

## ***Degrees of Reward and Punishment***

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### ***Saving Faith Has Works***

If we are in Christ, then such will be evidenced by good works. Good works are the evidence of our justification and right relationship with God.

In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul spoke of his abundant work for the Lord; he said, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

Paul did not do the many good works that he did in an effort to gain salvation; rather it was the grace of God and salvation itself that led Paul to do what he did.

We are indeed to do good works, but it is God (through His Holy Spirit) who enables us to do these good works.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Acts 26:20 speaks of "performing deeds appropriate to repentance."

In Matthew 3:8, John the Baptist similarly said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance."

Galatians 5:6 speaks of "faith working through love."

Paul said in Romans 4 that Abraham was not saved by works of the Law.

But Jesus said in John 8:39, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham." If indeed they were his sons, then they would produce the natural fruits of sonship. Those who are sons of God will produce fruits of evidence showing that they do indeed belong to Him.

Thus, in James 2:14ff, it is shown that Abraham's faith was evidenced by his works. Furthermore, without such works, he would not be justified. A faith that does not have such works is not a true saving faith (v14).

As Jesus said in John 14:15, "If you love me, [you will] keep my commandments."

Surely the Bible shows that genuine faith in Jesus Christ will exhibit itself in genuine acts of good deeds, godliness, and righteous living.

### ***Our Works Do Not Merit Salvation***

There is obviously a direct correlation between a person's true character (whether in Christ or not) and his deeds. Thus to judge one according to his deeds is really to judge if he is truly in Christ! Doing such works, however, does not enable us to stand before God deserving of salvation and meriting eternal life.

Being judged/justified by works does not mean that we will merit or deserve our eternal reward based on our own good deeds. Such works are merely indicative of our faithfulness to Him. And if faithful, then we are found to be "in Christ" at the Day of Judgment and thus granted eternal life, not on our merit, but on His!

Again, we are not saved by our own efforts at sanctification (even though true faith will result in a determined effort to become more Christ-like day by day); we are saved (and thus shall inherit eternal life) by justification through Jesus Christ.

We indeed need to say (as Jesus taught), "We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done" (Luke 17:10).

Romans 4:4-5 says, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

Romans 11:6 "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace."

Ephesians 2:8-9 "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."

Titus 3:4-5 "But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

2 Timothy 1:9 "[God] has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity."

Isaiah 64:6 says, "All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment." Despite all our good works, we still stand in need of a Savior and cannot be cleansed on our own. Our cleansing is a gift of God that we will never deserve by our own meritorious deeds.

A good example of this is that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. V1 says, "Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper."

The chapter goes on to tell about the prophet Elisha, the man of God. Elisha told Naaman, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you and you shall be clean" (v10).

At first Naaman wanted to be cleansed on his own terms, but finally, "He went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (v14).

Notice that Naaman had to obey God in order to be cleansed, but he certainly didn't merit his cleansing. The cleansing was still a gift of God, just as is our spiritual cleansing through Christ.

### ***Judged by Our Works***

Since genuine saving faith produces genuine good works, we are therefore justified, not only by faith, but by our works. And thus, in a sense, we are judged by our deeds. Numerous passages of Scripture refer to this (in the apparent context of salvation in general)...

Romans 14:12 "So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God."

Matthew 25:31-46 Those who have fed, clothed, etc. will "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Those who failed to do so "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

John 5:28-29 "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment."

Romans 2:6-7 "[God] will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life."

2 Corinthians 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one of us may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Later Paul referred to false apostles, "whose end shall be according to their deeds" (11:15).

2 Timothy 4:14 Paul said, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay (KJV: reward) him according to his deeds."

1 Peter 1:17 "[God] impartially judges according to each man's work."

Revelation 20:11-15 "...And they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds."

## *Various Degrees of Reward?*

If we're being judged by our works, is it possible that our works therefore determine the extent of our reward in heaven? Will those who do greater works perhaps merit greater rewards? Will people like Peter and John and Paul receive a greater reward in Heaven than those of us who probably fall short of being the servants that they were?

Let's first of all consider the parable of the householder in Matthew 20:1-16. This passage may indicate that there is no variation in eternal rewards. Jesus told about a landowner who hired workers at various times throughout the day, but they all received same reward.

It may be, however, that the application of this parable is simply that all who belong to God will receive eternal life regardless of the extent of their works or their time as Christians. If that is the meaning, then such would not contradict other apparent teaching that there are various degrees of rewards.

It does appear that there may be various degrees of punishment. 2 Peter 2:21 speaks of those who at one time had been faithful Christians and then turned away: "For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them." This may refer to an actual state of eternal punishment that is of greater external severity, or it may simply refer to a greater inner anguish (the mental suffering of knowing that punishment could have been avoided had one remained faithful).

(See also Matthew 11:21-24 and Hebrews 10:29.)

Another passage regarding degrees of punishment is Luke 12:47-48. In the context of being ready for the Day of Judgment, Jesus said, "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more."

But what about varying degrees of reward? Numerous passages do speak of our rewards, though it is not clear if such refer to various degrees of such or simply salvation itself...

Matthew 5:11-12 "Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great..."

(See also Luke 6:23.)

Matthew 6:1-4 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven... [Let] your alms be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay (KJV: reward) you."

Matthew 6:5-6 "And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites... Pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay (KJV: reward) you."

Matthew 6:16-18 "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do... and your Father who sees in secret will repay (KJV: reward) you."

Matthew 6:19-20 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal."

Matthew 10:41-42 "He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward."

(Those who accepted Christ's disciples as they would receive Him would be rewarded accordingly; see also Mark 9:41.)

Matthew 16:27 "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense (KJV: reward) every man according to his deeds."

Luke 6:35 "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men."

Colossians 3:23-24 Regarding slaves/servants, Paul said, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord whom you serve."

(See also Ephesians 6:7-8.)

Hebrews 10:35 Concerning those who had endured persecution, the writer said, "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward."

2 John 8 "Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward."

Revelation 22:12 Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man to what he has done."

But also notice v14: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city."

Some consider 1 Corinthians 3:8ff as possibly referring to various degrees of eternal reward; it may be (and perhaps more likely and truer to the context) that Paul is simply referring to the immediate reward of winning souls for the Lord.

Some also think that the parable of the pounds in Luke 19:11-27 (and perhaps the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30) might be an indication of lesser and greater rewards in heaven.

Several passages also speak of receiving a prize or a crown.

Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 about receiving a prize and an imperishable wreath/crown.

In 2 Timothy 4:8, he spoke of "the crown of righteousness."

James spoke of receiving "the crown of life" (James 1:12).

Peter said that elders would receive an "unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4).

(See also Revelation 3:11 and 4:10.)

Two other passages suggest some may receive a greater reward.

In Matthew 20:20ff, the request is made for two sons to sit on right and left side of Jesus. Jesus replied, "But to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those whom it has been prepared by My Father" (v23).

In Luke 22:30, Jesus said to the apostles, "You will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Some think this means that the apostles will actually co-judge with Christ at the Day of Judgment. Others think it refers more to their teaching by way of the Holy Spirit that will be the standard of judgment.

(Consider also Luke 19:11-27 and Matthew 25:14-30.)

## *Conclusion*

Will some receive a greater reward for their greater service in the kingdom? As mentioned, Peter mentioned that elders will receive an "unfading crown of glory." Surely good and faithful leaders of God's people are deserving of great honor and glory in Heaven. James warned that teachers "shall incur a stricter judgment (James 3:1).

Is it reasonable then to conclude that good and faithful teachers of the word shall receive a greater reward? The apostle Paul suffered numerous hardships because of his dedication to the Lord; will he perhaps be therefore blessed with greater honor throughout eternity?

What about Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Peter, John...? Noah and Enoch walked with God. Noah alone was found righteous out of millions of people; Enoch was taken so that he did not see death. Elijah, that great prophet of God, was also taken up to be with God. Is it then perhaps reasonable to consider that some will receive a greater reward for greater works?

Whether some receive greater rewards than others, it is evident from Scripture that salvation itself is a gift of God that no one can deserve by their own merits. Despite all our good works, despite all our accomplishments at sanctification, we all still stand in need of a Savior. We will never deserve eternal life because of what we have done. Thank God for what He has done.