

Are Christians Judged?

The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Matthew 12:35-37

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

Romans 2:6-8

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

2 Corinthians 5:10

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile...

1 Peter 1:17

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

Revelation 20:12

In Peter's second epistle he writes of Paul's letters that, "There are some things in them that are hard to understand," and nowhere is this more apparent than in regards to judgment. As the above sampling of relevant texts highlight, the Scriptures have much to say on the topic and yet its testimony is somewhat paradoxical. We constantly preach that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone and yet the Scriptures state the puzzling truth that we are judged on the basis of our works. How are we to reconcile this difficulty?

I think there are three simple statements that will help to clarify this issue:

1. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone.
2. Our deeds reveal the reality of our faith.
3. Our deeds determine the degree of our rewards.

The first point above is absolutely critical lest we fall into a works righteousness mindset. The Scriptures make it absolutely clear that salvation is only attained through faith and thus no man or woman will be justified (declared righteous) on the basis of the deeds that they do. Here are some texts that evidence this truth:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

John 5:24

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Romans 3:28

yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 2:16

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Justification by faith is an essential and precious doctrine which must be embraced and pondered by all who call on the Lord, but it is critical that we define what faith is lest it become diluted beyond recognition. This is the hope of the second statement, "our deeds reveal the reality of our faith."

James speaks about this truth in the second chapter of his epistle. He writes, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." Contrary to the opinion of many liberal critics who would see contradiction between James and Paul, James is actually quite explicit in emphasizing the efficacy of faith throughout his letter. In 1:3 he speaks of the testing of faith, in 1:6 he speaks of the necessity of faith in our prayers, in 2:1 he speaks about the impartiality produced by "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ," and in 2:5 he relates faith to inheritance in the kingdom.

What James is concerned with is not whether or not faith is sufficient for justification, but rather whether the faith in question is true and valid faith or if it is instead that type of faith which is shared even by the demons (James 2:19). He is concerned with whether we have actual saving faith or a semblance of faith which

is useless, vain, and empty. Such “faith” is not really faith. This is why he writes in 2:18 “I will show you my faith by my works.” As Charles Spurgeon once wrote, we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith which is alone. True faith is accompanied by deeds, and these deeds reveal the reality of our confession. The faith which is credited as righteousness (Romans 4) is the response of a heart which has been born again through the living and abiding word of God (1 Peter 1:23) and this type of faith produces works as evidence of its reality. The person who produces no works is condemned on the basis that he or she has not truly experienced the freedom from condemnation that is enjoyed in union with Christ. For those who have trusted Christ, there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1) and no ultimate judgment (John 5:24). Here is what John Piper says in regards to judgment on the basis of works:

“It is by grace we are saved through faith; not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. But the heart that is full of faith will overflow in attitudes and actions very different from those which flow from unbelief. Therefore, our deeds will testify truly to the genuineness or absence of faith, and it is not inconsistent for God to judge us according to our works. But we must understand that this judgment according to works does not mean we earn our salvation. Our deeds do not earn, they exhibit our salvation. Our deeds are not the merit of our righteousness, they are the mark of our new life in Christ. Our deeds are not sufficient to deserve God’s favor, but they do demonstrate our faith. Please keep that distinction clear in your mind regarding our attitudes and actions: they do not earn, they exhibit; they do not merit, they mark; they do not deserve, they demonstrate. And therefore, “God will render to every man according to his deeds,” including Christians.”¹

Though some may read this as a rejection of faith alone, it is rather an urgent plea for us to pursue true faith. If our actions do not align with our confession then we are called to examine the reality of the confession. This is God’s mercy to us, a visible litmus test to the reality of our faith lest we perish while clinging to a façade. Both demons and Christians “believe,” but there is a difference. Christians are saved by grace alone through faith alone and this faith is active and living and embraces the promises and person of Jesus Christ.

Given that we are justified through faith and that this faith produces works, the last statement to be considered is the idea that “our deeds determine the degree of our rewards.” The parable of the minas in Luke 19 expresses this understanding well. Within the parable, the master gives various amounts of money to various servants and they are considered responsible for the amount that they are given. When the master returns, he gives authority over ten cities to the servant who had been entrusted with ten minas and had made ten more and he gave authority over five cities to the servant who had been entrusted with five minas and had

made five more. In other words, our faithfulness in this life will somehow affect the eternal life to come.

We should be really careful here lest we think that eternity will be less enjoyable for the servant who has fewer rewards than the other. Eternity with Christ will be absolutely blissful for all who partake in it. The analogy that is often used is that of a sponge. Though each of us may have a different size sponge with a corresponding capacity for joy, nonetheless each of our sponges will be completely full.

The reality of rewards should compel us not to compete with other believers as though fighting for limited resources, but rather toward love and good works. Faith sees the treasure that awaits and sacrifices fleeting pleasures now because it can see through the shadows of that pleasure unto the greater joy that is found in Christ’s presence. Faith bids us to lose our lives now because in doing so we gain life later (Luke 9:23-25), to give now because we will receive later (Acts 20:35), to suffer abuse now for greater wealth later (Hebrews 11:26), and to count everything as loss now because of the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ who we will be with later. Faith looks back upon the cross and resurrection and sees there the certainty of the reward which comes in the future.

Though the concept of judgment can be a little difficult to understand within the Scriptures, I think we can simplify the matter if we remember that we are justified by a faith that is so captivated by Christ that it naturally overflows in love and good works for Him and others.

...and without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Hebrews 11:6

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¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/final-judgment>