

Going for the Gold

In the recent Olympic games in Salt Lake City some of the finest athletes in the world competed for gold, silver, and bronze medals. In his epistles to the Body of Christ Paul uses athletic competition to illustrate the spiritual race in which all believers are engaged.

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. I Corinthians 9:24-27

All believers participate in this race. We cannot win the prize if we do not run the race properly.

And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully. II Timothy 2:5

Good Works – Required or Desired?

It is vital to keep in mind the truth of salvation by grace. We do disservice to the Word of God if we mix the information of rewards for service with the truths of salvation by grace. While some perceive a conflict between these two truths, this is not the case. It is necessary to keep each truth in its proper context to bring harmony to these two doctrines.

No truth is more clearly or strongly presented by Paul than the truth of salvation by grace through faith, and eternal life as a free gift of God's grace.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. Ephesians 2:8,9

And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work. Romans 11:6

Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Romans 4:4,5

While these verses demonstrate that works are not the basis of salvation, there are also many verses in Paul's epistles indicating that the works of believers will be

evaluated, and either approved or disapproved.

Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. I Corinthians 3:12-15

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. II Corinthians 5:10

But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Romans 14:10-12

The distinction between the free gift of salvation and rewards for service are seen in many areas of Paul's epistles.

As believers we *have* a sanctified position in Christ. We are saints.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. I Corinthians 6:9-11

However, in service for the Lord we abstain from sin *to be* sanctified for God's purpose.

For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; I Thessalonians 4:3,4

As believers we *have* a position of absolute acceptance in Christ.

To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. Ephesians 1:6

However, in our daily lives we seek service that is acceptable to God.

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Romans 14:17,18

As believers we have a *position* in the heavenlies, seated at the right hand of the Father in Christ.

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved:) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: Ephesians 2:5,6

However, in our *walk* on earth in this life, we are subject to all the trials and tribulations that beset fallen creation.

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. Romans 8:22,23

In discussion of rewards we must keep these distinctions in mind and never mix the principles of service with the principles of salvation.

What Sort of Work?

To understand rewards for service, it is important to understand the basis of God's evaluation. Which works will God approve?

In I Corinthians 3 Paul teaches that God's judgment is based on what *sort* of work is done. Our human nature evaluates based on size or visibility. Surely preaching to 10,000 people in a soccer stadium is more highly rewarded work than sharing the gospel with your neighbor across a kitchen table. Feeding thousands of orphans in Africa must be infinitely more valuable than dealing with your spouse and children in grace. These evaluations are based on the size and visibility of the work, not on the *sort* of work. This is not to say that a large and visible work cannot be of the proper *sort*, but that God evaluates only the *sort* and not the size and visibility

Since God's evaluation is based on what sort of work we do, we must know what sort of work he approves.

As believers we have a position as sons of God.

Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. Galatians 4:1-7

As sons of God we are conformed to His image and are to manifest his attributes and characteristics.

For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Romans 8:29

The two characteristics that best describe God are grace

and truth. These two characteristics are described when Moses asked God to show His glory.

And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped. Exodus 34:6-8

These same two characteristics of God are revealed in Jesus Christ, the physical embodiment of God.

For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. Colossians 2:9

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. John 1:14

These are the qualities that God looks for in service for Him.

But speaking the truth in love [grace], may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: Ephesians 4:15

Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt [truth], that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man. Colossians 4:6

God seeks works of grace and truth. These works of grace and truth might be small in human terms and hidden from public view, but they are of great eternal value in God's sight. Sharing the gospel with that unsaved neighbor and dealing properly with your family is a work of grace and truth as great as any other. This is the *sort* of work that God rewards.

The Crown of Victory

Now that we understand the nature of the work that God rewards, we consider the nature of the reward itself. In I Corinthians 9 Paul refers to our reward as an incorruptible crown. He also makes reference to a crown awaiting him.

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. II Timothy 4:7,8

In Scripture a crown is more than just an ornament worn on the head. A crown represents authority.

And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. Revelation 13:1

The crowns on the heads of the beast represent the ten nations over which he exercises authority.

This meaning of the word crown is also seen in the way we commonly use the term today. When the "crown of England" takes a position or acts in the affairs of England, we are not referring to the physical crown on the queen's head but to the authority that she wields. The crowns for which we strive are not merely ornaments, medals, or trophies. They are positions of authority.

Knowing *what* our reward is, we must determine *where*

our reward is. Paul speaks of positions of authority in two different realms, heaven and earth.

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: Colossians 1:16

Just as there are positions of authority in the earth that we can see, there are corresponding positions of authority in heaven that we can't see. Based on all that Paul tells us about our heavenly position, these are the positions over which we will have authority.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: Ephesians 1:3

And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: Ephesians 2:6

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, Ephesians 3:10

For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Philippians 3:20

In connection with these positions of authority, Paul tells us we will judge angels.

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? I Corinthians 6:1-3

The reward we strive for is a position of authority over principalities and powers in the heavenly places. Just as God's earthly people, Israel, will exercise His authority in the earthly kingdom, His heavenly people, the Body of Christ, will exercise His authority in the heavenly kingdom. This position is our reward for faithful service.

The Suffering and the Glory

Now that we know the nature of the work that God rewards, and the nature of the reward, we must understand the relationship between the two.

In his epistles, Paul relates the sufferings of this life to the glory that we will manifest in eternity future.

Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us: If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself. II Timothy 2:10-13

The point of this passage from II Timothy is Paul's desire for believers to have salvation "with eternal glory" Also the result of suffering is we will "reign with him [Christ]." But, if we deny Him in our suffering, then He also will deny us the position of reigning, which suffering could have produced. He will however, remain faithful to his promise of salvation and eternal life. In other epistles Paul expands further on this relationship between suffering and reigning.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; II Corinthians 4:17

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. Romans 5:1-5

The afflictions of our lives allow us to realize our hope, which is eternal glory - the glory of God. (Remember that we have already seen that God's glory is manifested in his character of grace and truth.) The passage from Romans 5 spells out details of this process. As we experience sufferings and tribulations, it produces patience. As we patiently endure the tribulations, we gain valuable experience about how God strengthens us in the midst of tribulations. This experience produces our ultimate hope, manifesting God's glory - His grace and truth for all eternity. Paul gives his personal testimony about how this principle worked in his life.

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. II Corinthians 12:7-10

Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. Philippians 4:11-13

The trials and tribulations Paul experienced produced patience and glory in His life because he learned to endure sufferings in grace and truth. Manifesting God's grace and truth is our vocation in eternity.

That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:7

Relying on God's grace to get us through the trials and tribulations of this life brings experience for manifesting that grace in eternity future.

Only Experienced Need Apply

God is looking for experienced saints to take positions of authority in heavenly places for all eternity. In good times and bad, based on the principles of His grace and truth, we gain needed experience. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, we are rewarded with a position of authority that perfectly matches our ability to manifest God's grace and truth.

