

"THE RULE OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT"

from

Plain Sermons *On Subjects* *Practical and Prophetic*

by Alexander McCaul

"Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them, who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness; indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also the Gentile: but glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile; for there is no respect of persons with God." Romans 2:6-11.

BY the mercy of God in giving us a revelation of his will, we know certainly, what the heathen could only surmise, that there will be a judgment of the quick and the dead. God's command, to all men everywhere, to repent, hath reached us also. We have heard, and profess to believe, that God will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained, Jesus Christ our Lord. The knowledge of this truth ought to be sufficient to influence the conduct of man, and to teach him to prepare for the scrutiny of those eyes from which no secrets are hid. But it is possible for self-love to find out a way of evading the force of the plainest truths, so far at least as they concern self. The Jews had a revelation of God as well as we, and believed, on the evidence of revelation, that there would be a resurrection, a judgment, and a separation of the just from the unjust; yet they contrived to evade the practical consequences of this doctrine, by inventing such a rule of judgment as necessarily included themselves within the number of the blessed; and excluded none but the heathen. It appears that some of those who confessed their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Christ, still retained this error. They looked upon themselves, whatever might be their conduct, as necessary heirs of eternal salvation; and on the other hand, asserted of the Gentiles, without any regard to the state of their heart, that except they were circumcised after the manner of Moses they could not be saved." To such persons St. Paul here declares the true, just, and equitable rule of God's judgment. "He will render to every man according to his deeds; to them who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness; indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile: but glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile; for there is no respect of persons with God."

In these words he describes this rule of judgment:—

- I. Generally, "That God will render to every man according to his deeds." And,
- II. Particularly, by specifying the deeds intended, and the recompense to be given to each class, "Eternal life to them that work good;" "Eternal wrath to them that work evil." To these two points I wish now to direct your attention.

I. We consider the general description here given of God's rule of judgment, "Who will render to every man according to his deeds." The Apostle declares, that the righteous Judge has not two rules of

judgment—one for his chosen people, and another for the Gentiles—but one righteous rule for both. He will, without partiality or favour, render to every man, Jew or Gentile, according to that he hath done. The righteous Gentile will find himself under no disadvantage; and the wicked Jew shall find no favour. Each shall receive the fruit of his works, and reap according to that he hath sown. But before we enter more particularly into this subject we must guard against erroneous interpretations of the Apostle's words. When he declares, that God will render to the Gentile, as well as to the Jew, according to his deeds, he does not mean to predicate any thing concerning the salvation of those Gentiles who still continue in idolatry and sin. He does not intend to affirm that the heathen, who are still enveloped in darkness, and still fulfil the desires of the flesh and the mind, are living up to the light which they have, and have therefore as good a hope of salvation, as those who are living according to the light of God's word. He is not speaking of the heathen generally, but of those from amongst the heathen, who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory, honour, and immortality; of those, who, although they have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law; who consequently do not "turn the glory of the incorruptible God into an image," either of man or other creature. To such the bigoted Jews denied salvation, because they were not circumcised, and did not keep the law of Moses; that is, the Jews denied that God would render to them according to their deeds. Of such persons amongst the Gentiles—not of the whole idolatrous Gentile world—Paul declares that their want [lack] of external observances shall be no bar to their salvation—that this "uncircumcision keeping the righteousness of the law shall be counted for circumcision"—that God will render to them according to their deeds, just as well as to the circumcised Jews.

This text then is so far from giving any colour to the idea that the idolatrous heathen, who have never had either law or gospel, are in as good a state as the Jews or Christians, that it expressly proves the contrary. It declares that those only of the Gentiles, who do the will of God; who rise above all the disadvantages by which they are surrounded; who, born and bred in the midst of idolatry, nevertheless come to the knowledge of the true God, either by instruction of those that know him, or from a contemplation of his works; and who, in consequence of this knowledge, patiently continue in well-doing, and thus seek for glory, honour, and immortality,—that these alone shall receive eternal life. But the history of the church tells us with what extreme difficulty men are turned from dumb idols to serve the living God, even when Apostles themselves are the preachers. How almost hopeless then is the case of those who have nothing but the light of nature? The most that can be said of them is, that they are not beyond the grace of Him whose "mercies are over all his works," nor beyond the power of his Holy Spirit. And the Scripture assures us "that those who do not their master's will, because they know it not, shall be beaten with few stripes."

Under the pretence of charity to affirm any thing further concerning those who are without God in the world, is to be wise above that which is written. To deduce the doctrine of their salvability, generally, from the words of the text, is to pervert the plain reasoning of the Apostle.

It would be equally erroneous to adduce this text in order to support the doctrine of human merit or salvation by works. St. Paul certainly could not intend to contradict himself, which he as certainly does, if in these words he teaches that men are to be saved by their merit; for one great object of the first part of this epistle is to shew, that by the deeds of the law—that is, by human merit—there shall no flesh be justified: but that, on the contrary, "every mouth must be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God." (iii. 19, 20.) This he shews, first of the Gentiles, and then of the Jews: proving that their works condemn them, and confirming his proof by the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures, which declare that there is "none righteous, no not one. There is none that doeth good; that all are gone out of the way, and together become unprofitable." The Apostle could not then mean to contradict himself in terms, saying, in one place, that men are to be saved by their works; and directly after, that to be saved by works is impossible. The truth is, that in the words of the text and context, the Apostle is not discussing the question whether there be such merit in human works as

can and may become the efficient cause of salvation, but one entirely different; whether, without any respect being had to individual character, the Jews are to be saved because they are Jews, and the Gentiles to be damned because they are Gentiles. The Rabbies affirmed, and still affirm, that “circumcision is equivalent to all the commandments which are in the law;”¹ that “Abraham sits at the door of hell, and suffers no circumcised person to enter.”² But this St. Paul denies, teaching that the circumcision of a wicked Jew shall be counted uncircumcision: and the uncircumcision of a righteous Gentile shall be counted circumcision. God “will render to every man according to his deeds.”

The question, why God condescends to notice and reward the difference of character in sinners, still remains; and the answer given in Scripture does not confirm the doctrine of human merit. He vouchsafes to regard sinners at all, because he has, in his infinite love, given his only begotten Son as a sacrifice and propitiation for sin; and he accepts and acknowledges their continuance in well doing, because it is the operation of his blessed Spirit which maketh men to differ. Our Lord's parable of the ten servants will shew how it is possible for God to render to every man according to his deeds; and yet not man's merit, but God's free grace, be the efficient cause of his salvation. A certain nobleman going into a far country, called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds. On his return he gave unto each according to his deeds. Him that had gained ten pounds, he made ruler over ten cities; him that had gained five, over five cities; and the slothful servant he punished. Yet not the merit of the two first, but the nobleman's free grace, was the efficient cause of their being recompensed. As being his servants, they and their time, their labour and their earnings, belonged of right to the master. Their industry, there-fore, as being their duty, could claim no reward. The money, too, with which they traded was not their own, but their master's. The recompence, then, in this case, though according to the deeds of each, was not one which could have been claimed on the score of merit as a matter of right, but altogether an act of free favour on the part of the nobleman. But if we cannot argue merit in the case of these servants, much less can we in the case of saved sinners.

It is not said of these servants that they had by their crimes already forfeited their lives, which sinners have; nor that they had renounced their allegiance to their lawful master, and devoted themselves to the service of his bitterest enemy, as sinners have done: nor that they had, after being again and again forgiven, revolted more and more; requiting the tenderest love with the most heartless ingratitude. To put us on a par with those servants, it would be necessary to blot out all our sins, disobedience, and ingratitude; and even then we could lay no more claim to merit than they. Much less can we now, when God condescends to pardon our sins for the sake of his Son, to give us his Spirit, and thus to enable us to bring forth the fruits of righteousness, make any pretension to salvation by our works, because God crowns all his condescension by rendering to every man according to his deeds.

2. Having guarded against these two errors, we now proceed to explain, further, the Apostle's meaning. We have remarked above, that he was refuting a Jewish error. To understand, therefore, the force of this declaration, we must consider this error more particularly. The Jews believed, in the first place, that every Israelite should ultimately be saved, simply because he was one of the chosen people of God, and a descendant of Abraham. Therefore it was that John the Baptist and our Lord warned them, saying, “Think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.” This error still remains amongst them. One of the most famous tracts in the Talmud begins with this sentence, “All Israel have a portion in the world to come, as it is written, Thy people shall be all righteous: for ever shall they possess the land.”³ They have mistaken their national election to a particular office in this world for an election

1 Nedarim, fol. 31, col. ii.

2 Joreh Deah, § 261.

3 Pirke Aboth, c. 1. See also the beginning of that other famous chapter, the eleventh of the treatise Sanhedrin.

to everlasting life: and therefore flatter themselves that, whatever they may be here, they shall ultimately be saved. I say ultimately; for unable entirely to evade the denunciations of God's wrath in the Old Testament, they acknowledge that wicked Israelites shall be punished for one year in purgatory: after which they shall emerge from the place of torment, and have part in eternal life.⁴ Whilst they made their national election the rule of God's judgment respecting themselves, they made the want of it the ground of the reprobation of the Gentiles; asserting that those who had not been admitted by circumcision into the family of Abraham, could not be saved.⁵ St. Paul meets this double error by declaring that God is no respecter of persons; that individual character, not national election nor church privileges, is the rule of God's righteous judgment. The wicked Jew shall be punished as well as the wicked Gentile, and in the same degree—not for a year, then to be released, but for ever. Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil: of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile: the duration not temporary, but as permanent to the Jew as to the heathen; and, as being opposed to eternal life, eternal also.

The Apostle appears to accumulate various forms of expression in describing the retribution, in order to convince the Jew that his punishment should be as condign, and as unchangeable, as that of the Gentile. Our Lord appears to strike at the same error, when he represents Abraham as informing the rich man of the immutability of his condition: "Between us there is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you, cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." These words of our Lord conveyed to his hearers the very same truth as that contained in the text, that a wicked Jew should receive no more favour with respect to the duration of his torment than a wicked heathen: that God would, without any regard to his national election, render to him according to his deeds.

Besides their national election, the Jews laid, and still lay, great stress upon their knowledge and study of the law, and the external observances of certain precepts. They looked upon speculative knowledge of God's will as sufficient, and imagined that the hearing of the law was equivalent to the doing of it.⁶ To this the Apostle especially alludes, when he says, "Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law, and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish," &c. But he takes away this false hope also, declaring that God will not make knowledge but practice the rule of his judgment. "God will render to every man (not according to his speculative knowledge, but) according to his deeds." The Apostle, then, in combating the errors of the Jews, has taught us this important truth, that our eternal destiny shall be fixed, not by any external advantages vouchsafed to our church or nation; not by the external observance of even so solemn a rite as the covenant of circumcision—the Jewish sacrament of initiation; not by our speculative knowledge of the will of God; but by our deeds. "God will render to every man according to his deeds." Let us, then, examine,

II. More particularly, this rule of judgment. The Apostle does not rest in a general declaration, but describes minutely all that is necessary for us to know on this important subject. He divides those comprehended in the general expression "every man," into two classes, describing each particularly.

1. Those on whom God will bestow eternal life. To them, who, "by patient continuance in well doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life."

4 Rosh hashanah, fol. 17, col. 1.

5 Acts xv. 1.

6 "The study of the law is equivalent to the fulfilment of all the other Commandments." Iad Hachazakah Hilchoth Talmud Torah, c. iii. 3.

This class seeks for glory, honour, and immortality. All men have some object in view—riches, pleasure, or honour, or some of their varied forms: and from the beloved object the mind takes its tone. The covetous man, by seeking riches, becomes more covetous; the voluptuary, by his pursuit of pleasure, more sensual; the ambitious man, more ambitious. So he who seeks for glory, honour, and immortality, acquires gradually a habit of mind suited to the object of his desires. It is upon this habit of mind that the Apostle here lays the stress. The Jew hoped to receive eternal life, not because he had been renewed in the Spirit of his mind, and had been thereby made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light; but because he was, by the rite of circumcision, a member of God's church and chosen nation. St. Paul declares that God will give eternal life to those whose habit of mind it is to seek it; and that not by some insulated acts of goodness, but by patient continuance in well doing. Men, in general, flatter themselves that some few acts of benevolence, or some passing pangs of penitence, or some occasional aspirations after holiness, or some partial amendment of conduct are sufficient to secure their salvation. The revelation here given shews that all such hopes are delusive. Our repentance and our obedience, if they are to terminate in eternal happiness, must be continuous acts of the whole life. Our Judge requires "patient continuance in well-doing," and will be satisfied with nothing less.

[2.] On the other hand, he will recompense indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, to those who, whatever be their knowledge or their external advantages, obey unrighteousness. It is possible to have great knowledge of God's word, but to employ it not for the guidance of self, or the edification of others, but for strife and vain glory. It is possible to enjoy the greatest privileges in the church, and yet not to receive them humbly and thankfully, but to make use of them as an occasion of triumph over those whom the providence of God has not placed in equally favourable circumstances. This was especially the case of the Jews at that time, whose knowledge of the law was a source of glory amongst their countrymen, and a means of promoting strife and contention in the Christian church. The unmerited favours, too, which God had bestowed upon their nation were only regarded as a cause of exultation and triumph over the less favoured heathen. They knew the truth, and obeyed it not; but obeyed unrighteousness: therefore Paul declares, that they shall inherit, not eternal life, but eternal condemnation. "God will give to every man according to his deeds."

This is the rule of God's judgment to all, [so] then let us judge ourselves accordingly. We stand now in the situation in which the Jew stood then. We enjoy all the privileges of the visible church of Christ. But none of them can give us a sure evidence that our hope of salvation is well-founded. If we desire to know our state, we must examine ourselves by God's rule. If we desire to inherit eternal life, we must ascertain the object of our pursuit, and our mode of pursuing it. Are we seeking glory, honour, and immortality? And are we seeking it by a patient continuance in well-doing? Is eternal life the great object of our anxieties and desires, the incitement to our endeavours, and the guide of our conduct? Is it to eternal life that all the energies of our mind are directed, and by which the employment of our various talents, and the disposal of our time, are regulated? A little self-examination, a very short inquiry, will make known to any one, who does not wilfully deceive himself, the object of his pursuit. Whatever engrosses a man's thoughts, and controls his conduct, is an object of desire. Whatever is buried in constant oblivion, or made to give way to other objects considered more important, is not. No man could doubt what the merchant sought when he sold all he had that he might buy the pearl. And if he had afterwards sold the pearl to buy some other object, it would have been equally clear that the pearl had ceased to be the object of his preference. We must also inquire how we seek for glory, honour, and immortality? Is it by patient continuance in well-doing? It is most true that when we begin to examine ourselves by God's holy law, we shall condemn ourselves; and, instead of trusting that we are righteous, find reason to abase ourselves before God for our collective life, and our every action: but this does not hinder us from discovering the bent of our mind, nor from ascertaining whether we are working good or evil, whether we continue in well-doing, or whether we are contentious, and obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness.

Paul confessed at all times after his conversion, that it was by the grace of God he was what he was; and he derived his consolation from the great truth, that Christ had come into the world to save sinners, of whom he confessed himself the chief. But still he was able to distinguish between his state of mind when he had been a blasphemer and a persecutor, and his state when the law in his members was warring against the law in his mind, and compelling him to cry out, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" And because of his ability thus to distinguish, he was further able, at the close of his life, to calculate his whole conduct, and to say, as the sum of the matter, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." The entire word of God supposes that we can thus judge ourselves according to our deeds, and requires us to do so. Our Lord says, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." And St. John saith, "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous: he that committeth sin is of the devil."

By this rule then examine yourselves. Church privileges, speculative knowledge, religious observances may deceive you as well as the Jews, but this rule cannot. If you seriously judge yourselves by it, the very worst that can happen is, that you will discover more of your own sinfulness and infirmity, and be thereby led to plead more earnestly for pardon of sin, and to seek more diligently the gift of God's Holy Spirit, without whose help it is impossible to continue patiently in well-doing. Of this be assured, that whether you judge yourselves or not by this rule, God most certainly will. He has declared that "he will bring every work into judgment, whether it be good or evil." And as no work, so no man, is excepted. The Apostle says of himself and of those to whom he wrote and preached, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done; whether it be good or bad." We, my brethren, are included in this general declaration. Parents and children, masters and servants, friends and enemies, must all appear to receive according to their deeds. Let us, then, prepare for this awful event. Let us apply to Him who is to be our Judge, but who is our Saviour also, to wash us from our sins in his own blood, and to give us that Spirit which he hath promised: and so to help us by his grace, that we may continue faithful even to the end, that our pursuit of glory, honour, and immortality, may at last be crowned with eternal life.