

Degrees of Reward & Punishment

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Salem

Various

INTRODUCTION:

One of the most clearly taught lessons in the Bible is the fact that all people will be judged at the end of time.

- For example, in **John 5:28-29**, the Lord Himself said, *“Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”*
- Later, the apostle Paul (in **Romans 14:12**) also said, *“So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.”*
- And then (in **2 Corinthians 5:10**), *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*

So we learn from these Scriptures that we will all be judged at the end of time and that our eternal destiny depends on what we have done during our rather brief time on this earth.

- With these thoughts in mind, there may be several people here this morning who would like to know what the Bible teaches concerning the different degrees of punishment.
- I hope that most of us would agree that this is an interesting and also a very important question.
- We will be looking at a number of different passages and as we look at these passages I would like for us to answer the following four questions:
 1. What does the Bible say about degrees of punishment?
 2. What does the Bible say about degrees of reward?
 3. What is one major objection to this concept?
 4. What should these things mean for those of us here this morning?

I. But first of all, though, WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT VARYING DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT WHEN THIS LIFE IS OVER?

But before we even go to the Scriptures, please just think with me for just a moment about how reasonable it is to say that there are different degrees of punishment.

- In our own legal system, for example, we know that some crimes are worse than others and therefore deserve a more severe punishment.
- We can hardly imagine a judge giving the same punishment to a person who rolls through a stop sign as he or she would give to a serial killer—the judge would quickly be removed from the bench.
- And even with the taking of another human life, there may be negligent homicide, or voluntary manslaughter, or murder in the second degree, or even murder in the first degree—each representing a greater amount of intent, and each therefore indicating greater guilt and punishment.
- As far as I know, there has never been a court system that gives out the same punishment for all crimes.
- And so the courts have generally adapted the punishment to fit the crime, and it has been this way from Old Testament times.

We think back, for example, to the Law of Moses.

- In **Exodus 21**, the Lord very clearly set forth two different punishments for the crime of one man striking another.
- If the victim dies (according to **Exodus 21:12**), then the one who is guilty is to be put to death.
- However, if the victim lives but is disabled (according to **Exodus 21:18-19**), then the one who is guilty is to pay a penalty—he is to pay for his lost time and must take care of the victim until the victim recovers.
- It is no surprise, then, that the Lord would also employ varying degrees of punishment when this life is over.

If you will, please look with me at two very interesting passages from the book of **Matthew**.

- In **Matthew 10:15**, right after Jesus tells the disciples to shake the dust off their feet when they are rejected, the Lord says, *“Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.”*
- And then the Lord seems to apply the concept in the very next chapter.
- Matthew is talking about the Lord, and this is the account from **Matthew 11:20-24**...

20 *Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.*

21 *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*

22 *“Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.*

23 *“And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.*

24 *“Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.”*

And so we find that the Lord refers to three cities on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

- These were places where the Lord had spent a lot of time—places where he had performed many miracles.
- The Lord had spent roughly three years in this general area.
- Huge crowds had come out to hear the Lord teach and preach.
- The feeding of the 5,000 took place in this area.
- Several of the apostles lived in this area.
- And so the Lord says that these people had had just about every possible opportunity to hear the truth and repent.
- In fact, of all the people in the world, these people were the most privileged.
- They had personally heard Jesus preach.
- They had personally seen the miracles.
- They were eye-witnesses, and yet they were in the process of rejecting the good news.
- And so concerning Chorazin, the Lord says, *“...it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.”*
- Perhaps some of you will remember Jezebel—perhaps the most wicked woman in the Bible—Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Tyre.
- That tells us something about Tyre.
- Tyre was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 BC—a very wicked place.
- Jesus says that it would be better for Tyre than for Chorazin in the Day of Judgment.

In **verse 23**, the Lord says that it would be worse for Capernaum than for Sodom.

- And again, we also know something about Sodom—Sodom and Gomorrah were the two cities destroyed during the days of Abraham—destroyed with fire and burning sulfur from heaven.
- Jesus said that those who heard Him speak and those who saw the miracles would be worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment.
- Degrees of judgment, therefore, will be based at least partly on the opportunities that people have had to hear the gospel message.

In terms of eternal punishment, then, that means that those of us here in the United States are living in one of the most dangerous places on the face of the earth.

- Here in the US, we can purchase a Bible at just about any bookstore.
- You can even get a Bible at Wal-Mart.
- You can get God's word for free online.
- You can read God's word on your cell phone.
- The Lord's church is active in every state.
- In other words, there is no excuse for not knowing about the Lord.

Sodom, and Gomorrah, and Tyre, and Sidon, were all living in open rebellion to God, and they will be punished.

- However, Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and Capernaum will have it even worse, because they got to see the Lord in person and hear His words for themselves.

If you will, please look with me at another passage—a passage in **Hebrews 10**.

- The writer of **Hebrews** is trying to convince his readers acknowledge the hope that they have for salvation because of Jesus' sacrifice and he is trying to convince them of the value of holding on to Christianity—**Hebrews 10:23-31**...

*23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;
 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,
 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another;
 and all the more as you see the day drawing near.
 26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains
 a sacrifice for sins,
 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME
 THE ADVERSARIES.
 28 Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three
 witnesses.
 29 How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son
 of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has
 insulted the Spirit of grace?
 30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE
 LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE."
 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

When someone forsakes the assembling of the church together, and when someone goes on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth (in other words, if you know better but you do it anyway), the writer of **Hebrews** says that that person has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and that person will receive a "*much severer punishment*" even than those who died under the Law of Moses.

- For those of us in a saved condition, if we turn away from grace, we are treating God's own Son like road kill.

- If we could even just try to see this from God’s point of view, then perhaps we might just start to understand **Hebrews 10**.
- But it certainly appears from this passage that there will be some varying degrees of punishment on the Judgment Day.

Another passage is found in **Luke 12** as Jesus tells a rather unpleasant parable about an unfaithful servant.

- In **Luke 12:47-48**, we find the last two verses of the parable, where the Lord said, “*And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.*”

And so in we have a reference here to one slave who knew what he should have done, but did not do it—he will receive many lashes.

- But we also have a reference to a slave who did not know what he was supposed to do who will receive just a few lashes.
- In other words, it appears (once again) that our knowledge of God’s law will be taken into account on the Judgment Day.

I have known several people to make a very interesting argument: “**Since we will not be punished as severely for things we do not know about, then it would be better to be as ignorant as possible!**”

- And so in a sense it would be much safer to never attend a Bible class, never read the Bible, and never listen to a sermon.
- That is very convenient, but the problem is, God will take into account how much knowledge we could have gained.
- And again, consider our situation here this morning: We are in a room surrounded by Bibles—it’s already too late for us!
- We don’t have any excuses! Out of the nearly 7 billion people on this planet, we, of all people, will want to be prepared for the Judgment Day.

Here is another problem with this argument: Consider a remote island.

- If all people are saved in their ignorance, and we go preach to them, and only half obey the gospel, then we have effectively caused the other half to be lost.
- We have turned the good news into bad news.
- But the truth is, we are lost because of sin and ignorance, but we are saved through the gospel.
- It would be to our advantage, then, to learn as much as possible and tell as many as possible.
- And going back to the parable, the slave with no knowledge was still punished—he was not saved—he was still beaten—but just not with as many stripes as the slave who knew more.

There is another passage in **2 Peter 2:20-22** which speaks of false teachers who were at one time faithful Christians, Peter says, “*For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.’*”

- In other words, those who become Christians and then turn back to the world (according to Peter) will end up being worse off than they were even before obeying the gospel.

In times past, I have imagined hell containing several different levels of punishment.

- I have pictured bigger flames in the depths of hell and some kind of horrible torture going on for the worst of sinners and perhaps just a severe discomfort for those who simply never responded to the gospel.
- However there is a part of me that wonders if part of the punishment isn't in the persons' mind.
- I mean, imagine being lost forever—in torment—and realizing that you had heard Jesus speak.
- Imagine being lost and knowing that you had actually met Jesus face-to-face, that you had been in the crowd at the feeding of the 5,000, or even knowing that at one time you had been a faithful member of the church, that at one time you had been in this building, that you had heard classes and sermons, but had turned away from the truth.
- The self-torment will come from the fact that we realize we should have done something about our sin or remained faithful when we had the chance.
- Truly, the agony of torment would be multiplied many times over!—"If I had only... If I had only responded when I had the opportunity."
- At least this is something for us to consider.

Before we take a look at what the Bible has to say about varying degrees of reward, I would like us to consider another passage is found in **Ezekiel 3:17-19**.

- This passage addresses the fact that we will be punished for not teaching others.
- God said to Ezekiel, *"Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me. When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet if you have warned the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself."*
- For someone who knows that someone else is doing something wrong and fails to give a warning (as I understand it at least), the one who knows but does not tell will be held at least partially responsible for the other person's sins.
- This is very close to what we find in **James 3:1**, where James said, *"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment."*
- So we see that those who lead others away from the truth or do not warn them will be punished with a stricter judgment on the Judgment Day.

II. **For just a moment, let us move on and consider the other side of this: WILL THERE BE VARYING DEGREES OF REWARD IN HEAVEN?**

And again, just from a human point of view, it certainly makes sense.

- If we make use of more opportunities, will we receive a greater reward?
- My feeling is that we will. I personally do not see how it could be any other way.
- Think, for example, about the different levels of enjoyment right here in the worship service this morning.
- Out of the ___ or so people here this morning, hopefully we are all enjoying the service, but aren't there ___ different levels of enjoyment going on?
- Some may be on the verge of boredom, others may have a polite interest, but then there are others who are completely absorbed in the service—completely enjoying the singing, and the prayers, and the worship.
- We are all in the same place, we are experiencing the same things, so where is the difference?
- The difference is that there are different capacities for enjoyment.
- It has been said that when an elephant and a rabbit go down to the river to get a drink, both may fill up with water, but one drinks a whole lot more water than the other!

From a secular point of view, two people listen to a piece of music—one is a trained musician, a college music professor, and the other is not.

- Who appreciates it more?
- Two people go to the county fair and look at the 4-H woodworking projects—one person has never worked with wood in his life, and the other teaches a high school shop class.
- Who appreciates those projects more?
- That is the way I look at this question applied to heaven, but let us at least consider several passages.

First of all, please consider with me **1 Thessalonians 2:19-20**, where the apostle Paul says, *“For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.”*

- We read here that when the Lord returns, the Christians in the city of Thessalonica will be the apostle Paul’s *“hope,”* his *“joy,”* and his *“crown of exultation.”*
- When someone teaches an unbeliever to the point where he or she puts on Christ in baptism, and if that person stays faithful, Paul seems to teach here that the one who does the teaching will receive at least some level of “bonus” joy on the Day of Judgment.
- We will all be happy beyond our wildest dreams, but for those who have led others to the Lord, it seems that there will be just a little deeper appreciation for it.

A second passage is found in **1 Corinthians 3:6-15**, and it also involves those who lead others to the Lord.

- The apostle Paul says, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”*
- This is certainly a difficult passage to understand, but my understanding of it is that the building blocks in the last part of this paragraph refer to the people that we bring to the Lord during our lifetime, and these people are represented by various materials.
- Over time, the people we convert are tested.
- Some are like straw, in that they give up right away.
- Others are like wood, in that they are faithful for a while but then give up over time.
- Others, though, are like gold or precious stones.
- They are faithful until death and pass the testing of this life.

As I look at **verse 14**, it appears to me that if the people we bring to the Lord remain faithful, we will receive a special reward when this life is over.

- This reward is not the teacher’s own salvation, but it is in addition to the teacher’s salvation.
- In fact, it would be possible for someone to convert many people who stay faithful and then for the teacher to actually end up being lost himself.

- In **verse 15**, Paul says that if someone's convert falls away, that person will suffer a "**loss**," but he is not talking about the loss of his own salvation, but the preacher or teacher will lose his extra reward.

III. Due to time constraints, we will not read the whole parable, but ONE OF THE MAIN OBJECTIONS TO WHAT I'VE SAID SO FAR THIS MORNING IS FOUND IN THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD IN MATTHEW 20.

You might remember that those who were hired at the 11th hour received exactly the same wages as those who came in at the 1st hour.

- However, it is far from certain that the parable even deals with heaven at all.
- In fact, many people believe that it was directed at the Jewish people to tell them that the Gentiles (the newcomers) would enjoy the kingdom (or the church), just the same as the Jews who had been considered God's people for hundreds of years.
- And so the main lesson is that Jews and Gentiles stand on equal footing in the church.

IV. As we close the lesson this morning, I want us to ask ourselves, SO WHAT? Or in other words, WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR THOSE OF US HERE THIS MORNING?

First of all, I would suggest that if we want to truly appreciate heaven, we need to truly develop an appreciation for spiritual things here in this life, and certainly the church is a place where we can prepare ourselves for enjoying heaven as we should.

- If God is not very interesting to us, or if worship is not very exciting to us, then it is possible that heaven will not be a very interesting place either—assuming we even get there at all!
- Or in the form of a question: How can we expect to enjoy heaven if we are nearly bored to death by an hour of singing here on this earth?
- If worship is an annoying distraction, something that we must endure so that we can get back to doing what we really want to do in the world, then it is possible that we will not be going to heaven anyway!
- It has been said that the Lord will not force heaven on those who are not really prepared for it.
- So, first of all, we can develop an appreciation for spiritual things here in this life.

Secondly, I would suggest that this morning's lesson should serve as a reminder that hell is real and that a lot of people are going to go there.

- In fact, the Lord Himself had a whole lot more to say about hell than He did about heaven.
- So, let us not be intimidated by the world around us.
- I know they will cut on us for being judgmental and all of that, but hell is a real place and it is actually quite easy to go there.
- Many people have the idea that hell is only for the worst of the worst, that maybe there will only be two or three people there—certainly Hitler and Stalin, and maybe Osama, but beyond that, hell will be a very lonely place.
- And yet we remember the words of Christ in **Matthew 7:13-14**, "***Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.***"

And then finally, I would suggest that this morning's lesson should reinforce with all of us the importance of teaching others.

- It will be so awesome to go to heaven, but that blessing will be so much sweeter knowing that we have brought someone with us—a next-door neighbor, a child, a parent, a good friend!
- There is a special reward, perhaps a deeper appreciation, for those who have explained the gospel to others and have seen them through to the point of conversion.
- And yet we know that the reward is not just for the one who does the baptizing, but the reward is especially for the one who does the teaching.
- The actual dunking does not really take much effort at all, but there is a special reward for those who do the teaching, for those who do the inviting, for those who start the conversation.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we close with the good news that heaven is open to every person.

- No one has to go to hell.
- I owed a debt I could not pay, but Jesus paid a debt that He did not owe.
- The Day of Judgment is getting closer every day.
- It is closer today than it was yesterday, and tomorrow it will be closer than it is right now, and the degree of our reward or punishment will depend on what we do right now.
- If you are not a Christian and you believe in Jesus and if you are ready to turn away from sin, and if you are ready to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins, you can let us know about your decision.
- We would love to be able to help you to begin your spiritual journey as a Christian.
- That journey begins by washing away your sins (Acts 22:16) through baptism.

Comments or Questions?

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