

**Romans (9):
The Future Judgment of works
(Rom. 2:6-11)**

Introduction:

There is a reality program on television that I saw some months ago. It showed men and women standing in a court of justice, in which they were charged of crimes. Commonly it was the word of the accused against a single police officer or other witness. The accused protested his innocence; he argued very convincingly that he was not guilty. He protested that he was wrongfully charged. But then unknown to him, there existed video evidence. After his protested innocence, the video clip was shown to the courtroom. The guilt of the accused was apparent to all, and the accused then hung his head in shame and he acknowledged sheepishly that he had lied and was indeed guilty. His sentence was declared and he was led off to his just punishment.

Today we will give our attention to a most important matter for each of us that Paul addresses in Romans 2. One day the enthroned Lord Jesus will summon you to step forward before Him. He will then judge you according to your works, the things that you have done in this life. You will give an accounting for every word that you spoke in this life, for every thought that you formed in your mind, for every action that you have done. The outcome of that judgment will be the everlasting destiny of your soul. There will be no excuses allowed. There will be no protestations of feigned innocence. The Lord will give evidence, in what exact form I do not know, to show conclusively what is warranted, either your damnation or the gift of eternal life.

The Book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of how it will play out. After the Lord Jesus returns, He will sit on His throne of judgment. Here is the account:

¹¹Then 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³And 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. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:11-15)

The prospect of such a judgment may seem to be a tremendous, fanciful, invention of primitive man that no thoughtful person of today can accept as factual. How could God bring before Himself, one-by-one, every person who has ever lived, and then before each one unfold a lifetime of words, thoughts, and actions, which itself would take near a lifetime, and then multiply that by the billions of persons that have ever walked the face of this earth? Such a judgment would encompass eons. We understand and believe, however, that it will occur; how it unfolds we cannot explain, given our current conception of sequential time and three-dimensional space. But it will occur, of that we are certain. God has said so. His Son has declared so. His apostles have witnessed to us it will be so. The account is related to us here in Revelation 20 in a manner to convey to us the certainty of the event, the solemnity of the event, and need to be mindful and to live in the light of the event. God will judge us according to our works. Almighty God, who is omniscient--all-knowing--will bring before us all that we have done, and He will judge us according to His perfect, law of righteousness. The reference to "the books" that will be opened, out of which people will be judged, is the way that God conveys to us that all is recorded and that of all things we will render an account. "The record

books are metaphorical for God's unfailing memory, which at the end provides the account of the misdeeds of the wicked to be presented before them."¹

The reality of this certain judgment should govern our attitudes, our speech, and our actions. At the end of the Old Testament wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, God set before us this reality as a principle by which people should govern their lives:

¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Ecc. 12:13f).

Let us give our attention to Romans 2. We arrive to this section of Paul's epistle in which we read and learn of God's righteous judgment that He will exercise at the end of the age. In chapter 1 Paul indicted all idolaters, who were chiefly Gentiles (but actually the sin of all people everywhere), in whose lives the judicial wrath of God was being revealed (cf. Rom. 1:18-32).

In the opening verses of Romans 2 the apostle Paul continued his effort to prove that all people everywhere were in need of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ alone. Paul eventually declared that only through faith in Jesus could sinners receive the gift of righteousness before God that they would be required of them on the Day of Judgment (cf. Rom. 3:21ff).

Beginning with Romans 2:1 Paul set forth the case that people, who regarded themselves to be morally superior to others, who did not see themselves as those described in Romans 1, were just as guilty and just as damned as they. Paul thus addressed "the moralist", the one who thought that he was immune to God's condemnation in judgment, but who was sadly mistaken. Let us read the first 11 verses of Romans 2.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ²We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

Paul argued that the moralist was no better off than the pagan. For even as he thought himself to be more righteous than the idolatrous pagans, he was actually just as guilty, just as condemned. "For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things" (Rom. 2:2). God is a just God, so He we know that He will judge all people according to an objective standard. We know from other places in the Scriptures that God the Father has entrusted the future judgment to His Son. The reason for this is because the Son would not show favoritism in His judgment, but that He would execute God's law faithfully. Isaiah had recorded a prophecy of the Messiah:

His delight is in the fear of the LORD,
And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes,
Nor decide by the hearing of His ears;
⁴But with righteousness He shall judge the poor,
And decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

¹ Greg K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 1033

He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth,
And with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. (Isa. 11:3, 4)

The apostle Paul set forth the nature of the general, final judgment of mankind here in Romans 2:6-11.

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

I. Understanding the text

Verse 6 reads, “*He will render to each one according to his works.*” Paul uses the pronoun, “*He*”, which is a reference to God, which we should understand to be the one triune God. Elsewhere we read that God the Father assigned that His Son Jesus would be the Judge on that great day. Our Lord Himself said, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22).

We also read that God’s judgment will be rendered “*to each one.*” This is all-inclusive. Place your name there. “He will render to ‘Lars’ according to his works.”

The outcome of the judgment is two destinies—*eternal life or eternal wrath*. There is a display of literary art that Paul used in the manner he set forth his teaching in these verses. The ideas of the paragraph are placed in an order, which show their relation in comparison and contrast. It may be illustrated this way:

A ¹ God will judge everyone equitably	v. 6
B ¹ Those who do good will attain eternal life	v. 7
C ¹ Those who do evil will suffer wrath	v. 8
C ² Wrath for those who do evil	v. 9
B ² Glory for those who do good	v. 10
A ² God judges impartially	v. 11 ²

Here we see the pattern in which the clauses are ordered. There are three sets of two statements that are in parallel with each other. Each set of two statements (A¹ and A², B¹ and B², C¹ and C²) state the same or very similar ideas, but in different words. This formatting provides emphasis and clarity of his ideas. Moreover, here we see another example of the sophistication of literary style in the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, every word of the Bible is inspired of God, but these writers themselves were very intelligent and articulate men who wrote in such a manner to commend themselves to sophisticated readers and deep thinkers.

Please note this: he did not declare that works were the *basis* or the *ground* of salvation. That is very clear from the Scriptures: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). And so, salvation is not *by* our works or *through* our works, nevertheless, the final judgment will be *according* to our works. Simply stated, our works on the Day of Judgment will either be the confirming evidence that we are true believers or our works will prove that we were only hypocrites or infidels (declared unbelievers).

Paul’s suggestion that a person’s “good work” might lead to eternal life seems strange in light of his teaching elsewhere... It might be noted, however, that Paul goes out of his way to stress that the work God so rewards is a persistent lifestyle of godliness. In contrast to these people are “those who are characterized by selfishness, and who disobey the truth while obeying unrighteousness, there will be

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 135.

wrath and fury.” As the contrast in these verses makes clear, there are two, and only two, fates in store for “every person” at the time of God’s wrath. Paul describes these latter people from the standpoint of their basic motivating principle—selfishness—and from the standpoint of their allegiance: they give themselves in obedience to unrighteousness rather than to the truth. Paul here describes opposite sides of the same coin. These people are refusing to subject themselves to the truth as God has revealed it and prefer rather to give themselves over to “unrighteousness” (cf. 1:18). As often in Romans, Paul singles out obedience as indicative of one’s true spiritual state (cf. 1:5; 2:25-27; 6:15-23).³

Verse 7 reads, “*to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life.*” Paul is not declaring that people will *earn* everlasting life by the *merit* of “patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality.” Paul is saying that God *gives* eternal life to these people whose lives are characterized as persevering in well-doing. These are people of faith, and we will learn later in Paul’s epistle that the reason they are able to live lives of righteousness is because they are in union with Jesus Christ and have the gift of the Holy Spirit, who regenerated them and who empowers them to live in “patience in well-doing.”

The word rendered “patience” is perhaps better translated by “perseverance” or “endurance.” We are reminded of the truth that it is he who endures to the end that will be saved (Matt. 24:13) and that “we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:14; cf. Col. 1:22, 23). The complementation of perseverance in well-doing and the aspiration of hope underlie the lesson that these may never be separated. Words without redemptive aspiration are dead works. Aspiration without good works is presumption.⁴

These people “*seek for glory and honor and immortality.*” This describes their aspirations, the longings of their hearts, and the direction in which they have ordered their lives. Recognize that these are three blessings that they anticipate to receive from God at the end of this life. In other words, Christians who live in faith, have a forward perspective, not living for today, but for the day when these blessings of God will be granted to them. This is how the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews described faith: “Now faith is the assurance of *things hoped for*, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Paul is saying that the things people of faith hope for, long for, look to God for, are “*glory and honor, and immortality.*”

Paul wrote that Christians seek first for *glory*. “‘Glory’ is frequently used in Paul in this epistle and elsewhere to describe the goal of the believer’s expectation.”⁵ It speaks of the time when Christians will be resurrected and “glorified”, in that they are made to be like Jesus Christ, having been given authority by Him.

We may consider these verses in Romans alone:

Romans 5:2. “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the *glory* of God.”

Romans 8:18-21. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the *glory* that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and *obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*”

Romans 8:30. “And those whom He predestined he also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified he also *glorified.*”

³ Ibid, pp. 137f.

⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 64.

⁵ Ibid. See also 1 Cor. 2:7; 15:43; 2 Cor. 4:17; and Col. 3:4.

Romans 9:8-10. “What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, *which He has prepared beforehand for glory*--²⁴ even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

Secondly, Christians seek for *honor*. They do not seek the honor that the world confers. They take up their cross, following their Lord in humility and frequent dishonor in this life. They have encountered dishonor and disgrace here for walking in faith with their Lord. They look for the honor of being commended by their Lord. Every Christian desires to hear from His Lord on that day, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:21, 23).

Thirdly, Christians seek for *immortality*. This describes the quality of eternal life that will be conferred upon us when we are given immortal bodies that are capable of enduring for eternity. Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 15:35-57** of the need of these mortal bodies to be transformed into immortal bodies. This will occur on the day of the resurrection.

We read in **verse 8**, “*but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*” This is the description of all people everywhere who do not know the true God. They are “self-seeking.” They are gods to themselves, doing what they want, what they desire for themselves. They do not know God or submit to God and His law to rule their lives; they are self-seeking. They live unto themselves and for themselves. “They are in revolt to God.”⁶ They do not obey the “truth” but obey “unrighteousness.” The tenor of their lives run counter to God’s laws, which prescribe what righteousness is. Upon them is God’s *wrath* and *fury*. Their lives are characterized by disobedience to God’s laws. The just outcome of that life is God’s everlasting punishment, the infliction of His wrath and fury. Earlier Paul had said that the wrath of God was being revealed in history against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. Here Paul described the final and unending manifestation of the fullness of God’s wrath upon His enemies, those who lived in defiance of Him and His laws.

And then verses 9 and 10 state the same essential truths as have already been declared, but in reverse order. “*There will be tribulation 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.*” There is a difference, however, between the statement of the fate of the wicked in verse 8 and the statement of their fate in verse 10. Whereas in verse 9 God’s *displeasure* toward these people is described—wrath and fury, in verse 10 we read of the *experience* of punishment of those who do evil—tribulation and distress. We read that God will give priority in His judgment upon Jews first, and then Greeks (Gentiles); they receive first His wrath, but they also first receive the blessings of “glory, honor, and peace.”

Lastly we read in **verse 11**, “*For God shows no partiality.*” The Jews thought that they were privileged and would receive favor from God in a manner that the Gentiles would not receive, simply because they were Jews. “The criterion of judgment is not privilege or position but that affirmed repeatedly in the preceding verses, namely, the character of men’s works.”⁷

II. Understanding other views of the text

We attempted to take the text a verse at a time and understand the passage as it unfolded before us. But after doing so, it may seem rather odd to us that there are others who have interpreted the meaning of

⁶ Ibid. p. 65.

⁷ Ibid. p. 68.

Paul's words in this passage in ways that are quite different from what we have proposed.⁸ What seems to be the major cause for divergent opinions is what interpreters perceive to be a great conflict, even contradiction, some would say, between what Paul wrote in Romans 2 respecting a judgment according to works and what he wrote elsewhere. They would cite Romans 3:9-12:

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,¹⁰ as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one;¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'

Then they would say, "How could Paul say in Romans 2:6f that God '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', when he writes in Romans 3 that 'no one seeks for God' and 'no one does good, not even one'?"

Because of this paradox⁹ in Paul's writing, they feel compelled to interpret the passage differently. There are those, therefore, who say that Paul intended for his teaching on a future judgment according to works to be only *hypothetical*, not a future reality. They in essence say, "If God were to judge according to works, this is how it would be done. But since no one can be saved by works, then God must save us by grace through faith apart from works." The problem with this position is that there are no indications in Romans 2 that Paul was writing in hypothetical terms, but of actual historical happenings that will take place.

Similar to the position just described, some say that Romans 2 depicts what would be necessary in order for a person to be saved *if he were to keep the covenant of works*, that God had first made with humanity through Adam, the federal head of the human race. Through obedience to God's law, the individual could attain to salvation if he kept God's laws perfectly. But again, since all people are sinners, God only saves people through His covenant of grace, not reflected in Romans 2, but later revealed by Paul in Romans 3:21ff. The problem with this position is that Paul does not state in Romans 2 that perfect obedience to God's law was necessary for salvation. Also, from what Paul writes of our collective guilt for Adam's transgression, even if we were obedient to all of God's commands in this life, the guilt of Adam's one sin left us unable to fulfill the covenant of works that demanded complete compliance, with no infractions. Only Jesus Christ could keep the covenant of works, for He was born sinless, being born of a virgin, and He was obedient to God's law through life; He was without sin.

The idea of a general resurrection and general judgment that we considered earlier is rejected by most evangelicals. They have a view of the end times (eschatology) that affects how they interpret Romans 2. In Revelation 20 there is a period of 1,000 years that is described by John (**Read Revelation 20:1-10**).

There are different ways in which these 1,000 years are understood. First, we who are *amillennial*, believe that 1,000 years is a metaphorical way to describe this present church age. There will be no literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on an earthly throne. Satan is presently "bound", not in the sense that his presence and power to do evil is not operative in the world, but rather because of Jesus Christ's death on Calvary and Jesus being exalted in His resurrection, He "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:22). Satan is now bound in that he can no longer "deceive the nations" (Rev. 20:3). The result was the enthroned Lord Jesus to expand His spiritual kingdom into all the world. We do not have time to explain this further today.

Second, there are those who are *postmillennial*, which are relatively few in number at this point in church history. They believe that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will occur after a 1,000 year of peace and security and righteousness take place on earth, after the earth's population has been transformed by the gospel. Postmillennialists would agree that there will be a general resurrection and general judgment. They would interpret Romans 2 as we have set before ourselves.

But third, there are those who are *premillennial*, who believe that the Lord Jesus will return the second time before the 1,000 year earthly kingdom. The vast majority of evangelicals hold this view. Many

⁸ Actually, there are at least 14 different positions that interpreters have proposed for the understanding of this Romans 2 passage. See Dane C. Ortlund, "Justified by Faith, Judged According to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 52/2 (June 2009), pp. 323-39.

⁹ A paradox is what appears to be a contradiction, but is not in actuality.

fine servants of the Lord espouse this view. This had been my understanding for the first ten years of my Christian life. This is the only position that is widely taught today.¹⁰ They believe that Christians will be judged at the beginning of the 1,000 years. But all unbelievers will be judged at the end of the 1,000 years. They reject the teaching of Romans 2 of a general resurrection and judgment according to works.

But we would argue that the easiest and most consistent way to interpret Romans 2 is to do so as we have proposed. This is consistent with our Lord's own words in **John 5:28f**.

²⁸Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Most premillennialists, who distinguish the judgment of believers from unbelievers by 1,000 years, also generally deny that Christians will be judged by God for the evil they have done in their lives. They argue that Christians will be judged according to their works, but that judgment is only with respect to positive rewards that the Lord will give His faithful stewards. Some argue that the rewards are five in number, and are described as "crowns" that Jesus will give to His people. The point is this, however, they deny that Christians will be judged according to their works with respect to their salvation. They do not understand how it is that if Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins on His cross, then why would God, how could God, judge His people's works on a day in which the outcome would be their salvation? But that the Scriptures declare that this is the case. Paul himself wrote, "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 Cor. 5:10).

We believe their reasoning is wrong, they do not know the Scriptures rightly. We would acknowledge, that the sins that true Christians commit in this life will not damn them on Judgment Day, for Christ has atoned for their sins. And even though there will be ample testimony to sins that infected each of us brought forward on that day, they will humble us, show us our indebtedness to God's grace alone and Jesus Christ's work alone for the salvation of our souls.

The judgment of works will provide definite and substantial evidence that we are true believers. Those works will not be the ground of acceptance or pardon, Jesus Christ alone is the source and cause of our salvation. Nothing we do contributes to the acquiring of our salvation. Our good works testify that God has wrought salvation in us by His Word and His Holy Spirit, through the power and mediation of Jesus Christ and His gospel.

Christians 'are already justified—by faith.
But they are yet to be justified—by sight.'¹¹

Recognize this, and this is most important. Our future judgment of works should not leave us with a sense of uncertainty about our salvation. We affirm the Scriptural teaching reflected in our Baptist Confession:

...such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.¹²

¹⁰ The "Left Behind" fictional series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins popularize this view of the millennium, as did in *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Many fine servants of the Lord hold this position, including John MacArthur and Charles Stanley, and David Jeremiah. Many servants of the Lord of the past were premillennialists, although they were not dispensational premillennialists. These include Charles Spurgeon and John Gill, for whom I have the highest regard..

¹¹ Dane C. Ortlund, "Justified by Faith, Judged According to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox." **Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society**, 52/2 (June 2009), pp. 336.

¹² *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Article 18, par. 1.

We agree with this statement regarding the true believer's outlook and anticipation of our future judgment of works: "Ultimately, however, believers have nothing to fear on Judgment Day—every shortcoming is covered by Christ's sacrifice (Rom. 8:31-34; cf. James 2:13)."¹³

We may find this final word an important matter. Older Reformed and Puritan writers distinguished between a *legal* repentance and obedience and an *evangelical* repentance and obedience.¹⁴ Legal repentance and obedience is heresy. The motivation of this person is repentance and obedience because he thinks *by these works of repentance and obedience* he will be saved. He is essentially trusting in himself and his works for the salvation of his soul. But the true Christian manifests an evangelical repentance and faith. He turns from His sins and obeys Jesus Christ because of what He knows God has done for Him and has already promised to Him in Christ. His repentance and obedience is born out of love for God not out of terror of God. True Christians can fall from into this errant way of thinking of legal obedience, but when instructed rightly and thinking rightly, he rejects this foolishness. In short, we who are Christians live for Him because He died for us.

¹³ Ibid., p. 337.

¹⁴ The classic puritan book published by Banner of Truth addresses this subject: John Colquhoun, *Repentance* (Banner of Truth, 1965), pp. 159.