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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #11

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So, is Salvation by Faith or by Works?

Romans 2:6-11

There is no more important question for anyone to ask and answer than this: How might I be forgiven of my sins and reconciled to God, my Creator? I'm not suggesting that we don't face other challenging issues in life. For some, it may be about which political party one should align with, or perhaps whether one should remain independent. I know many parents who feel the most pressing question right now concerns the education of their children: home school? private school? public school? Or perhaps some other option I haven't considered.

I regularly receive emails from people all around the country who want my input on what kind of church and which church they should attend. Sometimes it is more a question of whether they should leave the church they currently attend.

But none of these issues have immediate and final consequences for where a person will spend eternity. We know from Scripture that in a certain sense of the term, everyone will "live" forever. Obviously, the word "live" is being used in two different senses. Life in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21-22) is the future that we believe comes to those who have trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Some would question whether we should even use the word "life" for what people who leave this earth without Christ will experience.

But in the final analysis, what ultimately matters is the nature of one's existence beyond physical death. On the one hand, Paul refers to "eternal life" in Romans 2:7b, by which he clearly means life in the presence of God in the new heaven and new earth. The alternative, he says in v. 8b, is "wrath and fury." So, if you want to simplify matters and say, "The ultimate and eternal destiny of all people, male and female, is either heaven or hell," that's fine too.

So, once again, I would argue that the single most important and pressing question for any human being is: How might I be forgiven of my sins and reconciled to God, my Creator? The book of Romans is largely devoted to answering that question. Romans certainly addresses a variety of other issues, but none can compete in terms of importance with the question of how the individual might be reconciled to God.

By Faith or by Works or by Both?

Before we dive into this difficult and challenging passage, I want to remind us all of a consistent teaching in God's Word that our salvation and our justification in God's sight comes only by God's grace, through faith in Christ. Consider these well-known texts:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

"Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (John 3:18a).

"For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24).

“but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

“And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’ (Acts 16:31).

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23-24).

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

“Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:4-5).

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith . . .” (Rom. 5:1a).

“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

“Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Gal. 3:11).

“But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22).

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

“[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

We could also cite Philippians 3:7-11; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 John 5:13; among others. I want you to see the overwhelming, undeniable, consistent testimony of Scripture that our acceptance with God, the forgiveness of our sins, our hope for eternal life are all due entirely to God’s unmerited favor, his grace, and that it is only by faith in Jesus Christ that we are reconciled to our Creator.

All that being said, what are we to do with these statements in Romans 2:7-10 and 2:13 (“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified”)? Is Paul guilty of blatant contradiction? Did he believe in salvation and justification by good works and obedience to the law in Romans 2, only to come to his senses and change his mind by the time he wrote Romans 3? Or was he altogether oblivious to the contradiction and simply made a profound theological error? Or could there be another explanation? Yes!

What's at Stake?

Some of you may be asking yourself, “So, what’s at stake here? Is it really all that important? Is this nothing more than a doctrinal dispute between a bunch of ivory-tower theologians who are largely out of touch with the lives and concerns of ordinary Christians?” Well, let’s allow Paul himself to answer this question. He makes perfectly clear what’s at stake, and it is the eternal destiny of every human soul.

The options are two, and only two. They are: “eternal life” (v. 7b) or “wrath and fury” (v. 8b). There is no middle ground. He states the alternatives in slightly different terms in vv. 9-10. The options are: “tribulation and distress” (v. 9a) or “glory and honor and peace” (v. 10a). Or to put it in terms with which you are more familiar: heaven or hell.

The word “distress” in v. 10 may refer to the subjective, emotional and psychological suffering that is caused by the “tribulation” that is inflicted. This would speak strongly against those who think that in hell they will party with their friends. This is confirmed by the reference to “peace” that the saved will enjoy. It is the opposite of the “distress” suffered by the lost.

Judgment without Partiality

Before we dive into these verses, let’s not overlook the opening statement in v. 6 and the concluding statement in v. 11. They are saying the same thing. According to v. 6, God will judge all mankind by their deeds, not by their social group or ethnicity or educational or financial status. As stated earlier, his judgment is and always will be “righteous” or according to the truth. It may be that Paul is making use of Proverbs 24:12, where we read this:

“If you say, ‘Behold, we did not know this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?” (Prov. 24:12; see Psalm 62:12).

We see this emphasis on judgment according to works in numerous biblical texts, such as: Isa. 3:10; Jer. 17:10; Hos. 12:2; Matt. 16:27; 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; Gal. 6:7-9; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:24-25; 2 Tim. 4:14; 1 Peter 1:17; Rev. 2:23; 22:12.

His point is that when it comes to the basis for the final judgment, there is a level playing field. No one stands to gain an advantage over anyone else. The color of your skin doesn't matter. Your favorite university or football team doesn't matter. Whether you are a Republican or Democrat or Independent or Libertarian doesn't matter. The word in v. 11 translated "partiality" literally means "receiving the face." The point is that God does not take into account or treat someone on the basis of external appearance but only on the nature and character of one's deeds.

The Kind of Faith that Produces Works of Obedience

Sometimes I get the uneasy feeling that the reality of salvation by grace alone through faith alone has dulled our hearts to the importance of obedience. Every so often I come across professing Christians who actually believe that to speak of obedience or to urge Christians to pay close attention to the many commandments in the NT is a threat to salvation by grace. To insist on the necessity of perseverance in good deeds strikes them as a negation of faith. To obey, or to call for obedience, so they argue, is to begin a dangerous journey toward legalism.

Such thinking is, in my opinion, profoundly unbiblical and unchristian. May I simply remind you of what Paul said back in Romans 1:5? There he described how Jesus granted him "grace and apostleship to bring about *the obedience of faith*." I hope it hasn't been such a long time since we were in the early part of Romans 1 that you have forgotten what the apostle is saying. He is telling us in no uncertain terms that the kind of "faith" that saves and justifies and reconciles us to God is the "faith" that "obeys." It is the sort of faith that by its very nature gradually transforms us and urges and prompts us to reorder our lives in accordance with God's revealed will for how to live. It is a faith that empowers and exhorts us to obedience and refuses to leave us in the condition in which we were first found by God.

This is why I have no problem at all with those many passages in the NT that speak of the urgency and necessity of good deeds and a consistently obedient life. For example, Paul continually prayed for the Christians in Colossae that they might,

“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

To the Corinthian church he said that,

“[God] is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8).

Let’s not forget in that famous text in Ephesians 2:8-9 where Paul declares that we have been saved by grace through faith, he goes on in the very next verse to say,

“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).

Notice that the very purpose for God having created us is “for good works,” not because of them, but “for” them. These were ordained by God in eternity past that we should walk or live in them. There isn’t the slightest hint that Paul believed vv. 8-9 were inconsistent with v. 10.

In his second letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul prayed this:

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thess.2:17).

Once again, God’s love for us and his gift to us through grace is perfectly consistent with our obeying him “in every good work and word.”

Only weeks or even days before being executed in Rome, Paul said this to young Timothy:

“Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21).

There are quite literally dozens of texts just like these spread all throughout the NT. And once we understand them, what Paul says in Romans 2 will not be a problem any longer.

Two Contrary Lifestyles, Two Contrary Destinies

In Romans 2:7 eternal life is said to be the destiny of those “who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality.” On the contrary, divine “wrath and fury” in hell, he tells us in v. 8, is the destiny of those who “are self-seeking and do not obey the truth.” Paul largely repeats himself in v. 9 when he says that “tribulation and distress” await those who do “evil” while “glory and honor and peace” await those who do “good” (v. 10).

Although much could be said about what it means to seek for glory and honor and immortality, I’ll restrict myself to the word “glory”. What does it mean for us to “seek glory”? If this is God’s glory, do we seek it to behold it and marvel at its beauty? At minimum, we seek God’s glory to see God revealed in his word

and works and preeminently in Jesus Christ. We seek it to enjoy it as the highest treasure of our hearts. We long to delight in it and cherish it and would never exchange it for anything in this world.

To seek after the glory of God is to live by his grace and power in such a way that our minds are transformed to understand it and our wills are changed to prefer it and our hearts are made fit to feel it and prize it above all else. But first and foremost, it means we long to see it displayed in its fullness so that God might be adored and enjoyed forever.

Now, there are several ways that students of Paul and Romans have tried to explain these verses.

(1) Some who don't have much confidence in Paul insist that he has landed himself in a contradiction. He can't say what he does in Romans 3:28, that a person "is justified by faith apart from works of the law" and also say here in Romans 2:7 that God gives eternal life to those who patiently persevere in "well-doing" and who "seek for glory and honor and immortality." If God receives to himself only those who do "good" (Rom. 2:10), he can't also believe that a person is justified by faith alone, apart from works. So much the worse for Paul!

(2) There are a few who say that Paul is describing here people who have never heard of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus. They either respond obediently to the light they have received, or they don't. If they do, it is only because God's grace has enabled them to obey.

(3) A quite popular interpretation is that Paul is speaking of what is true in principle, but in actual fact never happens. In other words, it is true that *if* a person patiently did what was good and sought after glory and honor, God *would* give them eternal life. But we know that no person can, in fact, live this way. Later in Romans 3:10b-12, Paul makes it clear that,

"none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10b-12).

So, whereas it is hypothetically possible, at least on principle, that someone who always does good and lives a perfect life will be rewarded with salvation, Paul makes it clear that in point of fact no one can live such a life. Thus, on this view, Paul is speaking to people who wish to be justified in God's sight by keeping the law and performing good works. And he says: "Fine, if you can live such a life, salvation is yours. But you can't, and never will. If anyone is to be saved, it must be by God's grace alone, through faith alone."

(4) The view that I embrace is that Paul is here describing what he earlier meant when he referred to "the obedience of faith." Paul can say that obedience yields eternal life because obedience is the fruit of a saving faith. At the final judgment, God will grant eternal life to those who have done good, not because good deeds *merit* salvation but because good deeds *manifest* faith.

To say that works are necessary for salvation, on the one hand, and that one cannot be saved on the basis of works, on the other, is not contradictory. Judgment is based on works, not because works earn salvation, but because works express faith. This is why it is possible for us to be saved by grace, through faith, not by good works, and yet for us to be judged according to our deeds in the final judgment.

It is by means of "patience in well-doing," or endurance in good works, that one inherits eternal life. The present tense of "seek" and the word "endurance" or "patience" emphasizes a steady and consistent way of life that characterizes those who are truly born again.

We have to reckon with the fact that there is a lifestyle that ultimately will exclude a person from entering the kingdom of God. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that the "unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God." He goes on to describe in some detail whom he had in mind: those who live in unrepentant sexual immorality, adultery, idolatry, homosexuality, as well as thieves, drunkards, and swindlers, just to mention a few. Much the same thing is said in Galatians 5:19-21 and Ephesians 5:5. Paul isn't alone in taking this view. Listen to what Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12.

"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:36-37).

Both Jesus and Paul and every other NT author can truthfully say that on the day of judgment we will be judged according to our works and our words because both of these are the infallible sign of what fills the soul. Both of these reveal unmistakably whether or not saving faith is in our hearts. “The issue,” states John Piper, “is [this]: On the judgment day how will God make manifest that his judgment is just? And the answer is, He will certify to the world that we have saving faith by calling our deeds to attest to its reality.”

The heart that is full of simple, humble, Christ-exalting faith in his sinless life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection, will overflow in beliefs and behavior that will set it apart from the heart that hates God. Our works and our words, although never perfect in this life, still bear standing witness to whether or not we have been born again and have trusted by faith alone in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

There are several ways of putting this that may help you understand what I believe Jesus and Paul are saying:

Good deeds don't deserve God's favor / they demonstrate it.

Good works don't earn salvation / they exhibit it.

Obedience doesn't merit the new birth and the forgiveness of sins / it manifests or marks them.

Conclusion

I have always promised you that I will tell you the truth of what the Bible teaches no matter how intellectually challenging that truth is or how emotionally uncomfortable it may make you feel. And the truth is this. Everyone will live forever. After death there is for those who are born again and who trust in Christ alone, by grace alone, and who display the reality of this faith by a transformed life, eternal life. And there is for those who hate God and reject Christ and demonstrate their unbelief by their ungodly lifestyle, eternal wrath.

And in a moment's time, before I even finish praying at the conclusion of this message, you could be irreversibly and eternally in either heaven or hell.

I hope you will forgive me for quoting John Piper one more time today, but we all need to hear his heart-felt and passionate warning. He says:

“[All of you who are now] in the prime of your life, beware of being swept into the all-consuming demands of your careers only to find yourselves gasping for some fun and entertainment on the weekend, finding your relief from worldly work in worldly fun. And waking — perhaps — someday to realize you have no taste for things of God. You have become a connoisseur of restaurants, and videos, and movies, and sports, and stocks, and computers, and a hundred transient things. And all the while, your sense of heaven and of hell has died. Wake up before it is too late. And tremble at these things today. And set your minds to think about the biggest issues in the universe: eternal life or wrath” (“The Final Divide: Eternal Life or Eternal Wrath, Part 1,” November 29, 1998; at www.desiringgod.org).

I know I sound a bit like a broken record today, repeating myself again and again in only slightly different terms. But when something as weighty and serious as your eternal destiny is at stake, there can be no room for ambiguity or verbal fuzziness. Only clarity is permissible. So here it is again.

Forgiveness of sins and eternal life are obtained for us by faith alone in the gracious work of Jesus Christ who lived the sinless life that we were obligated to live but never could and died the sacrificial death that we should have died but now never will. And that faith which saves and justifies always sanctifies.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. “How much holiness in my life is necessary to demonstrate that I’m truly saved? How much obedience, how much success is needed in the pursuit of good works that will testify on the final day of judgment that I truly know Christ?”

I think you’re asking the wrong question. The issue is this: Are you patiently pursuing a life of obedience? To use Paul’s language, are you seeking after the glory of God and a life that is honorable? Are you broken hearted when you fall short? Are you quick to repent when you fail? Do you see any signs of a gradual transformation of your values and the choices you make? Can you see a noticeable difference in the life you lived before coming to faith in Christ and the life you now have?

One way you can know if you are born again is whether you start to think that your obedience is actually the grounds for your acceptance with God rather than the fruit of it. Is your desire to be obedient the result of thinking that if you could just do enough good deeds God would finally love you and embrace you as his child? Or is your passion for and pursuit of a more consistently obedient life the product of knowing that God has saved you on the basis of his grace, by faith alone in Christ alone and all that he has done on your behalf?

So, yes, as Paul so clearly tells us, God gives eternal life to those who patiently persevere in obedience, not because obedience is perfect or because we are free of all sin, but because our obedience is the result of the power of the Holy Spirit progressively changing us ever more into the image of Jesus himself. When we believe the gospel, we are not left under the dominion of sin and immorality and greed and pride and idolatry. The gospel, which is wholly of grace, brings the power of God's Spirit to change us and to nurture within us a hunger for holiness.

When you stand before God on the final day of judgment and he happily pronounces you, "Not guilty! Forgiven!" it will be because of what Jesus Christ has done for you that you have received by faith. But that verdict will be consistent with our deeds of obedience, because our daily lives will bear witness to the truth of what God has decreed. It will be evident on that day that we have loved Christ more than money and have cherished his approval more than the praise of men and that we have trusted him more than all that the treasures of earth could provide.