

Incentives

By Steven Harper

Near the end of last week, a national automobile dealers' organization warned that the new CARS program [known as the "Cash for Clunkers"] might run out of money before the weekend and that any potential deals might be unfulfilled and/or without reimbursement and warned dealers they might want to hold off processing deals through the program or they would get stuck with the difference — up to \$4500 per transaction — if the program had indeed run through all the money. The problem, it seems, is that the incentive program was too good. Amazingly, about \$1 billion was not enough money because far more people took advantage of the incentives in such a short time than what was anticipated. That would mean more than 250,000 people were motivated to buy cars due to the government-funded incentive program in one month. [The website states it was anticipated to run through November 1, "or when the funds are exhausted, whichever comes first."]

Incentives, it seems, have become the norm in the automotive business. Most, if not all, of the American automobile manufacturers have been offering their own incentives for almost 30 years with only temporary breaks from time to time, with ever-increasing amounts, and are now seen as almost a necessity to get people in the showroom — often with more incentives thrown in to get them to actually make a purchase. In recent years, even many of the foreign car manufacturers have joined in the incentive programs, though not as heartily, and now we have the government program. Incentives, it seems, are now just part of the process.

In spiritual matters, I am afraid some churches are taking lessons from the automotive industry and are offering "incentives" of their own to get people in the door. Almost weekly, I get fliers in the mail advertising some church's special programs directed at kids, teens, singles, those who are divorced, seniors, the unemployed, and a dozen other classes. The ads emphasize the programs and how they offer something especially for the targeted group and their needs, and include an inevitable incentive to get them to come visit — anything from coffee and donuts to entertaining music to jump pits for the toddlers to skate parks for the teens to blatantly materialistic offerings such as giveaways of iPods, spa treatments, gift certificates to local retail stores, and — not surprisingly — cold, hard cash.

It saddens me to see these "incentive programs" offered by religious establishments, if only for what it says about their view of the spiritual side of life: What God offers is not enough! While they may deny that is their view, what else could one conclude? God said it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16); if some believe they must offer material incentives to get people in the door, they must obviously think that what God offers is not enough and something more must be offered to get people to just "take a look" or they wouldn't be doing it. And, like the automotive business, the "incentives" are only going to get more popular, those who are drawn by them will only demand more and more and, like the automotive business, people are going to come to expect them. The reality is that when the incentives dry up, so will the crowds. They don't come for the spiritual offerings, and often because little or nothing is offered along the lines of spiritual matters.

Thankfully, you won't find such incentives here; we offer you something so much better! We offer only what God has offered. And what is that? Let's take a minute to see just what God and His Son, Jesus Christ, have offered.

Their Love. It was the love of God, Paul said, that moved Him to send His Son to die for our us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8), and it was Christ's love for us that moved Him to die not for His friends, but for us His enemies (vv. 6, 10). We were certainly undeserving of the love of God shown toward us, but, as Jesus said, He “so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The apostle John says it in a way that sums it up well: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1John 3:1). What kind of love is that? It is a love that will never let us down, never leave us without comfort, and a love that does the best for us and tells us what we need to hear, even when we do not necessarily think so. God's love is such that we do not have to worry about it ending because the eternal God is love (1John 4:8). That being true, there is nothing that “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Nothing!

Now, if you know about this love and you truly understand its greatness, that should be incentive enough to get you to respond in obedience and enough to convince you that He is worthy of giving yourself entirely to Him. We offer this to you because there is simply no material thing we could offer you that would surpass its greatness.

Their Plan for Your Salvation. If you investigate the numerous churches in the area, you will likely be confused by what you hear regarding salvation from sins and from eternal punishment; in fact, it is likely nowadays that you may not even hear anything about sin and salvation! But there are so many variations out there, I could not list them all in this short space; be careful to test those words against what you will find within the Bible and understand that just because someone says they are speaking from God does not mean it is true. Many things do not agree with what God said through the inspired writers and they will not help you find salvation.

The answer is to look into God's word yourself and see what God really says. I would urge you to read through the book of Acts, when the gospel first began to be preached, and see what was demanded of people then — and do what they did. Don't let men convince you that it cannot be understood; I've met enough people who have studied themselves out of error and discovered the truth to know better. We offer you that plan because we believe there is no material thing we could offer you that would save you, but firmly believe that it is through Christ you can be saved.

Their Promises. The same God and the same Savior who love you as they do also have given us promises — promises worthy of hearing and pursuing. God has promised the obedient “eternal life” (1John 2:25) and that is certainly worth noting, but also note that God has promised to you, if you are one of His children, He “will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5), and that “He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1Cor. 10:13). We offer these same promises to you because you need to know what can be achieved, not false and empty promises that do you no good. But if you don't know God, you might think that these are like the many promises of men and cannot be believed. It is for that reason they have one more thing to offer:

Their Word. One of the most comforting attributes of God besides His love is the assurance that all He has said can be trusted because He “never lies” (Titus 1:2) — in fact, “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18)! Try finding that kind of assurance in the offerings made by men in churches across this country!

What we offer to you is simply what God has given to us and has offered to all men. Anything less would be not enough, and anything more is too much.

A Moments Wisdom

Swallowing your pride will not give you indigestion.

Train up a child in the way he should go and go that way yourself.

The reason worry kills more people than work is that more people worry than work.

There is nothing so frightful as an active ignorance.

Gossip is like a balloon; it grows bigger with every puff.