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(Reviewer: David Lau)

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## **Exegesis of Romans 10:1-13**

Michael J. Roehl

### **Background and Context**

In chapter 9 of Paul's Letter to the Romans we find some rather disquieting and difficult passages that challenge the sensitivities of our confessional Lutheran convictions. Of particular note are these:

*For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh* (Rom. 9:3 NAS); *Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"* (Rom. 9:13 NAS); and *So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires* (Rom. 9:18 NAS).

Yet also within this ninth chapter a careful study reveals a tremendous depth of gospel promise and comfort, as demonstrated in verses 23-24: "*And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles*" (NAS).

In chapter 10 we are blessed with the bright, clear declarations of good news for which the epistle of Romans is so well loved and cherished by Christians of all generations. In chapter 9 the Holy Spirit through Paul has set the stage for the section we undertake to study at present. Chapter 9 reminds us of the grace shown to Israel, even in the face of their ongoing rebellion, and how the remnant has always been preserved because of the Messianic promise. The happy result of Israel's rejection, as far as the Gentile readers of Paul's letter are concerned, is that the Gentile branches have been grafted into the vine in place of the Jews (Cf. Rom. 11:11-36). And in the context of God's patience in dealing with the unbelieving Jews, we hear the final reminder to praise our God for the mercy shown to the spiritual remnant who are kept faithful in every generation. The key, of course, is faith in Jesus Christ, who became for the Jews a "stumbling stone," but for the Gentiles who were brought to faith and kept in that faith, He forever remains the Rock of their salvation.

### **Overview of Romans 10:1-13**

Paul continues in chapters 10 and 11 to explain why Israel was cut off and the Gentiles were grafted in as the branches. The problem was not a lack of zeal on the part of the Jews. On the contrary, they were *very emphatic* in their religion, but they backed the wrong horse, so to speak, when they placed their hope and confidence in the keeping of the Mosaic Law. In so doing, they rejected the righteousness that God had prescribed and provided for them, and instead opted for a righteousness of their own manufacture. Paul proceeds to outline the key difference between salvation by works and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ and concludes this section (verses 1-13) by emphasizing once again the all-inclusive nature of God's gracious invitation.

The translation for the entire section below and repeated with the exegetical treatment of specific verses is New King James. The Greek text quoted is that of the Majority Text.

Romans 10:1-13 *Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them." But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."*

#### **Verse 1**

Ἀδελφοί, ἡ μὲν εὐδοκία τῆς ἐμῆς καρδίας καὶ ἡ δέησις ἡ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπὲρ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν.

***Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.***

### Exegetical notes:<sup>1</sup>

In this entire text the one variant of some significance is found in verse 1, where the Majority Text and Textus Receptus have the words τοῦ Ἰσραήλ ἐστίν. If one reads the text of Nestle-Aland, which contains the pronoun αὐτῶν and no verb, the implication or reference to the Jews is still understood from the context.

εὐδοκία, ας, ἡ 1. a state of being kindly disposed, *good will*; 2. a state of being favored, *favor, good pleasure*; 3. desire, usually directed toward something that causes satisfaction or favor, *wish, desire*.

δέησις, εως, ἡ an urgent request to meet a need, exclusively addressed to God, *prayer, petition*.

### Commentary:

One cannot help but be impressed with the sincerity and depth of the apostle's love for his own countrymen, demonstrated here and elsewhere in this epistle. He desired their salvation in spite of the animosity he received from many of them. It is the sort of sentiment that should fill every Christian heart every waking moment for every human soul. It is also worthy of note that Paul did not restrict his activities to prayer alone. He also poured himself into his work with deeds and words, reaching out with the message of Christ crucified to his fellow Jews around the Roman Empire.

### Verses 2-3:

μαρτυρῶ γὰρ αὐτοῖς ὅτι ζῆλον θεοῦ ἔχουσιν, ἀλλ' οὐ κατ' ἐπίγνωσιν. ἀγνοοῦντες γὰρ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην, καὶ τὴν ἰδίαν δικαιοσύνην ζητοῦντες στήσαι, τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑπετάγησαν.

***For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.***

### Exegetical notes:

ζῆλος, ου, ὁ 1. taken in a good sense: *zeal, ardor*; 2. in a bad sense: *jealousy, envy; factionalism, party strife*.

ἐπίγνωσις, εως, ἡ *insight, knowledge; consciousness*; Trench and others regard this compound form of γνώσις as capable of conveying the intensive force in the Koine period;<sup>2</sup> therefore if context supports the intensive sense for a given occurrence, one could translate (or at least interpret) *exact or accurate knowledge, thorough knowledge, or complete knowledge*.

ἀγνοοῦντες present active participle of ἀγνοέω *not to know, be ignorant, not to understand*.

ὑπετάγησαν aorist passive indicative 3<sup>rd</sup> pl. of ὑποτάσσω act. *subject, subjugate*; pass. *become subject, subject oneself* (pass. for middle); *be subjected or subordinated; obey*.

τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην The genitive τοῦ θεοῦ is given some prominence by its position of preceding the head noun (cf. the usual order of the same words at the end of the verse). Standing in contrast to τὴν ἰδίαν δικαιοσύνην, it probably expresses source, i.e., that it's the righteousness *that comes from God*, not from one's own self.<sup>3</sup>

### Commentary:

Paul wants to give the Jews their due, and therefore witnesses here to the fact that they were indeed zealous toward God. Their zeal, in fact, stands in sharp contrast to the general apathy that plagues mainline churches today. It is hard to imagine that the Reformation could even have taken place in our day, with so little care now given to doctrine, let alone orthodoxy. The trouble with the Jews was not that they didn't care; they cared very deeply. Their problem was that they had manufactured their own religion, and thus their zeal was tragically misdirected. In verse 2 θεοῦ is rightly regarded as an objective genitive; that is, God was indeed the object of the Jewish zeal. But Paul nonetheless describes their zeal as something not in accord with true knowledge or insight. That insight, of course, can only be the Spirit-worked knowledge of and faith in Jesus Christ.

It is telling that religious zeal which excludes a proper understanding of Christ so often tends toward fanaticism. We notice it back then with some of the Jews who appeared more than ready to kill at a moment's notice for any and every perceived infraction. We likewise notice it today in the religious zealotry displayed in the Middle East. Zeal, without Christ, is more often than not synonymous with fanaticism.

We also find insight and guidance here into the "many bridges across the chasm" nonsense of universalism, and a clear view into the false notion that Jehovah is Allah is Zeus is God by any other name. Paul clearly teaches that any and all zeal for a deity other than the one true Triune God is misdirected and tragically wrong. The sense of verses 2-3 likewise debunks the claim that "it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere."

We cannot, however, regard what is here rendered as *being ignorant* to be anything less than a stubborn refusal of Jesus Christ as one's Savior from sin. In other words, the problem with the Jews was not that they had no opportunity to learn about Jesus, but that they had their opportunities and squandered or rejected them. Imagine the horror that awaits every soul dying in unbelief, in particular those who were confronted over and over again with the gospel, only to consistently and ultimately reject it. Cf. also Jesus' warnings given to the Galilean cities in Matthew 11:20-24.

### Verses 4-5:

τέλος γὰρ νόμου χριστός εἰς δικαιοσύνην παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι. Μωϋσῆς γὰρ γράφει τὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ τοῦ νόμου, ὅτι ὁ ποιήσας αὐτὰ ἄνθρωπος ζήσεται ἐν αὐτοῖς.

***For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them."***

### Exegetical notes:

τέλος, ους, τό 1. a point of time marking the end of a duration, *end, termination, cessation*; 2. the last part of a process, *close, conclusion*; 3. the goal toward which a movement is being directed, *end, goal, outcome*.

γράφει τὴν δικαιοσύνην . . . ὅτι The accusative after γράφει conveys the sense of reference, specifying the topic of what Moses was writing, and the ὅτι clause conveys the specific content of what Moses wrote.

### Commentary:

Although this verse expresses one of the great gospel truths for our faith, unfortunately, it is often misunderstood, even among Christians. In his commentary A.T. Robertson identifies a variety of tenable ideas as to what Paul is expressing here: “Christ put a stop to the law as a means of salvation. . . . Christ is the goal or aim of the law (Gal. 3:24). Christ is the fulfillment of the law. . . .” He then gives his conclusion as to what the meaning is: “But here (Denney) Paul’s main idea is that Christ ended the law as a method of salvation for ‘every one that believeth’ whether Jew or Gentile. Christ wrote *finis* on law as a means of grace.”<sup>4</sup> The problem with that understanding, however, is that it was man himself who actually put an end to the law as a method of salvation, not Christ. Man “wrote *finis* on law” as righteousness with God from the very moment of his first sin. Compare also what Paul stated earlier in Romans 8:3-4: “For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

It is better to take τέλος in the sense of *completion* or *conclusion*. The resulting thought amounts to “Christ is the fulfillment of the law for everyone who believes.” This is not to say that Paul has Christ’s active obedience squarely in view, but rather that the demands of the law have been met in Christ through His obedience and atonement. What is demanded by the law is ultimately concluded in Jesus and officially over, and for the believer the law has nothing more to say, since Christ is his righteousness from God.

Like the unbelieving Jews at the time of Jesus and Paul, there were and are many who nevertheless insist on betting their eternal future on the law—on good works—as their own salvation plan. Paul tells us that Christ has put an end to all of that.

Neither should we think in terms of a specific point in history, as though the “*law for righteousness*” was valid up until Good Friday or Easter morning. Christ was the end of the law for righteousness from the very first sin and promise already in the Garden of Eden. The Old Testament promises pointed ahead to a future plan, and the New Testament has pointed back to an accomplished fact, but the Christ of both Testaments has always represented for His people the ***end of the law for righteousness***.

The fact that Christ represents such an end “***to everyone who believes***” is both telling and significant. The unbelieving Jews refused to acknowledge Jesus as that “end,” though Jesus Himself desired as much. There are, in the final analysis, only two options available to man: either faith in Jesus as one’s righteousness from God or the righteousness of perfectly obeying the law. Though Jesus did all that was necessary to fulfill the demands of the law for us and remove its curse from us, all who reject Him in favor of self-made righteousness will stake their eternal future on their own keeping of the law. All such cannot but fall short of God’s holy standard and fail.

In verse 5 Paul quotes from Leviticus 18:5. The point made here is that when it comes to any righteousness apart from Christ, a man stands or falls according to his own performance, his own obeying or disobeying of God’s law. What Moses wrote then was absolutely true and still applicable to all, which means that the problem was not the law itself, but man’s failure to obey it.

### **Verses 6-7:**

ἡ δὲ ἐκ πίστεως δικαιοσύνη οὕτως λέγει, Μὴ εἶπης ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου, Τίς ἀναβήσεται εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; τοῦτ' ἔστιν χριστὸν καταγαγεῖν ἢ, Τίς καταβήσεται εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον; τοῦτ' ἔστιν χριστὸν

ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναγαγεῖν.

***But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).***

Exegetical notes:

ἀναβήσεται future deponent indicative of ἀναβαίνω *go up, come up, ascend*.

καταγαγεῖν aorist active infinite of κατάγω *bring down*.

ἄβυσσος, ου, ἡ 1. an immensely deep space, *depth, abyss* (generally contrasted with sky and earth, hence unfathomable to the human eye and discernible only by God); 2. a transcendent place associated with the dead and with hostile powers, *netherworld, abyss* (esp. the abode of the dead and of demons).

Commentary:

After briefly describing the unyielding requirement of the law, Paul now turns to a description of the gospel’s impact, defining it here primarily by showing what it’s not. “***Do not say in your heart***” means “Don’t think that” and begins a free quotation from Deuteronomy 30:12ff.<sup>5</sup> Notice that the Deuteronomy quotation is interspersed here with the Spirit’s divine commentary, what the NKJ has placed in parentheses: “***that is, to bring Christ down from above***” and “***that is, to bring Christ up from the dead***.” This certainly helps us to understand the intended meaning when the Spirit caused these words to be recorded by Moses. The main point here is that not only is this “***righteousness of faith***” something that must be *given* to man; it also draws attention to the two great tenets of the Christian faith. These are the incarnation of Christ (Who will ascend into heaven to bring Christ down?) and His resurrection (Who will descend into the abyss to bring Christ up from the dead?). Hence this verse tells us not to think in terms of what *man* can or must do, for *man* can’t do such great and necessary things. But God can and has—in the incarnate and risen Christ. The gospel is thus different from the law in that while the gospel can indeed become a possession of man, it can never be *earned* or *established* by man. It has to be given as a gift. The thrust then is the exact opposite of the Jewish religion, which advocated the earning of one’s own righteousness on the basis of the Law of Moses.

It is interesting to note that still today the deity, incarnation, and resurrection of Jesus Christ come under vigorous attack by those who oppose the Christian faith.

**Verses 8-9:**

ἀλλὰ τί λέγει; Ἐγγύς σου τὸ ῥῆμά ἐστιν, ἐν τῷ στόματί σου καὶ ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου· τοῦτ’ ἐστιν τὸ ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως ὃ κηρύσσομεν· ὅτι ἐὰν ὁμολογήσῃς ἐν τῷ στόματί σου κύριον Ἰησοῦν, καὶ πιστεύσῃς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου ὅτι ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ἤγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν σωθήσῃ·

***But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.***

### Exegetical notes:

ὁμολογήσης aorist active subjunctive 2<sup>nd</sup> sg. of ὁμολογέω *promise, assure; agree, admit, confess; declare (publicly), acknowledge, confess; say plainly, claim.*

κύριον Ἰησοῦν A more involved point of grammar pertains to the intended sense of these accusatives. Is Paul using them appositionally, as rendered by KJV and NKJ? Or do they comprise an object-complement (direct object-predicate accusative) construction? The verb ὁμολογέω is capable of such a double accusative and can thus mean to “confess someone *as* something.” If viable here, the sense would be: “confess Jesus as Lord” or “confess that Jesus is Lord.” Since *Jesus* is a proper name, it serves as the direct object. And the predicate accusative κύριον, since it comes before Ἰησοῦν, would still be regarded as definite, even though it lacks the article. In his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* Daniel Wallace not only lays out the syntactical contours of the object-complement construction which could very well apply here; he also poses an intriguing line of thought for this passage and its context:

What does Paul mean here by “Lord”? Since the complement κύριον *precedes* the object, it is possible that it is definite though anarthrous. Thus, the confession would be that Jesus is *the* Lord, that is, *Yahweh*. This is substantiated by the context: Since Paul is alluding to and even directly quoting the OT here, his thought is colored by it. In vv 11-12, Christ is still clearly in view. And in v 13 he again mentions κύριος without indicating that a different Lord is in view. Thus to confess that Jesus is *the* Lord is to confess that he is the Lord mentioned in v 13. This verse is a quotation of Joel 3:5 (Hebrew; 2:32 in LXX), in which “Lord” is in reference to Yahweh. . . . For Paul, to confess that Jesus is Lord is to confess that he is Yahweh.<sup>6</sup>

### Commentary:

Verse 8 includes a continuation of the quote from Deuteronomy 30 and implies yet another difference between the Jewish religion and the Christian religion. While theirs is a religion of never-to-be-attained works (which reside outside of man), ours is a religion based on the Word of promise (which does reside within the believer). So not only is the Christian faith thereby “attainable”; it is truly within us. Contrast this with work-righteousness, where we see a constant reaching and grasping for that which always lies just beyond or well beyond the reach of the person.

At the beginning of verse 9 Lenski insists on “*because*” as the translation for ὅτι, rather than “that,” regarding it as a causal conjunction.<sup>7</sup> I tend to agree. Paul is explaining why or how the Word is not external but internal: it is because confession is made with the mouth and belief resides in the heart. Again, we may contrast this internal nature of the Word of truth with the external character or nature of work-righteousness.

In the conditional sentences of verse 9 we might have expected to find present tense forms of ὁμολογέω and πιστεύω rather than aorists (“if one *goes on* or *continues to* confess and believe”—linear action rather than punctiliar). The construction is a third class condition, which may use either present or aorist tense verbs, but the present tense seems to occur more often in the New Testament. Yet what the Holy Spirit chose to express here serves masterfully to answer a different question that may arise when hearing that confession of faith is needed to be saved. We would find it more assuring if this passage had simply said, “If you believe in your heart that God has raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved.” The clause “*if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus*” seems to add an element of obligation and activity on the part of man, which is totally out of character with the entire line of thought in this section. Thus we are helped by the Holy Spirit’s use of the aoristic tense in this verse,

which gives a summary snapshot of the true Christian heart.<sup>8</sup> It is not the fact that a Christian goes on confessing that earns or brings him paradise. The confession is a natural part of Christian faith. Approaching it from a different angle, one can say that no unbeliever can truly make such a confession. Thus the “snapshot” force of the aorist here helps to keep this verse out of the realm of work righteousness and aids in our understanding that Paul refers to a condition of the heart, not to mandatory, ongoing actions done by the Christian.

We would be foolish to allow any doubts or questions to cloud or obscure the simple beauty and comfort of these verses. Make them personal. I believe in Jesus. I confess that this is the conviction of my heart, which God has given to me (a confession that is as natural as an exhalation of breath). In Christ I will be saved. This is pure gospel for the individual, and it stands in stark contrast to the damning fate of work-righteousness.

### **Verses 10-13:**

καρδία γὰρ πιστεύεται εἰς δικαιοσύνην, στόματι δὲ ὁμολογεῖται εἰς σωτηρίαν λέγει γὰρ ἡ γραφή , Πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐπ’ αὐτῷ οὐ καταισχυθήσεται. οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν διαστολή Ἰουδαίου τε καὶ Ἑλλήνος· ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς κύριος πάντων, πλουτῶν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἐπικαλουμένους αὐτόν. πᾶς γὰρ ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται.

***For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”***

### **Exegetical notes:**

The present indicative verb λέγει conveys a perfective force, which emphasizes that the results of a past action are still continuing, i.e., that even though the statement was made in the distant past, it is nevertheless still speaking at the present and thus authoritative to the hearers or readers.

καταισχυθήσεται future passive indicative of καταισχύνω *dishonor, disfigure; put to shame; pass. be put to shame, be humiliated; humiliate; disappoint.*

διαστολή, ἧς, ἡ *difference, distinction*

Robertson says that Ἰουδαίου and Ἑλλήνος are probably ablative forms rather than genitives, but apparently should still be understood as or at least translated as genitives. Wallace contends that certain words like διαστολή take a genitive that didn’t readily conform to standard Koine usage. Here context directs us to translate in the sense of “between.”

ἐπικαλουμένους present middle participle of ἐπικαλέω 1. to call upon deity for any purpose, mid. *call on, invoke for*; 2. to address or characterize someone by a special term, *call, name, give a name or surname to*; 3. to make a request to a higher judicial authority for review of a decision in a lower court, *appeal to.*

### **Commentary**

In these verses four γὰρ clauses follow the great gospel proclamation of verse 9 and help to further



elucidate the “mystery” of that gospel promise.

Heart (καρδίᾳ) and mouth (στόματι) are both instrumental case forms indicating means. That which believes is the heart (also stating the location of faith in the human being), and that which confesses such faith is the mouth. Here we may find linear verbs at work, which would indicate an ongoing believing and confessing.<sup>9</sup> It is important again to note that just as faith is not something a person supplies to save himself or to make himself righteous before God, so also the subsequent confession of the believing heart should not be construed as something we provide for our own salvation.

The translation of the εἰς phrases is challenging. A literal approach, like that of KJV and NKJ, leads to the rendering “unto righteousness” and “unto salvation.” In the end it is probably easier to explain the concept than to find a translation for εἰς that fully reflects the original thought.

In connection with the statement “**with the mouth confession is made unto salvation,**” it is interesting to ask: Whose salvation? Is it ours or our neighbor’s? It is certainly true that God uses the gospel confession of the Christian to work saving faith in others. Nor is this an artificial injection or change of direction on the part of the exegete, since Paul himself takes us in this direction, beginning with verse 14: “**How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’**” (Rom. 10:14-15).

Verse 11 contains a quote from Isaiah 28:16, and verse 13 a quote from Joel 2:32. The fact that we are finding a high number of references to the Old Testament may be somewhat unexpected, given the fact that the congregation in Rome is believed to have been comprised primarily of Gentile converts. This degree of usage helps to validate the applicability of the Old Testament for all Christians.

With the words “**Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame,**” verse 11 focuses our attention once again on that one thing needful and clears away any possible misconception of the role of our own confession of faith in the matter of our own salvation. The statement stands on its own as true, without any mention of confessing or witnessing. We are reminded here of Mark 16:16 (“*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned*”) and how the second half of a given verse often helps to clarify the first. Just as a man can be saved without baptism—it is unbelief alone that damns—so also confession is not here added as the work or the step that man must provide. That being said, just as true Christians will naturally desire to be baptized, so also true Christians will naturally confess their faith. That does not mean that they thereby merit their salvation by that confession. The confession *follows* conversion and faith, at which point a person is already saved.

Verse 12 undoubtedly brought great joy and comfort to the Gentile Roman Christians. To hear that the God of the Jews was favorably disposed to them—that He indeed is “**rich to all**”—must have been sweet music to their ears.

It is only fitting that this great section would conclude with yet another magnificent gospel proclamation: “**Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.**” Every component of this passage is critical and worth a closer look.

*Whoever* – focusing on the individual, yet excluding no one from God’s gospel invitation and promise;

*calls on* – salvation is mediated through the Word, not by deeds or actions on the part of man;

*the name of the LORD* – the individual is directed for his salvation to a source outside of himself, that which is revealed to him about the one true Savior God, and this again stands in sharp contrast to the notion that man can supply his own goodness;

*shall be saved* – though our sins put us in the desperate plight of needing rescue, the passive assures us

that our salvation is supplied for us by another: by the Lord Jesus on whom we call.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Unless noted otherwise, lexical notes are taken from the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich 3<sup>rd</sup> edition lexicon (BDAG), sometimes listed with BDAG's format that explanatory information or definitions are given first in regular font and *glosses* (English translation equivalents) come next in italics.

<sup>2</sup> Some lexicons (e.g. BDAG) express the view that the compound form ἐπίγνωσις and the simple form γνωσις were virtually synonymous in the Koine period.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1996) 109-110.

<sup>4</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker 1931) 4:387-388.

<sup>5</sup> The first part of the quotation conforms to Deut. 30:12, but the second (“Who will go down into the abyss ...”) seems to parallel Ps. 107:26 or Prov. 30:4 rather than a verse in Deut. 30. Regarding this apparent inconsistency, Martin Franzmann's observation may be helpful:

Paul's language concerning the Word of faith echoes that of Deut. 30:11-14, which speaks of the Law. This has created difficulties for some; they either find some sort of inner unity between the Law and the Gospel suggested here by Paul, or they conclude that Paul is quoting Old Testament words without regard for the meaning they had in their original setting. But there does not seem to be room for either idea. Paul is not “quoting” the Old Testament at all; there is here no formula of quotation such as “it is written,” and Paul makes a clear distinction between what “Moses writes” (v. 5) and what “righteousness says” (v. 6). Moreover, the reproduction of the language of Deuteronomy is very free; the phrase “descend into the abyss,” so important for Paul's thought, is not found in the Deuteronomy passage at all. The phrases “ascend into heaven” and “descend into the abyss” seem to have become proverbial for attempting the impossible; in Paul they get their color from the incarnation and the resurrection of the Lord. The most that one can fairly say is that Paul's language is here, as so often, tintured by that of the Old Testament (*Romans: A Commentary*. 188-189).

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, p. 188, emphasis his. What Wallace contends in the material quoted from his grammar resonates well with C. Kuehne's observations made in a *Journal* article over 10 years ago. Though not citing Rom. 10:9 per se, Prof. Kuehne recognized the tie between “Lord” in Rom. 10:13 and Jehovah in Joel 2:32 and the clear connection of both to Jesus in the context of Romans 10. See “Jesus / Jehovah” *Journal of Theology*, (Sept. 1997): 25.

<sup>7</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern 1936) 659.

<sup>8</sup> Also of potential importance is the previously mentioned grammatical probability conveyed by the object-complement construction (Jesus as Lord or Jesus is Lord). If such is the intended meaning expressed by Paul, then the confession of Christ is specific. It centers on a believing confession of His divinity, i.e., that Jesus is Lord or Jehovah.

<sup>9</sup> Since the verbs are present *indicative*, the force could be aoristic (punctiliar), which would serve to make a simple description.

## Examining and Applying the Scriptural Teaching of Rewards

David Reim

How many cards do you have in your wallet that allow you to collect “reward” points of one kind or another? I counted eight in mine. My wife has dozens more. Rewards are a part of our daily lives in so many ways. Parents reward their children for good behavior. Teachers reward students for working hard. Employers reward employees for faithful service. People offer rewards for returning the valuables they have lost. The police offer rewards for help in catching criminals. Rewards are an effective motivator to get people to do what you want. Rewards are also a very hot topic right now in certain American churches. In recent years especially we find a growing number of congregations and pastors that preach what is known as “Prosperity Gospel.” Similarly, many are the books on the Christian bookstore market which appeal to both earthly and heavenly rewards as incentive for living the Christian life.

Does God work the same way in His Word? With all the hype we hear about rewards today, now more than ever we need to consider the Scriptures carefully and gain a proper understanding of the rewards spoken of and promised in the Bible. With that goal in mind it is the intent of this essay to examine and apply what Scripture says about two types of rewards available to us: our earthly rewards and our heavenly rewards from God.

### I. Earthly Rewards from God

Those in the “Prosperity” camp make much of gaining their earthly rewards from God. In fact, that is the main point of their entire message. Three of the four largest megachurches in America proclaim what is also known as “Prosperity Theology.” According to a 2006 Time Magazine article, Joel Osteen, a renowned megachurch pastor in Lakewood, TX (suburb of Houston), has insisted to his audience that “one of God’s top priorities is to shower blessings on Christians in this lifetime.”<sup>1</sup> It was this insistent claim, in fact, that inspired one of Osteen’s followers to march into a car dealership, demand a top salesman’s wage, and get the job. In the Time Magazine interview this man is quoted as saying, “Why would an awesome and mighty God want anything less for his children?”<sup>2</sup>

The following excerpt from the same article (“Does God Want You to Be Rich?”) provides some idea of the tenor of Osteen’s message and his unmistakable emphasis on worldly gain.

Several hundred stage lights flash on, and Osteen, his gigawatt smile matching them, strides onto the stage of what used to be the Compaq Center sports arena but is now his church. “Let’s just celebrate the goodness of the Lord!” Osteen yells. His wife Victoria says, “Our Daddy God is the strongest! He’s the mightiest!” And so it goes, before 14,000 attendees, a nonstop declaration of God’s love and his intent to show it in the here and now, sometimes verging on the language of an annual report. During prayer, Osteen thanks God for “your unprecedented favor. We believe that 2006 will be our best year so far. We declare it by faith.”<sup>3</sup>

Joel Osteen is not alone in his emphasis on God wanting to give people a prosperous, “abundant” life here and now. Others like Joyce Meyer, a popular TV preacher, make a similar claim: “Who would want to get in on something where you’re miserable, poor, broke and ugly and you just have to muddle through until you get to heaven? I believe God wants to give us nice things.” Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of Windsor Village, the largest United Methodist church (15,000) in the country, says: “Jesus did not die and get up off the Cross so we could live lives full of despair and disappointment.” He applies John 10:10, the “abundant life” passage, in this way: “It is unscriptural not to own land. God wants you to own land. The entire Old Testament is all about land. Land represents that God is with you and God has blessed you.”<sup>4</sup>

In a nutshell, Prosperity Gospel theology suggests that a God who loves you does not want you to be broke. That message has great appeal today, as one can see from the fact that the 14,000 attendees that Time reported in 2006 is now up to 42,000. This message appeals to people already caught up in the materialism of our time. In fact, it is a way of embracing materialism under the religious cover of the church. It says to people that they don’t have to give up the “American dream” in order to be Christians. They can simply view it as a sign of God blessing them.

## Many passages that speak of God's earthly rewards

Undoubtedly, God speaks plenty about blessing and rewarding us, even with physical and material benefits for our earthly lives. A search of four different translations produced a net total of 120 passages having the word "reward" either as a noun or verb. In addition, other expressions are employed to present the Bible's concept of rewards from God. Many of the promised blessings are contingent upon a person's obedience to God's commands, as we see below from an Old Testament sampling of the numerous passages that tell of such rewards.

**Leviticus 26:3-5** "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; and you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely."

**Psalms 19:11** Moreover by them [the "judgments of the LORD" in v. 9] Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward.

**Proverbs 11:24-25** There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself.

**Jeremiah 32:19** "You are great in counsel and mighty in work, for Your eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, to give everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings."

**Malachi 3:10** "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessings that there will not be room enough to receive it."

A key issue with some of the passages above and others like them is the matter of how God's promise of reward was attached to the old covenant He had made with the Jews.<sup>5</sup> If such is the case for a given Old Testament passage, this greatly minimizes the application one can make to New Testament Christians, who are not under the old covenant. On that basis then the New Testament passages that speak of rewards from God for our service and faithfulness to Him are especially noteworthy.

**Matthew 6:2-5** "Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly."

**Matthew 10:41-42** "He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."

**Luke 6:38** "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return" (NAS).

With these and other passages like them, one could make the case exegetically that the reward in question is spiritual or even eternal, not necessarily material or earthly. It is not the intent of this writer to draw such exegetical conclusions for the reader, but merely to show the variety and frequency with which such passages do occur. For more examples consider Deuteronomy 8:18, 30:16, 2 Chronicles 15:1-7, Proverbs 11:18, 13:21, 19:17, Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, Luke 6:35, 2 Corinthians 9:6, and Ephesians 6:8.

It is clear from the abundance of Scriptural testimony that God has rewarded with earthly blessings of health and wealth those who love and serve Him. Consequently, many such passages have become the regular fodder that Prosperity preachers strive so fervently to use. But is their message scriptural, albeit unbalanced? Not at all! There may be things they say which happen to be true, but the message is fundamentally false, inevitably leading people to worship and pursue a false god.

Paul's warning about the Judaizers also applies to these teachers: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:5-6). Paul declares that all who teach "another gospel" that is not the gospel of Christ should be "accursed" (vv. 8-9).

## The problems with Prosperity Theology teaching of rewards

They do get one thing right: all good things have come from God. Even small blessings that we may overlook are truly blessings of His love. We do well to remember that and thank God for everything. Yet for that one thing right, there are serious problems with the so-called Prosperity Theology. These are a few that come to mind.

1. Prosperity Theology's focus on physical blessings such as health, wealth, and happiness has tempted people to overlook and even despise the greater spiritual blessings. It teaches people to seek first the things of this life—the exact opposite of what Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:33.
2. Most serious of all is the way Prosperity preachers shift the focus off of our sins and our desperate need of God's forgiveness. They make passing mention of the cross and the sacrifice of Jesus, but, as one can see from the statement of Kirbyjon Caldwell above, it is not related to our sin and justification, but to the worldly blessings that, they say, God wants to pour out upon us. In the afore-mentioned Time article the problem is summed up well in regard to one of Osteen's books, *Your Best Life Now*: "Jesus is front and center but not his Crucifixion, Resurrection or Atonement." Even though their statement of faith says they believe in salvation by faith in Christ alone, they do not focus on that. The message comes through that our salvation is already taken care of by Christ; so let's concentrate on this life and gain all the blessings God has to give.
3. The theology of Prosperity Gospel completely overlooks the fact that trials, hardships, and even poverty can truly be blessings from God. It sees wealth and prosperity as a good measure of God's favor. This can lead to a false sense of security and harmony with God when things are going well. And when things are not going well, it can lead to a despising of the "chastening of the Lord," the very thing God warns us against in Hebrews 12:5-6: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."
4. Prosperity Theology teaches reliance on self. Instead of directing people to rely on Christ, Joel Osteen says, "I preach that anybody can improve their lives." On his website his stated purpose is a commitment "to serving and helping every person, regardless of background and economic status, to achieve their fullest potential." It's no surprise that his latest book has the title *Become A Better You*. After a closer examination of their teachings and their claims, it is evident to this writer that though they throw the word grace around quite freely, they deny the essence of what God's grace really is and what it does.
5. Though covered with a religious veneer, Prosperity Theology is the idolatry of materialism that has a thin gloss of praise to God over the top. It defies all the warnings God gives about materialistic temptations and the love of money. It has the deceptive potential of leading people into "many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition," and so they "pierce themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Tim. 6:9-10). For example, in response to the Lord's warning, "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?", followers of Prosperity preachers turn the question around: "Why not gain the whole world plus my soul?"
6. When it comes down to it, Prosperity Gospel presents God simply as the means to an end and not the end itself. Atlanta megachurch minister Creflo Dollar views the many passages that speak about God's blessings and earthly rewards as "a spiritual contract. God will pay back a multiple (often a hundredfold) on offerings by the congregation."<sup>6</sup> God warns us about such "men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, **who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself**" (1 Tim. 6:5). "They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15).

Prosperity Theology proponents are a more extreme example of how the Bible's teaching of rewards has been abused. A similar type of abuse can be found also among Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and other Protestant churches. The primary emphasis to notice with much of their published material is how one can attain the blessed, happy life by doing the works of God. What makes this so subtle is that there is an element of truth with it. The emphasis, however, is all wrong. It makes the "good life" the goal, while God and His law become the means to achieve it. It turns God's promise of blessing into a message of works. And it leads people to think that their prosperous life is a proof of God's favor. Hence they see even less of a need for His mercy and forgiveness.

If they think that they do not yet have the “good life” they want, then they just need to do more. Repentance and forgiveness are not an important part of the picture. Using the Bible’s teachings of rewards in such ways can have devastating consequences.

### The proper understanding of God’s earthly rewards

**1. The first and most important thing to remember is that all of God’s rewards, including the earthly kind, are rewards of His grace.** Nothing we do deserves any special favors from God. If God blesses us in any way, it is purely because He is a gracious God who delights in showing His kindness to us, the very same people who because of their sins do not deserve any of it.

This truth is especially hard to retain. The term “reward” in and of itself makes us think of merit. But does the word necessarily imply merit? A reward is typically offered in response to some action. It is something usually given, however, not paid. And the one giving the reward determines whether to give it, what the amount is, and who is going to receive it. So the emphasis with a reward is typically on the giver more than the receiver. It is more about the desperation or generosity of the giver than the merit or worthiness of the receiver. This is especially true in Scripture. When examining the truth about God’s rewards, we should not think of the merit of the one receiving, but the goodness of the One giving.

The greatest proof that God’s rewards are rewards of grace is found in the whole context and analogy of Scripture. Our entire relationship with God and all of His blessings are on the basis of His grace alone for Christ’s sake. God’s earthly rewards as well must be of this same grace, as taught in Scripture in the following ways.

A. Our works simply aren’t good enough to merit some special notice by God. Even our best efforts at serving God are tainted with sins which need to be forgiven. In this regard Quenstedt says: “Will he who must daily implore God: ‘Forgive us our debts’ demand of God that He discharge His debt to him? Can he merit an eternal reward who daily asks God to remove eternal damnation from him? Or with what face can he who daily must ask for clemency boast of merit?”<sup>7</sup> It is a marvel of God’s grace that He chooses to bless and “reward” us, since our works do not deserve His notice at all. He does this purely because He is the gracious, loving God who delights in giving us blessings.

B. Our works are only pleasing to God by faith in Christ and by the fact that they are done through Christ. “Without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Heb. 11:6). “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Jesus Christ covers our feeble works of faith with His merit so that they shine like the sun to our Father. As the Lord sanctifies us more and more, we are “filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11).

C. We cannot take credit for our good works, for they really are God’s work. “It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). Immediately after telling us that we are saved by grace alone through faith, and not of works, Paul adds, “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). How can God owe us for something that He essentially has done? He deserves all the glory both for the works we do and the rewards He gives. “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21). May we all confess with Jacob: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant” (Gen. 32:10).

D. The works we do are not worthy of special reward because we are only doing our duty. Jesus says, “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (Luke 17:10). Also pertinent here is God’s Word through St. Paul: “Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?” (Rom. 11:35).

Those who have come to know and have received the grace of God by faith readily understand that everything good from God is due to His grace in Christ. Regarding the right Christian perspective toward God’s reward, Francis Pieper says:

The long and the short of the matter is this: One who is still extra muros ecclesiae [outside the walls of the Church] and thinks that he must earn his salvation will always, when the reward of good works is mentioned, think of a reward which he has earned. But as soon as the Gospel has taught him the Christian way of thinking, namely, that remission of sins and salvation have been fully and completely gained by Christ and are freely

offered in the Gospel, his thoughts concerning reward also assume the Christian form; he will think of the reward only as a reward of grace, as Christ so powerfully presented this truth in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.”<sup>8</sup>

If a person hands God a demand for wages based on his works, he has abandoned that faith which makes him a Christian. The reward of grace accords well with the faith in God’s grace, in fact, strengthens it; but to claim that one is entitled by law to any reward means that such a one has lost his belief in grace.”<sup>9</sup>

Now if God’s rewards are all of grace, how can we reconcile that aspect with all the passages that speak of God rewarding us according to our works? Also, many of the words translated “reward” in Scripture do focus on the reason for the gift. Many of them have meanings which express “wage, payment, or recompense.” These ideas need not contradict each other. They are sufficiently harmonized when we understand another important truth.

**2. The reward of grace is given in response to or according to our work.** God richly blesses those who love Him and keep His commandments, and He gives judgment to those who reject Him. “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exod. 20:5-6). A Christian’s love for God and his works done for Him do not merit God’s rewards ever. Nevertheless, when the Holy Spirit moves us to love and serve our Lord by faith, He rewards us and in this way proves to us that He is a good and gracious God. To sustain our relationship with Him as His people, God demonstrates in tangible ways—in blessings we experience in this life—that He is the Lord who is good to us. He thereby shows that the best and the wisest thing to do is to trust Him and follow His ways. No one else can do what He does for us.

Thus when God blesses those who love and serve Him, it is not because their works are so good and worthy of reward, but rather to confirm in their hearts that their faith in Him is not in vain. God encourages us to serve Him continually and more faithfully by blessing us when we do serve Him, however feeble that service may be. “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11).

**3. Since it is a reward of grace, God is free to give it according to His will.** “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16). He may give in different measures to people as He chooses and not necessarily in accord with the amount of faithful service rendered to Him. Sometimes those who are the most faithful have to suffer the most. Yet God chooses to bless them in other ways. God gives as He knows is best. Consequently, we should not expect a certain reward for a certain work. If God withholds some earthly reward, we can be sure that such withholding is also a blessing from Him.

Our role here is simply to trust His goodness, depend on His grace, and give thanks for all the blessings of that grace, especially those that heal and nourish our souls. Once enlightened by the truth of His Word, we marvel all the more that God’s amazing grace and goodness would choose to reward us at all.

**4. The rewards are not to be the goal in our lives nor the reason for doing God’s will.** We love God and want to do His will because the Holy Spirit has placed that love into our hearts by bringing us to faith through the Word. He has recreated us in His image to love and serve Him. And so our new man delights in doing God’s will without any need for motivation. God Himself is the goal of our faith-life. He is our “exceedingly great reward,” just as He told Abram (Gen. 15:1). We do not work to gain a reward; we work because God has given us everything by His grace.

It is to the renewed heart of faith that Paul can appeal when he directs Christians of all generations: “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another. . . . But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful” (Col. 3:12-15). Notice that God through His apostle does not tell us to do all these things so that we will be rewarded. We are to do these things because of what He has made us to be. Truly by God’s grace to us in

Christ, we are “the elect of God, holy and beloved.”

Retail stores do not give rewards because shopping there is meritorious, but only because it’s good for business. They do it to encourage people to become regular customers. They are saying that they notice and appreciate your business, and they want to make it worth your while to shop there more often. In a much greater way God shows us that He does notice what we do out of faith in Him, and by His grace in Christ He is pleased with it. He chooses to reward us, even though our works do not deserve His acknowledgment or reward. By that He encourages us even more in our faith-life. He leads us to realize from our own experience the blessedness that we have in serving a loving and caring God.

## II. Heavenly Rewards from God

Most of what was said about God’s earthly rewards also applies to our reward in heaven. Especially the fact that it is a reward of grace, for we are saved from sin, death, and hell by grace alone in Christ. Nevertheless, a few questions come to mind about the heavenly rewards from God through Christ to us.

One of the primary questions is: What are they? **What are the heavenly rewards?** It is clear in some passages that the reward spoken of is the gift of heaven itself. The Apostle Paul says, “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24). Here the reward is defined as the “inheritance” of eternal life. So also in Romans 2:6-7: God “will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality. . . .” The Greek word for “render” in Romans 2:6 is the same as “reward” in Matthew 16:27; both use the future indicative form ἀποδώσει, to give back (what is due). Jesus says in Matthew 16:27: “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.” Jesus is describing what He will do when He comes again on Judgment Day. Therefore the “reward” He gives will be the same as the one described in Romans 2: either eternal life or eternal condemnation.

In recognizing this truth, however, a key follow-up question comes to mind. **How can the God of grace say that He will reward us with eternal life according to our works?** Jesus says this very thing in Matthew 25:35, referring to those who will be on His right side. On the last day He will say to them, “For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in.”

We know it’s been said many times before that such passages do not teach that we are saved by the works we do. The Bible is very clear we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. But these passages do teach that we are judged according to our works. In other words, the works are the visible evidence which proves that one either has or does not have saving faith in Christ. The Lord says, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” (Matt. 7:17-18). Faith naturally produces works of love to God and to others. Therefore if the works are present in one’s life, these testify in a visible way that faith is present in his heart. Thus it is true that each individual will be judged according to his works, but those who believe are nevertheless saved by faith alone.

**Why does God speak of eternal life as a reward?** On the one hand, when said this way, it is a strong warning to blatant unbelievers, and to those who think they can be God’s children by a professed faith without any works or while living in a state of unrepented sin. God gives notice that He will judge us on the basis of our works. He seeks to warn us in advance that “faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:26) and that the life without works will be condemned, even though one claims to have faith.

Yet on the other hand, God uses the reward as a comfort and encouragement for true believers. God wants us to know the value of the Christian life of faith, for living as a child of God in this world is going to bring heartache and opposition. We face the temptations of the world which lure us and say, “All these laws in the Bible are depriving you of the real pleasures of life!” So God reminds you that those “pleasures of life” are the very things which bring God’s condemnation and eternal punishment. When by faith we live a godly life and endure to the end, we have God’s promise of rewarding us with true “pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

Living as a child of God in this world also means conflict with family and friends (Matt. 10:34-36), being hated by all men (Matt. 10:22), suffering persecution (2 Tim. 3:12), and enduring much tribulation (Acts 14:22). One would naturally wonder: Is it really worth it? God reassures us with these promises that following Him will be



more than worth all these troubles combined. As Paul says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). Jesus uses the promise of the reward of heaven in the same reassuring way when He says, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matt. 19:29).

In his exposition of Matthew 5-7, Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, Martin Luther observes the reassuring impact of God’s rewards with these words:

Merit is here altogether excluded. Any attempt to introduce it should be trampled on and consigned to the abominable devil in hell as a thing that destroys my faith and denies Christ. . . . But how, then, do you explain the many passages which speak of reward and merit? Of that we say to the common people that the promises of a reward are mighty consolations to the Christians. For after you have become a Christian and now have a gracious God and the remission of all your sins, both your past sins and those which you daily commit, you will find that you must do and suffer much because of your faith and Baptism. For the abominable devil in company with the world and the flesh will be on your trail and plague you on all sides, as Christ has shown sufficiently throughout these three chapters; you will feel as though there is no room left for you in the world. If, now, He would let us remain without a word of consolation, we would despair because of this persecution and say: Who wants to be a Christian, preach, and do good works? Is this to last eternally? Is it never going to change? Here He steps up to us, consoles, and strengthens us, and says: You are now in grace and God’s children; although you must on that account suffer in the world, be not terrified, but be firm, do not permit these things to tire and weaken you, but let every man perform his duty; he may fare badly, but that shall not be his loss; let him know that the kingdom of heaven is his and that he shall be richly repaid for it. What? Repaid? Has it not been given us already, through Christ, without and before all our work? God will repay in this manner that, as St. Paul says, He will make a great, bright star of you and give you particular gifts, already in this life. . . . Not that the works deserve it because of their worthiness, but because He has promised it for our strengthening and consolation, that we might not think that our labor, burden, and misery were in vain and forgotten. . . . When Christ says: “Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and “Blessed are ye if men persecute you for My sake, for great is your reward in heaven,” etc., He does not teach me to make this the foundation of my salvation, but He gives me a promise, namely, what is to be my comfort in my suffering and Christian life.”<sup>10</sup>

**Are there other rewards in heaven?** In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus said to the one persecuted for His sake, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (Matt. 5:12). Is that something above and beyond or in some way different from receiving heaven as your eternal reward? In other words, are there different rewards given to different believers in heaven, based on the works they have done here on earth?

Within the realm of confessional Lutheranism a number of prominent theologians have said yes, including Martin Luther. The above quote from Luther’s Works continues:

Since they [believers] are unwelcome on earth, they shall be the more richly rewarded in heaven; he that works and suffers the most will also get the greater reward. For though, as I have said, all are alike in Christ, and grace bestows on each one the whole salvation as the highest good, possessed by all, so that he who has Christ has everything, nevertheless there will be a difference in the brightness and glory with which we shall be adorned. Just as there is a difference in the gifts which we have now, one laboring more and suffering more than the other, so in the future life it will all be made manifest; all the world will see what everyone has accomplished, and he that has accomplished more will receive greater glory to the joy of the entire heavenly host. Let this now suffice. God keep us in His grace which He showed us in Christ! Amen.

Francis Pieper states his agreement with Luther in these words:

There are no degrees of bliss, because all the blessed are perfectly happy, that is, every one of them will find full contentment for himself in beholding God. However, Scripture does teach that there are degrees of glory (δόξα, gloria) corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth.<sup>11</sup>

Pieper quotes Luther again on this subject:

It is true, there will be a difference in yonder life, according as they have labored and lived here. For example,

St. Paul was an Apostle, Samuel or Isaiah a Prophet, etc. One will have greater brightness than the other because he worked or suffered more in his office. . . . Thus everyone will have his distinction and glory according to his office, and still one God and Lord will be in all, and one and the same joy and bliss. In his person none shall be more or have more than the other, St. Peter no more than you and I. None the less there must be a difference because of the works. For God did not do through Paul what He did through Isaiah, and vice versa. For that reason everyone will bring along his works, through which he will shine and praise God so that people will say: St. Peter has done more than I or another. This man or this woman has led such a fine life and done such great things. In short, all are to be alike before God in faith and grace and celestial bliss, but they are to differ in their works and their honor.<sup>12</sup>

Lutheran commentaries on the pastor's bookshelf have interpreted in a similar way. Lenski, for one, speaks of the rewards in heaven as being different from the reward of heaven. In his exegesis of Matthew 5:12 he describes the reward mentioned there by saying: "It consists, not in salvation, which becomes ours by faith before we ever do or suffer anything for Christ's sake, but in the greater glory that shall be ours in heaven." Also in explanation of the phrase, "for thus they did persecute the prophets before you," Lenski states: "In one and in only one way may we join this most illustrious company in heaven—by joyfully suffering persecution for Christ's sake. Beyond question the highest glory in heaven belongs to the martyr prophets, and next to them stand in due order all others who suffered in their various stations for Christ."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, G. Jerome Albrecht and Michael J. Albrecht, co-authors of the People's Bible commentary on Matthew, say this about the great reward in heaven given to those who suffer for Christ's sake: "These rewards will be of grace, not merit, and they will be in addition to the salvation that is theirs by Christ's merits alone."<sup>14</sup>

After hearing the consensus of those who have gone before us, one is very hesitant to question the idea accepted by them. To this writer, however, there are concerns to address. The idea of differing rewards in heaven for differing degrees of service on earth is quite popular also among heterodox writers of our day. From their writings especially we note some dangers to avoid.

First of all, it is easy to slip back into the idea of human merit when it comes to reward from God. Much of the language used sounds like there is personal merit in suffering for Christ or in bringing many to faith. We need to remember that we do not choose to suffer. If it comes upon us and we are able to bear it, that is only because the Holy Spirit has given us the strength to do so. If you bring many to Christ, that is also the work of the Holy Spirit working through you. It is not you yourself. Hence there is no personal merit to be rewarded, for God deserves all the glory. No one will be able to say, or even dream of saying, that he has this reward because he willingly suffered shame for Christ's sake, or because he worked so hard in God's kingdom. Rather, we all will praise the glory of God's grace.

In addition, the idea of bonus rewards in heaven for certain works on earth can lead to a false motive, namely, that of doing extra works to seek a greater reward. There is a difference between edifying encouragement for our fight of faith by God's assurance of our eternal reward and doing certain works to gain a greater reward in heaven. Having the goal of heaven before our eyes is always good encouragement to endure. But if we do some charity work or spread the gospel so as to stock up extra bonus rewards for eternity, can one really say that these are the works of faith?

In his popular marriage book *Love & Respect* Dr. Emerson Eggerichs seems to use "The Rewarded Cycle," as he calls it, in a proper way at first. He encourages Christian husbands and wives to continue to give love and respect, even if their spouses do not reciprocate. He says, and rightly so, that you give love or respect to your spouse for Jesus' sake. Even if you don't see any good from it now, you will be rewarded in heaven. That line of thinking seems to be using the reward of eternal life to help Christians look past their present troubles and keep doing God's will. But then he goes on to say: "When you make a decision to love or respect your spouse, the dividends are without end. Jesus is offering you a bargain. Do a few things on earth in this life and get many things forever in heaven." He calls it the "cha-ching! effect" and further describes: "It's as though a billion angels are holding a gigantic handle. Each time you do something loving or respectful toward your spouse, the angels pull down on that handle. A secret treasure dumps into a colossal golden bowl and cha-ching! The lead angel exclaims, 'He did it again! He put on love toward that disdainful woman!' . . . 'She did it again! She put on respect toward that pathetic man! Okay, everyone, hit it again! Cha-ching!'"<sup>15</sup>

He bases his assertions on Ephesians 6:8, which he quotes in the NASB: "Whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord." He then claims, "The Lord is keeping track somehow." He clearly takes

this passage and others to mean that every good work you do, God is keeping track of it and will pay you back for it in heaven. These will be extra special blessings beyond the simple privilege of being in heaven.

Doesn't such teaching encourage us to do our good works in order to gain a greater reward? Doesn't it suggest that if you work hard now and suffer for Christ, you can store up for yourself a greater amount of treasure in heaven? Are we thus collecting more bonus points to cash in later? Is that what Jesus was telling us to do when He said, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20)?

If works are being done for that kind of motive, are they really good works before God? God says that "without faith it is impossible to please" Him (Heb. 11:6). Faith works spontaneously because God has created it to do so. Faith seeks to glorify God without any special incentive. If you do a work seeking a greater reward in heaven, is it a work of faith? Or is it simply another way of serving yourself? Isn't that what James and John, along with their mother, were trying to do by asking Jesus if they could sit on His right and left hand in the kingdom of God? Jesus explained that greatness in God's kingdom comes through serving others. But shall we serve them only that we may become great? Isn't that really serving ourselves? Lenski says, "As vicious as is the secret desire for the praise of men, so vicious is the secret mercenary desire to trade our good works for far greater rewards from him."<sup>16</sup>

I had the opportunity to have several good discussions with a very committed Pentecostal. She claimed to believe that she was saved by faith in Christ alone, by God's grace, and not by her works. Yet she was driven by fear and desire. She was driven by fear, thinking that every sin she commits will be brought out in the open and exposed for everyone to see on Judgment Day. She said she believed she would be forgiven, but she still feared the embarrassment of such exposure. She was also driven by her desire to do more works to gain greater reward in heaven. I was concerned that she really didn't understand the nature of God's forgiveness. I explained to her that all our sins are "blotted out" (Isa. 44:22) of God's book and forgotten, never to be remembered again (Jer. 31:34). Her desire for greater reward also concerned me because it almost seemed as though salvation in Christ was not enough, that we need to work for something greater and better. Isn't this the devil's subtle way of putting the sufficiency of Christ into doubt once again and adding in the value of human merit?

We do not shy away from a scriptural teaching simply because it can be and has been abused by others. Instead, we strive to teach it more clearly and warn against the abuses. With that perspective in mind we ask once more:

**Does Scripture teach that there are special rewards in heaven for works done on earth?**

Pieper says that the teaching of special rewards in heaven "is proved by Scripture texts such as 2 Cor. 9:6 f. and Dan. 12:3."<sup>17</sup> These we consider below:

2 Corinthians 9:6-11: But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. As it is written: "He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever." Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God.

In a footnote Pieper quotes Calov, who says of the promise and reward mentioned in the above passage: "It is to be referred not to eternal life as such, but to the rewards in eternal life, not to the essence of blessing and glory, but to the degrees of glory."<sup>18</sup> Does this passage definitively say anything about eternal rewards? The whole context points more to the idea of God's earthly providence sustaining and blessing our stewardship. We may be able to apply it to the reward of heaven given to believers, but is there anything in the context that would compel us to understand that God is teaching us about degrees of glory in heaven?

What of the other text referred to by Pieper? Daniel 12:2-3: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever." Here Pieper says in the same quoted footnote: "Those who have led many to a knowledge of salvation and to righteousness are specially mentioned among the risen saints." Though we agree that this is true, does this passage say that they will shine brighter than all the other saints? Couldn't it mean that in contrast to those raised "to shame and everlasting contempt," those who have the wisdom of faith will truly shine brightly?

Pieper also makes reference to 1 Corinthians 15:35ff. in this same footnote. That section includes the familiar words, “There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory” (1 Cor. 15:40-41). That example could be used to show the differences in glory of the saints in heaven. But that does not seem to be the way Paul is using the example. Paul is answering the questions, “How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?” (v. 35). Then he gives several examples. A seed is planted; it comes up a far more glorious plant. There are different types of flesh with differing glory on earth. Then in verses 42-44 Paul gives the explanation of the examples: “So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.” Paul’s point is that our resurrected body will be more glorious than our earthly body, not that one believer will be more glorious than another.

Other passages have been likewise used to support the teaching of varying rewards in heaven for certain works done on earth. We consider again Matthew 5:12: “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” Much is made of the wording “your reward in heaven.” As if it is saying that once you get into heaven by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, you will get an even greater reward if you have suffered persecution here on earth. But haven’t we noticed how several passages speak of the divine reward of grace as being the gift of heaven itself? Is there anything in the context of Matthew 5:12 that compels us to take this reward any differently? Is Jesus saying anything more than this: Rejoice if you are persecuted for My sake, for that shows clearly that you are on My side and eternal life is yours as promised? Heaven will be a great reward that will more than repay you for any suffering you endure here on earth.

The same could be said in the interpretation of passages like Matthew 16:27, Revelation 11:17-19, and 22:12. In regard to Matthew 10:41-42 it would be most natural to understand the reward given as the reward of eternal life. What of 1 Corinthians 4:5: “Then each one’s praise will come from God”? Must that imply that each believer will receive a different level of praise from God?

The idea of special rewards given to believers based on their works seems to go against what Jesus teaches in the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). Jesus told this parable in direct response to Peter’s question, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” Jesus assured him that the apostles would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matt. 19:28-29). Then Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard, in which He specifically showed that it doesn’t matter how long or how hard you work in God’s kingdom; it doesn’t matter how much you suffer, bearing the heat of the day, for all people working in God’s vineyard will receive the same pay or reward. The gift of eternal life is more reward than the greatest apostle could ever deserve. Jesus was telling Peter and all who give up things for His sake: You will receive eternal life. But He also warned them not to think that they have deserved more than others because they gave up more or suffered more or worked more. The reward for all believers who suffer much or little, who work long or short will be the same reward from a gracious and generous God.

### **Different Rewards or Different Ranks?**

There are a number of passages which suggest there will be different ranks in heaven. Indeed, it would not be strange to have different ranks among the saints in heaven, for aren’t there ranks among the angels? God has established rank and order here in this world. It would seem natural for Him to establish rank among the saints in heaven also.

Jesus told the twelve apostles that they would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). The Apostle John saw a visible representation of that in the vision of Revelation 4 and 5, where he saw 24 elders sitting on 24 thrones around the throne of God in heaven. When James and John came asking to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in heaven, Jesus said, “To sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father” (Matt. 20:23). Those positions of honor will be given to someone, Jesus says. They could even be given to James and John, for all we know. The point here is that those are not positions we can seek or work for. God alone determines who will be given such honor. Will those positions be given to two people who lived very humbly in devoted service to God and suffered much for

Christ's sake? Perhaps. That would be a logical deduction from all that Jesus taught about greatness in the kingdom of God. But only God knows.

That really is the final conclusion we must come to in the end. Only God knows, and therefore it is not something that we need to worry about or fuss over. Since every good thing from God is a reward of His grace, He alone must determine who shall receive it and what they shall receive, whether honor or rank or some other blessing. If God chooses to give a greater blessing or some special honor to those who have labored harder and suffered more, that will be wonderful. As Luther points out, all heaven will rejoice in it. No one will feel slighted or be envious of another. No one will boast or show off his medals. All will rejoice in what God has done and praise and glorify His name forever and ever.

## **TO GOD ALONE THE GLORY!**

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" *Time Magazine* Canadian ed. 18 Sep. 2006: 30.

<sup>2</sup> Van Biema and Chu, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Van Biema and Chu, 33.

<sup>4</sup>All quotations in this paragraph are from the same *Time Magazine* article previously cited.

<sup>5</sup> With these old covenant promises another consideration would be the attached curse of earthly punishments for those who disobeyed, as well as God's collective approach in dealing with the whole nation of Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Van Biema and Chu, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Quenstedt, qtd. in *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:54, footnote 85.

<sup>8</sup> F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia 1953) 3:57.

<sup>9</sup> F. Pieper, 3:54.

<sup>10</sup> M. Luther, *Luther's Works*, St. Louis ed. 7:666-668, qtd. in *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:58-59.

<sup>11</sup> F. Pieper, 3:552.

<sup>12</sup> *Luther's Works*, St. Louis ed., 8:1223-1224, qtd. in *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:553.

<sup>13</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern 1932) 191.

<sup>14</sup> G. J. Albrecht and M. J. Albrecht, *The People's Bible: Matthew* (Milwaukee: Northwestern 1996) 68.

<sup>15</sup> E. Eggerichs, *Love & Respect*, (Nashville: Integrity 2004) 274-275.

<sup>16</sup> Lenski, 251.

<sup>17</sup> F. Pieper, 3:552.

<sup>18</sup> F. Pieper, 3:552-553, footnote 83.

## The Principles and Practice of Excommunication

Paul Tiefel, Jr.

Many years ago in my pastoral ministry I had a member who was dying of cancer. The prayer was offered to God that, if it be His will, she might recover and continue in her godly role as a Christian wife and mother. When the doctor reported a remission of the cancer and a stay to the death sentence, all rejoiced and thanked God for extending her life. Only the doctor had lied, as we soon found out. The cancer had not gone away, and her time of grace was soon ended. Why this lie from the doctor? That was the question we naturally had. He had reasoned that the truth of the disease and the impending death would have outweighed her will to live, and so in his mind his job was to try to extend her life—even if it meant telling a lie.

Much could be said about that type of medical care, but I simply bring up this case to examine how we pastors and congregations are conducting our God-given care of souls. Are we really telling the truth? Or are we lying about the seriousness of the situation in an effort to keep the “patient” around a while longer?

Thankfully, the Great Physician of both body and soul, the Lord Jesus Christ, has given us the reliable procedure to follow as God-pleasing, proper care of any soul in critical danger.

**Matthew 18:15-18 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**

May the Spirit of truth who has preserved these words of Him who is the Truth guide us into all truth, especially as it pertains to this serious matter of Christian soul-care.

Of primary importance in our study we consider several key components of this passage in some detail.

A. The “*your*” and “*you*” of the passage, while spoken at that point in time to the disciples (Matt. 18:1), is certainly directed to all Christians of all time. Who would limit the surrounding verses just to the twelve? Should they alone have been concerned about offending a young believer? Is the promise of the Savior’s abiding presence with “two or three gathered in His name” only good for the disciples back then? Clearly these verses are for all Christians. It is to each Christian that Christ has given the keys of His kingdom, namely, the authority to forgive sin as well as the authority to retain sin. This is significant. It can happen that a group of Christians will assume that it’s the pastor who is to carry out this work. While it is true that this is part of his work and he is trained and called to do it, it is nevertheless the business and responsibility of every believer. Whenever a Christian has a fellow Christian sin against him, our Savior directs immediate action by that believer. No time for excuses; no point in delay; no passing the buck. Do not spread the story of this sin by first going to others. “*Go*” to the person who sinned, Jesus says, and “*tell him his fault between you and him alone.*”

B. “*If your brother sins . . .*” Yes, Jesus did say, “If your brother sins against you.” But He did not thereby limit the step of admonition as applied only to those who sin against the believer directly or personally. Nor does the Savior limit the type of sin to be addressed. That is, there is no grouping here of “big” sins which can do great harm and “little” sins which can be overlooked. It is dangerous to think of sin that way, for any sin poses the potential threat of destroying a Christian’s faith. The only cure for any sin is the shed blood of Jesus. Faith will not want to hold on to sin of any kind, but will

repent of it and flee to Christ for cleansing. It is a man-made doctrine, one which makes the Word of God of no effect, to develop a list of sins that alone qualify for excommunication. The Savior wants us to be concerned about every sin that our brother commits and to address it with the attitude exhorted by Paul: “*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted*” (Gal. 6:1).

C. “*If he hears you, you have gained your brother . . .*” vs. “*Let him be to you like a heathen and tax collector.*” In the beginning of this process the sinner is recognized and dealt with as a believer, as a fellow Christian “brother.” But by the end it is clear that through impenitence, he or she has become an unbeliever. Where along the way the impenitence drove saving faith from the heart is not known to us, but to God alone. Luther’s *Small Catechism* has wisely described this type of person with the words “manifestly [or obviously] impenitent sinner.” We are not to act on what we think or guess to be the case, but only when it is manifest, obvious, clearly seen that impenitence has displaced repentance and faith in the heart. In such cases the loss of faith has happened before we can clearly determine that the impenitence is obvious. And similarly, faith can be restored before we know it too. So our actions are always playing catch-up to what is actually going on in the person’s heart.

D. This section of Matthew 18, commonly used as the main text of church discipline, outlines steps that are truly meant for a fellow member’s spiritual good. A member of a Christian congregation is entitled to certain rights and privileges. Among these we recognize the right of a Christian wedding, a Christian funeral and burial, admission to the Lord’s Supper, and other such benefits. But also included with these rights and privileges is the opportunity to receive godly admonition when sin has been committed. There is a debt of love among the brethren of the fellowship, which is evidenced by a godly concern when I, the individual member, have sinned. No time or effort should be spared as my fellow believers launch a rescue mission to extinguish the flames of sin, whichever sin it may be. This work of Christian love takes place to some degree in every Christian service, every Bible Class, every devotion—in short, every time the Word of God (both law and gospel) is brought to the child of God.

E. Our Savior makes it clear that the next step is to be pursued if the sinner will not hear. By the word “hear” the great Shepherd of souls has more in mind than the mere use of the ears. He has in mind the “hearing” of the heart, that is, a turn from sin and impenitence to the Savior and His grace.

F. We should also note that no timetable is given by Jesus. Each step, except for the final one of excommunication, may be tried more than once. Care of souls is not to be done in accord with a mere conformity to the letter of the law or in some kind of assembly-line, mechanical fashion. The Savior who sought and found the woman at Jacob’s well, Nathanael under the fig tree, the thief on the cross, as well as you and me wants all of us to be motivated by His love for the souls He bought and to do whatever love and the Word dictate. Jude 22-23 is to the point: “*On some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.*”

### **Key points to be emphasized**

1. It bears repeating that love is to guide all actions in a case of church discipline leading to excommunication. In attempted communication, both written and spoken, the group of believers will strive diligently to remove any thought of anger, malice, or prejudice. The old Adam of the sinner being dealt with will only too quickly try to relegate the whole matter to some petty emotion. Hence the need to emphasize, implement, and communicate the motive of love.

2. Use the Word. Only the Word of God is able to stem the tidal wave of impenitent unbelief, and only the Word is able to bring a sinner back from the edge of hell. It has done that for each of us. With each case of Christian discipline in the congregation, it is imperative that the Word be brought to bear on the wayward brother's heart.
3. Certainly the sin will be identified and the law of God be brought to expose it as such, but it is very important to point out that the excommunication is for the lack of repentance over that sin. Otherwise, the disciplined soul or even some in the congregation may wonder how or by what right one group of sinners can take action for any sin done by any other sinner. And so we stress: it is not the particular sin that separates, but the lack of repentance.
4. It is likewise important that the unrepentant be told that his membership in the Holy Christian Church is at stake. Excommunication certainly has the subsequent effect of ending membership in a visible church. But the real impact—one with eternal consequences—is the declaration that because of his manifest impenitence his soul is outside of Christ's Church, the Holy Christian Church, also referred to as the invisible Church. Therefore it should be pointed out that the problem for the unrepentant person is not solved by simply finding another church or synod to join. His problem is solved only by repentance.
5. The implementation of the first step does not have to be done by the pastor. It can and should involve any Christian who is rightly aware of a fellow Christian's sin. Similarly, in selecting the one or two witnesses, the pastor may or may not be included. One case may call for a member who is a neutral third-party; another may call for a Christian member who is a friend or relative. Pray for sanctified wisdom in selecting the witnesses. Men or women may be used, but it is obvious that the individuals should be confirmed members who can adequately serve in the capacity of witnesses, both to the admonition given and the reaction it receives.

### **The relationship between excommunication and an appeal process**

Since they are sinful human beings, Christians can and do err in their judgments—as individuals, as congregations, and as synods. Only the Word of God is infallible, and in that Word Jesus spoke of how His followers would be put out of the synagogues (read excommunication) and even killed—all in the name of doing God's will (John 16:2).

It can happen, then, that a congregation errs in its judgment of excommunication. The Bible helps us to identify three contributing factors which have caused that kind of error. We can call the *first* one the "Jezebel syndrome," an error—intentional or inadvertent—in the facts of the case. In the case of Naboth (1 Kings 21), to all who heard the evidence it was an open and shut case of blasphemy worthy of death. Only a handful knew the truth: Ahab, Jezebel, the false witnesses bought for a price, Naboth, and, of course, God. Jesus has put a safeguard in the process of excommunication by giving us step two, the bringing along of one or two witnesses. This was merely a continuation of the same principle God had established in the Old Testament. "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (Deut. 19:15). See also Deuteronomy 17:6.

Yet despite this timeless safeguard from our Savior, if there happens to be an error in the facts of the case, an excommunication would not be valid. For instance, a congregation might act on the government's conviction of a crime, all the while the individual is really innocent. Or members of a family involved in a feud conspire against a rival individual. Or personality clashes cause a distortion



of the facts and a fueling of passions.

A *second error* occurs when Scripture is misapplied. Paul was on the wrong end (both sides of the wrong end) several times because of errors in biblical understanding. Early on he consented to the stoning of Stephen, because he (Saul/Paul) had rejected that Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled the Old Testament Messianic prophecies and because he falsely believed that his righteousness could be obtained by deeds of the Law. Later on he was the target of defective judgments made against him, mainly because the Sadducees had rejected the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. So also, congregations can err in the application of Scripture to a specific case, when, for example, they label as sin something which God does not call sin.

Finally, there is a *third error of religious leaders having the wrong motive*. Pilate was able to see what was behind the charges against Jesus. Matthew 27:18: "For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy." Likewise, in the case of the man born blind but healed by Jesus, the improper motive of the religious leaders became widely known. John 9:22: "His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue." The man's eventual excommunication (John 9:34) was due to a sinful motive and a false confession by those who cast him out. A similar situation is found in John 12:42: "Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue." And so it can happen that pastors or elders or the church council can get on the wrong track and lead the congregation down the path of excommunication because of a wrong motive.

For all such possible errors our Lutheran catechism has properly included this assertion: "A Christian congregation, with its pastor, uses the keys according to Christ's command by forgiving those who repent of their sins and are willing to change, or by excluding from the Christian congregation those who are obviously impenitent. These actions are as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ our dear Lord were dealing with us Himself" (Luther's *Small Catechism*, Sydow ed., underlining added). Perhaps it was because Luther himself had been excommunicated improperly (see errors two and three above) that the statement is made that only excommunications done in accord with Christ's command are valid in heaven also.

In the early days of our church body's formation, our founding fathers recognized the same need for protection from an excommunication not done in accord with Christ's command, and for that reason they provided members with a process of appeal to the larger fellowship of the synod. One may consult the CLC Constitution for the procedure to be followed.

In recent years we have had reason to re-examine the appeal procedure of our church body, with concerns expressed that notifying the person of the appeal process may undermine the congregation's action of excommunication taken over against him. So we ask: Does the synodical procedure undermine or undo in any way the steps outlined by the Savior in Matthew 18? Let's review what Jesus says.

1. Talk to the sinning brother personally and privately.
2. If he does not repent, take sufficient witnesses.
3. If the impenitence continues, tell it to the congregation.
4. If impenitence persists in spite of the congregation's admonition, excommunicate the manifestly impenitent person.

Does the process of appeal now add a fifth step? Not at all. The Savior concluded the fourth step with these words, "Let him be to you as a heathen and a tax collector." "*To you*" are the key words here, and the CLC Constitution recognizes this by saying that the whole synod will honor the action of the congregation "unless and until it is shown that the appellant has been dealt with in an unjust and

unscriptural manner” (Bylaw 6, 2002 Constitution). There is no delay or withholding of the congregation’s judgment. “Let him be to you a heathen . . .” is to be applied by the local *and* the larger fellowship of believers.

We acknowledge, however, that an individual has the right (not afforded poor Naboth!) to say there is an error in the facts of the case or in the application of Scripture. The blind man in John’s Gospel could say to God and to all others, “I was excommunicated for the wrong reason.” An excommunication not in accord with Christ’s command is not valid. Perhaps a congregation may determine an adiaphoron to be a sin. Let’s use the example of women wearing hats to church. To excommunicate a woman for not wearing a hat, i.e., to call that a sin, would be wrong. And the appeal to the larger fellowship would be the opportunity for the synod to declare its position, either by upholding the Bible’s position and seeking to correct the congregation’s action or by supporting the congregation and thereby falling into error too. In either case the synod is not adding to the steps of Christ’s discipline, nor is it putting the excommunication on hold if it carries out a process of appeal.

Now the question arises: Should the excommunicated person be notified of the appeal process available to him? Common sense says yes. What good is such a process if its existence is not known? The laws of natural man even maintain that the accused must be told of his rights when being arrested and tried. Wouldn’t the Christian congregation, in following the higher standards of love and divine truth, let the “accused” know of the appeal process that is established by the CLC Constitution?

Care must certainly be used so as not to leave the impression that the congregation is uncertain about its judgment, or that there is a time delay until the excommunication stands, or that the synod needs to confirm the action for it to be valid. But a careful wording will only serve to reaffirm that a biblical (and valid) excommunication has been done. Consider something to this effect:

“If you feel the facts in your case are in error or that Scripture has been misapplied, you may appeal this matter to the synod.”

A proper excommunication will leave the individual thinking about his or her sin, based on facts beyond dispute and what God says about sin, repentance, and the Savior. Is that not precisely what believers want the wayward soul to do? Is not the only hope for the excommunicated a focus on the Word of the Spirit, which alone is able to effect repentance and restoration of spiritual life?

The only time the process of appeal would undermine an excommunication is when the excommunication has not been done in accord with Christ’s command. And that is exactly when an undermining is needed.

### **The difference between *excommunication* and *termination* of membership**

There will be great confusion and serious harm to souls if congregations do not keep these two actions distinct, separate, and appropriately applied to their own membership matters. The chief distinction to be made is this:

Excommunication is the declaration that an impenitent soul is outside the Holy Christian Church and on the way to hell. Coincidental to this excommunication is also the recognition that the soul is no longer a member of the visible church (since he is no longer a believer).

Termination of membership, on the other hand, is simply the declaration that a person is no longer a member of the local visible church, with no statement being made about his faith, i.e., his membership in the Holy Christian Church.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, we then recognize that *excommunication* can only be for impenitence over sin and that such impenitence must be manifest for all to see. *Termination of membership*, however, may be for a variety of reasons: a difference in confession of doctrine, joining a heterodox church, circumstances which prevent scriptural admonition from taking place, or the inability to locate the member.

Confusing the two will result in unscriptural, harmful soul care. On the one hand, to excommunicate where termination is called for can result in the unscriptural concept of calling someone who holds to an error an unbeliever and outside the Church of God. There are many who do not now share our visible fellowship because of a difference in doctrine; yet we know they can have saving faith in Christ. Unless the error were to involve the doctrines of the Trinity or the deity of Christ and His atoning work, we have no business declaring a soul who holds to an error to be outside the Holy Christian Church, no longer connected to the body of Christ. We may and should warn of the dangers of false teaching, but our witness should go no farther than what God's Word allows.

Similarly, when a person is under discipline and "quits" the church before the final step, we are unable to carry out the Savior's directions to the last phase. Since we are prevented from judging that the impenitence is manifest, we can only terminate membership, not excommunicate. That should not stop us, however, from plainly stating the seriousness of the matter. We need to clearly state to the person: "Here is where we are left in our care of your soul. Because of this specific sin and your impenitence as known to us, you are at the very least in extreme danger of losing your faith, if it is not lost already. The only hope is a turn from sin back to your Savior. It is only His blood which can wash and cleanse you. Now is the day of salvation." All of that can be expressed with great urgency, but the declaration of excommunication can not be made, not without following all the steps given to us. "Self-excommunication" is not an appropriate term to use for such outcomes. An individual can not really excommunicate anyone, including himself. An unrepentant sinner who "quits" his membership has in truth excluded himself; hence the appropriate term to describe such a result is *self-exclusion*.

Obviously, it is inappropriate to excommunicate someone with whom a congregation has no contact. Matthew 18 presupposes that believers are able to find the sinning brother and bring the Word of God to his soul. In the absence of personal contact termination is all that a congregation can do as a final measure.

On the other side of the coin, great harm comes about also when a group of believers shirks its responsibility to the impenitent member. Paul severely chastised the congregation in Corinth for being careless and not taking action (see 1 Corinthians 5). How tragic it is when indifference replaces love and a soul is allowed to continue on in sin and impenitence. Equally bad is the situation when the church books are simply "cleaned up," and inactive members are terminated without following the Savior's directives for proper soul care given in Matthew 18.

A precious part of a member's rights in the congregation is the benefit of receiving biblical admonition from his fellow Christians. Every soul continually needs the Word of God brought to him in proper measure of law and gospel. How tragic and contrary to Christ it is when a Christian fellowship takes the easy route by avoiding confrontation of the sinner with the Word and simply terminating his membership.

Each soul is redeemed by the precious blood of Christ and is the object of God's earnest desire for his salvation. A group of Christians will reflect this love of Christ and His Father in their loving care for the souls among them. Thus may there be no rush to judgment. No short cut or easy way out. No lack of effort or end to prayer. No limit in the attempts to bring the Word to bear. No jumping to conclusions as to the outcome. Only the steady, loving application of the Word in accord with the Savior's plan, and all with the goal of rescuing the sinner from the tragic loss of his faith. In its practice of

excommunication the Christian congregation is to seek the same goal that Paul laid out for the church in Corinth: *“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”* (1 Cor. 5:4-5).

### **Specific points of order to be observed**

1. It should go without saying that a congregation will keep very careful records. A case of excommunication deserves more care than financial records or the church archives. It does, after all, involve the welfare of an immortal soul. Each step of discipline taken and the reaction of the sinner to it need to be documented with dates and names of witnesses. All of it needs to be preserved for future use.
2. Those involved in the admonition need to specify the sin. It does no good to call vaguely for repentance. The sinning brother needs to know what the sin is in his case and what the appropriate Word of God is that reveals such to be sin. Specify both clearly.
3. Don't rely on someone else to deliver the Word. Communication by certified mail or by e-mail may be used, but not in place of face-to-face contact. The Savior spoke of *go, tell, and hear*, not mail, write, and read.
4. The meeting of the congregation will clearly announce the soul-care issue it intends to address. Any vote on excommunication should be unanimous. The impenitence should be so obvious that all will agree to its existence. If someone is not ready to vote in favor of excommunication, action should be postponed until that individual has reviewed the pertinent Bible teaching and the facts of the case. A difference in understanding Bible teaching would be a cause for a break in fellowship (not another case of excommunication). A steadfast rejection of the facts or a failure to follow the advice of the Savior in Matthew 18 would be a cause for godly admonition to the dissenter. Love for souls that imitates the boundless love of the Savior will patiently and faithfully work through the concerns of a dissenting vote.
5. Who should sign the letter of excommunication? It is extremely important that the impenitent sinner not view the action as coming merely from the pastor or the church council. It is the church, the believers of Christ, who have taken the action. In smaller churches how appropriate it is to have all the voters sign the letter. In larger congregations where this is not possible, consider having the signatures of all the council members or all the elders. The more names the better. It is the united testimony of believers that is being brought. Among the names on the letter the excommunicated soul may recognize a relative, a respected leader, a former Sunday School teacher, a friend, or a helpful hand from the past, and such recognition may trigger within him a greater awareness of the seriousness of his situation.

### **Helpful measures in training the congregation**

For this pastor it has been a good and valuable assignment in youth or adult classes to request the Bible student to write a hypothetical letter of excommunication. The teacher will soon get the necessary feedback he needs to see if the biblical concept has been taught and understood correctly. In examining the results of the student's work, one can look for the following: action taken in love, biblical

references to the specific sin, clear presentation of law and gospel, specific details about the steps taken in accord with Matthew 18, distinction made between invisible and visible church, action taken based on manifest impenitence, and taken by the whole group of believers, not just the pastor or church council.

It may be helpful also to alert friends and family of ways they can support the action of the congregation and aid in the spiritual recovery of their loved one. For example, they may attempt to emphasize the Word of God, echo the church's call for repentance, and avoid aiding or abetting by cushioning the sin, complaining about the church, or otherwise compromising the witness of Christ's followers. They may also express loving concern for the soul of their loved one, continue in prayer, and avoid compromising expressions such as "Blessed Christmas," "Easter joy in the risen Savior," and the like, which are inappropriate to say to one whose faith has been driven out by his impenitence.

## **Conclusion**

There is no greater piece of news I can hear today or any day of my life than the news of sin forgiven in Jesus. What blessing is greater than the turning of the key which declares all my sins forgiven and heaven open to me through victory won by Christ?

By the same token, there is no greater piece of news I need to hear than the message that my impenitence over a sin has caused the key to be turned the other direction and that my sin, all of it, is *not* forgiven and heaven is *closed* by my refusal to repent. If that is my situation, I would need that message as much as the other. I would need that message NOW, before my time of grace is ended.

May God the Father grant each of His children a measure of the Savior's love so that what we need this day we are ever ready and eager to bring to our fellow Christians.

*So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).*

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## **Book Review**

**Donald Opitz and Derek Melleby: *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness—A Guide for Students*, Brazos Press, 2007, paperback, 144 pages.**

The authors of this brief but helpful guide state in their introduction: "We are writing primarily for Christian students, specifically those that are at the tail end of high school or early in their college experience" (p. 10). "We want you to find the deep satisfaction of pursuing your daily labors (for now, primarily attending classes and studying) as service to God" (p. 11). The key passage for consideration by writer and reader is 2 Corinthians 10:5: "*Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.*"

The present American college scene, however, is not conducive to such academic faithfulness. Tom Wolfe did the research and wrote the book on college life. In his work *I Am Charlotte Simmons: A Novel* he speaks of "a student culture dominated by alcohol, sex, consumption (particularly of alcohol and sex), exploitation, and, consequently, cynicism" (p. 16). Our authors contend: "Perhaps a bigger

problem than alcohol on American campuses is a pervasive disengagement with learning. Many students skip classes, scorn assignments, and tolerate poor grades. They have given up on education” (p. 17). Negative influences come from agnostic and atheistic professors as well as from their fellow students, who are more interested in partying and athletics than academic achievement.

What is needed, of course, is a Christian worldview that judges all things with reference to Jesus Christ and His revelation in the Scriptures. Developing such a worldview takes time and continuing study of the Word of God. Even in the best of circumstances, that is, within the influence of a Christian home, Christian teachers united in their confession, and fellow students who have a similar Christian background, it is difficult to maintain such a Christian worldview. How much more difficult it must be when one is surrounded by teachers who are openly antagonistic to Christian teaching and by students who really don't care!

The two authors warn: “We need to recognize the danger of deceptive philosophies and traditions and to undertake our collegiate journey with care and courage” (p. 28). “What you learn and how you live while in college really matters. And to the degree that your mind is not renewed by the gospel and your life is not transformed by the power of Christ, you will conform to the dominant culture” (p. 30).

The authors recommend personal Bible study, group Bible study, and regular worship. “As Christians, surrounded by so many competing stories and songs, it is vital that we gather at least once a week to tell the stories and sing the songs that make us a distinct people, the people of God” (p. 60). The basic Christian teachings of creation, the fall into sin, and the redemption of Christ dare never be sacrificed. The Christian teachings of Scripture need to be integrated with all other learning, so that the Christian does not become compartmentalized into two persons: the person who believes Christian teaching, or at least says he does, and the secular person who falls for all the current evolutionary and socialistic humbug. “We must continually seek to integrate our beliefs with the testimony of scripture, our words with our beliefs, our actions with our words, and our academic work with our theology” (p. 84).

So much time in college is wasted. Why not strive for excellence? For Christian students this means more than doing what is required for our courses. “To do justice to your studies, you will need to study not only the subject matter at hand like everybody else, you will also need to study the scriptures and the works of other informed Christian scholars who have explored the subject matter that is in view” (p. 119). This “double study is also the hard work that is going to prepare you to be the kind of person who can take your faith with you into the classroom without embarrassment. Even more important, double study will prepare you to take your faith with you beyond college, into your life and work” (p. 120).

From this book pastors may get some helpful ideas for counseling the young people in their care. Teachers as well may be encouraged to strive for excellence in their work and integrate Christian teaching with the subject matter of their discipline. And, of course, it would be good if our college-bound students would read this book too, perhaps in group sessions with each other. There are discussion questions at the end of each chapter, as well as recommendations for further reading.

At the present time we Christians of the Church of the Lutheran Confession have been blessed with a college that attempts to do just what Opitz and Melleby recommend: develop a Christian worldview in its students by integrating what is learned in other academic areas with the testimony of Scripture. We do not know how long we will retain the gift of Immanuel Lutheran College (ILC) in its current form of high school, college, and seminary. For almost fifty years, from the fall of 1959 to the present, we have been blessed with an ILC faculty united in its confessional Lutheran worldview (which we believe is identical to a Christian worldview). We would like to see a pattern develop in which more and more of our young people not only attend the four years of high school, but at least the first two years of college also. Of course, the argument against this recommendation is that such a course will take too much time and money. But some things are more important than time or money, and a solid Christian

education is certainly one of them.

At the same time, we encourage our young people to do more than just enroll at ILC. They need to be “outrageous” rebels against the commonly accepted view that college is a time for fun and games, and instead use that time faithfully for serious study and also as a precious opportunity to recognize and develop the personal gifts which God has given to them.

- *David Lau*