

## A CUP OF COLD WATER

Evan A. Fry, Radio Minister  
Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ  
of Latter Day Saints

All Rights Reserved

Independence, Missouri

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 10:40-42 (Revised Standard Version)

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward. (Compare Mark 9:41: For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.)

\*\*\*

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these  
my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

One of the oft-misquoted and greatly misunderstood verses of the Bible is the saying of Jesus about giving a cup of cold water. Separating it from its context, and even omitting part of the complete statement, we generally render it something like this: "He who gives a cup of cold water shall in no wise lose his reward," and regard it as a teaching about charitable treatment of our fellow men.

Many fine masterpieces of literature have been written on the theme that a good or charitable or kindly deed done to one of the least of God's creatures is done vicariously to Christ himself. There is nothing wrong with that philosophy; but it is not very good Bible interpretation to get that meaning out of Jesus' statement about the cup of cold water. Those who do regard the cup of cold water as simply a insignificant act of charity, and nothing more, miss the whole point of Jesus' saying. It would be far more reasonable and intellectually honest to turn to the 25th chapter of Matthew and read, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Here is unquestionably a good basis for the philosophy that even a cup of cold water offered to the humblest child of God is offered to Christ himself. And if we take the context of the entire statement or parable about the sheep and the goats in Matthew's 25th chapter, it becomes crystal clear that Christ's judgment of our earthly life will be based largely on whether or not we have been kind, helpful, thoughtful and charitable to our fellow men, especially those who were poor, humble, helpless, and in need of food, clothing, drink, love, understanding, and companionship. We shall be judged on the basis of the deeds we could have done and should have done but left undone, as well as on the basis of what we have actually done.

There are restrictions and limitations implied even in this interpretation, however. Any kindly or charitable deed -- feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and comforting the prisoner -- must be done in the name of Christ or in the spirit of Christ, or there is no promise of reward. Even though the one who does such deeds of kindness and charity may be ignorant of Christ's name and of his mission, he may still be acting in his Spirit of love, compassion, and kindness. And on the other hand, even if he knows something of Christ, he may be acting in a way completely foreign to Christ's Spirit. To suppose an extreme case, suppose that an executioner is using the rack, the wheel, and other instruments of torture to make a Christian renounce his Lord. The victim faints. To revive him so that the torture can continue, the executioner pours cold water down his throat, not in love or in pity, but in cruelty and hatred. Would the promise of Jesus about a reward for a cup of cold water apply in such a case? Could one extend charity to buy votes, or to be seen and applauded by men, or for some other ulterior motive, and still claim the reward that Jesus promised?

There is a much deeper meaning in Jesus' statement about giving a cup of cold water than many have yet discovered, or than we have yet mentioned. It is much more than an exhortation to simply charity. Consider for a moment the setting for that saying. Just previously, Jesus had been talking about taking up the cross and following him; about seeking to save one's life but losing the soul. He had been warning the apostles of great persecution and tribulation which would come to all who took upon them the name of Jesus -- when it would be dangerous and painful even to recognize the apostles before the world as his servants. Then follows the significant statement: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives (the Greek Diaglott reads "entertains") a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives (or entertains) a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward." Then follows the statement about the cup of cold water: "And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

What Jesus is saying here is that all men cannot be prophets, or saints, or apostles. But a man who feeds and clothes and shelters a prophet because he recognizes him as a prophet, is helping in the work of that prophet, and hence is also helping in the work of him who sent the prophet. Such a man proves that he would gladly accept the responsibility, the burden, the unpopularity and persecution that come to a prophet, even though he could not do the work of a prophet. He proves that he is willing and eager to use such gifts as he has in the service of God. Because of his willingness and his devotion, therefore, he shall receive the same reward as the prophet -- eternal life. In the same way he who ignores the danger of persecution and the shame of ridicule and unpopularity to receive or entertain or give hospitality to a righteous man in the name and in the Spirit of Christ, shall receive the reward of a righteous man.

The "little ones" mentioned by Jesus as receivers of the cup of cold water are not necessarily children, though the confusing language of some translations might lead one to jump to that conclusion. I think the true sense of this saying is best expressed in the Emphatic Greek Diaglott translation, which reads: (and please note this language carefully) "And whoever shall give a single cup of cold water to refresh one of these lowly ones, because he is my disciple, I assure you that by no means will he lose his reward." Jesus is talking here about something much more significant and important than casual and unthinking charity to poor people or children. The "little ones," or "lowly ones" are the apostles. He had warned the apostles that he was sending them forth to face persecution, shame, and death, as he would soon face persecution, shame, and death. He was warning them that the time would come when it would be dangerous and unpopular and perhaps even fatal to befriend one of his apostles by such an insignificant gesture as giving a cup of cold water. But he is at the same time promising that "he who receives (or entertains) you, receives (or entertains) me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me."

The proof of discipleship is the willingness to share in the danger, the risk, the unpopularity, the shame, and the seeming disgrace of those who are called and sent to be special witnesses of Christ. To help them is to acknowledge them. Giving them a cup of cold water because they are disciples, is expressing a willingness to share with them in the labor, the danger, the weariness, the ignominy and shame, and perhaps even the martyr's death which came to every one of Jesus' apostles save the traitor, Judas.

Giving the cup of cold water to a servant of Christ means acknowledging Christ as Lord, and taking up one's cross of personal danger, persecution, shame, toil, and perhaps even death. It means that one is willing to share in the Humility of "these lowly ones," the servants of Christ, and that although one's gifts and callings may not qualify him to be a prophet or apostle, he is willing to devote such gifts and talents and callings and possessions as he has to the service of Christ, even at the risk of his life.