

The prospect of the judgment of a Christian's life according to his works galvanizes him or her to faithful action. It does not compromise the Bible's doctrine of justification by faith alone.

“The Judgment According to Works”

Revelation 22:6-21

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We read the epilogue of the Book of Revelation last Lord's Day morning and considered its emphasis on the imminence of Christ's return. As the Lord says three times, “I am coming soon. We are reading the epilogue again today and, Lord willing, once more next Lord's Day. I made some comments on the text up to verse 11 last time and won't repeat those comments this morning.

Text Comment

- v.13 God spoke these words, “I am the Alpha and Omega” in 1:8 and 21:6. Here Christ applies the title to himself, as he did already in 1:17 and 2:8. This linguistic identification between God and Jesus throughout the New Testament is important evidence for the deity of Christ. What can be said about God can be said about Jesus!
- v.14 This is the seventh and last of Revelation's beatitudes or blessings. “...those who wash their robes” are the martyrs. The phrase is used specifically of them in its other use in Revelation, in 7:14 where we are told that they wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Remember, the martyrs are representative of all Christians in Revelation. Here the verb is in the present tense, suggesting that this is what Christians *are doing* and continuing to do. They are remaining pure both by receiving forgiveness and cleansing from sin from Jesus Christ *and* by refusing to submit to the demands of the beast. Washing their robes refers, here as in 7:14, to the Christians' continued faithfulness to Jesus.
- v.15 As in 21:8 the blessedness of the faithful in the world to come is described both positively and negatively. The wrong kind of people will not be there. It serves also as a final warning to those who may be wondering if faithfulness to God is worth the price one must pay for it in this world.

A question is raised whether the emphatic position of liars, last both in this list and that in 21:8, is intended to suggest that the people being described here are not sinful and unbelieving people in general but specifically professing Christians who nevertheless live sinful lives. They are duplicitous and, as we read here, they love to be so. They want to be known as Christians but they also want to live worldly lives and, by so doing, betray their profession of faith in Christ. In John's other writings he uses the same “liar” word group to describe people whose claim to belong to the Christian community is contradicted by their ungodly lives. In Jeremiah we read of false Israelites described as those who “practice the lie” (8:10). Paul uses the term “dogs,” emphatically the first term here, in Phil. 3 to refer to Jewish Christians who profess to be part of the church but whose actions show otherwise. [Beale, 1141] It goes without saying that unrepentant

sinners of all stripes will not enter heaven, but John is writing to the church and wants the church to know that a faithful, obedient, godly life is necessary for entrance into heaven.

- v.16 In the first verse of the book we learned that John's vision was given to him through an angel sent from God. Now, at the end of the book, Christ himself vouches for this angel and, in that way, accredits himself the vision John was given. By the way, the "you" in the phrase "I have sent my angel to give *you*..." is plural. The vision wasn't given only to John but to the members of the seven churches to whom the book was originally addressed, as we read in 1:11. And those seven churches, of course, represent the whole church of God. That glorious vision was given to us!

These identifications of Jesus as the "root and offspring of David" and as the "bright morning star" repeat statements made earlier in the book. Both descriptions are derived from OT prophecies (Num. 24:17; Isa. 11:1, 10) and identify Jesus as the Messiah and as the king of kings who will conquer his enemies and establish his righteous kingdom.

I'll reserve comment on the remaining verses until next Lord's Day.

Now, what are we to do with the Lord's statement in v. 12?

"I am coming soon. My reward is with me and I will give to everyone according to what he has done."

We believe, indeed we know, that salvation is a free gift and that our right standing with God is based not on our own achievements – there can be no thought of that once we know both the full extent of our moral failure and something of the holiness and justice of God – but is based instead on God's reckoning to us the righteousness of another, his son, Jesus Christ. That doctrine is so clearly, so often, and so emphatically taught in the Bible that there can be no doubt whatsoever that we are justified – that is, we are made righteous before God and granted entrance into eternal life – not by our own works, not by our own acts of obedience or service or loyalty to God, but by our trust in Christ and his work on our behalf. Paul's mighty polemic against the very idea of salvation as a reward for our own efforts – the polemic that occupies so much of his attention in his letters – has surely put paid to any thought that a sinful human being, even with God's help, can earn his way to heaven. And this is emphatically John's doctrine and the teaching of Revelation as well. We read of Jesus, at the very beginning of the book, that he freed us from our sins by his blood (1:5).

But here we hear Jesus saying that he is bringing *a reward* – a term that clearly refers to something given in exchange for deeds done – and that he will give to everyone according to *what he has done*. Christ is coming as a judge. We read that everywhere in the Bible and in Revelation to be sure. And he will judge our lives, so we are told here, *according to our conduct*. He will reward us or not according to our conduct, our behavior, *our works*, for "works" is simply another term for the things that we do.

The reason this statement strikes us as it does is because this doctrine – that Christ will judge our lives according to our works – is almost *never* taught in the evangelical pulpit. I think there will

be a very large majority of Bible-believing Christians today who have *never once* heard a sermon on this theme; not once in their lives, no matter how old they are or how long they have been Christians.

There are several reasons for this inattention to this particular doctrine. Such a glory attaches in our hearts to the doctrine of salvation by grace and to that of justification by faith in Jesus Christ that we are naturally disposed to be little interested in teaching that in any way or to any extent might be thought to diminish those magnificent truths. Who wishes to talk about our paltry works when we can contemplate instead the perfect and mighty working of the Son of God on our behalf? The great *solas* of the Reformation: salvation *sola gratia*, by grace alone, *sola fide*, by faith alone, and *solo Christo*, by Christ alone, are doctrines so gloriously captivating that it is no surprise that a kind of spiritual prejudice rises in the mind against teaching that in any way might be thought to diminish them.

What is more, there is an entirely understandable fear that a pointed assertion of the judgment according to works, however properly it is taught, however carefully it is qualified, would subtly but inevitably undermine the church's confidence in the sovereignty of divine grace and re-introduce justification by our own works through the back door. If we talk too much about what *we* must *do*, if we talk too much about the eternal consequences of *our* obedience or disobedience as Christians, if we hold up the prospect of having to answer point by point for the behavior of our lives, will it not be hard for us to continue to believe that in respect to our salvation God does all and must do all?

And, then, there is a third reason; perhaps the most important reason why this doctrine is not preached in the believing church, or is very rarely preached. *We don't like it.* We much prefer to believe that our moral failures have no abiding consequence. We much prefer to believe that every Christian is going to get the same reward irrespective of the greater or lesser faithfulness of his or her life. It is not hard to understand why we would prefer *that* to be true. We wouldn't have to answer for our failures; we wouldn't have to endure the pressure of thinking that there is an "or else" attached to our responsibilities and callings as Christians. And, in our day especially, when life in our culture and so also life in our Christian culture has churned up so much failure and sense of failure – failure in marriages and failure in families and failure to surmount one's problems and weaknesses – people are loathe to hear that they might still in some way have to answer for those failures. Believe me; I know very well the temptation to think this way and to wish the Bible had never said what it said about Christ coming with his reward and giving to everyone according to what he has done.

But, like it or not, we are Bible Christians. We are obliged to believe what has been revealed to us in Holy Scripture. There and there alone do we find the truth about both the present and the future. It is the truth, we believe, that sets us free. And of this there can be no doubt: that Christ will judge the believer's works and reward him accordingly is the consistent and emphatic teaching of Holy Scripture. We have it here in words that are too plain to mistake.

We have this teaching throughout Revelation as we have had more than one occasion to notice. In 2:23 Jesus said, in very similar words writing to the members of the church in Thyatira, that he searches the hearts and would repay or recompense each of them according to his deeds.

Indeed, at the time we considered that letter to Thyatira, we noticed that that statement stood in the center of the letter that itself stood in the center of the seven letters and that it represented the only statement in the body of the seven letters that was addressed to all the churches together. In other words, there is a great emphasis placed on this promise to repay each according to his deeds. It is the central theme of the seven letters, the undergirding of the exhortation to each of the churches. The Lord knows and the Lord will repay! In 14:13 we read that the works of believers will follow them to heaven. In 19:7-8 we read of the fine linen that was given to the saints to wear upon Christ's return, which fine linen stood for the righteous acts of the saints. In 20:12-13 we read that in the last judgment every person will be judged according to what he had done.

But it is not only in Revelation that we read of this judgment according to our deeds. Paul, the champion of salvation by grace and justification by faith, did not hesitate to say that "God will give to each person according to what he has done" [Rom. 2:6] and that "each of us will give an account of himself to God." [13:12] Later he tells the Corinthians both that a believer's reward in heaven will be more or less according to how faithfully he served the Lord on earth (1 Cor. 3:14-15) and that they must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due him for the deeds done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). Our Lord Jesus spoke similarly. We read him saying, in Matt. 16:27, that when the Son of Man comes in his Father's glory he will reward each person according to what he has done. We have many other such statements. I won't weary you with reciting them all: they are found in the OT and the NT alike. I have commonplacely my Bible on this theme at John 5:29 and have listed there in the margin some 23 texts, but could have listed many more. Suffice it to say that it is the teaching of the Bible that, as Peter puts it (1 Pet. 1:17):

"Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear."

I think this is a very wise observation of Archbishop Richard Trench.

"It is one of the gravest mischiefs which Rome has bequeathed to us, that in a reaction and protest, itself absolutely necessary, against the false emphasis which [Rome] puts on works, unduly thrusting them in to share with Christ's merits in our justification, we often shrink from placing upon them the true [emphasis]; being as they are, to speak with St. Bernard, the 'via regni,' [the way of the kingdom] however little they may be the 'causa regnandi...[the cause of belonging to kingdom]'" [*Letters to the Seven Churches*, 153]

Clearly we do not get to heaven on the strength of our own works. We get to heaven on the strength of Christ's works on our behalf and those works alone. But it remains a fundamental principle of God's justice that "whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap." And that principle is demonstrated in two different ways in the last judgment. In the first place, real believers will have lived lives of real godliness; not perfection but real godliness. In saving sinners the Lord transforms their lives. He recreates them to walk in good works. That is why again and again the Bible can distinguish between the saved and the lost according to the kind of lives the two respective groups live. In this way works or conduct, reviewed at the Last Judgment, *vindicate* believers. They prove their faith in Christ. In the second place, it is clear that

God's perfect justice requires that there should be distinctions made at the Last Judgment between members of the two classes: those who are saved and those who are lost. Just as in hell some will be beaten with few stripes and some with many, in heaven the reward of some will be greater than that of others. It may well be – it is no doubt the case – that our good works are Christ's work in us, and that we cannot take credit for them because we could not perform them without his help; nevertheless, Christ will reward those gifts in keeping with their measure. He will crown his own gifts, in other words, in keeping with their measure. Mystery, perhaps; fact indeed! "Let few be teachers," James warns *Christians*, because teachers will be judged more strictly. That is, a greater opportunity to influence the thinking of other believers means, inevitably, a greater accountability for whether that work is done poorly or well. And greater accountability can only mean a greater or lesser reward in heaven.

Heaven will not be a place where everyone occupies the same rank. The angels don't occupy the same rank now; believers don't live in equal faithfulness, they don't have the same place or spiritual rank in the body of Christ now and they won't in the world to come either. There is much that will be the same in heaven for every believer. It is for us all a place of joy and rest, of fellowship with God and with the saints, of the fulfillment of life. But it will not be the same life *in every respect*. That the Bible makes very clear. Some will rule ten cities and some but one. The Christian's reward will be linked with and proportionate to his or her faithfulness and obedience. [Bavinck, *Ref. Dog.*, iv, 728]

In his *Paradise*, Dante meets the nun Piccarda on his passage through heaven, a woman who inhabits the lowest level of heaven but with perfect contentment. Then Dante reflects:

...it was clear to me that everywhere
in heaven is Paradise, though the high good
does not rain down it's grace on all souls there
equally...

It is something to ponder: how this works out; what sort of levels or stations or measure of reward there may be; and how we will rejoice in the reward of everyone however different from our own. As with so much else about heaven, as we have already seen, we are left with little more than our speculations. What we do know is that our lives here will come up again on the Judgment Day and that our being in Christ and righteous in his righteousness does not preclude our being given a particular reward proportionate to our obedience and our service of God in this world. If words mean anything at all, the Bible teaches this prospect with unmistakable clarity.

And surely it is not an accident that another such teaching of the judgment according to works should be found here, at the end of a book that focuses our attention on the end of things, on the consummation of our lives in the world to come, and, indeed, at the very end of the Bible. It is not a surprise that we should hear of this discriminating judgment in a book calling upon all Christians to live a faithful life no matter the difficulty.

Glorious as the Bible's proclamation of salvation by grace and justification by faith truly is, nothing is more certain than that God and Christ *care deeply about* how we their people live our lives. It *matters*, it *matters a very great deal* how we live our lives.

Paul, the champion of justification by faith alone, understood that the great temptation of that doctrine, the great mistake that people would be inclined to make who believed it, would be that it would cause them to relax, to make less of an effort to practice holiness and to serve the Lord because they would know that their efforts do not get them into the City of God. Christ makes the difference *for them*, not they themselves! If their conduct didn't get them to heaven, then how they lived day by day couldn't be *that* important. Paul was so sure people would make that mistake, would misunderstand his doctrine *in just that way*, that he anticipated the misunderstanding in Romans 6 and carefully disposed of it. And if Paul thought this would be a likely misunderstanding, you and I must face the fact that the greatest reason why people would misunderstand the doctrine *in just that way* is because they would *want* to. Life is easier if you don't *have to* do the most difficult things and putting on holiness in the fear of God is the most difficult thing a human being ever does. Life is less burdensome to you as a Christian if you don't *have to* carry with you through the years the weight of your moral failures. As the Puritan, John Flavel put it,

“Our actions, physically considered, are transient, but morally considered they are permanent.” [Flavel, *Works*, I, 306]

We wish it weren't so. It is a burden to think that a record is being kept that will eventually be opened; that our works will follow us to heaven; that our behavior through our lives *as Christians* will have permanent consequences. We find it very easy to wish that weren't so. We are quite ready to have Christ's righteousness as our righteousness and that be that. To hear that the way we live our lives still counts, still matters for time and eternity strikes us as a disappointment.

But should it? Should it really? Should we really blanch to hear that our place in heaven – the measure of our reward – is determined -- *what* that means I do not claim to know, *that* it is so, I cannot doubt – by the measure of faithfulness that I have shown the Lord while he gave me to live in this world. I do not claim to be able to resolve all the tension created by the Bible's teaching at one and the same time of justification by faith and the judgment according to works – it is certainly a striking juxtaposition of two truths – but, then, Chesterton said that was the point. A paradox is truth standing on its head to get attention. I say I don't claim to be able to resolve the tensions.

But, at the same time, I have no difficulty believing that both things are true. I am a sinner and I know I cannot save myself or even contribute to my salvation if salvation requires that I meet the standards of a God as holy as I know God to be. But I am also a Christian and I know that my heavenly Father, holy and wise and good as he is, perfect Father that he is, will and must take with full seriousness how I live my life and that, as my Judge, his perfect justice makes it inevitable that he would note and reward a greater or lesser faithfulness.

But, what is more, I can see very clearly how the two of these doctrines together make for a Christian life such as I want with all my heart to live. What is that life? Is it not two very different things? Perfect humility before God and man in the awareness of my terrible need, my utter hopelessness in myself, the immensity of my debt to the grace of God *and, at the same time*, perfect

zeal in the performance of my duty as a servant of God, in the demonstration of my love as his child, and in my obedience to his law as his subject and servant.

I do not want one truth or the other, I want them both. I want the life that both together alone can create. I never want my reliance upon the grace of God to make me lazy or careless in my devotion to and service for God. But I never want my Christian service, to the least degree, to diminish my sense of absolute obligation to the love of God in Christ. It is far too easy to spend our lives, as one Christian man said he spent his, "laboriously doing not much of anything." The prospect of giving an account will concentrate our minds and set us to doing those things which our flesh may resist doing but our spirit knows we are so much going to want to have done and done well and done at length and done with zeal when we are standing before the Lord Christ on his holy day.

That is always and everywhere the point the biblical writer is after, as John is here, when he speaks of the Lord's judgment of our works. He intends to galvanize us to action. He intends to warn us away from idleness or half-heartedness in living the Christian life. He urges us to remember that even the most intense persecution faithful Christians suffer in this world vanishes as a consideration before the specter of the Last Judgment. He intends to provoke us to greater and more consistent effort in putting our sins to death and in bringing to ever greater expression the attitudes, the words, and the deeds of a genuinely Christian life. We work hard at teaching our children that there are long term consequences to the choices they make when they are young. Lackadaisical studying, the unwise choice of friends, bad behavior when one is young can mark and reduce and curse a life to its end. Well, that is the point here. You don't *get away* with anything. There is a consequence, an everlasting consequence. Even God's grace, even Christ's righteousness, does not eliminate the consequences of our choices. So, choose wisely and well; obey the Lord; remain faithful to him; do the hard work that godliness requires. You will be so glad, so very glad you did when the books are opened and you are standing before your Savior to receive that reward that is according to what you did and did not do.

I know you. I know you want to live for Jesus Christ. But you also know how difficult it is to live that Christian life as it ought to be lived. You are far enough along the road to know that you need every motivation, every reason, every goad to spur you on. Well, here is an important motivation; here is a great reason. Peter says that knowing that Christ judges our lives with impartiality will cause us to live our lives in reverent fear. You want to live in reverent fear. Every Christian does. Well, think of the Last Judgment and the account then you must give of your life. Think of the rewards, greater or lesser, that will be given to believers then. Paul also said the thought caused the fear of the Lord to rise in his heart. I want the fear of the Lord to rise in my heart; don't you?

Let there be no thought – in my own heart or in yours – that we have in some way contributed to our own salvation or reward. If God gives us any reward whatsoever in heaven in return for our faithfulness to him, he will be crowning his own gift and rewarding his own grace. But the summons comes nevertheless to each one of us. Live now as you will want to have lived then. Lay up your treasure in heaven, for, with God's help, you can! You actually can!