



Reformation Society of Western New York

Thursday, May 12, 2022

A BRIDE PREPARED

Justification by Faith and Judgment According to Works

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INTRODUCTION

Falling down before Paul and Silas, the Philippian jailer asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Such an eternally significant question was met with a profoundly simple answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:29, 31). There was no work for him to do, for the work had already been done by God in Christ. As Paul would later explain to the church at Rome, it is the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly whose faith is counted to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:5). Eternal life is the “free gift of God,” a gift received by faith (6:23; cf. 3:24; 5:15-16). Yet in that same letter, we also read that God gives eternal life “to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality” (2:6). Only those who persevere in good works are rewarded with . . . a free gift? Here we find an instance of the tension between faith and works.

The fact that Scripture declares “that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28) and “that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas. 2:24) has been a perennial issue within the Christian church. Perhaps the most helpful solution, however, is the familiar adage from the Reformation: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”¹ The Bible is clear that genuine faith bears fruit (John 15:5) and begets virtue (2 Pet. 1:5-11); it is expressed through love (Gal. 5:6) and completed by works (Jas. 2:22).² This explanation of the relationship between faith and works is most helpful for understanding the nature of justification and sanctification. It also brings clarity to a related doctrine that is often misunderstood: the doctrine of the final judgment.

On the last day, when the risen Lord Jesus returns in glory to set the world to rights, all those who have ever lived will be raised to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. This

¹ John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote* (1547), https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html

² J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 160.

judgment will be a universal demonstration and decisive vindication of the perfect justice of God.³ There are several descriptions of this singular event found throughout Scripture, but one of the truths held in common by all of them is that this judgment will be according to *works*. This raises an important question: If justification is by faith, then how is judgment according to works? Since the present reality of justification is an already-pronounced eschatological judgment received by faith and not works, on the basis of the imputed righteousness of God revealed in Christ, how does this relate to a future judgment according to works?⁴

To answer this question, we will use Paul's most extensive description of the final judgment, found in Romans chapter 2, as our starting point. Once we have established that judgment is indeed according to works from several other supporting passages, we will explore how the enduring obedience of faith and the transforming power of grace connect our present justification to the future judgment. Finally, we will conclude with one of the last and most beautiful images given to us in Scripture of this relationship, along with some points of application for gospel ministry in our local churches.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO WORKS

ROMANS 2:5-11

Having described how God's wrath is revealed even now against an unrighteousness world (Rom. 1:18-32), and how the self-righteous moralist is also storing up wrath for himself on the day of wrath (2:1-5), Paul takes time to explain what will happen on that day when "God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (2:5):

⁶ He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be tribulation

³ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 259.

⁴ Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Paternoster, 2006), 97–98.

and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality. (Romans 2:6-11 ESV)

He begins with a citation of Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12, that God will repay man according to his works. This principle of retribution is affirmed throughout the Scriptures, from the writings of the prophets to the teaching of Jesus himself. It's the foundation of justice and why God's judgment is righteous: it will be according to what each person has done in life, according to their ways.

Paul then provides more detail about the final judgment. On that great day, there are two—and only two—categories to which humanity will belong. There are those who receive eternal life and those who receive wrath and fury. Those who receive eternal life are described as “those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality” (2:7). Notice their *works*: they persevere in doing good (cf. 2:10). Despite trial and temptation, they endure to the end with a persistent lifestyle of godliness. But we also see the heart behind their works: they are those who continuously seek “glory and honor and immortality.” Their goal in life is to behold God's glory, to receive his approval, and to experience unfading joy in his presence.⁵ In other words, they seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). This is why their life is characterized by steadfast endurance in good works; this is how they seek the life of the age to come. And they will receive what they are due for their well-doing.

But who will receive wrath and fury—the very opposite of eternal life? “Those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness” (2:8). Again, notice their *works*: they do not obey God's truth but instead obey unrighteousness and do evil (cf. 2:9). And the heart behind their works, their goal in life, is also revealed: they “are self-seeking.” They are those who do not see fit to acknowledge God, to live for his glory, to seek his kingdom and righteousness. They live only

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 84.

for themselves, which is essentially a summary of Paul's comments in Romans 1:18-32. Paul then works backwards in verses 9-10 to explain the two contrasting outcomes of the judgment. And the reason for why the unrighteous pagans of Romans 1 and the unrepentant moralists of Romans 2 are both alike headed for wrath is because "God shows no partiality" (2:11). He does not play favorites.

The judgment in store for the wicked is readily understandable, since they are receiving what they justly deserve for all their evil deeds. But the standard of judgment for those who receive eternal life is exactly the same: it is according to their *works*. What's most striking is that, in a letter preoccupied with upholding and defending the critical doctrine of justification by faith, there is no mention of "faith" or "believing" or even "grace" in this passage. Those who receive eternal life are not described here as believing in Jesus, receiving Christ's righteousness by faith, or being saved by grace, but as persevering in doing good! Some have suggested that believers will experience a different judgment. But despite the numerous and creative attempts to avoid the issue, the meaning of this text and the unified witness of Scripture is abundantly clear: judgment is according to works.

OTHER RELEVANT PASSAGES

That God will render to each one according to his works is repeatedly taught in the Old Testament. Elihu's speech concerning the justice of God expresses this truth beautifully:

- ¹⁰ "Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding:
far be it from God that he should do wickedness,
and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.
¹¹ For according to the work of a man he will repay him,
and according to his ways he will make it befall him.
¹² Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,
and the Almighty will not pervert justice. (Job 34:10-12)

However, for our purposes it would be helpful to survey a few specific texts from the New Testament that also attest to this doctrine of the final judgment.⁶ To begin, Jesus proclaimed that

⁶ This survey will include only those passages concerned with the final judgment of humanity, not that of angels (1 Cor. 6:3) or the illustration of gospel ministers and their building materials (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

“the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done” (Matt. 16:27; cf. 13:40-43). Paul declared in the midst of the Areopagus that God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). And he later explains to the church at Rome that all must “stand before the judgment seat of God” and give an account of ourselves before him (Rom. 14:10-12).

In addition to these texts, there are a few that deserve further comment. First, Jesus’s words in Matthew 12:33-37:

“³³ Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ . . . For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

As we saw in Romans 2, our works serve to reveal the condition of the heart, our greatest aim in life. Jesus likewise declares that our words do the same. The fruit of our lips reveals the state of our heart, whether the tree is good or bad. Therefore, we will be justified or condemned by our words, for when the Lord comes, he “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (1 Cor. 4:5).

Second, there is Jesus’s teaching on the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, where all the nations are gathered before the Son of Man on his glorious throne, and are separated by him “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” In this passage, those who are to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world are notably called “the righteous” (25:37). However, there is not a single reference to their faith or having been justified. Rather, the righteous are welcomed by King Jesus on the basis of their works. Specifically, these works concern their treatment of Jesus, who identifies himself with his people. This is relevant to Paul’s teaching on the judgment in Romans since, as D. A. Carson points out, their good deeds “are not only works of

compassion and morality but reflect where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself.”⁷ This is more than simply the Lord of glory determining who’s been naughty or nice.

Third, we have Paul’s well-known statement from 2 Corinthians 5:10: “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.” What’s important to notice here is that it is a person’s life as a whole that is in view; their behavior as a unity is the basis for judgment. While each person will indeed be judged on the basis of their works and every careless word, the language suggests that it is habitual action that is determinative: The things done in the body (plural) is qualified with the neuter singular construction, “whether good or evil.”⁸ This idea is reflected in Paul’s use of present tense verbs in Romans 2:6-11, which convey continuous or ongoing action. It’s not the sinless who receive eternal life but those who “keep on doing good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers” (2:7 NLT).

Finally, there is the awesome scene famously described in Revelation 20:11-15:

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² 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. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Once more we find the universality, impartiality, and inescapability of the final judgment. “*Everyone* is judged, no matter his or her social or political status. Small and great are judged in the same way,

⁷ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 520.

⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, ed. Ralph P. Martin, Lynn Allan Losie, and Peter H. Davids, Second Edition., vol. 40, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 271–272.

by the same standard, before the same divine Judge.”⁹ Twice we read that this judgment will be according to their works—the same phrase used by Paul in Romans 2:6. The books that are opened contain the record of what they have done that will serve as the basis of either conviction or acquittal.¹⁰ However, we also learn that “another book was opened, which is the book of life” (Rev. 20:12; cf. 3:5; 13:8). This particular book contains the names of all those who will be spared from the wrath and fury that is the second death. The suggestion that this means that there are two different judgments—one for unbelievers and another for believers—is highly unlikely when one considers the weight of biblical evidence in support of a single judgment. This then raises an important question, which brings us now to our discussion of the relationship between justification by faith and judgment according to works: How does one’s name come to be written in *this* book?

UNDERSTANDING JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AND JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO WORKS

THE ENDURING OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

We can begin to make sense of Paul’s teaching on the final judgment in Romans 2 by first looking at the context of his opening quotation from Psalm 62. As it turns out, this psalm is a song of faith!

- ⁵ For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,
for my hope is from him.
⁶ He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
⁷ On God rests my salvation and my glory;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.
⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. *Selah*. (Psalm 62:5-8)

⁹ Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, vol. 2, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 331.

¹⁰ Leithart, *Revelation*, 331–332.

David calls for unwavering trust in God and sings of confident expectation of deliverance. Even in the midst of suffering and trial, he waits for the Lord. Why? Because not only is God a refuge for him, but because he knows that the Judge of all the earth will do right: “To you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For you will render to a man according to his work” (62:12). The person described in this psalm sounds much like those in Romans 2:7 who “seek for glory” by patience in well-doing, who are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Yet in the end, these will receive eternal life because they are living by faith; their salvation and glory rest on God (Ps. 62:7)!

What this helps us to see is that the final judgment—a judgment according to works—will reveal the object of our faith. Only those who are trusting in, rooted in, and abiding in Christ will bear the fruit of saving faith. Only those who desire God and his glory above all else will persevere in doing good, for good works are the verifiable proof of faith (cf. Jas. 2:14-26). Faith *believes* God and his precious promises, and the evidence that such faith is genuine is demonstrated through the ways we live in light of and act on those promises.¹¹ In fact, Paul bookends his letter to the Romans with a crucial reference to “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:27) and describes those who have been set free from sin as those who “have become obedient from the heart” (6:17). To the Thessalonians likewise he mentions their “work of faith” (1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11). This is because obedience flows from faith; works prove the genuineness of one’s faith in, and submission to, the risen Lord Jesus.

Returning to our passage from Romans 2:6-11, Douglas Moo provides an excellent summary of the relationship between the believer’s present justification and future judgment: “The justification by faith granted the believer in this life is the sufficient cause of those works that God takes into account at the time of the judgment. The initial declaration of the believer’s acquittal

¹¹ Jon Bloom, “Parable of an Unhealthy Soul: Why ‘Faith’ Dies Without Action,” *Desiring God*; January 16, 2022 (accessed February 24, 2022); <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/parable-of-an-unhealthy-soul>.

before the bar of heaven at the time of one's justification is infallibly confirmed by the judgment according to works at the last assize."¹² So, while it is gloriously true that those who believe the gospel and put their trust in Jesus are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is an obedient faith that will produce and be completed by good works.

Furthermore, it's also important to note that this obedience of faith is an enduring obedience; saving faith is a persevering faith. Those rewarded with eternal life were described in Romans 2:6-7 as those who seek the life of the age to come "by *patience* in well-doing." This idea is also attested to throughout the New Testament. Jesus describes the seed that falls in the good soil as "those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with *patience*" (Luke 8:15). Paul tells the church in Thessalonica that he boasts about them for their "*steadfastness* and faith" in all the persecution and afflictions that they were enduring and explains: "This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering" (2 Thess. 1:3-5). Commenting on this particular verse, G. K. Beale writes: "Their enduring faith through suffering is the badge (the evidence or sign) by which they will be *counted worthy* . . . of inheriting *the kingdom of God* at the end of history. One will not be able to enter the kingdom without the badge of enduring faith and its accompanying good works."¹³ The author to the Hebrews also refers to the necessity of the enduring obedience of faith—utilizing the theme verse of both Romans and Galatians!—when he writes:

³⁶ For you have need of *endurance*, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For,

 "Yet a little while,
 and the coming one will come and will not delay;
³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith
 and if he shrinks back,

¹² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 143.

¹³ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 184.

my soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Hebrews 10:36-39, emphasis added)

Therefore, God’s righteous judgment on the last day will expose what was the object of our faith, the deepest desire of our heart, and our only hope in life and death. Our works will serve to reveal whether or not we lived for Christ and his kingdom. And thanks be to God, this judgment according to works for the believer will accord with our justification by faith. Richard Gaffin is worth quoting at length here:

For Christians, future judgment according to works does not operate according to a different principle than their already having been justified by faith. The difference is that the final judgment will be the open manifestation of that present justification, their being “openly acquitted.” . . . And in that future judgment their obedience, their works, are not the ground or basis. Nor are they (co-)instrumental, a coordinate instrument for appropriating divine approbation as they supplement faith. Rather, they are the essential and manifest criterion of that faith, the integral “fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith,” appropriating the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 16:2. It is not for nothing, I take it, and not to be dismissed as an overly fine exegesis to observe, that in Romans 2:6 Paul writes “according (κατά) to works,” not “on account of (διὰ),” expressing the ground, nor “by (ἐκ) works,” expressing the instrument.¹⁴

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF GRACE

Another way for us to approach the relationship between justification by faith and judgment according to works is to consider why it is that obedience flows from faith. How is it that good works are the verifiable proof of genuine, saving faith? The answer is that the grace of God in Christ is not only a liberating pardon but a transforming power. Faith works because God works, working in us “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). While it is certainly true that we are saved “by grace through faith,” and that this is “the gift of God, not a result of works,” it is equally true that saving grace makes us his workmanship, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10). That is, grace is the faith-creating, sin-conquering, mind-renewing, and heart-transforming power of the new creation

¹⁴ Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 98–99.

in Christ—a power that produces good works of enduring obedience to God and Christlike love for neighbor.¹⁵

This is what Paul goes on to show in the second major section of his letter to the Romans. In chapters 5-8, he explores all the blessings of justification by faith and the hope of salvation provided by the gospel. And what we discover is that God's grace not only meets us where we are to forgive us of sin and justify us by faith; it meets us where we are to unite us to Christ and raise us to "walk in newness of life" by that same faith (Rom. 6:4)! Saving grace brings deliverance not only from the *penalty* of sin but also from the *power* of sin in order that might "belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God" (7:4). God pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us so that we might "serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code" (5:5; 7:6; cf. 2:29). Those united to Christ by faith in his death and resurrection are no longer under the condemning, corrupting, and crushing reign of sin through the law that leads to death; they are under the forgiving, transforming, and empowering reign of grace through righteousness that leads to eternal life (Rom. 5:21).

All of these threads come together in the glorious tapestry that is Romans 8, where Paul provides a marvelous declaration of the heart of the gospel and the purpose of the Triune God:

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)

Here we are reminded again of the doctrine of justification. Because Christ Jesus fulfilled the demands of the law and bore our sins in his body on the tree, those in him are forgiven and declared righteous by faith. But notice: God did not send his Son into the world simply to secure our

¹⁵ Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 101–102.

justification but also to secure our *sanctification*. Christ not only fulfilled the demands of the law on our behalf, but empowers us by his Spirit to walk in a new obedience to the demands of the law from the heart.¹⁶ The “one act of righteousness” of the last Adam that leads to justification and life (5:18) also results in the righteous requirement of the law being fulfilled in us who walk according to the Spirit (8:4). Christ bore our sins “that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). So, just as sin was at work in us to bear fruit for death, now “trinitarian grace” is at work in us to bear the fruit of holiness—all because the Father sent his Son into the world and his Spirit into our hearts.¹⁷

This understanding of the transforming power of grace helps to shed light on the other relevant passages we surveyed that attest to a judgment according to works. First, remember Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 12 that we will be justified by our words, and in Matthew 25 where our works will reveal our relationship to Christ and his kingdom. For those who professed allegiance to King Jesus, a review of their words and works at the final judgment will have, as Packer puts it, “the special point of uncovering the evidence that shows whether their profession is the fruit of an honest regenerate heart. . . . Those whose professed faith did not express itself in a new life-style, marked by hatred of sin and works of loving service to God and others, will be lost.”¹⁸ The decisive factor then is whether or not we have received the Spirit by hearing with faith (Gal. 3:2; Ezek. 36:26-27) and experienced the new birth by God’s grace (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8).

Second, consider Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that all will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what we are due for what we have done, whether good or evil. To use the imagery of Matthew 12, this judgment will expose whether a tree has been made good or

¹⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 485.

¹⁷ Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 221–222.

¹⁸ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 259–260.

bad. The criteria won't be sinlessness but the overall pattern of our entire life. But it's significant that we keep the context of Paul's letter in mind. Dane Ortlund explains:

Paul has been seeking to instill in his readers a deep awareness of the resurrection they have already begun to experience through the presence of the Spirit (5:5) as they carry around the resurrection life of Jesus (4:10–11). The deeds for which we are judged, we are heartened to know, are deeds wrought not out of self-manufactured energies but out of the new life into which we have been irreversibly swept. A life of good deeds is simply *living in accord with who we now are* as eschatological creatures.¹⁹

Again, the outcome of this judgment is ultimately determined by whether or not we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection by grace through faith, sealed with his Spirit as a guarantee (2 Cor. 5:5; cf. Eph. 1:13–14). Only then will we always be of good courage, walking by faith and not by sight, making it our aim to please the Lord, for we know that we will one day appear before him (2 Cor. 5:6–10). But on that day, we will not stand before our risen King in fearful expectation of judgment for the works we have done or failed to do. There will be no wrath for us to face since, through the gospel by faith, our day of wrath has effectively moved into the past—the day when Jesus died in our place for our sins. On that day, we will receive eternal life.

Third, recall the scene of judgment in Revelation 20. All the saints standing before the throne on that day will be judged by what is written in the books, according to their works. But the saints are those who produce the requisite works “only because they have received the gift of life and are recorded, by the sheer grace of God, in the book of life.”²⁰ Here, at the capstone of the Scriptures, John is certainly not suggesting that our good works are the grounds for our final reward, that they can earn for us the *free gift* of eternal life! No; those whose names have been “written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (13:8) are those who have received this gift by grace through faith in Christ alone. Yet this faith is one marked

¹⁹ Dane Ortlund, “2 Corinthians,” in *Romans–Galatians*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. X, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 469.

²⁰ Leithart, *Revelation*, 332.

by an enduring obedience, for “true faith expresses itself in a changed life—though not a perfect life, to be sure—revealing the transformation taking place by God’s grace.”²¹

THE FINE LINEN OF THE BRIDE

Before we come to this description of judgment, however, John has already provided a clue for understanding how this Day will play out for the Christian. The picture of the bride of the Lamb found in chapter 19 provides a critical insight into the works that will be taken into account:

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

⁸it was granted her to clothe herself

with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. (Revelation 19:6-8)

Christ loved his bride, the church, and gave himself up for her in order that he might sanctify her and one day “present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27; cf. 1:4). When John finally sees the vision of the new heaven and new earth, he sees “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). This is the future of the church: to be a bride prepared. But the definitive reason the bride will be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, on that day is because “it was granted her to clothe herself” (19:8). Her radiant beauty is the gift of God to her. This scene is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;

²¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Revelation,” in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. XII, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 734.

my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)

The Lord is the one who clothes us and covers us, for he is our salvation and our righteousness. He makes us his bride. And the church will be holy and blameless on the last day because we have been chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and sealed by the Spirit (Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pet. 1:2). The bride will have been made ready to meet the Bridegroom because those whom God justifies he also glorifies (Rom. 8:28-30).

But here we also learn that it is the bride who has *made herself ready*! The fine linen with which she has clothed herself is none other than her own righteous deeds (cf. Rom. 8:4). While clothed in the robe of Christ's righteousness in justification, she prepares for her wedding by adorning herself with good works. "Precisely because she is *given* to clothe herself, she clothes herself; because she is *given* to do righteous acts, she does righteous acts that are truly her own and truly adorn her."²² This is because those who have been justified by God's saving grace are also transformed by that same grace, being both enabled and compelled to devote themselves to good works (Titus 3:7-8). Christ's blood-bought bride makes herself ready for him by patience in well-doing *because* she has been justified by him; and thus, she will receive the glory and honor and immortality that she seeks on the day when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

These bright and pure garments are also indicative of the enduring obedience of faith, for it is only those who conquer who will be clothed in white garments (Rev. 3:5; 7:13-14). There is a sense in which a person's confession of faith can only be revealed as genuine once they have believed to the very end. Therefore, the bride will only be prepared to meet her husband once she

²² Leithart, *Revelation*, 263.

has persevered in righteousness and remained faithful unto death—truly following the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4). And in this way, all those whose names have been written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain will be vindicated by their works at the final judgment. Peter Leithart summarizes this well:

The names in the book of life are judged favorably because of their deeds; because they have kept the faith of Jesus, their names are not erased from the book of life. The book is a book of perseverance, including the names who have been loyal to Jesus, resisting the seductions from harlots and beasts, refusing his mark, worshiping God alone. They can enter because they wear their own good works, the works that were given them to do.²³

CONCLUSION

Jesus tells the parable of the master of a house who went out early to hire laborers for his vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). To the surprise of those hired first, those who only worked for one hour received a denarius just like them. They received the same reward as those who had been there all day. Why? Because ultimately it is a gift of the master's grace to be received, not a wage to be earned by their works.²⁴ While more could be said about the question of degrees of reward in the new creation (e.g., Matt. 25:14-30), the fact remains that "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Rom. 2:7). Those who have been justified by faith will be judged according to their works on the last day in order that their works might publicly testify to the validity of their past justification. This is because the faith which justifies is a faith of enduring obedience, a faith made possible by the transforming power of God's grace. And therefore, in the end, every good work we will have ever performed and any commendation we ever hope to receive will be to the praise of God's glorious grace. "God in his great kindness deigns to dignify us for our good works even though he is ultimately supplying them.

²³ Leithart, *Revelation*, 332.

²⁴ Gerald Bray, "The Final Judgment," in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

As Augustine beautifully and famously put it, when God rewards us, ‘He crowns nothing but his own gifts.’”²⁵

So, as we preach the gospel and the doctrine of justification by faith, may we be careful to never neglect the necessity of good works. As we proclaim Christ and him crucified, may we also encourage our churches to walk in blood-bought obedience. As we rightly denounce a self-made righteousness submitted to God in reliance on works of the law, may we declare that the Lord Jesus our Righteousness “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). May we help our congregations better understand that good works flowing from our union with the risen Christ are not the “filthy rags” of a works-righteousness, but those works prepared beforehand by God for his new creations in Christ to walk in. May we faithfully call the church to prepare herself for the marriage of the Lamb by adorning herself with the righteous deeds granted to us to do. And may we herald both the reign of the risen Christ and the day fixed by God on which he will judge the world in righteousness, so that our hearers may seek and find eternal life.

²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:27-28)

²⁵ Ortlund, “2 Corinthians,” 469.

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