

Mod 7: — JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, YET JUDGED BY WORKS?

We have stressed, as does Paul, that sinners are justified by faith, apart from works of law (Rom. 3:28; 5:1). But the fact is that many Biblical texts specifically say or at least imply that we will all somehow be JUDGED BY WORKS. See for example 2 Chron. 6:30; Job 34:11; Prov. 24:12; Eccl. 12:13-14; Jer. 32:19; Ezek. 33:20; Matt. 12:37; 25:31ff.; Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:13; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:25; James 2:18-26; Rev. 2:23; 20:12-13.

In addition to these, here are some I will quote: Psalm 62:12, “For You recompense a man according to his work.” Isa. 59:18, “According to their deeds, so He will repay.” Jer. 17:10, “I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.” Matt. 16:27, at his second coming Jesus “will then repay every man according to his deeds.” Rom. 2:6, God “will render to each person according to his deeds.” 2 Cor. 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” 1 Peter 1:17, God “impartially judges according to each one’s work.” Rev. 22:12, “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.”

How can we reconcile the teaching that we are justified by faith and not by works, with this abundant testimony that we will be judged by works?

I. FALSE ANSWERS TO THIS QUESTION.

One false answer to the question is that when Paul speaks of being justified by faith and not by works, by “works” he is referring to the Law of Moses only. This cannot be the case, though, since Paul’s use of the word “law,” in the crucial passage of Romans 1-5, is not limited to the Mosaic Law. Here he discusses law as it applies to Gentiles (e.g., 1:18-32; 2:14-15), and as it applies to Abraham (e.g., 4:1-5). The non-justifying “works of law” (Rom. 3:20, 28) include everyone’s responses to whatever law code he or she may be under.

Another false answer is the idea that the faith that justifies actually INCLUDES works as part of its very definition. Works are just a part of faith; thus to be judged by works IS to be judged by faith. This claim, however, is simply not so. It is based on a faulty assumption regarding lexical definitions, namely, that if the words for faith (e.g., *pistis*) according to some (not all) Greek lexicons sometimes means “works,” then whenever these words are used they must always include the connotation of works. This simply is not the way lexicons and lexical definitions work.

Another false answer is the Galatianism discussed in lesson six above, that we are indeed *initially* (at conversion) justified by faith; but once we become Christians we *stay* justified by works and are finally judged only by our works. We have already seen, however, that this view is contrary to the very essence of justification by faith.

II. HOW THEN CAN WE EXPLAIN THE “JUDGED BY WORKS” TEXTS?

There are definitely some valid senses in which human beings are judged by works, even though our final destinies are determined by our faith-relationship to Jesus Christ. Here I will summarize a few of them.

First of all, in the OT, sometimes the judgment of which the writers speak is not eternal judgment but earthly judgment, e.g., rewarding Israel for covenant faithfulness or pouring out wrath upon Israel’s enemies (e.g., 2 Chron. 6:28-31; Isa. 59:18).

Secondly, in the final judgment an examination of works is necessary to determine the DEGREE of rewards for individual believers. It seems there are degrees of punishment for the lost (Matt. 10:15; 11:22-24; Luke 10:12; 12:47-48; 20:47; John 19:11). Likewise the quantity and quality of believers’ works will determine the degree of their rewards (e.g., Matt. 5:19; 18:4; Luke 19:12-19; Jas. 3:1). This is especially evident in 1 Cor. 3:12-15, which says the fire of judgment “will test the quality of each man’s work.” Some believers will be rewarded, and some not. This also seems to be the point of 2 Cor. 5:10, which says that every believer will be recompensed for deeds done in this life, good and bad.

A third way works will enter into the final judgment is that they will be cited as EVIDENCE of the presence of faith. Justification is indeed by faith, but the faith that justifies is a faith that WORKS (Rom. 1:5; James 2:14-26). Works thus demonstrate the state of the heart, just as a tree is known by its fruit (Matt. 12:33). The fruit does not determine the kind of tree, but demonstrates it. Likewise our works are the evidence of the presence of faith: John 15:1-8; Gal. 5:6; Eph. 2:10; 1 Thess. 1:3; James 2:17-18.

One may wonder why it is necessary to survey the works of any individual in the judgment process, since the omniscient God already knows who truly has faith and who does not. This is in fact true; God himself does not need to review our works in order to know if faith is present. But the point of the review is not for God’s sake, but for the sake of others. The point of judgment by works is to demonstrate before all that God’s judgment is impartial, that he is no “respector of persons” (Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:8-9; Col. 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17). Judgment according to works thus demonstrates to all observers that God’s judgment is completely in accord with his word, that he is showing no favoritism or partiality.

Finally, judgment according to works is only one part of the final judgment. In fact, it is a preliminary process, and in itself it does not yield a final result. It is immediately followed by a second stage of judgment, which is the deciding factor of where each of us will spend eternity. We see this in Revelation 20:11-15, which pictures two stages of judgment.

First, the BOOKS are opened, and every person is “judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (v. 12). These “books” are either the books of God’s LAW (the law codes by which all will be judged), or the books that have recorded all of our deeds. The implication is that NO ONE is judged to be worthy of heaven based on what is written in the books, plural. But the final decision is not yet made.

The second and final phase of the judgment is then recorded in verse 15: “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the BOOK OF LIFE, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” What does this tell us? It tells us that our final destiny is not determined by what is written in the BOOKS, from which our works are judged. Rather, our final destiny is determined by whether our name is written in the BOOK, the book of life, “the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain” (Rev. 13:8). Only those who are trusting in Jesus’ blood will pass this final test, and only because they are trusting in Jesus.

If we know, going into the judgment, that we are saved (and this is the point of assurance), and if God knows, going into the judgment, who is saved and who is not, what is the point of having all of us, especially believers, go through this uncomfortable (to say the least) judgment of works, even our sinful works, according to the books? Here is a suggestion. As a result of this full disclosure and remembrance of our works at the very threshold of heaven, it will be made perfectly plain that the ONLY reason we are saved for eternity is because of God’s infinite grace and mercy. God’s own mercy is thereby glorified, and we will enter heaven with hearts that are overflowing with humility, gratitude, and praise to the Redeemer.