

Purpose-Driven or Forgiveness-Given?

by Todd Wilken

One day God is going to reward you for everything you've done. But on that day, when God hands out heavenly rewards, Jesus isn't going to do you one bit of good.

Oh yes, if you trust Jesus, God will let you into heaven. But when it comes to those heavenly rewards, you have to earn them yourself. Jesus may have earned heaven for you, but not heaven's rewards. When it comes to salvation God may be gracious, but when it comes to rewards He's purely *quid pro quo*.

This is the message of *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California.¹

It's Not About You...Or Maybe It Is.

Ironically, Warren begins *The Purpose-Driven Life* (TPDL) with great promise, by saying, "It's not about you."² However, he spends the rest of the book explaining that it is up to you to earn rewards from God. This is typical of what the reader will find in TPDL. In one section Warren rightly affirms,

*God is not just the starting point of your life; he is the source of it. God...planned the days of your life in advance, choosing the exact time of your birth and death.... God left no detail to chance. He planned it all for his purpose.... God was thinking of you even before he made the world.... there is a God who made you for a reason, and your life has profound meaning.*³

But in another section he writes, "God will give you what you need *if you will just make the choice to live for him.*"⁴

So, which is it? Is the starting point and source of my life God, or my choice to live for God?

Warren does know the Gospel. He knows that we are sinners saved only by the perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what little Gospel Warren does give the reader of TPDL, he ultimately takes away. All the assurance of the Gospel is siphoned off by Warren's relentless emphasis on earning rewards from God. Instead of directing his readers to the perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for them, he misdirects them to their own choices, decisions and deeds done for God. Warren must do this. The very premise of his book demands it.

In the first half of this review, I will let Warren lay out his premise with minimal commentary. In the second half, I will offer a critique and response to TPDL.

There Will Be a Test!

Early in the book Warren establishes the premise for TPDL:

One day you will stand before God, and he will do an audit of your life, a final exam, before you enter eternity. The Bible says, "Remember, each of us will stand personally before the judgment seat of God.... Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God." Fortunately, God

wants us to pass this test, so he has given us the questions in advance. From the Bible we can surmise that God will ask us two crucial questions: First, "What did you do with my Son, Jesus Christ?" God won't ask about your religious background or doctrinal views. The only thing that will matter is, did you accept what Jesus did for you and did you learn to love and trust him? ... Second, "What did you do with what I gave you?" What did you do with your life—all the gifts, talents, opportunities, energy, relationships, and resources God gave you? ...Preparing you for these two questions is the goal of this book. The first question will determine where you spend eternity. The second question will determine what you do in eternity. By the end of this book you will be ready to answer both questions.⁵

Warren writes, "Life is a test, life is a trust, and life is a temporary assignment."⁶ and, "Every time you pass a test, God notices and makes plans to reward you in eternity."⁷ This life-long test culminates in a final exam, administered and graded by God Himself. Warren writes:

At the end of your life you will be evaluated and rewarded according to how well you handled what God entrusted to you. That means everything you do, even simple daily chores, has eternal implications.⁸

At the end of your life on earth you will stand before God, and he is going to evaluate how well you served others with your life.... One day God will compare how much time and energy we spent on ourselves compared with what we invested in serving others... To all excuses God will respond, "Sorry, wrong answer. I created, saved, and called you and commanded you to live a life of service. What part did you not understand?" The Bible warns unbelievers, "He will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves," but for Christians it will mean a loss of eternal rewards.⁹

Warren believes that God is going to reward you for everything you've done. Warren believes that those heavenly rewards must be earned—by you. Again, he writes,

*One day God will review your answers to these life questions. Did you put Jesus at the center of your life? Did you develop his character? Did you devote your life to serving others? Did you communicate his message and fulfill his mission? Did you love and participate in his family? **These are the only issues that will count.**¹⁰*

TPDL is built entirely on this premise. Warren spends over 300 pages outlining how you can find your purpose in life, live according to that purpose and thereby earn eternal rewards. **The only problem is, Warren's premise is false.**

Don't get me wrong, Scripture does teach eternal rewards; but not the way Warren teaches them. TPDL is a subtle yet serious misinterpretation of this teaching. Because of this error, TPDL continually throws the reader back upon his own works:

Knowing that one day you will stand before God, here are some questions you need to consider: How will you explain those times when projects or things were more important to you than people? Who do you need to start spending more time with? What do you need to cut out of your schedule to make that possible? What sacrifice do you need to make?¹¹

According to TPDL, on that day when God hands out heavenly rewards, the sacrifice that Jesus made for you isn't going to do you one bit of good. Jesus may have earned heaven for you, but you have to earn heavenly rewards yourself. Warren writes, "When you transfer to eternity, you will leave everything else behind. *All you're taking with you is your character.*"¹²

Jesus may have saved you, but it's up to you to pass that final exam.

Just Do What Jesus Did

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Now, Jesus does have a role to play in TPDL. He is an example of how to fulfill your purpose and earn heavenly rewards. Warren writes, "Jesus honored God by fulfilling his purpose on earth. We honor God the same way."¹³

According to TPDL, your life is a series of choices. And Jesus is your example for making the right choices:

*Even Jesus struggled with this.... Jesus stood at a fork in the road. Would he fulfill his purpose and bring glory to God, or would he shrink back and live a comfortable, self-centered life? You face the same choice.*¹⁴

*Jesus modeled a purpose-driven life, and he taught others how to live it too. That was the "work" that brought glory to God. Today God calls each of us to the same work.*¹⁵

According to TPDL, if you follow Jesus' example of making right choices, you make yourself more Christ like. Warren writes, "Every time you choose to do good instead of sin, you are growing in the character of Christ"¹⁶ and "Every time you defeat a temptation, you become more like Jesus!"¹⁷

Now, God does help a little. Under the aptly named heading "God's part and your part," Warren writes, "Christlikeness is the result of making Christ like choices and depending on his Spirit to help you fulfill those choices."¹⁸ But even then, according to Warren, you must take the first step. You must make the right choice first. Warren writes:

*Christ likeness is not produced by imitation, but by inhabitation. We allow Christ to live **through** us.... How does this happen in real life? Through the choices we make. We choose to do the right thing in situations and then trust God's Spirit to give us his power, love, faith, and wisdom to do it. Since God's Spirit lives inside of us, these things are always available for the asking. We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work.... The Holy Spirit releases his power **the moment** you take a step of faith.... God waits for you to act first.*¹⁹

It's all up to you. You must act first. And then, as you continue to make the right choices, those choices make you more like your example, Jesus. The process of becoming like Jesus not only begins, but also continues with your decision. Warren writes:

*Spiritual Growth is not automatic. It takes intentional commitment. You must **want** to grow, **decide** to grow, **make an effort** to grow, and **persist** in growing. Discipleship—the process of becoming like Christ—always begins with a decision.... When the first disciples chose to follow Jesus, they didn't understand the implications of their decision. They simply responded to Jesus' invitation. That's all you need to get started: **Decide** to become a disciple.*²⁰

It's up to you. God will smile on you and reward you with heavenly rewards. But, according to TPDL, it all depends on your choice. Warren writes: "The truth is—you are as close to God as you choose to be.... Remember, it's your choice. You are as close to God as you choose to be."²¹

Yet Warren doesn't leave the reader without some practical advice for earning those rewards:

*Develop the habit of writing down exactly what you intend to do. This action step should be **personal** (involving you), **practical** (something you can do), and **provable** (with a **deadline** to do it) ... spend some time thinking about this question: What has God **already** told you to do in his Word that you haven't started doing yet?*²²

Just do what God tells you. It couldn't be simpler. And don't worry! If you're unclear about exactly what you should be doing, remember that Jesus is your example. In fact, it is just that simple. All you have to do to earn heavenly rewards from God is to do what Jesus did. Warren writes:

Notice that Jesus expects us to do only what he did with the Father. His relationship with the Father is the model for our friendship with him. Jesus did whatever the Father asked him to do—out of love. ²³

For Warren, there is a lot riding on this. If you can obey God in this way, He will smile on you, He will be your friend and He will reward you. Warren writes, “Jesus made it clear that obedience is a condition of intimacy with God.” ²⁴

The Problem of Perfection

So, all you have to do to earn smiles, friendship and heavenly rewards from God is do what Jesus did. Warren cites Noah as an example of this kind of obedience:

Notice that Noah obeyed completely (no instruction was overlooked), and he obeyed exactly (in the way and time God wanted it done). That is wholeheartedness. It is no wonder God smiled on Noah. ²⁵

Be like Jesus, be like Noah and God will smile on you. All God is asking for is complete, exact and wholehearted obedience! No problem!

But wait a minute. Isn't the fact that **I can't obey** God completely, exactly and wholeheartedly a problem? Isn't that the reason Jesus lived a perfect life for me, and went to the Cross for me— because **I can't and don't obey** God completely, exactly and wholeheartedly? Oh, yes... sin. It's a problem all right.

And then there's the pesky fact that Jesus obeyed God **perfectly**. If all I have to do is what Jesus did, then that means I have to be perfect, doesn't it? But hold on. Warren has the answer:

You may have had unpleasable teachers or parents as you were growing up. Please don't assume God feels that way about you. He knows you are incapable of being perfect or sinless... What God looks at is the attitude of your heart: Is pleasing him your deepest desire? ²⁶

So, like the Great Pumpkin in the *Peanuts* comic strip, God is all about sincerity. He doesn't expect you to be perfect, just sincere. Elsewhere Warren writes, “God doesn't expect you to be perfect, but he does insist on complete honesty.”²⁷ According to Warren, God simply insists that you be sincere and completely honest, *and* that you obey completely, exactly and wholeheartedly.

Does It Sound to You Like We Still Have a Problem?

Again, Warren writes, “What God looks at is the attitude of your heart: Is pleasing him your deepest desire?” But what does Scripture say God sees when He looks at our attitudes and deepest desires? “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” ²⁸ “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” ²⁹ and from Jesus Himself, “...from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.”³⁰

Warren says that all God is asking for from us is complete, exact and wholehearted obedience. But how does the Apostle Paul assess his own obedience?

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free

from the body of this death? 31

Does Paul sound like someone who thinks he is obeying completely, exactly and wholeheartedly? No. Apparently Paul hadn't read TPDL. So, how can the same Paul write elsewhere,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.³²

How could Paul both admit that he does not obey and that he still expects heavenly rewards? Paul knew that God does demand perfect obedience to His Law. Anything short of perfect obedience God condemns as sin.³³ Paul knew why God rewards even those who fall short of God's demand for perfect obedience. Paul knew that God rewards sinners for the same reason He saves sinners.

Why Does God Reward Sinners?

Scripture does teach eternal rewards, but not the way Warren teaches them. Warren teaches that God rewards you because you find your purpose, live according to it and thereby earn rewards from God. This is a subtle yet serious misinterpretation of Scripture.

Scripture teaches that God rewards sinners for the same reason He saves them.

You see, it really isn't about you. It's about Jesus. It's not about your purpose lived for Him, it's about His purpose lived for you.³⁴ It's not about you choosing Him; it's about Him choosing you.³⁵ It's not about your obedience to Him; it's about His obedience for you. 36

It's about Jesus. Is Jesus an example of how to fulfill your purpose? Or is He the one who fulfilled God's purpose for you? Is Jesus an example of how to earn heavenly rewards? Or is He the one who earned those rewards for you?

God's purpose for you and me is that we live a life of perfect obedience to Him. But we didn't do that. In fact, we did everything but that. So Jesus fulfilled God's purpose for us. He lived the life that God demanded of us—a life of perfect obedience. He died the death God required of sinners like you and me. He rose again to show us that He had indeed fulfilled God's purpose for us.

What pleases God is Jesus—His life of perfect obedience lived for sinners, His perfect death for sinners. That's it. We do not earn rewards by our works. Jesus earned those rewards for us by His works. What God rewards is faith in the One Who earned the rewards. And even that faith itself is a free gift of God earned by Jesus at the Cross.³⁷

Look at it this way: Can you add anything to what Jesus has done to please God for you? Because of what Jesus did for you at the Cross, God is as pleased with you as He is ever going to be. You can't do anything more to make God smile, win His friendship, or earn His rewards than what Jesus has already done for you.

What about all of those Bible passages that seem to promise rewards for works? Consider this: Is it the works themselves that God rewards, or the faith in Jesus from which they flow? Scripture is consistent: "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." 38

Look again at those Scriptures. In every case, passages used to teach that we earn heavenly rewards by our works (Matthew 5:12; 6:16; 10:40-42; 25:14-30; Luke 6:35; 12:42-48; 16:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:15-19; Colossians 3:23-24; 2 John 1:8, et al.) actually teach instead that what God rewards is faith in Jesus Christ and His works for us.

Also, in these Scriptures the contrast is not between Christians who earn many rewards and Christians who earn few rewards (as Warren assumes). Rather, the contrast is between Christians who receive rewards and unbelievers who do not. Again, the distinction is between those who have faith in Jesus and those who do not.

God rewards sinners for the same reason He saves them, by Grace, through Faith, for Jesus' sake. God saves us by Grace; which is His undeserved, unearned favor. God rewards us by Grace too. God saves us through Faith; which itself is a gift He gives us to trust the promise of forgiveness in Jesus. God rewards us through Faith too. God saves us because of what Jesus has done for us in His perfect life, death and resurrection. God rewards us because of Jesus too.

You might say, "But that means that I earn nothing by my works!" You're right; it does. That is the point. Good works aren't the result of striving to obey. Good works are the result of trusting in the perfect obedience of Jesus. Good works are not done to earn rewards. They are done because Jesus has already earned the reward for us.

The saddest thing about Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* is how often he comes close to getting it right, but how far he ends up from this truth. In his zeal for deeds, he ultimately obscures the One who has truly earned our salvation and our heavenly rewards.

Warren has lamented, "our churches are filled with far more believers in the Word than doers of the Word ." 40 Warren believes that he must produce deeds with the stick of the Law and the carrot of rewards. Pastor Warren, if you want more deeds from Christians, stop promising them heavenly rewards in return for their obedience, and proclaim to them the obedience of Jesus for them. If you want deeds done in faith, then preach the Word that creates and strengthens faith, Christ and Him crucified for sinners. The deeds will follow.

The Forgiveness-Given Life

When you stop trying to earn rewards from God with your works, you are free to give all those works away to your neighbor—expecting nothing in return. Rather than a life lived from "Purpose" in pursuit of rewards, Scripture presents the Christian life as a life lived from Forgiveness in love of others.

Rather than worrying about whether or not God is pleased with you, is smiling at you, is your friend or will reward you, you can live assured that Jesus has already pleased God for you, won God's favor and friendship, and earned your heavenly rewards. You no longer need to work to please God. God has forgiven you in Jesus. He is already pleased with you because of Jesus! Now you can work to serve your neighbor.

The Forgiveness-Given life is nothing less than the life of Jesus Himself. Paul writes:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. 41

The Purpose-Driven life is lived in pursuit of rewards. The Forgiveness-Given life is lived in pursuit of others. The Purpose-Driven Life is lived in either fear or false confidence of answering to God. The Forgiveness-Given Life is lived by faith in Jesus who has already answered to God for us.

The Good News is so much better than TPDL would have you believe. Yes, one day God is going to reward you for everything—everything Jesus has done for you. Jesus not only earned heaven for you with His perfect life, death and resurrection. He also earned heaven's rewards for you too. On that day, when God hands out heavenly rewards, Jesus Himself will be your reward

I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 42

1 *The Purpose-Driven Life* is the centerpiece of "40 Days of Purpose," a program of reading and study used by

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thousands of Christian congregations.

2 Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002, p. 17.

3 Ibid. pp. 20, 235 (emphasis original).

4 Ibid. p. 58 (emphasis mine).

5 Ibid. p. 34.

6 Ibid. p. 42.

7 Ibid. p. 44.

8 Ibid. p. 45.

9 Ibid. pp. 2312

10 Ibid. p. 318 (emphasis mine).

11 Ibid. p. 128.

12 Ibid. p. 126 (emphasis mine).

13 Ibid. p. 55.

14 Ibid. p. 57.

15 Ibid. p. 310.

16 Ibid. p. 201.

17 Ibid. p. 203.

18 Ibid. p. 180.

19 Ibid. pp. 1745 (emphasis original).

20 Ibid. p. 180 (emphasis original).

21 Ibid. p. 99 (emphasis original).

22 Ibid. p. 192 (emphasis original).

23 Ibid. p. 96.

24 Ibid. p. 95.

25 Ibid. p. 72. Warren ignores the fact that Noah found favor with God before he obeyed. In fact, Scripture clearly commends Noah's faith. Hebrews 11:7.

26 Ibid. p. 76.

27 Ibid. p. 92.

28 Genesis 6:12.

29 Jeremiah 17:9.

30 Mark 7:2122.

31 Romans 7:1824.

32 2 Timothy 4:78

33 Romans 3:23; Matthew 5:48, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Galatians 5:10, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law to perform them.'" James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."

34 2 Corinthians 5:110; Ephesians 1:312; 3:812.

35 John 15:16; 1 Corinthians 1:3031; Ephesians 1:36; 2 Thessalonians 2:1314; Titus 1:13

36 Romans 5:1819; Galatians 2:20; 5:14.

37 Ephesians 1:89, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." Philippians 1:29, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

38 Hebrews 11:6. See also Hebrews 10:35.

39 The context of this passage shows that it is not about our works built upon the foundation of Christ, rather it is about how those teachers who followed Paul taught in accord (or not in accord) with the foundation he laid in the message of the Cross. Paul is warning, as he does in Galatians, against building an edifice of human works on the message of Grace alone. "This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:23) Warren would do well to heed this warning.

40 Warren has said, "We've made biblical interpretation an end in itself. This is why our churches are filled with far more believers in the Word than doers of the Word... Application-less preaching is why there is no difference between the way many Christians and non-Christians act." Baptist Press, "Application-less Preaching Isn't Biblical, Warren says," by Jon Walker, 2-16-01.

41 Galatians 2:20.

42 Ephesians 3:89.

The Rev. Todd Wilken is the host of Issues, Etc.

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