, and another grows his one mina into five and is rewarded with five cities; so you see, the analogy is different with regard to the outcome later. Here's the key: We all have different backgrounds, we all have different abilities, intelligence levels, health, experience—all of that is different for each one of us; it's just a fact of life. When we all come into salvation and we get baptized and begin our Christian life, what's the one thing that's an even playing field, across the board, regardless of what one's background is? The same down payment of God's Holy Spirit.

Here's the key, and it's what I love to call the gap. It's the gap between where you started and where you ended up, how much growth took place between those points as a result of God's Holy Spirit, and how much we yielded to it and grew as a result of it. Our physical circumstances are going to be different—our intelligence levels, our background, our health, and numerous other factors that are going to be completely different; that's life—but God can level the playing field: How much did you yield to My Spirit, and how much did you grow what was given to you?

Again, we tend to judge with the seeing of our eyes and the hearing of our ears, and are more impressed with the physical abilities. We have to realize that's not where God places the value. The things that, you might say, are talents of our life and our background, which might enable us to do better, or, you might say, our physical righteousness—He doesn't place much value in them.

Turn over to Isaiah 64 and verse 6.

Isaiah 64:6 *But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. (NKJV)*

As I mentioned, God looks at our physical righteousness—the talents we have innately with us—and says that's like dirty rags to Me; that's not what I'm concerned about. When you contrast Beth and David, they both come to the point where they are baptized and start their Christian life, but from very different places. That's not due to anything that they chose, it's just a factor of what they happened to be born into, circumstances over which they had no control. It would be totally unjust to judge them and reward them for all eternity over factors they could not control.

When you look at it from God's standpoint of, I gave you the down payment of the Spirit, what did you do with it? How much did you yield to it, how much did you grow? When measured like that, now we have a level playing field. Now you can look at this and say, I understand this person's background—what did they do with what they were given, and how much did they yield, and how much did they grow and strive to overcome, based upon their circumstances? When you put it in that context, God can look it and say, I gave you all one mina and what did you do with that one mina? He can take all these factors into consideration and say, this person yielded and strived more with My Spirit and grew with it more, so I'm going to reward that more. That's a level playing field that is just. That's something on which we are now being judged—factors we can control, and it's an important thing for us to do.

If we look at it like this, there are some important lessons in this for all of us. One is, as I mentioned, not comparing ourselves among ourselves. That's a natural human tendency because we are impressed with the seeing of our eyes and the hearing of our ears, and what our perceptions are in that regard. This can be dangerous. Turn over to 2 Corinthians 10 and verse 12.

2 Corinthians 10:12 *For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. (NKJV)*

There are two general ditches we can fall into, doing this type of thing. One is discouragement and the other is arrogance. Take, for example, that you're David, and you came from a horrible background and struggle with a lot of issues simply because of the baggage from your upbringing. You look over and see someone who, like Beth, had this very positive background; life dealt her a handful of cards that work really well and you look at that and think, I'll never measure up; I struggle with all these other issues and have these problems to overcome, and I see these people who seem to have it easy and I'll never be good enough—I'll never measure up to be in God's Kingdom, and this just leads to discouragement. We have to realize that God judges us all, understanding the backgrounds, the struggles, the issues that we come from. He knew that going in. He was very informed on the issues when we started, and wasn't surprised by any of this. Forgetting that can lead to discouragement for us.

The other side of this is arrogance, because if you are a Beth, and look at someone like David and think, if that guy can make it into the Kingdom of God with all the struggles he has, I have an easy slide—look how well I'm doing. Thus we can get puffed up and think too much of ourselves. That's one of the reasons we are warned to not compare ourselves among ourselves; we strive to be like Christ. If we are constantly comparing ourselves to His example, we're always going to fall short. We're never going to measure up to that but we have to realize that God is very merciful. He understands that we are never going to be that good but we have to be constantly striving to take on that character and to follow that example.

It's how hard we strive to do that and how willing we are to repent when we see that we were wrong, and to keep striving to do better, because we're always capable of messing up. We all say and do things that we look back on later and cringe, and say, if I could do that over again, I wouldn't make that choice; I wouldn't say this or I wouldn't do that, and that's the right response because we're all going to have those times in life, that are part of the Christian life. There's a famous quote that I've always loved: It's not how many times you get knocked down in life, it's how many times you get back up. You keep striving to overcome because you're going to make mistakes and mess up, but we don't ever want to give up, and we want to keep striving to overcome regardless of what mistakes we make along the way. The example we should be comparing ourselves to is the example of Jesus Christ, and we should strive to do as He did, not comparing ourselves among ourselves, because you're going to wind up in one of two ditches. It's just a recipe for trouble.

It's also important for us to realize that in God's eyes we are all important. Again, because we oftentimes tend to judge with the seeing of the eyes and the hearing of the ears, we can sit here and think, over there are the important people, the important jobs. As a friend of mine used to love to joke (he was an elder as well), he referred to the

person behind the podium as the talking head. He said people would think, that's the important job or those are the important people—those in an ordained office or doing some visible job.

God places us all in our own individual roles and He considers them all important, and He judges them accordingly, because He assigns the roles and the responsibilities. Again, every role is unique and has its own stresses and responsibilities—to whom much is given, much is required—and just because someone may not have, what you might call, a more visible role, doesn't mean their role isn't very important. Let's turn over to 1 Corinthians 12 and verse 12.

1 Corinthians 12:12 *For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.*

13) *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.*

14) *For in fact the body is not one member but many.*

15) *If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?*

16) *And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?*

17) *If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?*

18) *But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.*

19) *And if they were all one member, where would the body be?*

20) *But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.*

21) *And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."*

22) *No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.*

23) *And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty,*

24) *but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it,*

25) *that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.*

26) *And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*

27) *Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.*

28) *And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.*

29) *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?*

30) *Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?*

31) *But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.*
(NKJV)

The more excellent way—in chapter 13—is agape love. I think an important lesson, in looking at all this, is that we all have our part in the body. One of the things that's common in human nature is we sometimes get discouraged when we look at our role and our circumstances in life, and think, well, I don't matter that much, I'm not that important to God; I don't have some visible role, I'm in an isolated situation, or I'm just a widow—how important am I?

Let me share with you a very personal story of an individual who played a huge role in my life. Like I said, it was not someone who was in an ordained office or in a more visible role, but let me show you how important just a regular member, not in any specific role, can be, and how significant that can be. To tell you this whole story I'm going to have to build a picture and give you some background, so just bear with me and you'll see the point as I get to this.

Back in 2008, my wife Linda was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. She died later that year as a result. She was 39. As you can imagine, this was a rather traumatic time in life and was stressful. With all the health issues that were going on and the dynamics that were happening in the aftermath of all that, it was a very difficult time. What I want you to understand is the background of the individual who became the biggest help to me through this whole time period. (Forgive me if I get a little emotional telling this story).

To understand the contrast here I need to tell you a little about my personal background, and this is not to exalt myself—I want you to understand the options available and you'll see at the end how this comes together. The reason I mentioned that, when all of this happened, is I have a number of friends in the church of God whom I've known for years who are elders in the church of God, who had been ordained for decades at that point, and any of them were more than happy to be there as a help to me and assist me through that. I also graduated from Ambassador College a number of years ago, and as a result of that, a lot of the guys I went to college with are now pastors or elders in a variety of church of God organizations. My point in saying that is, in terms of reaching out for support to someone in an ordained office, who is an elder or deacon or someone we think of as being in an important role, none of them were the most significant person in my life who helped me through it all. I had plenty of options available there. Again, my point is to simply describe the options available.

I work for a hospital system in Dallas, Texas—kind of the biggest hospital system in Texas—as a recruiter for them. One of the positions I recruit for is that of psychologist. So I know a number of psychologists who have their PhDs or are licensed and credentialed, and I myself have a Master's in Counseling, my point simply being I have plenty of people—with credentials and licensure and all that type of thing—easily available to me. The person who was by far, bar none, the most helpful person in my life during that whole period was just a regular church member who farmed hay for a

living. I'm going to quote his own words, how he would describe himself in his own community—this is a direct, word-for-word quote: "We're just regular people, nothing fancy." That's how he would describe himself and his community.

We happened to meet at a Feast site a few years prior to all of this happening in my life. Even up to the point of Linda's diagnosis and all the issues that followed, this man and I had not developed a strong friendship at that point; we were casual friends who had seen each other at the Feast sites—we didn't know each other all that well. He reaches out to me just as a friend to show care and as we begin to talk, our personalities just begin to hit it off. He had had circumstances in his life that helped him relate to my circumstances, and again, our personalities just clicked.

This grew into regular phone conversations, and literally over the next year or two, probably several hundred hours. It turned into what I jokingly referred to as my Saturday night therapy sessions, because literally on Saturday evenings, typically at the end of the Sabbath (we were in different parts of the country), we would be talking on the phone, I'm pouring my guts out to him for several hours at a time, and this went on for a couple of years. This was extremely significant in my life in helping me through this. I point this out because it's easy for us to sometimes think, that's something pastors do or elders do, or someone who is in an important job, or, to quote my friend's term, the fancy people. He said, we're just regular people, nothing fancy.

My point is to understand that regardless of what your background is—whether you come from a fancy background or you come from David's background—we are all significant. We all have our important role to play and God knew what He was doing when He called you. He had a plan for every single one of us and the contribution that we all give is very important. So don't ever look at that and think, I'm insignificant, what help could I be? This guy started making phone calls just to ask, how are you doing, how are things going, and we started hitting it off. He essentially became a therapist for a year or two and he was a hay farmer. So just think of that in terms of how significant your role in the church of God can be and the plans that God has for you.

He has plans for all of us and He's going to judge us all accordingly, based upon our background and the role that we play. Just because you're not in a visible service role, or in some ordained office, doesn't mean that your role is not very significant—believe me. When I look back at that time in my life, there's no question to me as to who was the most valuable person, the most helpful individual in my life, who got me through all of that. This was just a regular church member who quite frankly was just a good listener. That was really what made all this work. He would ask me questions and he would just listen, and whatever I was going through at the time he would just be there with me. That got me through a very difficult time in life.

You never know if your reaching out to someone who is isolated, someone who is in difficult circumstances, can have that impact on their life. That may not be anything that is ever a visible role, because, again, if I wasn't up here telling you this story of what this individual did for me, you would never know how impactful that was and how important

that was. So realize in your own Christian life, you can have that same value as well. It doesn't matter if you're the talking head behind the podium—you don't have to be in that role. The contribution you can make is significant. Don't ever devalue that and realize, also, when God comes to ultimately judge us, He's going to judge us all based upon the cards—how we played the cards we were dealt, how we fulfilled the role that He gave us, because we all have to serve an important role but those roles are different.

We've all been given a different set of cards, so to speak, a different set of talents and life circumstances, and it's our job to figure out how we can serve, that is, what can I do to help others, given the cards that life has handed me? That's going to be different for every single person. We'll be judged according to that. It's not at all a situation where you look back and say, this person had an ordained office so they had a job at headquarters, or something like that, and thus they automatically get a better position in the Kingdom—no, they don't. Every one of us gets judged on how we play the cards that we're dealt.

So let's realize that God is very fair in how He will work all of this out. We all come from different backgrounds with different talents and different circumstances, different trials and scars we have to overcome in our life. God knew all of that the day He called us; it's not like it's a surprise and He's going to judge us all accordingly. So our job is to continue to keep striving and to take that one mina that we received of His Spirit, and constantly strive to grow it and to overcome as much as we can.

It's not an issue if the person next to you started with five or ten talents, and in terms of talents that they are farther ahead, and you started with one or two—no, if you're doubling and tripling what you have, that's how God is going to judge you. It's what you do with the Spirit you have been given, and how much you yield to it; we're all judged on what we know and what we do with what we've been given. Let's think about this as we go through this Feast, looking at our lives, and realizing that God is very fair, He is very just, and our job is to continue to keep overcoming and doing the best we can with the cards we've been dealt.