Ever Notice This In John’s Gospel?

Perhaps you have read John’s Gospel dozens of times, but never have given any thought to these words of Jesus:

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good [things], unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil [things], unto the resurrection of damnation. (John 5:28-29 KJV)

We all glaze over this. We trust our Modern Gospel has the better truth. We read this verse but we somehow block its truth from penetrating our minds. Yet, so far, we see Jesus here is saying the same thing we saw in His answer to the young rich man and the Torah-scholar. It is the same message Jesus gave John about those who do God’s commands and thereby enjoy the right to eat of the tree of life and enter the New Jerusalem — the abode of God. (Rev. 21:14.)

1. Compare: “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” (Eccles. 12:14.) Compare also Jesus’ statement after talking of the “good things” or “evil things” that come out of the mouth from the heart says: “every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” (Matt. 12:36, 37.) Thus, the “good things” and “evil things” include the words of your mouth.

2. See “Right To The Tree Of Life” on page 373 et seq.
Those Who Have Done Good Things Are Resurrected

Let’s break John 5:29 down to see its blunt but rather surprising meaning.

TABLE 1. John 5:29 Analyzed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If have done good things (plural)</td>
<td>Resurrection to Life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If have done evil things (plural)</td>
<td>Resurrection of Damnation.</td>
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</table>

The word for good is agathos. It is in the accusative plural of a word meaning good thing. Thus, more literally, this passage says those who have done “good things” will rise to eternal life. In contrast, Jesus says those who have done “evil things” — the plural of phaulos meaning bad thing — rise to damnation.

These plurals are important because some wedded to the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace try to spin Jesus so He means the saved were resurrected because they did only one good thing — believed. However, that is only permissible because our English translations lack the clarity that the underlying Greek word for good thing is in the plural. Jesus is talking about those who did good things, not merely one good thing, such as believe.

Then, of course, the cheap grace reading is ignoring something even more fundamental. Jesus contrasts the ones who did “evil things” with the ones who did “good things.” Jesus says salvation precisely turns on whether you did “good things” or “evil things.” Jesus’ message was blunt.

Interpretation

Gathercole is an evangelical scholar. He acknowledges in John 5:29 that “John’s Jesus [says]...the criterion for whether one is punished or receives life at the eschaton [i.e., the age to come] is the ‘doing’ of good or evil.” Actually, to repeat, Jesus said it is whether one was doing good things or evil things that will make the difference.
Interpretation

Jesus does not say the criterion is whether you believed one time or not. The criterion, and the only criterion mentioned, is that you have done good things as opposed to evil things. If taken literally, this means Christians are not shown any favoritism over non-believers in the judgment-by-works process. Apostle Peter precisely had this same understanding. He wrote in 1 Peter 1:17: “And if you call on the Father, the One judging impartially according to the work of each [one], conduct yourselves in fear [during] the time of your sojourn [fig., life on earth].” (ALT)

In fact, Jesus later gave Apostle John a vision of this final judgment process. John sees all the dead, including those listed in the book of life, uniformly judged by this criterion of works:

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. (Rev 20:12 ASV.)

3. Simon J. Gathercole, Where Is Boasting: Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5. (Eerdmans 2002) at 114. However, Gathercole claims that John’s Jesus does not equate “doing good” with “obeying Torah” because of Jesus’ answer in John 6:26-29. (Id.) He means if faith is a good work in John 6:26-29, then it alone is what Jesus meant by “good things” that cause one to be resurrected in John 5:28-29. Salvation remains supposedly by faith alone. However, work in John 6:26-29 does not mean faith. First, Paul’s usage in Romans 4:4-5 & Eph. 2:8-9 proves pistis (faith) excludes the meaning of erga (works). Thus, Jesus would not call faith a work. Also, Jesus in context means His ministry is the work that should lead to pisteuo eis Himself. Also, John 6:26-29 cannot solve John 5:28-29 for the simple reason that Jesus said the plural do good things in John 5:28-29. He did not endorse a single command to believe. Finally, Jesus elsewhere speaks again of “good things,” and says they come from the “good treasure” of the heart (Matt. 12:35). Is this faith? No. Isaiah 33:6 says the “treasure” is the “fear of the Lord” not belief in the Lord. Paul similarly calls this the “treasures of wisdom,” not faith. Col.2:3.
The Key Of The Book Of Life: Personal Responsibility

Moses previously spoke of this same book of life mentioned in Rev. 20:12. God’s response explained the process by which names are added and erased, and judged. Moses asks God to forgive the people’s use of the golden calf during Moses’ trip up the mountain:

Yet now, if you will, forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray you, out of your book which you have written. And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. (Exo 32:32-33.)

God’s response above explains that names are in this book, but when you sin against God, your name is erased. Once in, however, absent God’s blotting your name out, you have life. Moses offered to lose entry in this book in solidarity with Israel’s fate to move God to forgiveness, i.e., making himself an offering to appease God’s wrath. God responded by saying obedience is an individual responsibility. Personal sin is the criterion of who is in and who is blotted out.

Then how does atonement interplay with judgment? If what God told Moses is true, no one can offer their own damnation as a substitute to save another from the consequence of unrepentant disobedient behavior. How do we then understand the interplay of personal judgment-by-works and substitutionary atonement?

This is an area of confusion. The solution is to stop confusing judgment by-works principles with atonement principles. Substitutionary atonement is simply the payment which God offers to those who have need of forgiveness of sin (which is everyone). At the same time, Jesus explained

4. See: “And... there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. (2) And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Dan 12:1-2 ASV.)
Interpretation

atonement applies to *only a person who has properly repented from and appeased the one whom they offended by sinning* (i.e., reconciled with the one offended). See page 1 et seq. As a result, atonement by Jesus does not let you pass the judgment by works on a personal review by God. Rather, if you pass the judgment by works where failure is mitigated by prior repentance from sin, *then* atonement applies!

As Apostle John explained Jesus’ message on atonement, Christ’s atonement only applies as we *walk in the light* including *confessing sin* when we fail to *walk in the light*:

(7) but *if we walk in the light*, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and *the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin*. (8) *If we say that we have no sin*, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) *If we confess our sins*, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and *to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. (1 John 1:7-9, ASV.)

Thus, whether these sins are overlooked and atoned for depends on the *walking in the light* characteristic that represents *personal cleanness — works of obedience that God requires!* Atonement cleans you of sins in your past. In other words, atonement *alone* does not allow you to pass through the judgment by works. Hence, if you have *unrepented sin where you did not reconcile with the one you offended by works worthy of repentance* you will come into condemnation. Your name will be blotted out of the book of life! It’s that simple! For example, in Revelation 3:5, Jesus gives this *conditional* statement: “He that *overcometh*, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name *out of the book of life*, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” The logical corollary, and implication, is that the one who does not overcome and instead denies Jesus will have his name *blotted out of the book of life*. Jesus stated that negative corollary bluntly in Luke 12:4-5,8-9. Jesus taught sin leads to being blotted out.
Paul Concurs

Paul repeats Jesus’ point about a judgment by individual works in Romans 2:6-10. It does not turn on whether someone was merely ever a believer. Paul says the final criterion is “works”—those who do good receive eternal life. Those who do evil are damned. This may seem odd in light of other teachings by Paul. Yet, Paul’s words are identical to Jesus in John 5:28-29. Paul correctly paraphrased the Master.

What is interesting is the early church saw Paul’s words on a judgment-by-works in Rom. 2:6-10 as clearly refuting cheap grace—specifically faith alone. Origen in 246 A.D. was combatting Marcion who in 144 A.D. proclaimed Paul’s faith-alone verses were the only Gospel. Marcion rejected many of Jesus’ teachings as legalistic, and intended for an earlier dispensation. Marcion insisted in his Antithesis #19 that God now saves those who merely “believe,” and God no longer judges any for “disobedience.” But Origen said Paul in Romans 2:6-10 teaches to the contrary that “God pays back to each one not on his nature but on account of his works.” (Origen, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Ed. Scheck) at 2:4:7 at pg. 111.) Then Origen saw an implication at odds with Marcion’s faith alone dogma: “in the second place, let believers be edified so as to not entertain the thought that, because they believe, this alone can suffice for them.” Id., at 111-12. We may be shocked to read passages like John 5:28-29, 1 Peter 1:17 or Romans 2:6-10. We never sincerely believed that any personal obedience (good works) was required at the judgment seat. We were simply wrong.

5. “God (6) who will render to every man according to his works: (7) to them that by patience in doing good works [ergon agathon] seek for glory and honor and incorruption, eternal life: (8) but unto them that are factious, and obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness, shall be wrath and indignation, (9) tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that worketh evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Greek; (10) but glory and honor and peace to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” (Rom 2:5-10.) See discussion of this passage at 474 ff & 526. Note Paul like Peter says this is impartial.