

## DEGREES OF REWARD IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG\*

The lordship-salvation debate rages on. In the recent pages of this *Journal*, John MacArthur pursues his thesis first laid out in detail in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, considering it now in light of the epistle of James.<sup>1</sup> One of the respondents to the article, Earl Radmacher, declares MacArthur's view to be one of three examples of contemporary evangelicalism's return to a view of authority akin to Roman Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> A more balanced assessment, and one of the finest brief reviews of the debate, appeared already in an article by Darrell Bock.<sup>3</sup> Whatever else one thinks of arguments against lordship salvation, one ought to acknowledge their commendable concern to preserve a full-orbed Biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. But ironically it is precisely in those circles—largely but by no means exclusively dispensationalist in heritage—that rightly seek to preserve the strong Reformation tradition of God's freely granted justification apart from any human merit that often a contrary doctrine is also vigorously promoted: the doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven. Believers may enter into God's family entirely apart from their own good works, but the degree to which they will enjoy heaven is said exclusively to depend on how they live out their Christian life—to what extent they obey God's commandments and mature in the faith. In short, though few would put it so baldly one is left with justification by faith and sanctification by works.

In the twenty years of my adult Christian life I have grown progressively more uncomfortable with any formulation that differentiates among believers as regards our eternal rewards. Several recent, lengthy conversations with students and pastors who have been equally troubled about this issue and about some of its very practical consequences in ministry have heightened my concern. Joe Wall's new book, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers*,<sup>4</sup> troubles me greatly. On virtually every major passage he treats concerning the topic of rewards I find his exegesis unconvincing. I will state my thesis at once and then briefly

\*Craig Blomberg is associate professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, P.O. Box 10,000, Denver, CO 80210.

<sup>1</sup> J. F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985); "Faith According to the Apostle James," *JETS* 33 (1990) 13-34.

<sup>2</sup> E. D. Radmacher, "First Response to 'Faith According to the Apostle James,'" *JETS* 33 (1990) 35-41.

<sup>3</sup> D. L. Bock, "A Review of *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *BSac* 146 (1989) 21-40.

<sup>4</sup> (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

defend it. I do not believe there is a single NT text that, when correctly interpreted, supports the notion that believers will be distinguished one from another for all eternity on the basis of their works as Christians. What is more, I am convinced that when this unfounded doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven is acted upon consistently—though, fortunately, it often is not—it can have highly damaging consequences for the motivation and psychology of living the Christian life.

I begin with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16). The story is well known: Employees hired at many different times throughout the day all receive equal pay despite unequal work. I have recently defended in book-length form the hypothesis that many of Jesus' parables make three main points, one per main character. In my study of this passage I conclude:

The three main points which the three groups of characters [in this parable] suggest . . . all deal with the status of individuals before God at the final judgment. (1) *From the earlier groups of workers, one learns that none of God's people will be treated unfairly (cf. v. 4—"whatever is right I will give you"); that is, no one will be shortchanged.* (2) *From the last group of workers comes the principle that many seemingly less deserving people will be treated generously, due to the sovereign free choice of God.* (3) *From the unifying role of the master stems the precious truth that all true disciples are equal in God's eyes.*<sup>5</sup>

"All true disciples are equal in God's eyes." One does not have to accept my theory for interpreting the parables to find similar statements among commentators on this passage from a wide variety of theological persuasions. Expositors debate whether the different laborers represent people coming to Christ at different times of life, in different eras of world history, or at different stages in Jesus' ministry. They do not agree as to whether those first paid represent Pharisees, who are excluded from the kingdom, or disciples, who are included. But almost everyone agrees that Jesus is teaching about a fundamental equality here among those who are truly his disciples. All are rewarded alike. Consider the following catena of quotations from disparate sources:

In the parable of Jesus, the labourers who were engaged last show nothing to warrant a claim to a full day's wages; . . . in this apparently trivial detail lies the difference between two worlds: the world of merit, and the world of grace; the law contrasted with the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

To insist, as the parable does, that invitation, not justice, is the way of the kingdom radically subverts the kingdom of God as a reward for a faithful and just life.<sup>7</sup>

The parent-God evidently wishes to relate to all the children with a radical equality. . . . Once individuals and groups of people realize that they have

<sup>5</sup> C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 224.

<sup>6</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 139.

<sup>7</sup> B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 298.

their place in this community and that they can neither lose nor earn more of their acceptance, they begin to be freed from the need to compete with one another for what they most need in life.<sup>8</sup>

Because God is so good, the principle of grace triumphs. The principle in the world is that he who works the longest receives the most pay. That is just. But in the kingdom of God the principles of merit and ability may be set aside so that grace can prevail.<sup>9</sup>

It is hard to see how one can take the imagery of the parable in any other way. In fact so clearly does this story demonstrate grace and equality that most nonevangelical commentators dismiss v. 16 at once as a redactional conclusion that misses the whole point of the passage. Yet there are at least three ways of understanding "the last will be first, and the first will be last."<sup>10</sup> To be sure, this maxim could be an attempt to reinstate a system of ranking people within the kingdom, albeit on a radically new basis. But it may also be a vivid equivalent to the more prosaic truth that all numerical positions are interchangeable.<sup>11</sup> What is more, Jesus has probably repeated this refrain to tie the parable back in with 19:16–30, which concludes with nearly the identical words (v. 30) and in which "the last" are those excluded from the kingdom.<sup>12</sup> A similar use of this proverb appears even more plainly in Luke 13:30. In any event, no ranking need be seen among genuine believers.

The imagery of the laborers in the vineyard also squares well with the more abstract concepts of "grace," "heaven" and "perfection." The vast majority of Scriptural texts that encourage people to prepare for judgment day refer simply to two options: eternal life, or eternal death. Salvation is consistently said to be by grace, damnation by works (cf. esp. Rom 3:21–5:21 with 1:18–3:20 respectively).<sup>13</sup> There is an important asymmetry here that preserves the sovereignty of God, giving him all the credit for redemption, alongside the accountability of men and women, giving them all the blame for being "lost" (cf. esp. 9:22–24).<sup>14</sup> There does seem to be Scriptural support for the doctrine of degrees of punishment in hell, according to the extent of one's conscious transgression of God's laws (see esp. Luke 12:47–48; cf. Matt 10:15; 11:22, 24; cf. also possibly Rom 5:13),<sup>15</sup> but

<sup>8</sup> F. H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 37–38.

<sup>9</sup> S. J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 77–78.

<sup>10</sup> All Biblical quotations in English follow the NIV.

<sup>11</sup> See esp. J. B. Bauer, "Gnadenlohn oder Tageslohn (Mt 20, 8–16)," *Bib* 42 (1961) 224–228.

<sup>12</sup> The refrain is phrased as it is also because of the reversal of sequence in payment in the parable itself. Cf. R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 126: "The beautiful staging must be observed. Although the order of hiring is, of course, from the earliest to the latest, the payment of the wages is in reverse order. As a result we have a heightening of expectation on the part of the earliest workers."

<sup>13</sup> On which see esp. N. M. Watson, "Justified by Faith; Judged by Works—An Antinomy?", *NTS* 29 (1983) 209–221.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. esp. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979) 2.492–498.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. esp. I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 544.

precisely by this very lack of symmetry between works and grace we would not expect endless gradations of reward within heaven. And when one reflects soberly on the vast gulf that separates even the most righteous of believers from God's infinitely perfect standards it is hard to see how the differences among Christians that seem to loom so large in this life could figure significantly in God's eternal reckoning. The differences in elevation between Mount Everest and the Mariana Trench seem negligible when the earth is viewed from Mars.

The Biblical data concerning heaven, sparse though they are, seem in concord with these suppositions. The most extensive teaching passage on the topic is Revelation 21-22, and the clearest nonmetaphorical statement in these chapters is 21:4b: "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain"—absolutely nothing to make one sad. But surely people would live with some unending sense of regret and sadness if they realized that they had not attained to as high a level of enjoyment or privilege in heaven as they might have, had their lives on this earth proved more meritorious. Theologians often sense this problem and dismiss it by assuming that we will not be conscious of such distinctions or that the great happiness of heaven will outweigh whatever small sense of regret remains.<sup>16</sup> But these concessions, unsupportable by any Biblical texts, give away precisely what the doctrine of degrees of reward is supposed to ensure: a powerful motivation for living a life that pleases God now. If such gradations are not preceptible or do not matter, why introduce them in the first place?

Other inconsistencies abound as theologians try to make sense of a doctrine of varying rewards for Christians. Just what will they involve? Suggestions include capacity for service, added responsibilities, degrees of bliss, an enriched relationship with God.<sup>17</sup> The most honest writers admit they are speculating at this point, as with Millard Erickson, who nevertheless goes on to ask: "May it not be that the difference in the rewards lies not in the external or objective circumstances, but in the subjective awareness or appreciation of those circumstances?"<sup>18</sup> In other words, heaven is really the same for everyone, but not everyone experiences it equally well. This explanation stands on its head the more popular view noted above that, subjectively, we all equally appreciate differing objective realities. One cannot have it both ways—though Erickson, no doubt unwittingly, tries, when he goes on to add that no one will be aware of these subjective differences anyway.<sup>19</sup>

A final logical question could be asked: If the heavenly aspect of eternal life represents perfection, is it not fundamentally self-contradictory to

<sup>16</sup> Cf. respectively M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 3.1233-1234; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939) 737.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. respectively J. MacArthur, *Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1988) 114; B. Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982) 273; Berkhof, *Theology* 737; J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 132-133.

<sup>18</sup> Erickson, *Theology* 3.1234.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

speak of degrees of perfection? Surely theologians ought to reconsider a doctrine that involves an elementary lexical and conceptual fallacy.

But what of the Scriptural data? 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 clearly distinguishes between the qualities of believers' works and their rewards on judgment day. Five key passages speak of believers' crowns (1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4) and are often interpreted to mean that some Christians will receive more of them than others. Revelation 4:10 seems to pick up on this imagery, depicting the twenty-four elders casting their crowns before God's throne. Various texts identify people who are "least" or "greatest" in the kingdom (e.g. Matt 5:19; 11:11; 18:4; Mark 9:34-35; Luke 9:48). And numerous other passages are often cited. Does not Scripture itself force one to believe in eternal differentiations among Christ's followers?

The crowns are most easily dispensed with. A majority of commentators agrees in each of the five instances that our texts are not at all talking about degrees of reward in heaven but simply about eternal life. In 1 Cor 9:25, Paul compares our perseverance to the athlete striving after an Olympic crown. But unlike a race on a track in which there can be only one winner, "we" [Christians] all should compete for "the crown that will last forever." This "crown" is the same as the "prize" of vv. 24, 27, which one fails to receive if one is "disqualified" (*adokimos*). Paul is not concerned to compare first place with second or third but to contrast finishing the race with not finishing at all. In the words of Gordon Fee, the crown "is not some specific aspect of the goal but the eschatological victory itself."<sup>20</sup> Being declared "approved" (*dokimos*) or "not approved" (*adokimos*) is also the imagery of pottery fired in kilns to see if it will survive or not. Eternal life and death are at stake here, not gradations of reward.

A too simplistic understanding of "eternal security" has probably led many Christians to doubt that Paul could have seriously considered not "making it to heaven." But true Reformed doctrine recognizes that saints are those who persevere. No Biblical text offers assurance of salvation for people who flagrantly repudiate Christ without subsequent repentance. Anthony Hoekema captures the sense of 1 Cor 9:26-27 quite well: "Only as he thus continued to discipline himself did Paul feel justified in claiming his spiritual security in Christ. He did not dare to claim this blessing while being careless and indolent in his daily battle against sin. And neither may we."<sup>21</sup>

"The crown of boasting" of 1 Thess 2:19 proves no different. It appears in synonymous parallelism with the "hope" and "joy" of eternal life itself, the pleasure of unending fellowship with other believers whom we have played some role in helping to nurture. As Howard Marshall explains, the expression is a Hebraism (cf. Prov 16:31), equivalent to

"a crown to boast of" or rather "a crown to exult in"; from what Paul says elsewhere about the impossibility of men boasting of their own achievements

<sup>20</sup> G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 437.

<sup>21</sup> A. A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 251.

before God (Rom. 3:27; 1 C. 1:29) it may be taken for granted that Paul is not looking forward here to any sort of proud display of his apostolic achievements before the Lord Jesus, but is rather thinking of the joyful exultation which he will be able to feel when the work which God has done through him (1 C. 15:10) is recognized.<sup>22</sup>

All true believers will experience some such exultation, no doubt in varying ways, but the passage says nothing of different crowns for different quantities of joy.

In 2 Tim 4:8 commentators debate whether *dikaïosynēs* in the expression "crown of righteousness" is an appositional genitive or ablative of source. But either way it can hardly be a reward that distinguishes one believer from another, in view of the conclusion of the verse: "which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."<sup>23</sup> Surely one who has never wished for Christ's return cannot have truly been his disciple.

In Jas 1:12 the "crown of life" almost certainly employs an appositional genitive, inasmuch as it applies to those who have persevered under trial, who are in turn taken to equal all who love God.<sup>24</sup> Again, although not all believers always respond properly to God or to trials, all do so sometimes. In the larger context of James it seems clear that such predicates refer to all Christians, not just to some specific category of them (cf. 1:2–4; 2:5; 3:17–18; 5:7–11).

1 Peter 5:4 leaves fewer contextual clues to help us interpret the "crown of glory that will never fade away," which faithful elders receive. But in view of the recurring pattern in the previous four passages it is probably most natural to take this crown too as a metaphor for eternal life. Every other reference to believers' "glory" in 1 Peter confirms this presumption (1:7; 4:13–14; 5:10), so that the elders' crown is nothing other than that which "all who share in the Christian hope" can expect.<sup>25</sup>

The twenty-four elders who cast their crowns before God's throne probably remain irrelevant to the topic at hand. The most likely interpretation of Revelation's symbolism at this point takes the elders to be angelic creatures rather than raptured believers. The way these elders distance themselves from Christ's work on behalf of humanity, in the song they sing in Rev 5:9–10, seems to confirm this understanding.<sup>26</sup> Angelic behavior can scarcely prove anything about the likelihood of human rewards. Even if the elders were human, their number would suggest a combination of the twelve patriarchs of Israel with the twelve apostles,<sup>27</sup> in which case one may still not deduce any general doctrine that would apply to all believers. And even if these elders did turn out to stand for the

<sup>22</sup> I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 87.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (London: Black, 1963) 210.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. P. H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 80.

<sup>25</sup> J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1988) 287.

<sup>26</sup> R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 135.

<sup>27</sup> P. E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 72.

whole Church<sup>28</sup> their very surrender of their crowns would prove my point: Whatever differences believers may experience on judgment day are not perpetuated throughout eternity.

1 Corinthians 3:11–15 reinforces this observation. Here if ever appears a clear distinction between believers whose works endure their fiery purgation and those whose flimsy construction projects are consumed. Paul makes plain that both categories of Christians “will be saved” (v. 15), but one only as “escaping through flames” since such a person “will suffer loss.” Still, two caveats must be registered. First, while there is absolutely no disputing the uniqueness of every believer’s personal encounter with Christ on judgment day, nothing in the text says anything about these distinctions among believers’ experiences persisting for all time. In like fashion, 1 John 2:28 anticipates that some Christians may experience more shame than others when Christ returns,<sup>29</sup> but no Scripture ever suggests that shame remains a component of heavenly life beyond the immediate context of the *parousia*.

Second, it is not nearly so clear as many assume just what the implied object of *zēmiōthēsetai* (“he will suffer loss”) is in 1 Cor 3:15. Most take it to be “his reward” of v. 14, but the nearer noun, syntactically, is *to ergon* (“the work”) of v. 15a (NIV “what he has built”). This fits perfectly in context. As David Prior explains, what the believer loses, then, is the satisfaction of seeing much of his life’s work count in an eternal perspective befitting kingdom priorities. “No doubt every Christian’s work is mixed in quality; no doubt we shall all have the awesome sadness of seeing much of our work *burned up*.”<sup>30</sup> The reward that more faithful believers enjoy, then, becomes nothing more or less than knowing that they did spend substantial time on building things that would last into eternity: winning people to the Lord, disciplining them, being good stewards of all the resources with which God entrusted them, and the like.<sup>31</sup> Most commentators recognize that 2 Cor 5:10, with its mention of believers appearing before the judgment seat of Christ, refers back to 1 Corinthians 3, so what one does with the former text must carry over to the latter. And both of these texts speak only of judgment day, not of an everlasting hierarchy in heaven.

There remain those passages that speak of individuals who are “least” or “greatest” in God’s kingdom. The crucial question here, however, is this: Which of the two temporal aspects of the kingdom is in view—present, or future? In Matt 11:11 (par. Luke 7:28) only the present aspect of the

<sup>28</sup> As e.g. in J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 107; C. C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986) 512.

<sup>29</sup> See esp. S. L. Hoyt, “The Negative Aspects of the Christian’s Judgment,” *BSac* 137 (1980) 128–130.

<sup>30</sup> D. Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985) 60 (italics his).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. also Fee (*First Corinthians* 143–144), who emphasizes the corporate nature of the reward or its loss, in view of the plural pronouns and the context of vv. 16–17. The destruction then becomes “the church’s failure to function any longer as a viable alternative to Corinth by manifesting the nature and fruit of the gospel within totally pagan surroundings.”

kingdom makes any sense. If "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist," and "yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he," it cannot be because every Christian who has ever lived, however carnal, has proved more virtuous than John the Baptist. Rather, Jesus must mean that John, despite being the greatest of prophets of the OT age, lost out on an incredible privilege by not living long enough to see the new covenant inaugurated with the complex of events including Christ's death, resurrection, exaltation and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>32</sup>

Matthew 11:11 should thus be allowed to influence our understanding of similar sayings of our Lord. In 5:19, those who practice and teach God's commands are "great" in the kingdom while those who break them and teach others to do likewise are "least." As an isolated saying this could be taken to refer to rewards in the *eschaton*, but it is at least equally appropriately interpreted as referring to those whom God deems more or less pleasing to himself now in this life even as they perform their teaching ministries.<sup>33</sup> A careful reading of 18:4 in context confirms this suggestion. There Jesus declares that "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." But in the previous verse he has stated equally forcefully that "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." So the criterion for greatness is precisely the criterion for entrance.<sup>34</sup> *Meizōn* is clearly a superlative used as an elative, as was common in Hellenistic Greek. The present tense "is" probably also is significant. As in the partial parallel in Luke 9:48 ("Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is greatest"), it is status within the present aspect of the kingdom that Jesus has in mind (so also in Mark 9:34–35).<sup>35</sup> Whereas the world glorifies those who exhibit the character traits of machismo, God deems most worthy, now in this same world, those who remain humble and unassuming (cf. Matt 5:3, 10; cf. vv. 4–9).

Numerous other texts might be cited in defense of rewards, but none bears the weight of the doctrine. Matthew 19:28 promises the twelve that they will judge the tribes of Israel, but 1 Cor 6:2–3 reminds even the carnal Corinthians that they will judge the whole world and even angels. It is hard to see the apostles' "privilege" as any greater honor, if indeed it is even limited to the twelve.<sup>36</sup> The final Matthean beatitude promises a great reward in heaven to those who endure persecution (Matt 5:12), but

<sup>32</sup> For more detailed exegesis of this text and the other passages from Matthew to be discussed see C. L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, forthcoming).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 101.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 332: Jesus "rejected their envious competition."

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Marshall, *Luke* 398: "The clause is concerned not with *becoming* great by acting as a servant but with *being* great" (italics his).

<sup>36</sup> Most commentators on Matthew see the twelve as "transparent" for all disciples of Jesus. On this passage cf. e.g. R. T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 288.



this text simply repeats the theme of v. 10 in which the blessing for endurance is "the kingdom of heaven." The "great reward" of v. 12 must therefore refer to the kingdom itself rather than some special status within it. What is more, in the context of the beatitudes God's reward is more a promise of "future recompense for a present condition of persecution and reproach" than a response to piety.<sup>37</sup>

The same must be said of the other Matthean "reward" passages. The reward that those who do their "acts of righteousness" before men, to be seen by them" (6:1) fail to acquire, in view of the parallel with hypocrites and pagans (in vv. 5, 7), must be heaven itself. The reward that those who appropriately minister to prophets, righteous people, and "little ones" (10:41-42) receive is reception by God (v. 40; cf. also Mark 9:41). "Treasures in heaven" (Matt 6:20; par. Luke 12:33; Matt 19:21) appears in synonymous parallelism with "getting eternal life" (Matt 19:16) and "entering the kingdom of heaven" (19:23). In 1 Tim 6:19, those who "lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age" are coterminous with those who "take hold of the life that is truly life."

Several NT texts warn believers that they must give an accounting to the Lord for every deed performed (Rom 2:6; Rev 22:12) and word uttered (Matt 12:36; Luke 12:2-3), but nothing in the contexts of any of those passages suggests varying degrees of reward or the perpetuating of distinctions beyond the Day of the Lord. The purpose of Christians' standing before God's bar of justice is to declare them acquitted, not to embarrass them before the entire cosmos for all their failings (Rom 2:7; Rev 22:14; Matt 12:37a).<sup>38</sup> The contrast in each of these three passages is between the saved and the lost, not between two or more different kinds of believers.

In Matt 10:35-45 and parallels, James and John ask Jesus if they may sit at his right and left hands when he comes into his glory. Undoubtedly, in view of the standard Jewish doctrine of rewards they were hoping for the highest status possible in the coming age, though in view of conventional Jewish messianic expectation they may well have conceived of an earthly kingdom and temporal glory. Jesus' reply in 10:40 leaves the door open for some people to receive such a higher status, but tellingly Christ refuses to discuss that option, redirecting his disciples' attention to servanthood instead and employing the language of present rather than future greatness (vv. 43-44) already observed in Luke 9:48. If I am wrong and the typical evangelical doctrine of reward is correct, that doctrine still may not be used as a motivation for "empire-building."<sup>39</sup> But fresh on the heels of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (cf. the sequence of passages in Matt 20:1-16, 20-28) it is hard to imagine that Jesus is here

<sup>37</sup> W. C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh; T. and T. Clark, 1907) 42.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955) 630.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8.432: "One of the ironies of language is that a word like 'minister,' which in its roots refers to a helper, one who 'ministers,' has become a badge of honor and power in religion and politics."

reinstating heavenly hierarchies at all. The shorter parallel in Luke 22:26–27 seems more clearly to limit differentiation of status to the present age: "The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." This synonymous parallelism identifies "the greatest" as those who are currently ruling over God's people with appropriate servant-leadership.

The parables of the talents (Matt 25:14–30) and the pounds (Luke 19:11–27) are often cited as teaching the doctrine of varying heavenly rewards. But this is to press the imagery of the parables beyond what even a controlled allegorization warrants. In each passage three servants appear. Two reflect faithful stewardship, one depicts gross negligence. In each case the solitary talent or pound is taken from the faithless servant and given to the first of the two faithful investors. But Jesus has drawn such careful parallelism between each of the first two servants, having their master praise them with identical language (Matt 25:21, 23), that it is impossible to conceive of the extra talent/pound as a reward that distinguishes the one faithful servant from the other. Either the economy of parabolic narrative has prevented Jesus (or the evangelists in their reporting) from repeating the same reward verbatim for the second servant, or else this detail is not to be allegorized at all but viewed simply as a necessary part of the story line in which the master must continue to keep his money distributed among those charged with its oversight.<sup>40</sup> And if the reward of a talent or pound may not be allegorized, then logically neither may the imagery of ruling over cities, which functions in the parable in the identical way as the master's redistribution of his money. The contrast in both Matthew and Luke is between the two faithful servants on the one hand and the unfaithful servant on the other—that is, between believers and unbelievers. No distinctions between categories of believers are introduced. To argue with Wall that the "darkness" of Matt 25:30, which is "outside" and in which there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth," is simply a less desirable compartment in heaven<sup>41</sup> defies all credulity. Matthew uniformly applies such language elsewhere to hell (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51).

One might continue at some length. 1 Corinthians 4:5 talks of each person receiving his or her "praise from God" when the Lord returns. But "praise" more naturally suggests a temporary response than permanent differences in status. Philippians 3:14 finds Paul pressing on "toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." But in context that prize is no more or less than "to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (v. 11). As in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul wants to make sure that he perseveres in his faith so that he does indeed receive

<sup>40</sup> Cf. further Blomberg, *Parables* 216–217. If there is a point to be made from the distinction in amounts given to the various servants it is merely that "grace never condones irresponsibility; even those given less are obligated to use and develop what they have" (Carson, "Matthew" 517).

<sup>41</sup> Wall, in private communication with the author. I have heard this view in a number of church settings but never seen it in print in any academic literature on the parables.

eternal life.<sup>42</sup> 2 John 8 warns against losing "what you have worked for," so that "you [or, more probably, "we"] may be rewarded fully." The better textual reading, "we,"<sup>43</sup> by itself cautions against a doctrine of individual rewards. John is anticipating the same reward as the Ephesian Christians. But even if "you" be accepted and interpreted as a distributive rather than collective plural (also less likely), the reward in context can be nothing other than seeing the work of the ministry at Ephesus endure against false, gnostic teachers.<sup>44</sup> From several angles the same conclusion recurs again and again. There is no unambiguous NT doctrine of varying eternal rewards for believers.

But it is time to conclude and to discuss some of the significance of this study. We live in a culture that grows ever more performance-centered with each passing year. Competition infects children's spirits from far too early an age—in sports, in school, at play. Adults face longer hours on the job with less job security and more performance-based evaluation (merit pay, commission, pressures for promotion, and the like) than was ever anticipated a generation ago when labor-saving devices were being heralded as ushering in the age of the thirty-hour work week with manifold opportunities for leisure and recreation. Not surprisingly—but nevertheless tragically—the spirit of competition, comparison with one another, and rewards on the basis of merit have overwhelmed many aspects of Christian living as well, both corporately and personally.

The NT manifesto of grace stands out in stark contrast, calling believers to exhibit the countercultural character traits of living apart from the basis of varying rewards, to provide much-needed relief from the symptoms of a sick society. Far too many Christians whom I have personally encountered think that God relates to them just like the taskmasters they have known in their families and at their work. If only they can be a little more obedient today, God will like them more and deal with them more favorably. Conversely, when they fail, especially when repeated failures plague them over a short period of time, they are convinced that God will be quick to punish them. Even a cursory survey of Christian counselors and psychologists reveals how endemic this problem remains in North America.<sup>45</sup>

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ ought to liberate believers from all such performance-centered conceptions of the Christian life. An important step in that direction would be to jettison this misguided and discouraging doctrine of eternal rewards that distinguish one believer from another. The important counterquestion may then be posed: What motivation remains for obeying any of God's commandments? Why not become a

<sup>42</sup> Cf. G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983) 155: The prize was "to be in Christ, i.e. Christ was his prize."

<sup>43</sup> B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: UBS, 1971) 719.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. D. W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 426: "The purpose of such guard is so that spiritual gains already made may not be lost."

<sup>45</sup> Cf. esp. S. B. Narramore, *No Condemnation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), even if at times he swings the pendulum too far away from motivation by guilt.

Christian and then expend as little effort as possible serving Christ? The very fact that the counterquestion follows naturally encourages us that we are on the right track: It is the very question Paul himself anticipated in Rom 6:1 after he articulated his theology of justification by faith.

The correct answer would seem to have at least two prongs to it. First, to continue following closely Paul's own train of thought, the person who comes to such a conclusion demonstrates that he or she has not truly appreciated or appropriated salvation at all. In other words, one of the main reasons for trying to live as good a Christian life as possible is to make sure that we do in fact persevere, so that we do not lose out on eternal life altogether (as in 1 Cor 9:24–27; Phil 3:10–14, discussed above).

Second, and even more fundamentally, proper Christian motivation for pleasing God should stem from a profound sense of gratitude for what Christ has already done for us. The complete salvation that he has already acquired for us leaves no room for further human merit. The person rescued from near drowning does not need to be given additional reasons for expressing deep and heartfelt thanks to his or her rescuer. Children who fully appreciate the sacrifices their parents have made to give them an expensive education or a secure inheritance will want to please them even apart from the promise of further gifts. In the language of the conclusion to the parable of the unprofitable servant: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10). Nothing we could ever offer to God could begin to repay him for the immense gift of forgiveness he has wrought on our behalf through the death of his dear Son. John Donahue nicely encapsulates this truth:

God's justice is different from human justice. It forgives unpayable debts and summons the disciples to live a life of forgiveness to others *as an expression of gratitude*. To do otherwise is to risk the ultimate (i.e., eschatological) judgment pronounced on the unmerciful servant. God's justice is also not to be limited by human conceptions of a strict mathematical judgment where reward is in exact proportion to merit. Mercy and goodness challenge us, as in the Laborers in the Vineyard, to move beyond justice, even though they do not exist at the expense of justice. God's ways are not human ways.<sup>46</sup>

Why then do we hear so little of the full-orbed Biblical doctrine of grace? I suspect it is because grace offends the sensibilities of the "natural man" that remain deeply imbedded in all of us. Grace by definition is not fair. As Donahue concluded, "God's ways are not human ways." If one of the primary uniquenesses of Biblical Christianity *vis-à-vis* other world religions is salvation by grace rather than works, then it is not surprising that even within Christianity the biggest danger to keeping the faith pure would be a reinstatement of works-righteousness, even if more subtly disguised under the garb of "sanctification by works."<sup>47</sup> As one of my stu-

<sup>46</sup> J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 84–85 (italics mine).

<sup>47</sup> E. Disley ("Degrees of Glory: Protestant Doctrine and the Concept of Rewards Hereafter," *JTS* 42 [1991] 77–105) notes that the development of this doctrine was in part the legacy of

dents aptly phrased it, in most of the conservative Christian circles of which he had been a part the Christian life was like a free, trial membership to an elite country club: The first year is wonderful, but after that you pay through the nose.<sup>48</sup>

There is at least one evangelical tradition, however, in which grace without any variation according to merit remains deeply imbedded. That tradition is the Lutheran tradition. Martin Luther often shied away from speaking of Christians even standing before God's judgment seat, preferring instead to call it his mercy seat. It was a bar of judgment only for unbelievers. In his sermon on "The Sum of the Christian Life" preached in Wörlitz on November 24, 1532, Luther declared:

If we are ever to stand before God with a right and uncolored faith, we must come to the point where we learn clearly to distinguish between ourselves, our life, and Christ the mercy seat. . . .

The man who can do this will be the justified man. All the others operate with a feigned faith. They talk a lot about faith but they mix things together, as a barkeeper mixes water and wine, by saying if you live in such and such a way God will be gracious to you, and they turn the mercy seat into a judgment seat and the judgment seat into a mercy seat. . . . Therefore, keep these two widely separated from each other, as widely as ever you can, so that neither can approach the other.

See, if that is the way faith were preached, men would be justified and all the rest; a pure heart and good conscience through genuine, perfect love, would follow. For the man who through faith is sure in his heart that he has a gracious God, who is not angry with him, though he deserves wrath, that man goes out and does everything joyfully. Moreover, he can live this way before men also, loving and doing good to all, even though they are not worthy of love. . . .

This is the highest security, the head and foundation of our salvation.<sup>49</sup>

No doubt Luther has overstated himself. This study has surveyed numerous texts in which the mercy seat is also a judgment seat for Christians. But it agrees with Luther's profound insights concerning the motivation for Christian living. Judgment for true believers poses no threat for them precisely because whatever shame they variously experience at the great assize is then over and done with and does not persist into the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>50</sup> The only threat is that one's profession of faith

---

rejecting the Roman Catholic notion of purgatory and trying to find a more appropriate substitute. She also notes that in addition to the Lutherans one of the most vigorous opponents of the doctrine was John Cameron of Glasgow in his *Praelectiones* of 1632 (p. 87).

<sup>48</sup> Or—more prosaically, but nevertheless more candidly than most—with H. Z. Cleveland, "Reward," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 962: "Salvation is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9) whereas rewards are earned (1 Cor. 3:14)."

<sup>49</sup> *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 51.282-283. I am indebted to Mrs. Robin Ottoson for this reference.

<sup>50</sup> The view that rewards differentiate us during the millennium but not thereafter does not trouble me, since it accomplishes the same purposes for which I am arguing. Even a thousand years is an undefinably small fraction of infinity and will pale into insignificance after it passes. But I find no textual warrant for this view.

might prove entirely vacuous so that one is excluded altogether from the company of the redeemed.

Here is the crucial contribution of those who today advocate lordship salvation. Ironically, those who seek most strenuously to preserve justification by grace may lead professing believers to think they are saved when in fact they are not. Grace will have been preserved—but not justification. God assures salvation only to those who presently believe in Jesus as Son of God (1 John 5:13). Claims of commitment, long since abandoned, may not be salvaged by any appeal to a category of “carnal Christian,” though Paul does use that term for those who continue to believe but remain unduly immature in their faith (1 Cor 3:3). The major spokespersons for historic Calvinism and Arminianism agree that people commit apostasy and are lost for all eternity. They merely disagree as to what that proves about their prior state (cf. e.g. 1 John 2:19 with Heb 6:4–6). The greatest danger of the doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven is that it has misled many people into thinking that the very nominal professions that they or their friends have at one time made will be sufficient to save them, even if they fail to receive as high a status in heaven as they might have. This is in no way to argue for works-righteousness. It is merely to remind us of the consistent Biblical theme that true, saving faith does over time lead to visible transformations in lifestyle and to growth in holiness (Matt 7:15–27; Gal 5:6, 19–24; Jas 2:14–26; 1 John 3:4–10). Without such evidence that God’s Spirit has truly taken up residence and begun to work within a person, Biblical Christianity is absent. But even with the help of God’s Spirit, no believers ever so approach the standards of God’s holiness that it would make sense to eternally reward them differently from their Christian peers. May all evangelicals recover this precious legacy of the Protestant Reformation and do away with the depressing and damaging notion of eternal degrees of reward in heaven once and for all.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> I am indebted to several of my colleagues for their reading and critique of this study: R. Alden, J. Beck, P. Borden, B. Demarest, H. Robinson, H. Westing and S. Wenig. I am equally grateful for the comments of J. Wall and L. Atcheson. Above all I wish to acknowledge the encouragement of my colleague, J. Means, in giving me the initial impetus for putting these thoughts into manuscript form.