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JUDGED BY YOUR DEEDS

Romans 2:6-11

By

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Romans, Lesson 10

Judged by Your Deeds Romans 2:6-11

During my college years, several of my friends and I knew an attractive coed who was Roman Catholic. She called us her “minister friends,” because we were always talking to her about the gospel. After hours of spiritual conversations, I persuaded her to read the Gospel of John. I told her that as she read, she should ask God to show her how she could have eternal life.

Shortly after that she came up to me beaming and said, “I did as you said. I asked God to show me how to have eternal life, and He did!” I thought, “Yes! She came to John 3:16 and discovered that those who believe in Jesus have eternal life!” But instead, she took me to John 5:28-29, where Jesus says, “. . . for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.” She said, “I will get eternal life if I do good deeds!”

How would you have answered her? That sounds like what Jesus is teaching there. And, it seems to be what Paul is teaching in our text. He says that those who persevere in doing good receive eternal life. Those who do evil will incur God’s wrath. Is salvation by grace through faith *alone*, as the Reformers insisted? Or is it by grace through faith *plus* works, as the Roman Catholic Church has taught?

It’s not just an academic question, because your eternal destiny depends on getting it right! Paul damned the Judaizers for perverting the gospel because they added just one biblical “work” (circumcision) to the gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). So we need to get the gospel right. We need to know for sure that when we stand before God for judgment, it will go well. You don’t get a makeup exam!

Our text continues a sentence that begins in verse 5: “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person ac-

ording to his deeds." So verses 6-11 elaborate on "the righteous judgment of God."

Thomas Schreiner (*The Law and Its Fulfillment* [Baker], p. 190) explains, "The primary purpose of Romans 2 is to prove that the Jews are guilty before God, for they transgressed the revelation they received, just as the Gentiles rejected the revelation they received (1:18-32)." Charles Simeon says that Paul is countering the pervasive Jewish view "that no Jew could perish, except through apostasy or idolatry; and that no Gentile could be saved, but by subjecting himself to the institutions and observances of the Mosaic ritual" (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 15:36).

So Paul is arguing that being Jewish doesn't get you any special favors come judgment day. In fact, it gets you to the front of the line because you've been given more spiritual privileges! We can apply that to being raised in a Christian home in a country where you can readily hear the gospel. If you do not respond to those privileges, they render you more guilty on judgment day than if you had never known the truth. Paul's point here is:

Since God will impartially judge each person according to his deeds, we must persevere in doing good.

The text follows a chiasmic structure (adapted from Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 135):

- A. God will judge everyone according to his deeds (2:6).
- B. Those who do good will attain eternal life (2:7).
- C. Those who do evil will incur wrath (2:8).
- C'. Those who do evil will suffer tribulation (2:9).
- B'. Those who do good will receive glory (2:10).
- A'. God will judge everyone impartially (2:11).

The main point is at the beginning and the end, that God will judge each person impartially according to his deeds (Moo, p. 136). First let's look at what the text teaches. Then we'll try to understand how this fits with Paul's teaching that we are saved by grace through faith alone, apart from our works.

1. Every person will stand before God in judgment.

Hebrew 9:27 makes this point: "... it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." That verse refutes reincarnation. Our text (and every other Scripture that touches on this topic) shows clearly that there are two and only two destinations after death: eternal life or eternal wrath. Some argue that the wicked will be annihilated after a time of punishment. Frankly, that would be an easier view to accept than the eternality of hell. But in Matthew 25:46, Jesus contrasts the punishment of the wicked with the reward of the righteous: "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." *Eternal* is the same word both times. According to Jesus, life is eternal and punishment is eternal. In Romans 2, Paul contrasts these two eternal destinies:

A. Eternal life includes glory, honor, immortality, and peace.

Eternal life means, life pertaining to the age to come, and since that age will not end, it means life that goes on forever (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 117). But also, it refers to the quality of life in the very presence of God. As Jesus prayed (John 17:3), "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." As such, eternal life begins the moment that we come to know God through faith in Jesus Christ. It grows sweeter as we grow to know Him better in this life. But it will be indescribably deepened and forever expanded the moment we step into God's presence in eternity, free from all sin.

Paul describes this eternal life by four words: *glory*, *honor*, and *immortality* (2:7); and, *peace* (2:10). *Glory* refers to the hope of all believers, that we will be transformed into the image of God's Son, so that God's glory will be reflected in us (Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 21, 29-30; 9:23; 1 Cor. 2:7; 15:43; 2 Cor. 3:12-18; 4:17; Col. 3:4).

Honor is similar to *glory*, and focuses on the approval that God will give us in contrast with the scorn that the world gives us now and the eternal disgrace that God will pour out on the wicked (1 Pet. 1:7). To receive honor will be to hear from the Lord Jesus, "Well done, good and faithful slave.... Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21). All glory and honor that we receive in heaven we will immediately turn back in praise to the risen Lamb as we sing (Rev. 4:11), "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to

receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed and were created.”

Immortality refers to the hope of the resurrection, when we will receive new bodies that are not subject to disease, aging, and death (1 Cor. 15:42, 50, 52-54). Paul says that those who seek for glory, honor, and immortality receive eternal life (2:7). But in the parallel verse (2:10), he mentions glory and honor, but substitutes *peace* for *immortality*.

Peace refers to “peace with God and peace of heart and mind in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity” (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 67). It is the eternal peace of “deliverance from sin and its conflicts” (James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], 1:227). These four terms show that as believers, our hope is not in this short life, but in eternal life with God. Thus, as Paul says (Col. 3:1-4), we should be seeking the things above, where Christ is, because when He appears, “then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4).

But, Paul also mentions the other eternal destiny:

B. Eternal wrath and indignation include tribulation and distress.

Paul says that the wicked (we will look at their characteristics later) receive “wrath and indignation” from God (2:8), resulting in “tribulation and distress” for them (2:9). *Wrath* is the usual word for God’s settled and abiding opposition to sin, with the purpose of revenge (R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 131). God warns (Rom. 12:19), “‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” *Indignation* indicates the more turbulent, boiling agitation of the feelings (*ibid.*). *Wrath*, as in Romans 1:18 (same word), is God’s abiding anger towards the ungodly, whereas *indignation* points to the outbreak of His anger on the day of judgment (Alford, cited by William Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse* [Moody Press], p. 60, footnote).

Tribulation and *distress* describe the trauma experienced by those who are the objects of God’s wrath and indignation. *Tribulation* means “pressure,” and is illustrated by a form of capital punishment in ancient England where the victim had heavy weights placed on his chest to crush him to death (Trench, p. 203). *Distress* refers to restriction or confinement. It is illustrated by the torture

that Queen Elizabeth used on some of her victims, who were placed in a room so small that they could not stand, sit, or lie at full length (Trench, pp. 203-204). Together, Paul uses both words here to describe the eternal punishment for “every soul of man who does evil.” *Soul* here refers to the entire person. Those in hell will suffer conscious torment “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:9). The Bible consistently uses frightening descriptions of the agonies of hell to warn, “You don’t want to go there!”

Thus Paul clearly says that every person will stand before God in judgment, resulting in either eternal life or eternal wrath.

2. God will impartially judge each person according to his deeds.

Romans 2:6 is a quote from the LXX (Greek OT) of Psalm 62:12 and/or Proverbs 24:12 (English Bible references). There are three things to note about God’s judgment of our deeds:

A. Judgment according to one’s deeds is the uniform teaching of the Bible.

Leon Morris explains (p. 116),

It is the invariable teaching of the Bible and not the peculiar viewpoint of any one writer or group of writers that judgment will be on the basis of works, though salvation is all of grace. Works are important. They are the outward expression of what the person is deep down. In the believer they are the expression of faith, in the unbeliever the expression of unbelief and that whether by way of legalism or antinomianism.

I can’t be exhaustive here, but let me give a few references from both the Old and New Testaments that show this point.

Jeremiah 17:10: “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.”

Jeremiah 32:19, the prophet in prayer describes God as “giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.”

Ezekiel 33:20, the Lord says, "O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."

Matthew 16:27, Jesus says, "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds."

2 Cor. 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

Galatians 6:7-8, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."

Ephesians 5:6, after describing the evil deeds of the wicked, Paul warns, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

Revelation 2:23, after telling how He will judge those who join in the immorality and idolatry of "the woman Jezebel," the Lord warns the church in Thyatira, "I will give to each one of you according to your deeds."

Revelation 20:12, at the great white throne judgment, "the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds."

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

(See, also, Job 34:10-12; Ps. 28:4; Jer. 25:14; 51:24; Hos. 12:2; Matt. 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 3:8; 2 Cor. 11:15; Eph. 6:8; Col. 1:21-23; 3:5-6, 24; 2 Tim. 4:14.)

So the uniform teaching of Scripture is that God will judge each of us according to our deeds.

B. Judgment will be individual.

"Each person" shows that this is individual judgment, not corporate or national. Paul uses the same phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "each one may be recompensed for his deeds" Or, in

Matthew 16:27 and in Revelation 22:12, Jesus says He will render to *every man* according to his deeds.

C. Judgment will be impartial.

This is inherent in the fact that God is a righteous judge. As Abraham pleads with God prior to the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 18:25), "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" Again, there are many verses in both the Old and New Testaments that show that God judges impartially (Deut. 10:17; 2 Chron. 19:7; Job 34:19; Acts 10:34; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Pet. 1:17). Here, Paul especially is saying to the Jews that they will not get special treatment because of their being children of Abraham (Matt. 3:9). When he says (2:9, 10), "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (= Gentile), he means that the Jews were first in privileges, in that God chose to reveal Himself to them and bring the Savior through them; so they will be first in either judgment or salvation.

In the same way today, growing up in a Christian home gives you greater access to salvation, if you repent of your sins and believe in Christ. But it also exposes you to greater judgment if you neglect this privilege. But the point is, God will impartially judge each person according to his or her deeds.

3. God is the judge who determines whether a person's deeds are good or evil.

Note how Paul describes the two groups:

A. Those who persevere in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.

We've already looked at the meaning of glory, honor, and immortality. Here I just note that those who *persevere* in doing good *seek* these eternal blessings. *Perseverance* indicates lifelong persistence in the face of opposition, hardship, and discouragement. It *isn't* referring to *perfection*, but rather to *direction (seek)* over the long haul. It's a path or journey that one commits to, much as John Bunyan describes Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*. If the pilgrim gets off the path into By-Path Meadow or Doubting Castle, he persists until he gets back on the path to the Celestial City.

B. Those who do evil are selfishly ambitious, disobedient to the truth, and obedient to unrighteousness.

Scholars debate about the meaning of the word translated *selfishly ambitious*. Most now take it that way, although some think it has the nuance of factious or contentious. Paul lists it as a deed of the flesh (Gal. 5:20), where the NASB renders it, *disputes*. He also uses it (Phil. 1:17) to describe those who opposed him by proclaiming Christ “out of *selfish ambition* rather than from pure motives.” Whatever the translation, the word points to those who are selfish in their motivation. They do what they do to promote themselves or to feed their pride. They do not live for God’s glory. God will judge not only outward behavior, but also our motives—why we do what we do.

Paul also says (2:8) that they “do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness.” They “do evil” (2:9). They do not submit to God’s Word and seek to please Him by obeying His commands. Rather, they live to please themselves in disregard of God’s Word.

So, at this point the crucial question is, Which path are you on? Are you doing good as you seek for glory, honor, and immortality? Or, are you doing evil as you live for yourself, disobey God’s truth, and obey unrighteousness? Maybe you’re thinking, “I kind of do both, depending on the situation!” But you can’t straddle the line! You can’t go down two roads heading in opposite directions at once. You’ve got to choose the path of righteousness that leads to eternal life and then persevere on that path. So, how do you get on the right path?

4. The way to persevere in doing good is to experience the power of God for salvation through believing the gospel.

Here is where we come to grips with the question, Is Paul contradicting himself? Is he saying here that we’re saved by works? But later, he clearly says that we’re saved by faith (Rom. 3:20-28; 4:4-5; Gal. 3:11; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:9; etc.). Which is it?

I assume that Paul was smart enough not to contradict himself in the space of a couple of chapters. He has already said (Rom. 1:16) that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (the same phrase that he uses twice in our text). The power of God that saves us is not anything that sinful people can effect by their works. It is God’s resurrection power by which He imparts new life to those

who were dead in their sins (Eph. 1:19; 2:1-6). God speaks and creates light out of darkness. He makes us new creatures (2 Cor. 4:4-6; 5:17). He changes our hearts, giving us new desires. Formerly, we loved the darkness and hated the light, but after God saves us, we hate the darkness and love the light (John 3:20-21; Eph. 5:8-14). By nature, "there is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:10). But here we see people who persevere in seeking for glory, honor, and immortality, which can only come from God. What explains the change? They have experienced the power of God in salvation by believing in Jesus Christ.

Genuine saving faith always results in a life of good deeds. Good deeds are not the basis of salvation, but rather the evidence of it. As Paul clearly puts it (Eph. 2:8-10), "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, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

Good works do not earn salvation, but they are the essential evidence that a person is on the path to glory, honor, and immortality. We have to lean on God's grace not only for salvation, but also for perseverance in good works. So we will be judged by our works, which reveal whether our faith in Christ is genuine or mere empty profession. Paul and James say the same thing: your faith is demonstrated by your works.

Conclusion

Two concluding thoughts:

First, to think that that you will get into heaven without good works because you prayed a prayer once or because you claim to believe in Jesus is foolish. Jesus said (Matt. 7:21-23), "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'" Genuine conversion means that God has changed your heart. If the direction of your

life is not to “do good” out of love for God, you need to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus for salvation.

Second, *live with your sights on eternity and the hope of hearing “well done” from the Lord who knows your heart.* Would you have lived differently last week if your mind had been on that great day when you stand before Christ? Would you have spent your time differently? Would you have treated others differently? If God exists and He promises to reward those who persevere in doing good and to punish those who live selfishly in sin, it is foolish to live for this short life only. Since God will impartially judge each person according to his deeds, persevere in doing good in light of eternity!

Application Questions

1. How do you explain 2 Cor. 5:10, that we will be recompensed for not only the good, but also the bad, in light of Romans 8:1?
2. How can a believer gain a more consistent focus on “the things above,” rather than the things on earth (Col. 3:1-4)?
3. How would you answer a Christian, doubting his salvation, who asks, “How much good do I need to do to prove that my faith is genuine?”
4. Those in Matthew 7:21-23 who called Jesus “Lord” had done a lot to serve Him. Why did He reject them?

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