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Volume 3 – 2011

**Does the New Testament Teach that Divine Favor
at the Final Judgment Comes Through Works**

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Introduction

The question of whether the NT teaches that the divine favour of eternal life and salvation at the final judgement comes through the good works of a believer is puzzling and complex because the NT also teaches that divine favour (*sola gratia*) is all that is needed on

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judgement day. The issue can be starkly put simply by juxtaposing different verses:

Even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – (Eph 2: 5)

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

For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (Rom 2:6-8):

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28-29)

However, because of the centrality of Jesus Christ, the saviour, the agent of the Spirit, and judge (see, for instance, Luke 2:11; 3:16; Acts 17:31), to the NT the question of whether the NT teaches that divine favour at the final judgement comes through the good works of a believer needs to be made more specific. The more specific question is: How is Jesus Christ, grace in him, and the Spirit, connected to good works and divine favour at the last judgement? I shall answer the question by looking at Rom 8:28-30 as the key passage that throws light upon NT teaching before considering various passages in the NT on good works at judgement day.

Romans 8:28-30 as the Hermeneutical Key

And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. Because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.²

² English translations in this article are from the NRSV or modified from it.

This important passage connects divine favour and God's eternal and ultimate saving purpose, Christ, justification, the Christian life, and eschatological glory together. Therefore, in its context in chapter 8, it can be considered as the large-scale, overarching framework within which the specific NT passages about judgement by works can be located. As Robert Jewett well observes, in these verses "Paul initiates the climactic celebration of concerning hopeful suffering of the children by reviewing what 'we know' as persons who 'love God.'"³ Douglas Moo rightly summarizes when he says, "Rom. 8 deserves to be put in the front rank for its rich and comprehensive portrayal of what it means to be a Christian."⁴ So, Romans 8:28-30, within chapter 8, could be considered the hermeneutical key for understanding grace, works, and judgement, especially in Paul.⁵

The key issue for our purposes lie in the connection between Paul's concept of conformity to the Son (v. 29) and divine favour and purpose, good works and the last judgement.

The introductory "we know" (*oidamen*) implies that Paul's readers can give wide assent to the premise that "all things work together for the good for those who love God" (v. 28.)⁶ The dislocated clause at the end of the verse, "who are called according to his purpose," reminds those who love God that the things they go through are good and are linked to the calling and purpose of God.⁷ Both the "good" (*agathon*) and the "purpose" (*prothesin*) are then unpacked in v. 29, with important implications for the relationship between divine favour and works at the last judgement.⁸

³ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 526.

⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 468.

⁵ Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and the Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes/Colorado Springs/Hyderabad: Paternoster, 2008), 108.

⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 527. For a discussion of the different textual and translational possibilities in this verse, see Moo, *Romans*, 527-528.

⁷ Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 530-531.

⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 528, rightly notices that the *hoti* (because) in v.29 connects vs. 29f with v. 28.

The “good” of believers and the “purpose” of God are related to God’s foreknowledge and predestination, and, crucially, for our question, to conformity to “the image of his Son” (v. 29.) Importantly, the language Paul uses here reminds us of his central “in Christ” and “with Christ” terminology and theology, and needs to carefully considered.⁹

Paul links union with Christ to the Christian life/works in two key ways in Romans. First, Paul has urged the Romans to appropriate and apply Christ’s atonement for themselves by living for God, “so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). Here, as Moo perceptively comments, it is “only in relation to’ and as ‘joined to’ Christ – by faith – can the new life of victory over sin become a reality.”¹⁰

Secondly, Paul stresses the essential requirements of the Holy Spirit’s control in the believer’s life. The believer in living in the realm of the Spirit, “but you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit (*en pneumati*), since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (v.9a.) The Spirit unites the believer to Christ, “anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (8:9b.) Paul continues by asserting that union with Christ through the life-giving Spirit is essential for righteousness, “but if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (v.10.) Further, Paul emphasizes that if the Spirit was the agent of Christ’s resurrection, then the Spirit will ultimately bring resurrection to the believer’s body, “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit in you,” (v. 11).¹¹

So, to return to 8:28-30, the “good” for which all things work, the work of the Christian life, and God’s “purpose” are seen as one thing: that Christians may become more like Christ by being “conformed to the image of his Son (*symmorphous tēs eikonos tou huiou autou*)” (v.29). “Conformed” (*symmorphous*) here “denotes an inward and

⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 534.

¹⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 381.

¹¹ Moo, *Romans* 491-492.

thorough and not merely superficial likeness.”¹² Interestingly, Paul does not say “conformed to Christ” but “conformed to the *image of his Son*” (*symmorphous tēs eikonos tou huiou autou*).¹³ While there may be an allusion to believers being restored to the original Adamic image – Christ being the last Adam (c.f. 1 Cor 15:22, 45, 49) – the use of “his Son” implies that Paul is primarily thinking of Christians reflecting *the Son* as he is the image of *the Father* (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; c.f. Phil 2:6; Heb 1:3.)¹⁴

When does this conformity take place? Moo argues that Paul thinks here of the last judgement and God’s predestining to eschatological glory, and cites Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:20, 49.¹⁵ Moo is right to see a reference to judgement day, given the reference in v. 29 to Christ, through the resurrection, being “firstborn among many brethren.” However, the phrase “firstborn among many brethren” (*prōtotokon en pollis adelphois*) also means that there is a fraternal bond and union between Christ and believers. The phrase is linked with adoption, “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs (*synklēromonoi*) with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him (*sympaschomen*) so that we may also be glorified with him” (v.17) Paul, therefore is thinking, in v. 29, more broadly than merely of the day of judgement.¹⁶ Rather, the Christian is to assimilate the mind and character of the Lord, be renewed throughout their mortal life, and ultimately reflects the glory and splendour of Christ’s presence in the eschatological state.¹⁷

Therefore, Paul focuses upon the pattern of conformity to Christ’s sufferings in the Christian life now to be followed by eschatological glory, as he will “be the firstborn among many brethren” (v.29.) Jewett correctly concludes that, “to restrict the

¹² William Sanday & Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5th edition, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980) 218.

¹³ John Calvin, *Romans & Thessalonians: Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries 8* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans, 1995) 181.

¹⁴ Sanday & Headlam, *Romans*, 218.

¹⁵ Moo, *Romans*, 534-535.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38a (Dallas: Word, 1988) 483, rightly notes the link between v.17 and v. 29 with the use of the *syn*-compound.

¹⁷ Sanday & Headlam, *Romans*, 218.

bearing of this passage to future transformation overlooks the significance of the aorist verbs and the context of current suffering.”¹⁸ One can add that in 2 Cor 3:18 Paul states that, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” Second Corinthians 3:18, then, links transformation through the work of the Spirit to the Christian’s present experience.

Thus, it is because of their union with Christ that believers can be conformed to Christ. Christians are to “replicate” Christ, make him their pattern, and imitate him (cf. 1 Cor 11:1). By virtue of their union with Christ by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:1f), believers reflect the pattern of Christ’s own life. Christians, being “in Christ,” are to be “like Christ.”¹⁹ Simon Gathercole summarizes Pauline thinking well when he says that, “Paul sees the primary ‘work’ of a Christian as imitation of, and obedience to, Christ” because they are united to Christ and conformed to him.²⁰ Therefore, the principles are first, suffering first, then glory, “we suffer with him [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him,” (v. 17b, c.f. Phil 2:5-11). Secondly, Spirit-directed mortification of sin now, is to be followed by vivification/resurrection later, as seen in 8:13b, “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Therefore, importantly, the obedience and good works of suffering and mortification (wrought by the Spirit) now, bring eschatological reward and eternal life.²¹ Indeed, Paul, exhorts the Christian that if “by the Spirit you put to death (*thanatoute*) the deeds of the body, you will live” (v.13.) Here, clearly, the “good work” of mortifying the

¹⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 529.

¹⁹ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 141.

²⁰ Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? : Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2002), 132. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans,1968), II, 170, concludes on Rom 13:14, (“instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”) that “nothing less than the complete negation of vice and the perfection of purity and virtue exemplified in Christ make up the habitude required of the believer ... The negative is as exclusive as the positive is inclusive.”

²¹ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 136-137.

misdeeds of sin the body (note the activity implied in the use of the verb) results in eternal life (c.f. John 15:5, 17:6).

To turn to v. 30, Paul, after having focused on conformity to Christ (v. 29) goes to form a “golden chain” between predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. Here three points need to be made. First, those whom God has “justified” (*edikaiōsen*) will, in time, be “glorified” (*edoxasen*). The glorification should probably be understood in light of vs. 17-18, 21 since this is the last time Paul mentions glory. There glory clearly refers to resurrection bodies (c.f. vs. 21-23.) Therefore, the glorious final resurrection of true saints is an eschatological manifestation and vindication before the cosmos of their prior justified status in the present.²²

Secondly, Paul emphasizes divine favour, and, indeed, divine sovereignty over the whole process of salvation, from eternity past (predestination) to eternity future (glorification of the resurrection), “whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

Thirdly, human agency is implicit in the “golden chain.” Those called, will turn to God from idols (1 Thess 1:9-10), those justified, will have trusted Christ (Rom 3:28), and those glorified, will have been adopted (vs.15f) and conformed to Christ (v. 29.) The glorification is dependent (in terms of sequence and order) on conformity to Christ, and hence good works, but it is, nevertheless, the goal of God’s eternal gracious purposes of predestination and calling.

Therefore, the principle seen in Rom 8:28-30, is seen in those who through divine favour and grace are “in Christ,” are graciously “conformed to Christ” and become “like Christ” through the work of

²² Greg K. Beale, “The Role of the Resurrection in the Already-And-Not-Yet Phases of Justification,” in Sam Storms & Justin Taylor eds. *For The Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honour of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 199. Note here that, for Paul, it is because of justification today before God, “in Christ” based on Christ’s work, through faith, that the elect believer can have assurance. The believer can be confident that the verdict of the last day will be “not guilty,” despite all sufferings and the presence of cosmic powers (Rom 8: 35-39), “who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.” (8:33f).

the Holy Spirit. Conformity to Christ means that believers obey and produce the good works that lead to eschatological glory. With this large-scale framework in place, we can now consider the NT passages about judgement by works.

NT Passages about Final Judgement by Works

Romans 2:5-11

But by 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. For "he will repay according to each one's deed": to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

Rom 2 is a complex passage that has stirred a great deal of scholarly debate.²³ Even if vs. 5-16, are considered to be conditional and hypothetical (that Paul assumes that no-one is reality justified by works but, in reality, everyone is convicted by breaking the Torah) nevertheless the passage is important. For, vs. 6-11 imply, in line with early Jewish thought, that the general principle and standard of the last judgement is that of works (c.f. Rom 14:10f).²⁴

In v. 6, Paul cites Ps 62:12 and/or Prov 24:12, "he will repay according to each one's deed" (*kata ta erga autou*) to establish the principle from Scripture. He then glosses the Scripture, those God will reward are "those who by patiently doing good (*ergou agathou*) seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life" (v. 7) which will mean "glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good (*ergazomenō to agathon*)" (v.10.) Mark Seifrid rightly notes that Paul speaks of the singular *work* receiving judgement: either selfishness and disobedience to the truth, or perseverance in

²³ See Tom R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfilment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 179- 204, for a discussion.

²⁴ See Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?* 37-111.

doing good.²⁵ Paul makes his point clear that performance of the works of the Torah can acquit on judgement day, “for it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified” (v.13.)

Yet, divine favour ultimately comes from an inward circumcision of the heart and will, “but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit (*en pneumati*) not in the letter; whose praise (*epainos*) is not of men, but of God (*ek tou theou*)” (v. 29.)²⁶ Here the “spirit” is most likely the Holy Spirit given the letter/Spirit contrast in Rom 7:2; 2 Cor 3:6f and the correlation between circumcision and the Spirit in Phil 3:3 (c.f. *Jub.* 1:23.) For Paul, the resurrection of Christ “according to the Spirit of Holiness” (1:4) inaugurates the new era of the Spirit. Importantly, it is “in whom (*ev ho*)” [Christ]” that there is a “circumcision made without hands” and the “body of the flesh” is put off “in the circumcision of Christ (*en tē peritome tou Christou*)” (Col 2:11.)”

Therefore, under the new covenant and because of union with the risen Christ, circumcision in the Holy Spirit, in fulfilment of Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4, Ezek 11:19f; 36:26f, powerfully and internally enables believers to be sensitive to God’s will and do good as the pattern of their lives.²⁷ The result is praise and reward by God with eternal life on the day of judgement.

²⁵ Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification*, NSBT 9 (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 149.

²⁶ See here 1 Cor 4:4f. It is the future judgement of Christ that will reveal the inner motivations and intentions of human wills, and will result in God’s commendation and reward for those whose wills are directed towards him, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive praise from God” (cf. 1 Cor 3:11-16, where a Christian minister’s work will be evaluated on judgement day by Christ.)

²⁷ Galatians has a similar focus on the work of the Holy Spirit. While in 5:4, Paul emphasizes that the Law does not justify because the Law is a negation of the grace of Christ, “you who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Yet in the next verse, Paul looks to the hope of future righteousness because of the Spirit, “for through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” Then Paul adds in v. 6 that based on union with Christ, “in Christ Jesus,” ultimately what counts is “faith [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Romans 6:22-23

But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free-gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Romans 6, union with Christ, obedience/righteousness and eternal life are tied together. In 6:3, believers are “baptized into Christ Jesus” (*eis Christon Iēsoun*) and “into his death” (*eis ton thanaton autou*). Just as “Christ was raised from the dead,” believers too must live a “new life” (v. 6.) This “new life” is seen in the Roman Christians who “have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (v.13, c.f. 1:5; 16:26.)

The freedom from sin, won by Christ, results not in licentiousness but in being “enslaved to God” and “sanctification” (v. 22.) This service to God will “end” (*telos*) in “eternal life.” Nevertheless, “eternal life,” coming from obedience, is “the free-gift of God” (*charisma tou theou*), and is found “in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*ev Christō Iēsou tō kyriō hēmōn*) – c.f. vs. 3, 8, 11. Further, in Eph 2:10, the author relates divine favour and good works together, by emphasizing that Christians “are his [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works (*en Christō Iēsou epi ergois agathois*), which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (cf. Titus 2:11-14.) Here good works are done in union with Christ and are the results of God’s will, creatively working in and through believers.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

So we are always of good courage; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether

working through love” (c.f. 1 Cor 7:19, where the only thing that counts is obedience to God’s commandments). This work of love is produced in the domain of the Spirit, “if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Gal 6:8b.) In Eph 6:8; Col 3:23-25, obedience, focused on Christ, will bring eschatological inheritance.

we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what things done in the body, whether good or evil.

In 2 Corinthians 5:9-10, as in Romans, final judgement is according to works, yet believers are exhorted to be of “good courage” (5:6) in confidence of the coming bodily resurrection. The basis of this courage and confidence is three-fold. First, it is based on union with the resurrected Christ. Paul exclaims that union with Christ means new creation and new spiritual life, “so if anyone is in Christ (*en Christō*), there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (5:17). Murray Harris captures the force of the verse when he says, “when a person becomes a Christian, he or she experiences a total restructuring of life that alters its whole fabric – thinking, feeling, willing, and acting.”²⁸

Secondly, God “has given us the Spirit as a guarantee (*arrabōna*)” or down-payment of the coming resurrection (5:5, c.f. 5:1.) The believer, through the Spirit, manifests a transformative resurrection character in his life, “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (*tēn autēn eikona metamorphoumetha apo doxēs eis doxan*); for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (3:18.)

Thirdly, Paul has confidence in being with Christ in the future, “yes, we are of good courage, we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord, so we do not lose heart” (5:6, c.f. v.8). The daily renewal of the believer’s “inner person” by God brings confidence, “even though our outer man is wasting away, our inner man is being renewed (*anakainoutai*) day by day” (4:16, c.f. 5:17; Col 3:9f.) This daily renewal contributes toward the progressive transformation of the believer into the image of Christ (3:18) that will be completed at the resurrection.²⁹ So, believers’ walk/conduct in the present is by trust (which is not visible), it is not by the visible

²⁸ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids/Milton Keynes: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2005), 434.

²⁹ Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 360.

manifestation and appearance of spiritual realities, “for we walk (*peripatoumen*) by faith, not by sight” (v.7.)³⁰ Believers make it their aim in life “to please the Lord” (5:9) by making him their pattern and imitation (c.f. v. 15).

This desire to please the Lord looks forward to the manifestation of the reality of the believer’s life at the final judgement, where “all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ” (v. 9, c.f. Rom 14:10; 1 Pet 1:17). Paul continues that at this judgement, there will be reward, based on character as seen in good works, “so that each may receive recompense (*komisētai*) for what things (*a*) done in the body, whether good or evil (*eite agathon eite phalon*)” (v. 10.)³¹

Greg Beale summarizes the passage’s thought accurately when he says, that people will be judged “on whether they have borne the fruit of good works in keeping with and result of their resurrection existence. Thus, what is being evaluated is the character (i.e. ‘in Christ’) from which the works arose.”³²

John 5:28-29

“Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

In John 5:28-29, the resurrection to eternal life or condemnation is based on works. Yet, for John, like Paul, union with Christ is crucial. The Christ of the 4th gospel teaches that the Father and Son will reside with the believer, “and we will come to them and make our home with them” (14:23). Further, the Spirit is central to union with the believer, since the Spirit, “abides with you, and he will be in you,” (14:17).³³ Christ’s unity with believers matches the unity between the Father and him, “I in them, and you in me” (17:23).

³⁰ Beale, “The Role of the Resurrection,” 203-206.

³¹ Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 408.

³² Beale, “The Role of the Resurrection,” 207.

³³ One can note here the centrality of the Spirit to Luke’s soteriology. Luke asserts that it is through the coming of the Messiah and judge, Jesus, that the Spirit is poured out believers, “John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat [Footnote continued on next page ...]

In John 15:1-6 the trope of the true vine means organic union with Christ, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (15:5a). Yet the consequence of this union is that the believer will “bear much fruit” (v. 5, 8). The fruit that Jesus has in mind is probably obedience, love (vs. 9-17), and suffering for Christ (15:18-16:4). Indeed, crucially, Jesus emphasizes that it is *only and exclusively* “in Christ” that the believer can *do* anything good, “those who abide in me and I in them (*menōn en emoi kagō en autō*) bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (*chōris emou ou dunasthe poiēn ouden*)” (v. 5b c.f. 1 John 1:3; 2:4f; 2 Pet 1:4). C. K. Barrett gets it exactly right when he says of believers that “this union [with Christ], originating in his initiative and sealed by his death on their behalf, is completed by the believers’ responsive love and obedience, and is the essence of Christianity.”³⁴

Bearing in mind John’s concept of union with Christ, we can now consider the criterion by works in 5:28f. It is Christ’s voice that will rouse the dead, “all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out” (v. 28 c.f. 11:43.) Those who have “done good” (*ta agatha poiēsantes*) will be those who have been remained in Christ (15:5) and so produced the “work” that God requires for eternal life, which is to believe in Christ, “this is the work (*ergon*) of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (6:29 c.f. 5:24). Further, believers are rewarded with the resurrection to eternal life because of

into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (3:16f.) In this key verse, the metaphor of “fire” refers to the purification of believers by the Spirit, which will mean that the believers/the wheat will be differentiated from those to be condemned/the chaff at the last judgement (v.17.) So, it is only through baptism in the Spirit can anyone escape condemnation at judgement (“the unquenchable fire,” v.17, cf. 1 QS 4.20f; CD 2.12.) We can note here the allusions to Luke 3:16 in Acts 11:15-17; 13:23-25. In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus’s answer to the question “what must I do to inherit eternal life” (v.25) is the parable of the Good Samaritan; one needs to exercise mercy (vs. 30-37). However, in the previous pericope, (Luke 10:22-24) blessing comes to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father. In the following pericope (vs. 38-41), Jesus insists to Martha that the one thing that is needed is to listen to Jesus at his feet (v.39). Further Luke’s short answer to the question, “what must I do to be saved?” is “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31.)

³⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edition (London: SPCK, 1978), 470.

the fruit (obedience, love, and suffering) that comes from remaining in the true vine, Christ (and indeed, because of the Spirit who indwells them).

Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

In Revelation, those whose names are “written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (13:8; c.f. 20:15; 21:27) will escape condemnation and will inherit eternal life in the new creation (21:1-22:6). The Lamb/Christ will himself acknowledge before God all whose names are written the book of life (3:5) and identified with his righteousness and death.³⁵

Believers are united with Christ, they endure, which will bring them final blessing, “‘blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord (*en Kyriō*).’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours (*kopōn*), for their deeds follow them (*erga autōn akolouthei met autōn*)’” (14:13.) So, in 1:9 and 14:13, John views Christians as identified corporately with Jesus (*en* designating both sphere and incorporation).³⁶ This corporate identity generates the good works that bring participation in the Kingdom.³⁷

³⁵ Greg K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1999), 1037.

³⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 201.

³⁷ We can note also 1 John 2:28, where believers must endure in their union with Christ so that they may have assurance of their standing at the second coming, “and now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.”

The Lamb's disciples, those "in Christ," recapitulate the model of his ironic victory in their own lives. They imitate the pattern of Christ's suffering by enduring through their own suffering and persecution, "John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance in Jesus (*synkoinōnos en tē thilpsei kai basilea kai huomenē en Iēsou*), was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9.)³⁸

Yet, the principle of judgement based on works is affirmed, "and the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books" (20:12). Jesus himself states explicitly that eschatological reward depend on a believer's work, "I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve" (2:23b) and "see, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work" (22:12.)

Therefore, in Revelation, believers are evaluated according to their placement in the book of life (which identifies them with the Lamb) and the work of their lives, following the pattern of Christ.

Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as

³⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 171.

you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

In this passage, the last judgement is based upon works.³⁹ The sheep/righteous will be blessed and “inherit the kingdom” (v.34) and enter into “eternal life” (v. 46) because of their compassionate good works for the hungry, thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison (vs. 35-39.) Conversely, the goats will be cursed and go into the “eternal fire”/“eternal punishment” (vs. 41, 46) because they were not compassionate towards the hungry, thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison (vs. 42-43.)

While the identity of the “sheep”/ “righteous”/“brothers” is a matter of debate, what is important from our point of view is the close association between the Son of Man/Jesus and the “brothers of mine” (*adelphōn mou*)/“the least of these” (*toutōn tōn elachistōn.*) Thus, it is Jesus/“I” (note the use of *egō*, vs.35f, 42f) to whom either good deeds are done or not done. The Son of Man, then, identifies himself with the “brothers.” Indeed, there is a fraternal union between him and them, a bond so close that an act towards them is an act towards him,

³⁹ See also Matt 16:24-27 (paras. Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-26,) “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done’” (c.f. Matt 5:12.) In Matt 16:24-27, Ps 62:12 is alluded to as the basis of judgement according to works (v.27). The good works done are those done in imitation of Christ’s journey to the cross and self-denial for the sake of following Christ. The focus on self-denial is similar to the perspective of Romans 6.

“truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (v. 40.) So, as people respond to the Son of Man’s brothers, and align themselves with their distress and afflictions, they align themselves with the Son of Man who identifies with them (vs. 40, 45), with the result that people’s eternal destinies are fixed by their response to the “brothers.”⁴⁰

The identity and union between the Son of Man and his “brothers” in ch. 25 is in line with the association between Christ and his disciples elsewhere in the gospel. At his birth, Jesus is called “Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us,’ (*meth hēmōn ho theos*)” (1:23.) When the disciples have a case of discipline to deal with, then Jesus will be with them, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (*ekei eimi en mesō autō*)” (18:20.) At the end of the gospel, Jesus promises his followers that in their mission to make disciples of all nations, he will be present with them until the end of the age, “and lo, I am with you (*egō meth hēmōn eimi*) always, to the close of the age” (28:20). Thus, in Matthew, Christ is associated with his followers and the works that find eternal blessing and reward are those done to Christ because of his union with his brothers.⁴¹

James 2:20-26

Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent

⁴⁰ Don A. Carson, “Matthew,” in Frank E. Gaebelin gen. ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 522.

⁴¹ In Mark 10:17-31, reward comes through selling everything and serving to Christ and the Kingdom (v.21); a prospect that Jesus believes is hard (v.22), which raises the question whether anyone can be saved (v.26), to which Jesus replies that it is truly impossible for men but is possible for God (v.27) i.e. through his power and grace alone.

them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Despite difficulties in this passage, James's main point is clear: real faith does good works and results in being called "the friend of God" (v.23.) The concept of justification in James should probably be seen in the framework of final salvation and the last judgement.⁴² If justification in James refers to the final judgement, then good works, at the very least, play a key role in gaining eschatological blessing and divine favour.⁴³

Yet, in James, salvation is the act of God. So, Ronald Fung correctly observes that, "against the backdrop of the universality of sin (3:2-12), conceived as transgression of the law (2:9-11; 4:7), the inexorable connection between temptation, sin, and death (1:13-15; 4:8), and the inevitability of judgement for sin (2:12f; 3:1; 5:8f, 12; c.f. 4:4, 6), James presents salvation as a work and a gift of God, to be received by faith."⁴⁴ Thus, God is a generous giver (1:5) who bestows grace on the humble (4:6, 10).

Importantly, God is the immutable source of all good gifts, and, supremely gives the gift of new spiritual life by regeneration through the word of the gospel, "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose (*boulētheis*) he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (1:17f.) It is this "implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (1:21).

Strikingly, James asserts that God has chosen the poor, "Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen (*exelexato*) those who are poor in the world?" and the purpose of God's election is that the elect

⁴² See Gathercole, *Where is Boasting?* 116, for a discussion. Also, see James 2:12f; 3:1, 6; 4:12; 5:7 for references to final judgement.

⁴³ It is difficult to see a great deal of difference between the justification language in James being used in the sense of, "to prove or demonstrate that someone is in the right," or in sense of, "to declare someone in the right/acquit." After all, a verdict of someone being "righteous/not guilty" in a court entails the legal demonstration or proof of innocence based on the evidence.

⁴⁴ Fung, "Justification in the Epistle of James," in Don A. Carson ed. *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (London: Paternoster/Baker, 1992), 157.

may be “rich in faith” (i.e. have true work-producing faith) and have eschatological blessing, being, “heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” (2:5; c.f. 1 Cor 1:26-28).

Given this picture of James’s soteriology, it seems likely that the good works that justify are the products of divine grace working within believers.

Conclusion

Divine favour at the last judgement is dependent upon good works (in terms of order and chronological sequence.) However, in Paul and the Johannine corpus (and to a lesser extent in Matthew) good works flow from union with Christ. United to Christ the believer is given grace, by the Holy Spirit, to become “like Christ” and to imitate the pattern of Christ’s life. In James, good works are the fruit of real faith that is created by the gospel. The ultimate answer to the question is quite simply: Jesus Christ!

Therefore, to paraphrase Augustine, God crowns his own gift of Christ in the life of a believer by graciously conforming the believer to be “like Christ,” through the Holy Spirit, in his life so that on judgement day he will give him eternal life because of the good works done “in Christ.”



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