

Will God judge us according to our works? (2:6–11)

The vast majority of Christians will answer, ‘No, of course not. We won’t be judged according to our works, our justification is by faith, and no-one will ever be justified by works.’

It reminds me of an examination that I once gave to my theology class. The students were in their senior year and just completing their seminary preparations, having taken the courses in systematic theology. I gave a true/false question test to the class of graduating seniors and one of the true/false questions was this: True or false—we are justified by faith but our rewards in heaven will be distributed according to our works? Every single person in that class answered the question by saying, ‘That’s false.’

Yet, according to classical Protestant theology, we are justified by faith but our reward in heaven will be distributed according to our works 📖. Those who are justified by faith will have imputed to them the work of [Jesus](#), by which they are justified. But the primary basis of God’s eternal judgment on mankind will be works 📖. That point is made on no less than twenty occasions in the New Testament and it is made very clearly here in verse 6: **God will give to each person according to what he has done**. The ground of God’s judgment is not our ceremonies, our church affiliations or our family relationships, but our deeds. And that is true for everyone. Each individual’s performance will be evaluated by Almighty God 📖.

I can hear Christians protesting, ‘Doesn’t the Bible say that as Christians we have passed from judgment to life, that there’s no condemnation for us?’ Yes, the Bible does teach so for those who are in Christ. But even the Christian must face the judgment of the evaluation of his

life. All will stand before God, and we will be evaluated according to our deeds.

Paul goes on to explain the judgment which will follow: **To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life** (verse 7). There is a problem of sentence structure here. It could be that Paul is saying those who persevere in doing good will receive glory, honour, immortality and eternal life. Or we could read it that all those who by persevering in doing good, search for glory, honour and immortality, they will be rewarded with eternal life.

Another question that I often stumped the seminary students with is, How many ways are there to get into heaven? They will respond, There is only one way to get into heaven and that is by faith in [Jesus Christ](#). I reply, That’s true, realistically speaking. But theoretically, there is another way to get into heaven—by leading a good life. If a person lives a life that is in perfect obedience to the law of God, they don’t need [Jesus Christ](#). [Jesus Christ](#) came to save people who do not live perfect lives. The tragedy is that there are actually people who believe that their lives are good enough to get them into heaven.

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger (verse 8). The apostle is saying that in the judgment God is going to distribute two possibilities: eternal life on the one hand, and wrath and anger on the other. Who will receive eternal life? Those who persist and endure in doing good. Who will receive the wrath and anger of God? Those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth but follow evil.

Paul gives us a future prophecy, a graphic view of what will happen at the last judgment: **There will be trouble and distress for every**

human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile (verses 9, 10).

The word 'Gentile' refers to anyone who is not a Jew. But a person's nationality does not affect whether he will receive reward or punishment. **For God does not show favouritism (verse 11).** Again the idea of ethnic identification that was held so strongly by the Pharisees is smashed by the apostolic teaching. God is no respecter of persons. All will stand or fall on the basis of their goodness or the absence of goodness. Pedigree, social status, ecclesiastical affiliation and ethnic background will count for nothing at the judgment seat of God.

The Gentiles and the law of God (2:12–16)

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law (verse 12). Paul has in view here that great point of demarcation between the Jew and the Gentile. The Jew possessed the law of God while the Gentile did not.

In verse 13 he elaborates: **For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.** The Jewish people heard the law recited on all kinds of sacred occasions. The scrolls of the Old Testament were presented in the synagogue and read verbally and audibly. Most concluded that because they possessed these documents, which were part of the covenant God had made with them, there was a guarantee of entrance into the kingdom of God. Paul states what should be obvious. It is not the hearers of the law who will be declared righteous before God, but the doers of the law.

Verses 14 and 15 are more difficult: **(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts ...** Some have wrongly interpreted this passage to mean that whereas the Jews had the law but did not keep it, the Gentiles, although not having the law, kept it. The idea is that non-religious people can live a good enough life to get them into the kingdom of God.

Paul chooses his words carefully here. He isn't saying that the Gentiles, who do not have the law, in fact keep the law. He is saying that they do the things required by the law. That is quite different from saying they keep the law perfectly. Paul has already made it abundantly clear in the first chapter that all pagans are under the judgment of God and he will make it even more clear in the third chapter.

But pagans, who have never heard of the Old Testament, do display what is called 'civil acts of virtue' or civic righteousness. We find pagans with enough human morality to take care of their children and to refrain from stealing. They don't obey the whole of the law, for they don't love God with all their hearts and all their minds and all their souls. But this partial obedience reveals that there is a certain sense in which the law is written in their hearts.

Here we have the classical location in the New Testament for the apostolic teaching of some sort of natural law. Every human being has some moral sense, some light of nature, by which he is able to distinguish right and wrong. Even the secular philosopher, Immanuel Kant, went to great pains to prove this point, that there is a sense of rightness in the breast of every human being. Human

behavioural patterns, no matter how primitive the culture, bear witness to the fact that man is born with some sense of moral awareness. We all have some built-in understanding of what is right and what is wrong. God gives us that innate or inward knowledge of morality.

Paul goes on, **their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.** Paul is not saying that conscience is this built-in moral sense of what is right and what is wrong. Conscience is not the same thing as natural law. Rather, conscience is another dimension that bears witness to the presence of a built-in moral awareness.

The fact that we have conscience bears witness to the fact that we are aware of things being right or wrong. Even in pagan nations, that have never heard of the Bible, we see the manifestation and the practice of conscience.

Some have argued against the apostolic teaching here by saying, 'We find in every society that we examine, some moral sense. Moral values may vary from culture to culture, but we've never found any primitive society that does not exhibit some moral sense in their culture. This indicates that morality is culturally derived, and their sense of right and wrong is imposed upon them by their culture.'

Similarly, we are told that our scruples about sexual morality are simply the result of the Victorian era's influence, or the Puritanical ethic of New England. Now that we are becoming liberated we realise that all these moral persuasions are simply the result of societal or cultural taboos.

But that is a naive explanation for this universal sense of moral oneness. How did society ever universally get to the place where it had such sanctions to impose upon the consciences of its members, if it were not for the fact that

the individuals concerned already had some sense of moral responsibility?

The apostle is saying here that it doesn't matter whether or not you know the Old Testament law, you are not excusable. Whether or not you have read the ten commandments, you are exposed to the law of God in some sense. Therefore, the law of God will be the basis of our judgment. This does not deny what the Bible says elsewhere that God will judge all men according to the light that they have. The more light one has, the greater the responsibilities that go with it.

In verse 16 he says, **This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.** The apostle is introducing a new element to the discussion. Not only will there be a last judgment and not only will that judgment be on the basis of the justice of God, but the judgment will be through Jesus Christ. This fact, that Jesus will serve as the Judge of all men, is in keeping with the Old Testament portrait of the Son of Man, who is established by God to be the Judge of all the earth.

The apostle speaks of that day when God will judge the secrets of men. There are skeletons in every man's closet. We all have secrets that we seek to preserve and conceal from the scrutiny of other people. But the point of this text is that those very things which we seek to keep secret will come before the throne of God.