

Eternal Life by Doing Good - Romans 2:6-7, 10, 13

⁶ who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: ⁷ eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.

¹⁰ but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹³ (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified).

Can a person obtain eternal life by doing good or be justified by keeping the law? Yes, of course—that’s what these verses in Romans say—at least speaking theoretically. Some would argue that these verses teach how one can obtain eternal life or prove they are justified by continuing to do good or obeying the law. But how are these verses used in context and can a person be good enough to satisfy God’s perfect justice? Later, the Apostle Paul will declare that there is no one who does good and no one can be justified by keeping the law (Rom. 3:10-20). He asserts that justification is through faith alone (Rom. 3:21-4:25). Does he carelessly contradict himself?

Mankind’s guilt is undeniable.

In chapter 1, Paul shows how humanity naturally does not acknowledge God and therefore all have become corrupt in thought and actions. This “unrighteousness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” merits God’s wrath (1:18). The indictments of chapter 1 lead to more specific conclusions in chapter 2. In 2:1-16 he shows that the self-righteous moralist suppresses the truth of their guilt by assuming moral superiority over those who commit the obvious sins of chapter 1. The moralists commit them also or “approve of those who practice them” (1:32). Their sense of morality, flawed as it is, at least acknowledges that God has a standard of righteousness, for these Gentiles have the law of God written in their hearts (2:14-15). Paul proceeds to show in 2:17-29 how the Jews also are guilty before God because they do not keep the laws that they teach. He thus demonstrates that all humanity is under sin and therefore all are guilty before God (3:9-20, 23). His conclusion couldn’t be clearer.

God’s judgment is fair.

Paul conveys in chapter 2 the central truth that the character of God is totally just and fair (cf. Gen. 18:25). God gives to each person what that person deserves. If someone continually does good without deviation, he will be rewarded with eternal life (1:6-7) and if he keeps the law perfectly, he will be justified (or declared righteous) by God (2:13). The reward for perfect behavior is also characterized by “glory, honor, and peace”—not temporal possessions, but eternal experiences (2:10). The retribution for those who disobey God’s truth is His indignation, wrath, tribulation, and anguish (2:8-9).

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God dispenses these judgments based on at least three prevalent principles. He judges “according to truth” or that which corresponds to His own righteous character in contrast to man’s unrighteous character (2:2-5). He also judges according to works, or the life actions that people choose (2:6-10). The third principle is one of impartiality, for God judges both those without the law (Gentiles) and those under the law (Jews) with the same standard of His righteousness. In a word, God is completely just and fair.

Some might conclude that if God gives eternal life to those who do good and justifies those who keep the law, this suggests it is possible for people to do so. On the contrary--Paul’s purpose is to affirm God’s just character, not the possibility of salvation by doing good or keeping the law. He later demolishes any such possibility by declaring that there is none who does good (3:12) and none who deserves to be justified by the law (3:20; Cf. Gal. 3:21; James 2:10).

Christ’s righteousness is free.

Paul has effectively closed the door to any possibility of people saving themselves eternally or of being declared righteous by God. That allows him to open a door of hope with the pivotal words of 3:21-22: “*But now the righteousness of God is revealed apart from the law . . . even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.*” It is not by good deeds or law keeping, but through faith in the One who lived the perfect life and fulfilled all of God’s righteous law. Those who believe in Christ as Savior are “justified freely by His grace” because Jesus paid for our sins: “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:24). Our best behavior cannot pay for our guilt before a righteous God.

Conclusion

God’s ideal standard for salvation is perfect obedience. He demands perfection or a sinless life to obtain eternal life. If someone so lived, then these verses in Romans 2 argue that God in His perfect justice would give that person eternal life. But no one does, so we need a perfect Savior who will give us a free undeserved gift of eternal life. God does not “grade on the curve” but grades on the cross. We are not saved by our imperfect performance, but by Jesus Christ sacrificing His perfect life on the cross on our behalf. Eternal life is God’s gracious gift to us who believe in Christ’s righteousness, not our own.