



Will there be degrees of reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?

A reward of grace, not merit

If the kinds of passages I have considered, teach not only that Christ will reward the righteous at the final judgment for their works, but also that this reward will vary in degree, depending upon the nature and quality of the works in question, then there are several questions that become rather pressing. The first of these has to do with the controversial matter of grace and merit.

If Christ rewards the works of the righteous, does this not reintroduce the idea of merit into the Christian life? How can we say that believers are saved by grace alone, apart from any meritorious good works done in obedience to the law, if we say that the good works of believers have their reward? And that this reward depends upon the quality of the works performed?

Broadly speaking, there are at least three approaches that could be (and often have been) taken to this question in the history of the Christian church.

One approach insists that, because the Scriptures teach the granting of diverse rewards to the people of God (depending upon the quality and extent of their good works), some notion of *merit* has to be granted a legitimate place in the Christian life. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, a distinction has been drawn between two kinds of merit in the Christian life, each of which is legitimate. The first or "congruent merit" (*meritum de congruo*) is a kind of "half-merit." In the case of congruent merit, God grants as a reward to the righteous more than their works, strictly considered, deserve. Though the believer, cooperating with God's grace and doing what lies within him, performs works of obedience, these works are imperfect and not strictly deserving of the reward God grants to them. The second or "condign merit" (*meritum de condigno*) is a kind of "true merit." In the case of condign merit, the believer's works truly measure up to the requirements of God's law and, by virtue of the working of God's grace as it is infused into the believer, genuinely merit the reward that God grants to them. In this understanding, the biblical teaching that God rewards the works of the righteous *demands the conclusion that merit plays a legitimate role in the Christian life*. The various rewards that God grants to His people are partially or wholly deserved. God's people, in this respect, *receive from God what they deserve or are due*.¹

A second approach opposes the whole idea of a diversity of rewards because it is incompatible with the doctrine of grace. This approach assumes the legitimacy of the first approach's argument that, if God variously rewards the righteous for their good works, then merit must be granted some legitimate role in the Christian life. However, precisely because the idea of a diversity of rewards requires merit as its corollary, this idea needs to be rejected altogether. If our salvation is wholly by grace, there can be no place for the granting of rewards according to works.

Those who take this second approach frequently appeal to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. This parable, it is argued, clearly shows that there is no place in the Christian life for the idea of a diversity of rewards corresponding to the diversity of works performed by the righteous.

In this parable, all of the laborers in the vineyard are rewarded for their labor, *but they are all rewarded equally whether their labor began earlier or later in the day*. What this parable teaches, then, is that the law of the kingdom is a law of grace, not of merit. The laborers are not rewarded according to the principle of merit, namely, that each laborer is rewarded in accordance with the work performed. All the laborers are treated equally. Each receives from God the same reward, the

less as well as the more deserving. God, according to this parable, subverts the ordinary law of justice by graciously granting the same wages to all of the laborers, regardless of the length and quality of their service. The emphasis upon God's grace and the equality of His treatment of all of the laborers militates against any suggestion that in the kingdom of heaven, God's people will receive varying rewards according to the nature of their service.

The *third approach*, and the one which I favor, maintains that the idea of rewards is consistent with the biblical teaching regarding salvation by grace alone, *provided the rewards are of grace and not of merit*. In this approach, it is readily acknowledged that the believer receives all things from God's grace in Christ.

Nothing the believer receives from God is deserved, either in the strict or the lesser sense of condign or congruent merit. When God rewards the righteous for their good works, He only *adds grace to grace, rewarding believers for those works which He Himself works in them by His Spirit* (compare John 15:1-17). In no sense whatsoever does any believer receive from God what he deserves or ought to receive. We are the Christian to obey God perfectly — which, of course, he does not do — he would be no more than an "*unprofitable servant*" who had only done his duty (compare Luke 17:7-10). He would not be deserving of any special praise or commendation from God. All of the gifts of God's grace are just that - I "gifts," unmerited favors granted for the sake of Christ.

The wonder of God's grace in the life of the believer, however, is that God also graciously acknowledges, notices and rewards those good works (still imperfect and undeserving) that the believer does by the powerful working of the Spirit of grace. Like a father who loves his child and who accordingly accepts not only their persons but also their works, so the believer's heavenly Father takes pleasure in the deeds of His children performed out of gratitude and in His service. These deeds and works are acceptable and pleasing to Him, not because they are in themselves worthy or deserving of His praise, but because of His delight in His children and what they have done, however far short this may fall of what His law demands.

In order to illustrate the sense in which God graciously receives our persons and even deigns to reward our inadequate good works by His grace, I have sometimes used the illustration of my wife's piano students at their recital. It is remarkable to observe how parents, in spite of the often clumsy and inept performance of their children at the piano bench during their recital,² invariably beam with delight at the performance of their children. Do they measure their children's performance by some strict rule of justice? Do they respond like overbearing perfectionists, quick to find fault with every defect in their child's performance? Not at all! They love their children. And because they love and find their children acceptable, they *graciously praise and smile upon their children's less-than-perfect playing*. In this sense also our heavenly Father, who loves and accepts His children for the sake only of the work of His Son, Jesus Christ, also finds delight and graciously is pleased to reward out of His grace the good works they perform — no matter that these very works are themselves the gifts of His grace and, of themselves, fall far short of deserving anything like the praise they receive from Him.

An encouragement, not a motive

Another question that often arises in connection with the idea of varying rewards for the righteous has to do with the proper motivation of the Christian life. Even if we insist that these rewards are given of grace rather than merit, the prospect of such rewards must inevitably influence the kind of motives that play a role in Christian obedience. Does the prospect of reward legitimately function in the Christian life as a motive, a moving impulse, for obedience? And, if this were the case, would a kind of *mercenary*³ or commercial spirit not corrupt the Christian life? Rather than serving the Lord out of gratitude for His grace in Christ, moved by no other impulse than heartfelt thankfulness, the Christian life would degenerate into a kind of *selfish pursuit* of personal advantage and gain. Thus, one objection to the idea of diversity of rewards is the worry that this will corrupt and pollute the stream of Christian service with a spirit of self-seeking labor. Here again, the radical teaching of God's grace is threatened by the introduction of the kind of performance-orientation and commercial spirit that so often corrupts our contemporary lives and the culture of many in North America.⁴

Though I would not want to minimize in any way the concern expressed by this question, it is interesting to notice that the Heidelberg Catechism, after having declared God's rewards to be "*not of merit but of grace*," goes on to say that "*it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth **fruits of thankfulness***" (emphasis mine, Lord's Day XXIV). In this *Catechism*, there seems to be no awareness of a necessary conflict between the teaching that God graciously rewards the good works of His children and the insistence that those good works are the fruits of thankfulness. While acknowledging that good works are rewarded, this confession recognizes gratitude as the *only proper motive* for Christian obedience.⁵ It does not follow, therefore, that any teaching of rewards for good works in the Christian life must lead to an improper emphasis upon rewards as a motive for Christian obedience. That this may occur, no one would deny. That it must occur, or that it is inherent in the very idea of varying rewards, does not follow.

Perhaps a distinction here between motive and encouragement may be helpful. Though the prospect of rewards may not serve as a motive or the basis for Christian obedience, it certainly might function as a kind of encouragement in the course of Christian obedience. The prospect of rewards encourages the believer to understand that his or her labor is not in vain in the Lord. The thankful life of the Christian does not go unnoticed and unremarked by Christ at His coming or in the final judgment. Rather, the final judgment and the notice taken of the works of God's people are an occasion for rejoicing in work well done and of enduring value. The sacrificial service of an elder, for example, who labors as a shepherd among the flock of God, not because he must or for the thought of "sordid gain," is surely encouraged by the reminder that "*when the Chief Shepherd appears, (the elder) will receive the unfading crown of glory.*" Similarly, in many of the trials and difficulties of grateful service on behalf of the Lord and His kingdom, Christians are properly encouraged to know that their service will be graciously and abundantly acknowledged by Christ at His coming.

In these kinds of circumstances, the prospect of rewards for the righteous does not constitute the motive for Christian obedience. The motive is always one of gratitude for God's grace in Christ. However, it does constitute a kind of encouragement in the midst of the Christian life. It serves to remind the believer that his heavenly Father is not unmindful of his service or labor. It serves as the same kind of encouragement a child experiences, when he realizes that his work is something in which his father takes delight and of which he takes special notice.

Compatible with perfect blessedness?

The prospect of being rewarded at Christ's coming for those good works done while in the body is not only an encouragement for the believer, but also an occasion for rejoicing in God's gracious gifts to others who are also heirs of God's grace and eternal life. One of the questions (and the last I shall consider in this article) that often arises in connection with the idea of divergent rewards is whether this is compatible with the state of perfect blessedness that will mark the final state. If there will be an *inequity* in the rewards granted the righteous in the final state, would this not suggest the strange, perhaps self-contradictory, idea of *degrees of perfection*? Furthermore, how could one believer enjoy the fullest blessedness, knowing that, on account of his failures in this life, he falls short of others in the life to come?

Though I do not pretend to know the full answer to this and other questions like it, I believe that some partial and helpful answers have been given in the history of Christian theology. I will mention the two most often suggested.

One suggestion that has often been made is that the final state of God's kingdom will be characterized by a diversity of giftedness, office, and capacity for service and joy that mirrors the diversity known among the people of God in this life. Accordingly, though no one will fall behind another in the experience of blessedness and joy, *the capacity for and quality of these may well differ* considerably among God's people. To use a quantitative analogy, one vessel may be larger than another and therefore of greater capacity. However, if each vessel, the larger and the smaller, is wholly filled, then it can be said to enjoy a kind of fullness or perfection *commensurate with its capacity*. So perhaps it will be in the new heavens and the new earth. One of the assumptions of this view is that the final form of God's kingdom will not be a strict egalitarianism, in which all will be

equal in the sense of sameness or identity. Or, to state it differently, this suggestion opposes the contrary assumption that the perfection of blessedness that will be the experience of all of God's children requires a complete similarity of gifts and capacities.

The other suggestion is that the diversity of giftedness, office and capacity for service in the final state of God's kingdom, far from being the occasion for regret or sorrow among the people of God, will be the occasion for greater joy. On the principle that perfect holiness excludes every possibility for envy or contention among the people of God, this suggestion argues that *the greater rewards enjoyed by some among the people of God will only engender further thankfulness among all*. Since it is already true in this life that all things belong to all believers, and all believers belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Corinthians 3:2123), this principle will presumably also hold in the kingdom which is to come. If it does, how could there be any sense of loss or impoverishment among the people who belong to Christ, when some are distinguished from others in gifts and rewards? Just as in this life God's gifts, variously distributed among His children, are the occasion for joy and thanksgiving, so it will be in the life to come. The argument that this various distribution of gifts would occasion jealousy or envy among God's children, fails to reckon, with sufficient seriousness, with the perfection of holiness that will mark the heart and life of God's children in the final state.⁶

Conclusion

No doubt some of these questions relating to the granting of a diversity of rewards at the final judgment deserve further consideration. However, the general answer I would give to the question of rewards for good works should be clear. The good works of the righteous will not go unnoticed in the day of judgment. They will be recognized and rewarded. This recognition and reward, however, are expressions of God's gracious dealings with His children. They are rewards not of merit but of grace. They represent God's gracious dealings with His children, adding grace to grace. The prospect of such rewards, though an encouragement to God's faithful children, are not the ground or motive for the Christian life. Gratitude for God's grace in Christ is *the great motive* for all Christian obedience. Furthermore, the prospect of these rewards — rather than suggesting a kind of inequity or difference that will diminish the perfect blessedness of the life to come for all the righteous — suggests only a further occasion to rejoice in God's goodness toward His own. If all things in Christ belong to all believers, whatever gain one may experience in the life to come will only be gain for all the others.

CP Venema

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¹ If I may illustrate this distinction between two kinds of merit with a rather crass commercial analogy, it is like the difference between paying an employee an hourly wage that is strictly or justly deserved (based upon contractual obligations and the quality of the work performed) or that is more than is strictly or justly deserved (going beyond contractual obligations and exceeding what the quality of the work performed deserves). The difference is that between a just wage and the granting of an additional bonus. The first of these coincides with condign merit; the second with congruent merit.

² I can only hope that none of them is reading this!

³ Interestingly, the term, "mercenary," comes from a Latin word for "reward." The mercenary is the person who serves for the sake of the reward granted, not for the sake of loyalty or true devotion to the cause.

⁴ Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward," p. 169, argues vigorously that this is a primary reason why the idea of varying rewards needs to be rejected: "The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ ought to liberate believers from all such performance-centered conceptions of the Christian life. An important step in that direction would be to jettison this misguided and discouraging doctrine of eternal rewards that distinguish one believer from another." That this worry on Blomberg's part has real merit (no pun intended!) is evident from a book which he cites by way of example (Joe Wall, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* [Chicago: Moody, 1991]).

⁵ This is the place also to note that the *Heidelberg Catechism*, in its third major section, treats the entirety of the Christian life under the heading of gratitude or thankfulness.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Complete Works of Jonathan Edwards* (vol. 2; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 618, uses both of these suggestions in considering this question: "Now most certainly the holier a man is, the more he loves *the same degree* of the image; so that the holiest in heaven will love that image of God they see in the least holy more than those do that are less holy; and that which makes it beyond any doubt that this superior happiness will be no damp to them, is this, that their superior happiness consists in their great humility, and in their greater love to them, and to God, and Christ, whom the saints look upon as themselves. These things may be said of this, beside what may be said about every one being completely satisfied and full of happiness, having as much as he is capable of enjoying or desiring; and also what may be said about their entire resignation; for God's will is become so much their own, that the fulfilling of his will, let it be what it may, fills them with inconceivable satisfaction."