

Sermons through

# Romans

According to His Deeds?

Part Two

*Romans 2:6-11*

*With Study Questions*

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## Part Two

*Romans 2:6-11*

**...who “will render to each one according to his deeds”:<sup>7</sup> eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality;<sup>8</sup> but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath,<sup>9</sup> tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek;<sup>10</sup> but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.<sup>11</sup> For there is no partiality with God. (Romans 2:6-11).**

### Review

Last week we observed how Paul writes of two types of people engaged in two types of behavior. On the Day of **“Judgment” (Romans 2:5)**, when God **“will render to each one according to his deeds (Romans 2:6)**, these two types of people will have strikingly distinct destinies.

The one type of person, through **“patient continuance in doing good”**, seeks **“glory, honor and immortality.”** This type of person **“works what is good”** and will receive **“peace”** and **“eternal life”**

The other type of person is **“self-seeking.”** They do not **“obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness.”** This other man of which Paul writes is a man who **“does evil.”** Paul informs his readers that this man will suffer the **“indignation and wrath”** of God.

We looked in detail at the attributes of these two types of people last week and, I hope, we would all make the effort, with all of our heart, souls mind and strength (Mark 12:30) to be the person who seeks the glory, honor and peace of heaven. As the author of Hebrews writes:

**Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).**

## Hanging in the Balance

The real question for this morning is not (so much) what the behavior is, nor where the behavior leads. The question for this morning is *what is hanging in the balance?* Last week I mentioned that motivation for appropriate behavior is, and always has been, a hot topic in the church (and everywhere else for that matter) and there are few passages in the Bible more at the center of the storm than the one presently before us.

Keeping in mind that Paul wouldn't be writing this letter if there wasn't problem in the church gathering at Rome. He clearly thinks the believers in Rome, whose faith he has extolled (Romans 1:8) need a change in their thoughts and behavior. At least at some level, they are thinking and behaving in a manner inconsistent with a man "**who works what is good**" (Romans 2:10). Let us be reminded that it is the man who "**works what is good**" that has "**eternal life**" (Romans 2:7).

In light of this, should we draw the conclusion that Paul is telling the Christians at the church in Rome (or any church for that matter) that if they don't master this area that they're going to hell? Is the motivation provided by the apostle here – a motivation given to professing Christians – a hanging of the threat of hell if they continue to fail in this particular area (or any other area for that matter)?

Should professing Christians be delivered from the arrogance (as some have put it) of presuming they'll go to heaven even though they have fallen short in the area of righteousness and holiness? Would we get more out of human performance if we lived under the constant threat of exile to perdition or the extended purification of purgatorial flames?

Perhaps you can begin to see why this passage ignites such debate! Just this week I found myself challenged via an internet thread suggesting that the only two verses in the Bible that contain the phrase "**faith alone**" are James 2:17 and 24 where James writes that "**faith alone without works is dead**" and a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." This coming from a person who identifies himself only as *By Faith But Not By Faith Alone*; most likely a Roman Catholic since they're generally the ones who do not like the expression *Faith Alone*.

What then, does the Apostle Paul mean by these words? Who are the two people in this passage? What are they doing? What do they get?

What have they earned? Which one am I? Which one are you? Since one goes to heaven and the other goes to hell, it might be worth figuring out!

Let's take a couple of minutes and look at some possible conclusions drawn by various theologians:

## **A Contradiction**

Some believe Paul has been caught in a contradiction. And the contradiction is not merely with Jesus or Peter or John, but with himself. Only one chapter later Paul will give his conclusion to his current line of reasoning when he writes: **“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28).**

There are some who don't have a problem with supposed contradictions in the Bible. They think God's knowledge is so distinct from our knowledge that the two can't be properly compared. Some will say that God is above logic as we know it and it may very well be that parallel lines, for example, intersect in heaven. This may sound honoring to God if we don't think about it too deeply.

Yet this kind of thinking elevates the natural world to a place where standards are created. When we say we're not going to subject God to our standard, it necessarily follows that we think we have an autonomous standard that we have ourselves created. Simply put, the precise reason parallel lines don't intersect on earth is because they don't intersect in heaven (or more specifically, in the mind of God).

To grant that God may contradict Himself is to grant that when He says believe and be saved, He may really mean (in His secret thinking) believe and be damned! We're utterly dependant on God being truthful – a God who declares Himself to be the Truth itself. But if truth cannot be defined or ascertained, then that statement (God being Truth) is meaningless. This position (that Paul is contradicting himself) must, therefore be rejected.

## **Obey and Be Saved**

Some understand this passage to teach that justification (being acquitted before the bar of God's judgment) is obtained by observing the law. Some may argue that this obedience to the law is itself by the grace of

God (grace at various levels depending upon how much they believe the fall actually affected man's ability to do good), some may argue that it is all upon man to succeed in righteousness. Either way, the works must be sufficient prior to entering glory.

Of course this begs the question, how sufficient is sufficient? How good does my patient continuance in doing good have to be to tip the bar of God's judgment in my direction? I don't know if there is a truly godly person on earth who, at the end of the day, would think they satisfied God's holy standard. Most people, along with the Psalmist, would cry: **"If you O Lord should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand" (Psalm 130:3)?** The implied answer, of course being no one!

It is often asked, then, why does Jesus mention works in His instruction of the final judgment with the separation of the sheep and goats where the sheep are declared blessed by the Father because of their good works and the goats cursed due to their indifference (Matthew 25:31-46).

But even here the good works don't appear to be good works in general but are a demonstration of their response to Jesus Himself (since Jesus thoroughly identifies Himself with His "brothers" [Matthew 25:40]) who were fed, clothed, visited, etc. And the neglect is a neglect of Jesus also. It might also be argued that the blessedness of the sheep is the cause of the good works not the result of the good works. In other words, there is nothing in that passage which indicates that the good works (whether by grace or not) merited entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

## **Purgatory**

Still others might argue that complete and total refinement either on earth or in purgatory is a necessary precondition for entrance into heaven. So the threat is not a threat of hell but of an extended stay in purgatory which motivates holy living.

We don't have time to address purgatory in its entirety, suffice it to say a few things: 1) it is very difficult to find the doctrine of purgatory anywhere in Scripture. For the Christian it would appear that the Bible teaches that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8); 2) it would appear that Jesus teaches a chasm fixed between heaven and Hades that cannot be crossed (Luke 16:26); 3) when a justly condemned criminal sought entrance into the kingdom of heaven

from Jesus, Jesus assured him that entrance into paradise would happen that day. Some mistakenly argue that paradise isn't heaven. But the promise of Christ isn't merely paradise, it is that he would be with Him in paradise – was Jesus in purgatory; 4) if a complete purging of sin in purgatory is necessary, sinners would be there forever for our sin deserves the infinite wrath of God.

The notion of man somehow coming up with enough good works to escape God's judgment, whether by human effort, grace or purgatory, is a far-fetched notion. And none of this yet addressing the sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ on the cross and the imputed righteousness which fully satisfies God's justice. There may be more ways of looking at this passage. But I think there are two that are at least reasonable.

### **Hypothetical View**

One potential way of understanding Paul in this passage which avoids a contradiction and works righteousness, is to understand Paul speaking hypothetically. According to this view, the first man in Paul's example doesn't actually exist (except for Jesus of course). Paul is merely laying the groundwork for what he will be teaching in the next few chapters (judgment, faith, federal headship, etc.) According to Charles Hodge Paul...

**...is not here teaching the method of justification, but is laying down those general principles of justice, according to which irrespective of the gospel, all men are to be judged. He is expounding the law, not the gospel.<sup>1</sup>**

That perfect person we read of in verses seven and ten is not sitting next to you in church. The only person who lives up to that standard is Christ Himself and we are dependent upon His success for our peace. We should not be looking at one another's obedience to commandments asking who will ascend into heaven or descend into the abyss based upon our level of success (Romans 10:5-7) – both views making the work of Christ of no avail.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Page 50.

## Evidence View

There is one last way to understand the words of Paul here that comports well with the biblical teaching of the grace of the gospel. It might be called the *evidence view*. It should not come as a surprise that Paul did not shrink back from teaching of the necessity of works for entrance into the kingdom of God:

**Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,<sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).**

What is Paul suggesting by a passage like this? Is he saying that if I, as a Christian, still struggle with greed, or have a single episode where I fail in the greed department, that I will not enter heaven? I think not. It would appear that Paul, along with James, is explaining that a person who genuinely trusts in Christ as Savior will at the same time necessarily trust in Christ as Lord.

Paul is not teaching perfectionism here. Notice verse eleven where “**sanctified**” and “**justified**” are in the passive voice – meaning it is something that happened to them. He is teaching, like Jesus, that no one can serve two masters. He is teaching against hypocrisy. He is teaching that a saving faith is an active faith. A person cannot define himself as a Christian and as a playboy or thief and expect to enter heaven.

If we were to apply the evidence view to the passage under question, we would not understand the first person (the person going to heaven) as hypothetical or sinless. They would be a person who has faith in Christ and Christ alone for their peace with God. But the same Spirit who granted them faith in Christ is also causing them to walk in God’s statutes (Ezekiel 36:27).

This person perseveres in faith and doing good (though marked with failure and repentance); they seek and desire glory, honor and immortality (don't all Christians?) and they do good works (are we not all called to good works – Ephesians 2:10)?

So I submit that if Paul is writing of justifying works in this passage, the only answer is the hypothetical view – otherwise heaven will be pretty empty. But if Paul is writing of the evidence view, it is obvious that he is writing against antinomianism (a view of Christianity which disregards the need to walk in God's law) and mere externalism (where your entrance into heaven is based upon your ethnicity or your inclusion in a community of professing believers).

Either way, it is the clear teaching of Scripture that given the nature of man, our only hope is that Jesus went to a cross to die for sinners. And those for whom Christ died are those who give evidence of that by seeking to faithfully follow Him. And the motivation for this obedience is not to somehow earn the favor of God. It is a Spirit-given gratitude for heaven itself along with an awareness of the wisdom of God's holy counsel that motivates, or moves, Christians to follow the one who is infinite in wisdom and mercy.



## Questions for Study

1. Who are the two people in this passage? What are their differences (page 2)?
2. Why do you suppose this passage is so controversial (page 3)?
3. Why should we reject the notion that Paul is contradicting himself (page 4)?
4. Is Paul teaching that a person can earn salvation by obedience? Why? Why not (pages 4,5)?
5. Discuss the merits or weaknesses of purgatory (pages 5, 6)?
6. What is the hypothetical view? Does this seem solid to you? Why? Why not (page 6)?
7. What is the evidence view? What are its strengths and weaknesses (pages 7, 8)?