

## Eternal Life for Those Who “Do Good”?

### Romans 2:6–11

(from “A Survey of Romans,” John Hepp, Jr.)

Romans 2:2–16 gives four principles by which God will judge the world:

- a. by truth (the abstract principle), vv. 2–5
- b. by deeds (the concrete principle), vv. 6–10
- c. without respect of persons, vv. 11–15
- d. by means of Messiah, v. 16

The most attention is given to the second principle, in verses 6–10. This is stated in a remarkable structure, shown in the chart at the end of this appendix. Stifler (pp. 39–40), adapting from John Forbes, describes it. There are “four triplets, balanced against one another” and including repetitions and reversals of order. These triplets speak about people who do good deeds and people who do evil deeds—and what they will get in judgment. In each and every triplet, the three lines deal with the character, the pursuits, and the appropriate awards of the good or the bad. Sometimes the order of those lines is reversed.

Such statement and restatement emphasize what is taught: that in the judgment God will give eternal life to those who do good and condemn those who do evil. Look at what is said about the former group:

God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” To those who by **persistence in doing good** seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life....glory, honor and peace for everyone who **does good**. (2:6–7, 10)

Later verses specify in what way some people do good:

For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who **obey the law** who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, **do by nature things required by the law**....) (2:13–14)

If those who are not circumcised **keep the law’s requirements**....The one who is not circumcised physically and yet **obeys the law**.... (2:26–27)

It seems clear, then, that some people—even some “Gentiles who do not have the law”—do good by doing what the law requires. Those who persist in doing good, says Romans 2:6–10 with much emphasis, will be given eternal life. How are we to understand such statements, especially in view of the purpose and conclusions of this section (1:18 to 3:20)?

- This section is designed to prove not that some are all right but that all are condemned.
- The conclusion claims that “there is no one who does good, not even one” (3:12). And the law’s function was to show that. It was not given to help some get saved but so that “every mouth may be silenced and the whole world be held accountable to God” (3:19).
- It is mankind’s incapacity to do good which calls for the doctrine of salvation by faith in the next section.

In other words, we have a dilemma; the apostle seem to contradict himself. (a) Since he denies that anyone does good (3:12), it would seem that good people do not exist. Yet, (b) he repeatedly refers to good people in chapter 2. Furthermore, the principle of judgment according to deeds could never result in eternal life if there will be no good people.

Some avoid this dilemma by denying that the “good” people of Romans 2 actually exist: they are hypothetical people, not real ones. This view implies that even the picture Romans 2 draws of the judgment is hypothetical, not real. But the view is weak since there is no hint in Romans 2 that such people do not exist or that the judgment will only condemn. In fact, many other Scriptures (e. g., Job 1:1, 8. 22; 2:3; Acts 10:35) speak of good people. And many other passages say about the judgment in summary (see the introduction to the chart) what Romans 2 says in detail.

Another solution to the dilemma admits that there will be “good” people in the judgment—but **not good enough** to get eternal life. This view assumes that the standard must be perfection (cf. Gal. 3:10). But Romans 2 calls for “persistence,” not “perfection.” And by criticizing the moralist for not repenting (vv. 4–5), it implies that the “good” people had sinned but then repented.

Here are two other solutions from well-known commentators (with emphasis added). Each of them believes that Romans 2:6–10 describes real good people who really receive eternal life in the real judgment. Each of these commentators solves the dilemma by the way he defines “doing good” (“well doing” in KJV). The first one defines it only as faith. The second one includes also deeds that result from faith.

- What is welldoing in this age? **Welldoing in this age is believing** on the name of the Son of God. “What must we do, that we may work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent” (Jn 6:28–29, ASV). (McClain, p. 76)
- [The apostle] is not speaking here of faith’s beginning, but of its completion; not of justification, but of judgment. **The deeds that gain a reward clearly imply faith** in him who does them. For in the opposite side of the parallel indignation and wrath are said to come to those who do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness; that is, this sad award comes to them as a result of their unbelief. (Stifler, pp. 40–41)

Will every person justified by faith also practice good deeds? Of course. “Saints...obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus” (Rev. 14:12). That is the glory of the gospel and the covenant of the Spirit—to make us good. By these God not only declares us righteous; He also transforms us (“We shall be like him,” 1 John 3:2; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). In theological terms, *imputation* inevitably leads to *sanctification*. This is an essential teaching of Romans 1–8.

Jesus pictured the same judgment event as Romans 2, and the same two groups. The event: “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). The two groups: those “in their graves [who] will hear his voice and come out—**those who have done good** will rise to live, and **those who have done evil** will rise to be condemned” (5:28–29). In his excellent commentary on John, Leon Morris comments on these verses (emphasis added):

This does not mean that salvation is on the basis of good works, for this very Gospel makes it plain over and over again that men enter eternal life when they believe on Jesus Christ. But **the lives they live form the test of the faith they profess**. This is the uni-

form testimony of Scripture. Salvation is by grace and it is received through faith. Judgment is based on men’s works.

Morris also quotes John Calvin regarding the same verses:

He **marks out believers by their good works**, just as elsewhere He says that a tree is known by its fruit...The Papists’ inference from these passages, that eternal life repays the merits of works, may be refuted without any difficulty. For Christ is not here treating of the cause of salvation, but only distinguishing the elect from the reprobate by their own mark. (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 322)

**Romans 2:6–11: God’s Judgment**

In the following chart the main caption (“God’s Righteous...”) uses words from Romans 2:2, 3, 5. The four column captions in row 2 use words from Jesus’ promise that “a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—**those who have done good** will rise **to live**, and **those who have done evil** will rise **to be condemned**.” (John 5:28–29). Everything else is quoted from Romans 2:6–11. In row 1 verse 6 quotes from Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12 and is similar to many other Scriptures. After reading verse 7 in the first cell of row 3, keep reading cell by cell to the right, then down, then cell by cell to the left.

God’s Righteous Judgment, Based on Truth, Romans 2:6–11			
6. God “ will give to each person according to what he has done . ”			
THOSE WHO HAVE DONE GOOD	TO LIVE	THOSE WHO HAVE DONE EVIL	TO BE CONDEMNED
7. To those who by persistence in <b>doing good</b> seek glory, honor and immortality, →	he will give <b>eternal life</b> . →	8. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and <b>follow evil</b> , →	there will be <b>wrath and anger</b> . ↓
for everyone who <b>does good</b> : first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ↓	10. but [ <i>there will be</i> ] <b>glory, honor and peace</b> ←	for every human being who <b>does evil</b> : first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ←	9. There will be <b>trouble and distress</b> ←
11. For God does not show favoritism .			