

Unmerited favor: Matthew 10:40-42

The only rewards that matter can't be earned.

by [Evan Drake Howard](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

The ex-con was finally heading home. He ignored the noisy college kids on the bus and stared out the window until, after a rest stop, a young woman sat down next to him and struck up a conversation. He told her that he'd been in prison for four years and that his wife hadn't written in three and a half. When he learned that he was being paroled, he wrote again and said he still loved her. He would understand, however, if she never wanted to see him again. To make it easier on both of them, he suggested that his wife use a yellow handkerchief to communicate her feelings. If she wanted him back, she would tie the handkerchief on the old oak tree near their home. If there was no handkerchief, he would stay on the bus and keep going.

Word of the arrangement spread through the bus. As it came into town, the college kids flocked to the windows. When they saw the tree, feverish cheering broke out.

On the tree was not one but hundreds of yellow handkerchiefs.

Like this story, which inspired the hit song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," the last three verses of Matthew 10 are about the power of an extravagant welcome. Earlier in the chapter we see Jesus sending out his disciples to preach and heal. After warning them about the rejection they will sometimes face, he describes the rewards of those who receive his messengers: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

God's presence is always and forever available to us in and through Jesus. The only requirement is that we open our hearts. The more extravagant the welcome, the greater the refreshment, the deeper the grounding, the clearer the enlightenment, the stronger the inspiration that will flow from it.

The welcome must be extravagant in sincerity and persistence in order to overcome opposition to it. Each day brings burdens and challenges, and these can become so urgent that they smother the welcoming impulse. But daily concerns are transitory.

Only God abides forever, and we belong to God in all circumstances—not only the joyful but also the mundane and excruciating ones. Trustworthy messengers remind us of this—apostles and prophets, righteous persons and children.

Most of all, Jesus himself. He lived in this place of welcome more than anyone ever has. When we invite him into our circumstances, we gain entry into his kingdom beyond, the kingdom in which all wounds are healed, all injustices made right, all joys realized in their glorious fullness. Here we transcend our puny mortality with its frail, time-bound limitations and step into the larger life of eternity. Here we receive the reward that really matters—God’s blessing.

Trying to earn the blessing causes much unhappiness and pathology. Our inner striving becomes insatiable and cannibalizes itself into a black hole of exhaustion. Work turns to drudgery. Futility sets in as we realize that even the shiniest brass ring tarnishes over time.

The unmerited reward of God’s favor illuminates the way out. Jesus tells his disciples to limit their ministry to those who are “worthy” of it. That’s the paradox. We are worthy to receive God’s kingdom only when we accept it as a gift. Not even the greatest apostles can force it on us, nor can we purchase it. Jesus purchased it for us, and the only limitation placed on our capacity to receive his kingdom is self-imposed.

Even in our suffering? Yes, even then. We don’t always feel God’s presence, just as we don’t feel the sun on a rainy day. But the presence never grows dim, and the confidence that it is there and will shine again keeps us hopeful. We can be blessed or cursed, depending on the quality of our soul work. The blessing comes from God; the curse, from our own spiritual ignorance, ineptitude or folly.

Author Brennan Manning, a former Franciscan priest, tells the story of how his striving to become the next Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi led him into the miseries of alcoholism and promiscuity. He found the way back by realizing that he could never earn God’s love, but only accept it as a gift. He reminded himself of a banner that psychologist Mary Michael O’Shaughnessy keeps on her wall. It says, “Today I will not *should* on myself.” When anyone tells her that she should do something, Manning reminds himself, she responds to that person by saying, “Don’t *should* on me.”

Everything changes when we realize that the only rewards that matter can't be earned. This is how prophets and righteous persons and children live—not out of shoulds but out of thanks.