

Grace and Reward

A tenacious idea exists, looming large in many Christians' minds, namely that there will be a large disparity in eternal rewards, with some earning for themselves a much finer eternal estate than others. Some insist that there must be a special judgment for Christians only, in which their works are judged and rewards determined. This view is accompanied by the thought of a corresponding judgment for unbelievers only, in which the degree of their punishment will be decided.

I have no basic quarrel with the concept of degrees in eternal rewards and punishments, and have no expectation of resolving the issue in this little paper. There is considerable logic, and, seemingly, Scripture for such. I am concerned, however, about how some of these ideas militate against the gospel of grace, and, with that in mind, propose to carefully examine the scriptural evidence for this view.

Scriptural Considerations

First, let's look at the "special judgment for Christians" idea. Two passages are generally cited as the *Bema*, translated in the Authorized Version as "judgment seat of Christ" (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10). We are told that this cannot be a punitive judgment, for *Bema* was the name given the judgment in which Greek and Roman athletes were judged and rewarded for their performances. This narrow interpretation immediately falls apart, however, because in every one of the other eight times *Bema* is used in the New Testament, it speaks of a place of penal judgment.

Let us consider the Scriptures themselves. Romans 14:10-12 states: "*For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.*" The argument is set forth that this occurs in the context of Christian brothers judging Christian brothers, and therefore it cannot be admitted that unbelievers are in view. But let us be reminded that primitive Christianity did not indulge in the presumption of professed brothers being true Christians, as is the custom today. In fact, that is precisely the issue. The validity of these professed Christians' profession was being brought into doubt and disputation over external observances of indifferent things.

The apostle is reminding us that absolute determination of who is and who is not a true Christian is not within the pale of our ability or responsibility. We all (all people of the earth without exception) shall give account to God; and He alone shall judge in that day. That is surely what is meant in the prophecy of Isaiah from which verse eleven is quoted. "*Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. I have sworn by Myself, the word is gone out of My mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.*"

Paul would have been guilty of gross perversion of the Word of God had he appropriated God's offer of Himself as a Saviour to "all the ends of the earth," and used it to teach a judgment for Christians only, the purpose of which was only to determine degrees of rewards. The Holy Spirit does not inspire such perversions and inconsistencies.

"*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad*" (2 Corinthians 5:10). It is postulated by this, that since Christians are in view, then it is only Christian works, not men themselves, that are being judged. But verse nine tells us that we are endeavoring that we (not our works) may be accepted of Him.

Likewise, the following verse, "knowing the terror of the Lord" does not lend itself to the idea of a judgment secure from penal consequences. Can there be any "terror" for those for whom there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1), to whom "*God will not impute sin*" (Romans 4:8)? No, it seems more likely that this bears witness to a certain general judgment of all men. Knowing that, and the terror of the Lord for those not accepted, the apostle says, "*we persuade men.*" That seems far more consistent with the burden of a gospel evangelist than one of simply trying to win converts so that they will have more heavenly assets built up.

Some might be troubled by the idea of connecting eternal salvation with "*things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.*" Is this not equal to salvation by human works? Not at all. In fact, every judgment of any kind anywhere is according to works.

The King does not say to the saved, "Come ye blessed of my Father because I died for your sins and imputed my righteous works to your account." No He says, "*ye gave Me meat, ye gave Me drink, ye took Me in, ye clothed Me, ye visited Me, ye came unto Me*" (Matthew 25:35-36). Works are always in view because they not only justify the sentence but give unerring testimony of the *state* of the person. They are the fruits which identify the tree.

Paul unashamedly connects good works with the quest for eternal life: "*Who will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil . . .*" (Romans 2:6-9).

Jesus promises to "*reward every man according to his works*" (Matthew 16:27). Surely that means every man without exception, not just Christians, for He has just warned His audience that a person could lose his life by trying to save it, and that it would be better to forfeit gain of the whole world and save his soul.

Again, our Lord says in Revelation 22:12, "*Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with Me, to give every man according as his work shall be.*" Surely "reward" here includes penalties for sins justly earned as well as eternal bliss for the righteous, for He

follows with “*Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.*”

The alternative for those who do not His commandments is “*For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie*” (Revelation 22:15). Most Bible believers will have a bit of trouble saying these are just some Christians who did not have enough good works to get them into the more favored place inside the city.

An exception may be imagined in Revelation 20:15: “*And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.*” But this cannot be, for the statement has already been made in verse twelve, “*and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works”.*

Of course, all who are not elect of God from the foundation of the world shall perish, but they are not judged for not being the elect of God or for not having their names written in the book of life. They are judged and punished or rewarded according to their works. Once again, their works justify the sentence at the same time that they identify the state of the person.

One other special passage lends itself to being interpreted as teaching a special day in which Christians will be judged and rewarded according to works. “*Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire: and the fires shall try every man’s work of what sort it is*” (1 Corinthians 3:13).

We are expressly told that the work being judged is that of particular people, fruits of the evangelist’s labor. “*For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building*” (verse 9). “*I have laid the foundation, and another man buildeth thereon*” (verse 10). “*Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay stubble*” (verse 12).

Since it is people being tried or judged, “the day” can only mean one of two times. It can mean the time of Christ’s return, in which all men shall be judged and their eternal destinies determined by whether they are genuine converts or false ones, or it can mean the time during each professor’s lifetime, when his faith is tried and he either is proven to be a true believer or a false professor.

The Scriptures have much to say about such proofs. The parables of Matthew 13 speak of seed being sown on four types of soil. Wayside hearers, shallow soil hearers, and weedy ground hearers all prove to be wood, hay and stubble, and are lost. A net is cast into the seas, bringing in of all kinds. When it is drawn to the shore, the good fish are separated from the bad. Servants gather guests for the wedding. The king comes in to look them over. He without the wedding garment is cast out.

Logical Implications

The whole concept of degrees of rewards according to the merits and quantities of our works runs afoul of grace, as is stated in Romans 4:4-5. “*Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.*” Again in verse 16. “*Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end that the promise might be sure to all the seed . . .*” Is it possible for us to get God into debt to us with our works? Is this reward something *besides* what was promised to Abraham’s seed, since that promise is made sure to all the seed?

If we say that the eternal salvation of our souls is the promised blessing to the seed by faith, and that rewards are something extra we earn by going *beyond* the faith in obedience that God requires, we run into trouble again.

Jesus gives the illustration of a servant in Luke 17 who did all that was required of him, but receives no special commendation or reward, because he has simply done all that he should. “*So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do*” (Luke 17:10).

Who among us is going to say that we have done all that is required of us, when the requirement shall never be less than, “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy strength and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself*”, according to Luke 10:17? Can we do something better, more excellent, superior to a holy God’s requirement? If not, then what is this reward over and beyond the reward of grace based upon? Not only must we admit that we do not do more than God requires, but we must confess that we do less. If we do less than God requires, is it not sin for which we ought to be punished? Yes! Yes! Yes!

Then we turn back to the reward of Romans 4:4. It is described in verses 7 and 8. “*Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.*” In order for the teaching of different rewards for individual Christians to stand, the “reward” must be distinguished from justification or eternal salvation itself. This is extremely difficult to do in the Scriptures. In fact, in most places, descriptions of the saint’s eternal reward mandate that they all be the same thing. Consider: We are called joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). In a joint heirship, all the heirs receive the entire estate together. They all inherit the whole thing in inseparable union. It is not divided up into either equal or unequal shares.

Revelation 21:17 asserts, “*He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.*” Only overcomers are promised *anything*, and it appears that they all are promised *all* things. Can one be saved and not have God for his Father? Philippians 3:20-21 and 1 John 3:2 tell us that we shall be made like Christ. May some be made more or less like Christ? No. We are either like Him or not. We cannot be saved and not be like Him. And no one can be superior to that. Matthew 25:34 and Hebrews 12:28 disclose to us that all the blessed inherit the kingdom. None are said to (or could be said to) inherit more or less of it. You either inherit or you do not.

The figure of a “crown” is often employed: *Crown of Righteousness* (2 Timothy 4:8). Can one be more righteous than another when only the righteousness of Christ will suffice? *Crown of glory* (1 Peter 5:4). Shall one man’s glory outshine another in the presence of the Prince of Glory? *Crown of Life* (James 1:2, Revelation 2:10). May one have more life and less death than another? *Incorruptible Crown* (1 Corinthians 9:25). Shall any believer inherit a crown less than “incorruptible?”

Rest is a metaphor frequently employed to portray the saint’s reward, as in Hebrews 4:9 and Revelation 14:13. Rest is either rest or it is not. Nothing less than complete rest could be the end of our labor on this earth for any true child of God.

Jesus’ disciples apparently had an eye to their rewards when they reminded Him that they had left all and followed Him (Mark 10:28-30). His reply promised compensations in this present life according to their sacrifices, but the eternal reward was no more than

that for any believer: *“an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.”*

It is quite evident that we are not all equally endowed with gifts and abilities to serve the Lord. But we notice that the five-talented servant and the two-talented servant who obeyed their Lord both received the same reward, even though one earned over twice as much with his talents as the other (Matthew 25:14-23). What was the reward? “Enter into the joy of thy Lord. The joy of the Lord! Could heaven be anything less than the joy of the Lord? Could there be anything in heaven greater than the joy of the Lord?”

Final Observations

These observations and questions have not fully dismissed the possibility of different rewards in some sense of the word. Two passages seem to be the strongest evidence for this. 2 John 8: *“Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.”* But this passage could easily be viewed as a parallel to Hebrews 10:35-39, which is manifestly a warning against apostasy to eternal perdition, not just the loss of some extra-salvation benefit. The other passage is 1 Corinthians 3:8-15. The language here is quite plain and undeniable here. The Christian planter and waterer are one, and each shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. His work abiding the trial of fire shall secure him a reward and burning shall incur him loss; nevertheless, he shall be saved.

We have already proved that the work being tried is people, persons to whom the Christian has ministered and which he hopes will be preserved blameless until the day of the Lord. He shall receive a reward if they do. But it seems that the converts themselves, their proof to be real, is the reward. *“For what is our hope, or joy or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the present of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy”* (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Surely this was the burden of the apostle’s work, *“That we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus”* (Colossians 1:28). This seems to be far more consistent with a trial of fire applied to every man’s work. We read in 1 Peter 4:17, written nearly two centuries ago, *“For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”* The righteous scarcely be saved? Where, then, is this extra-salvation reward for those who superseded obedience to the gospel?

When put in full Biblical perspective, it does not seem that the teaching of salvation by grace and rewards by works deserves the big emphasis it gets from some modern systems of eschatology, to say the least. One is made to suspect that it arises from carnal pride, ambition, envy and strife. Certainly, it is worthless as a motive for good works. No devout Christian would permit such to even suggest itself to his mind.

To us who love our penal Substitute, risen Lord and reigning King, acceptable service to Him is its own reward. If we can hear, *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant”* at the end of this sojourn, it will be crown enough. We desire nothing better than to be in His presence forever. He has promised nothing less.

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