

Justification by Faith Alone, Chapter 5

Works and Justification by Faith

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A question often asked even by orthodox believers is: “If all of the guilt of believer’s sins is imputed to Christ on the cross and Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed to believers, why does the Bible speak so often of a judgment according to works?” The Bible does clearly teach that all men shall be judged according to their works done in the flesh. This is the teaching of the Old Testament, Jesus, and the apostles. The Psalmist writes, “You render to each one according to his work” (Ps. 62:12). The climax of Ecclesiastes is: “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil” (Eccl. 12:13-14).

Jesus emphasized the coming judgment of all men in His teaching ministry. “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works” (Mt. 16:27). Berkouwer writes, “The Savior teaches that the great divorce in the final judgment is tied up with the concrete acts of man during his present life (Matt. 25:31-46). They inherit the kingdom who gave their brothers—and, in them, Christ—water in their thirst, bread in their hunger, clothes in their nakedness, and friendship in their banishment. They are the justified to whose astonished query shall come to reply: This ye have done unto *Me*! The interdependence between the ultimate judgment and the works of the present life is plain. According to the Lord, we shall be judged on the broad expanse of our entire lives and on every chance word spoken in an idle moment (Matt. 12:36). And to all this, Christ adds, ‘For by thy word thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned’ (Matt. 12:37).”¹

The same apostle who wrote “that we are justified by faith alone apart from the works of the law” (Rom. 3:26) also wrote: “God...‘will render to each one according to his deeds’: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath” (Rom. 2:6-8). This statement is only a chapter away from Paul’s detailed explanation of justification by grace through faith (Rom. 3:21 ff.). Some Protestant interpreters have considered this passage so problematic that they argue that Paul is expounding the law and thus speaking hypothetically. The problem with such an interpretation is that the principles regarding the future judgment set forth in this passage are found throughout the New Testament (cf. Mt. 16:27; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:29; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7-10; Eph. 6:8; Col.

¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 105-106.

3:23-24; Rev. 20:11-15). If this passage is hypothetical then all the others would also have to be considered hypothetical to avoid the alleged “problem.”

An examination of some other passages proves the impossibility of such a solution. Paul is not speaking in the abstract but is describing what God will actually do on the day of judgment. “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:11-15). “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one’s praise will come from God” (1 Cor. 4:5). “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Gal. 6:7-9). “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for the wrong which he has done, and there is no partiality” (Col. 3:23-25). “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged, each one according to his works” (Rev. 20:12-13). The same Paul who emphasized justification by faith alone also emphasized the final judgment in which a person’s works will be judged in detail. The apostle Paul repeatedly sets the judgment before believers to motivate them to a greater obedience. Paul obviously saw no contradiction between the two doctrines.

The best method of dealing with the alleged problems regarding justification and the future judgment is to consider some of these problems separately. The first and most important question to answer is: Does the judgment of believers in which rewards for good works are dispersed teach the Romish doctrine of salvation through faith and works (or human merit)? No, not at all. When the apostle Paul discusses the judgment of believers and the receiving of rewards, he makes it very clear that: (1) good works do not contribute at all to one’s salvation; (2) the reward for good works can only come to those who are already justified in Christ. The most detailed passage in the New Testament regarding the future judgment of believers and rewards is 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. Paul says that “no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (v. 11). Paul says that good works are built on this foundation (v. 12). The foundation of Christian ethics is the person and work of Jesus Christ. One must already be saved before one can do works which please God which in turn will receive a reward. This point is supported throughout Scripture. The Bible says: “that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). Since the Bible says that all our works are tainted with sin and imperfect,

the only works that could possibly receive a heavenly reward are works founded upon Christ, that is, works in which the guilt of sin has been removed. “How could God consider anyone worthy of reward ‘unless his infinite goodness had abolished all their demerit of punishment?’ Good works have a part in obtaining a reward only through ‘their acceptance by the divine mercy.’ He who concerns himself with the relation between works and reward must keep a steady bearing on God’s mercy. Otherwise he will lose himself in a maze of legalism and works-righteousness.”² Rewards can only be understood in relation to the foundation, Jesus Christ.

The whole Romish system (of *infused* righteousness, in which faith informed by love actually *makes* a person just over time; in which good works that flow from this infused righteousness actually contribute to salvation) comes crashing down in 1 Corinthians 3:15: “If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” Paul is *not* talking about a person’s venial sins being removed or purged in the fire of purgatory.³ The fire doesn’t purify the worker but rather judges his workmanship. The apostle is discussing Christian works which do not endure the judgment. Paul uses the analogy of two types of materials to describe the quality and enduring nature of a Christian’s work done for Christ. There are imperishable materials (“gold, silver, and costly stones”) which endure and survive the judgment and there are perishable materials (“wood, hay and stubble”) which do not endure. They are all burned up. But note that even if a Christian’s work is completely consumed on the day of judgment that person is still saved. What this means is that a person’s works have nothing to do with salvation. Remember, works are built on the completed foundation: Jesus Christ and His perfect accomplished redemption.

Paul’s warning is directed primarily to ministers of the gospel (note vs. 5-10). The apostle speaks of a real reward for enduring work. But what distinguishes work that endures from work that does not endure? Paul likely refers to work that is based on human wisdom rather than God’s word as work that is burned up. “It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, ‘pop’ psychology, managerial techniques, relational ‘good feelings,’”⁴ entertainment, charismania, church growth gimmicks, and so on. Many people who have been seduced by the world’s wisdom, however, are genuine believers. But on the day of judgment their work will be exposed for what it really is: merely human, vain, and useless. Their work does not endure for it was worthless; yet they are saved.

² Ibid, p. 128.

³ “They [Roman Catholics] distinguished also between Mortal and Venial Sins—the former deserving eternal death, the latter deserving only temporal punishments,—whereas, according to the Scriptures, ‘every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come;’ and whatever difference there may be between one sin and another, as being more or less heinous, and between the sins of believers and those of unbelievers, that difference does not arise from any sin being in its own nature venial, or undeserving of punishment, and still less from one class of sins being pardonable, and another not; for the Law declares that all sins are mortal, while the Gospel proclaims that all sins, short of the sin against the Holy Ghost, are pardonable, by the free grace of God, through the infinite merits of Christ.” James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1867] 1977), p. 105.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 145.

Judgment according to works does not at all support the Romish idea of human merit in salvation. When Christians go before the judgment seat of Christ there is no possibility of going to hell or purgatory; there is only the possibility of one's work being destroyed. Judgment according to works for the believer does not indicate an alternative way of salvation beside justification by faith, but does indicate the need for good works to be in accordance with divine revelation. They must arise from true faith and must aim solely at the glory of God. Paul's aim in the passages which speak of judgment according to works is to spur Christians to a greater *sanctification*; to a greater diligence in serving Christ. The same God who justifies the ungodly also sets the judgment seat of Christ before believers as a motivation for obedience. Only those who confound justification with sanctification see human merit for salvation in such passages.

The Relation of Good Works to Reward

A second and related question is: How can the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone be in harmony with the scriptural promises to believers regarding rewards in heaven for good works?⁵ Does not the payment of rewards presuppose some type of human merit? Furthermore, how can the idea of reward be reconciled with passages such as Romans 4:4 ("Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt")? The classic Protestant response is that even the believer's heavenly rewards are based upon grace and not merit. Before examining this formulation another possible answer will be considered: that of John Gerstner.

Gerstner argues that the issue of merit in heaven for good works done on earth is not a problem for the Protestant at all, for these good works have nothing to do with earning salvation; they all occur *after* justification. These faith-works are necessary to prove the genuineness of a Christian's faith, but they have nothing to do with earning heaven. How can imperfect works, tainted with sin, merit heavenly rewards? Gerstner argues that since Christ has removed all the guilt of sin from every believer, his post-justification good works actually do merit heavenly rewards. Gerstner writes, "They are real 'works of supererogation,' if you wish...[the believer] goes to heaven without one iota of merit in anything and everything he does. But every post-justification good work he ever does will merit, deserve, and receive its reward in heaven.... Moreover, do you dare impugn the justice of God by saying that He would 'reward' what did not deserve reward? (P.S. I confess my own and Augustine's past error in using the oxymoron: 'rewards of grace.')⁶

⁵ The Scriptures often speak of heavenly rewards. "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23-24). "Lay up for yourself treasures in heaven" (Mt. 6:20). To those who are reviled and persecuted for Christ's sake Jesus says: "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (Mt. 5:12). The author of Hebrews says that Moses forsook the pleasures of sin and instead suffered with God's people "for he looked to the reward" (Heb. 11:26). "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to everyone according to his work" (Rev. 22:12).

⁶ John Gerstner, "The Nature of Justifying Faith," in Don Kistler, *Justification by Faith Alone* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 121.

Gerstner is absolutely correct when he says that good works do not contribute to salvation. But what about his idea that post-justification good works actually do merit and deserve a heavenly reward? Is the classic Protestant view of rewards based upon grace wrong?⁷ Although Gerstner's logic is impeccable, his formulation oversimplifies the biblical view of merit and heavenly rewards. Note that even in Gerstner's own analysis a Christian's works must have sin removed from them before they merit a reward. Thus, already the correlation between work and merit or pay that one finds in everyday life and what the Bible describes are two different things. One does not pay for a new car with a severely warped engine block and non-functioning transmission and say, "I forgive you for these defects, but you've truly earned your pay." Furthermore, Jesus rules out human merit in the economic contractual sense in Luke 17:10: "So likewise you, when you have done all things which you are commanded say, 'we are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" Berkouwer writes, "Even with the complete performance of the obligation, there is no room for self-congratulation. Whether the believer is actually in state to perform this, is another question. Here the point is that we are unprofitable servants. This sentence so patently excludes every possible notion of merit and claim, that one is amazed that Rome has not been better able to understand and emulate the Reformation recollection."⁸

Gerstner (the good Protestant that he is) is only discussing merit within the sphere of sanctification, *not* justification. But sanctification is not isolated from God's mercy. Paul writes, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). "For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Sanctification is a continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in man where He progressively delivers the justified sinner from his sinful nature (i.e., the flesh) while renewing the sinner's nature and enabling him to perform good works. Berkhof writes, "It is essentially a work of God, though in so far as He employs means, man can and is expected to co-operate by the proper use of these means. Scripture clearly exhibits the supernatural character of

⁷ An excellent statement of the original Protestant position regarding merit and good works is found in Calvin's *Institutes*: "Scripture shows what all our works deserve when it states that they cannot bear God's gaze because they are full of uncleanness. What, then, will the perfect observance of the law deserve, if any such can be found, when Scripture enjoins us to consider ourselves unprofitable servants even when we do everything required of us [Lk. 17:10]? For to the Lord we have given nothing unrequired but have only carried out services owed, for which no thanks are due. Yet those good works which he has bestowed upon us the Lord calls 'ours,' and testifies they not only are acceptable to him but also will have their reward. It is our duty in return to be aroused by so great a promise, to take courage not to weary in well-doing [cf. Gal. 6:9; 2 Th. 3:13], and to receive God's great kindness with true gratefulness. There is no doubt that whatever is praiseworthy in works is God's grace; there is not a drop that we ought by rights to ascribe to ourselves. If we truly and earnestly recognize this, not only will all confidence in merit vanish, but the very notion.... Good works, then, are pleasing to God and are not unfruitful for their doers. But they receive by way of reward the most ample benefits of God, not because they so deserve but because God's kindness has of itself set this value on them" (*Institutes* III:XV:3 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 1:790-791).

⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, pp. 123-124.

sanctification in several ways. It describes it as a work of God, 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20, 21, as a fruit of the union of life with Jesus Christ, John 15:4; Gal. 2:20; 4:19, as a work that is wrought in a man from within and which for that very reason cannot be a work of man, Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:11, and speaks of its manifestation in Christian virtues as the work of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22. It should never be represented as a merely natural process in the spiritual development of man, nor brought down to the level of a mere human achievement....”⁹

Gerstner’s assertion that post-justification good works actually do merit rewards and are not rewards of grace should be rejected for the following reasons. First, strictly speaking, merit denotes a work that because of its own intrinsic value justly requires a reward or payment. But, as already noted, the believer’s works are not perfect or pure, but are tainted with sin (Rom. 7:18; Gal. 5:17-18; Isa. 64:6). The moment one asserts that Christ has removed all impurities, grace has entered the transaction and all assertions of intrinsic value vanish. Second, the Bible teaches that everything we have (including ourselves and everything that we can possibly do) is already owed to God and thus merits nothing (Lk. 17:10; Rom. 8:12). Third, the believer’s sanctification and every good work are gifts of grace (Jas. 1:17; Phil. 2:13; 2 Cor. 3:5). Since God prepares good works for each believer beforehand (Eph. 2:10) and enables him to perform good works by His Spirit, the Christian has no reason to boast over his sanctification. “If I am wicked, woe to me; even if I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head” (Job 10:15). Fourth, the rewards that God bestows upon believers for their good works are so magnificent and out of proportion to the accomplishments of the saints on earth that it is clear that grace is operative in the rewards. God is not just giving out payments to servants, but bestowing a wonderful inheritance to His own children (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17). The best way to understand God’s heavenly rewards toward his children for doing good is to view them as acts of God’s kindness and mercy. The key to understanding these rewards is not intrinsic human merit but the sovereign good pleasure of God. God wanted to bestow these gifts upon His children and thus graced them with the will and ability to carry them out and rewarded them. To speak of intrinsic human merit is to speak of God as a debtor and under obligation to man. This we deny. God is bound by His promise and not human merit. “[W]e do not deny that God from the time he gave the promise is necessarily bound to fulfill it and thus is made in a certain measure a debtor, not to us, but to himself and his own faithfulness.”¹⁰

The Protestant doctrine that the heavenly rewards that God gives Christians for good works are *gifts of grace* does *not* mean that believers are not valid secondary moral agents; nor does it mean that believers do not actively cooperate in their sanctification; nor does it mean that there is not a direct correlation between the good works done on earth and the rewards given in heaven. God is just and not arbitrary in bestowing these rewards. The point that needs to be emphasized is that these rewards are based on God’s promise, a promise which flows from God’s grace and mercy. God is obligated to give these rewards only because He of His own good pleasure decided to set up a system of rewards for good deeds upon earth. The whole idea of

⁹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), pp. 532-533.

¹⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed), 2:714.

merit implies an obligation on God that apart from His own promise is simply not there. God does not owe man anything. Good deeds apart from grace merit nothing. Calvin writes, “Only let us not imagine a reciprocal relation of merit and reward which is the error into which the sophists fell, for want of considering the end which we have stated.... Nothing is clearer, than that the promise of a reward to good works is designed to afford some consolation to the weakness of our own flesh, but not to inflate our minds with vain-glory. Whoever, therefore, infers from this that there is any merit in works, or balances the work against the rewards, errs very widely from the true design of God.”¹¹ God receives all the glory. When the saints worship God in heaven they “cast their crowns before the throne” (Rev. 4:10).

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¹¹ *Institutes*, II, xviii, 4. Even Adam before the fall, “if he had persevered, would not have merited life in strict justice” (Turretin, 2:712). Eternal life was based on God’s promise: the covenant of works. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works he would have been given eternal life. The condition was perfect obedience. Eternal life for a finite number of years of obedience is certainly gracious. Only Jesus Christ, who is both God and man, could and did fulfill this strict justice.