DEGREES OF REWARDS IN ETERNITY: SANCTIFICATION BY WORKS?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Within the study of eschatology, differing perspectives on the nature of the second coming of Christ, the millennium, and the doctrine of eternal punishment are well known and amply documented. Perhaps less known and documented is the abundance of perspectives with regard to the concept of degrees of reward in eternity for believers. On one side of the debate is the view that an eternal reward *in addition to* eternal life is a contradiction of the Protestant emphasis upon salvation by grace apart from works or merit. For example, Blomberg asserts that a doctrine of degrees of eternal reward in heaven leaves one "with justification by faith and sanctification by works."[1] Additionally, he objects that "it is hard to reconcile any kind of doctrine of varying rewards in God's kingdom with the notion of grace as something wholly undeserved."[2] According to this school of thought, texts traditionally adduced as teaching such a concept have been misconstrued.[3]

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[1] Craig L. Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," *JETS* 35 (June 1992): 159.

[2] Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 222.

[3] Other representatives of this perspective in the debate include Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001); and G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids:

On the other side of the debate are those who affirm the concept of degrees of eternal reward. As Sauer expresses it: "Justification is a gift of free grace, but the measure of glorification depends upon personal devotion and steadfastness in the race."[4] However, there is a variety of perspectives within this general affirmation. For example, one perspective heartily affirms the concept of degrees of eternal reward for believers as a significant and pervasive theological motif.[5] Indeed, some advocates of this perspective interpret many if not all NT warning passages in terms of the loss or gain of rewards.[6] Others go as far as to teach the prospect of a virtual purgatory for those believers who were especially unfaithful in their Christian

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Eerdmans, 1954). Though he affirms the "divine promise of reward—reward given to all who walk in His ways—is recorded in many passages of Scripture," Berkouwer is critical of Kuyper's view that there is a scriptural "distinction between eternal life as such and a special honor or pleasure in eternal life" (ibid., 114, 119).

[4] Erich Sauer, *In the Arena of Faith: A Call to a Consecrated Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 162.

[5] Representatives include Paul Benware, *The Believer's Payday* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002); Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, N.C.: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1990; reprint, 2006); Kenneth F. Dodson, *The Prize of the Up-Calling* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1989); Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981) and *Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1985); R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983; Chicago: Moody, 1985); Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward* (Chicago: Moody, 1998); Joe Wall, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Chicago: Moody, 1991); and Robert N. Wilkin, *The Road to Reward: Living Today in Light of Tomorrow* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2003).

[6] For example, with reference to the warning in Heb 10:26-39, Dillow states: "It is best to interpret Heb. 10 as a warning against the failure to persevere to the end. The consequences of this failure are … not a loss of salvation but severe discipline in time.... The most severe punishment, however, is that God will have 'no pleasure in Him' [*sic*]. When the carnal Christian stands before His Lord in the last day, he will not hear Him say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord'" (Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 466). Conversely, Schreiner and Caneday tend to see all NT warnings in terms of salvation: "We have also argued that these warnings do not merely threaten believers with losing rewards but that eternal life itself is at stake" (Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 268).

lives.[7] Yet another group of Evangelical exegetes and theologians give some credence to a doctrine of degrees of eternal reward, but they more stringently circumscribe the doctrine within certain theological boundaries and limit its expression to certain texts. Morris is typical of this perspective in the following paragraph:

> There are some who object to the whole idea of eternal rewards, affirming that it is not true Christian service if we serve simply for reward. This affirmation may unhesitatingly be endorsed. Selfishness is not less selfishness because it is directed towards spiritual rather than material ends.… *But that does not mean that God is to put all men on a flat level in the hereafter.* Here and now the man who gives himself whole-heartedly to the service of Christ knows more of the joy of the Lord than the half-hearted. We have no warrant from the New Testament for thinking that it will be otherwise in heaven.[8]

Given the variety of ways in which this doctrine is either elucidated or else denied altogether, one wonders whether the Scriptures speak clearly to this issue and whether a theologically coherent doctrine of degrees of eternal reward can be scripturally defended. As will be shown, this writer contends both these questions can be answered in the affirmative.

While much contemporary teaching focuses upon the present benefits of a consecrated life, less attention has

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[7] For example, Craig is of the opinion that the rich man who died and descended to Hades, as described in Luke 16:19-31, will one day "come forth and take his place among the redeemed in glory" after "he shall have served out the sentence of judgment imposed on him by his Holy Judge" (S. S. Craig, *The Dualism of Eternal Life: A Revolution in Eschatology* [Rochester, NY: Published by author, 1916], 138). Similarly, Faust teaches that the "unfaithful Christian goes to the same place as the unbeliever and hypocrite until after the millennium (Luke 12:46)" (J. D. Faust, *The Rod: Will God Spare It?* [Hayesville, NC. Schoettle Publishing Co., 2002], 408). Indeed, Panton places those believers "guilty of the gravest offenses…temporarily in Gehenna" (D. M. Panton, *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, 2d ed. [London: Chas. J. Thynne, 1921], 76).

[8] Leon Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 66-67, emphasis added.

been paid to the relationship between present sanctification and future glorification. In other words, to what end are believers being sanctified? Scripture attests to the value of those ends primarily or exclusively realized in the present (e.g., Matt 5:16; Eph 5:8-17; Phil 2:14-15; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Pet 2:9, 11-17; 3:16, etc.). But what difference, if any, does present growth in Christ make for eternity? If a correlation between present sanctification and reward as an aspect of future glorification can be established, the value of such sanctification, especially for those who are assured of their salvation, is thereby enhanced. As Kim states: "[B]elieving that God rewards is an essential aspect of Christian faith (Heb 11:6). A proper, Biblical understanding of rewards is a powerful motivator that does not cheapen the Christian faith but strengthens and purifies it. It gives clearer focus to the sanctification process and weighty glory to our God."[9]

In the view of some, even if there are degrees of reward for Christians, their impact is felt only at the believer's judgment before Christ. However, while the receiving of praise and honor at the Judgment Seat of Christ is certainly an experience to desire and even strive for, the prospect of the *eternal* significance of such honor or reward would seem to provide an even greater motivation to present faithfulness.

Unfortunately, time and space does not allow for a full exegetical treatment of all relevant texts. Instead, following a brief summary here of the conclusions of such a treatment,[10] this paper will focus upon response to a number of philosophical and theological objections to a doctrine of degrees of reward in eternity.

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[9] Paul D. Kim, "Reward and Sanctification" (Th.M. Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001), 1.

[10] See the writer's unpublished (as yet!) dissertation "Investing in Eternity: A New Testament Theology of Rewards," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Baptist Bible Seminary, 2008).

II. SUMMARY OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE PRIMARY PASSAGES ON REWARDS

A. Future Ramifications for Present Earthly Activity

The relevant NT texts on rewards present a number of distinctive teachings.[11] Several texts indicate there will be *future ramifications* for present earthly activity. Romans 14:10-12 establishes the principle that every believer will give account to the Lord for his conduct in this life. In particular, 1 Cor 3:8-15 teaches there will be rewards for those who have invested their lives and ministries in that which God esteems highly ("gold, silver, and precious stones"). Others, who have invested in that which God does not esteem ("wood, hay and stubble"), will suffer the loss of rewards. The possibility of the loss of rewards appears to be the teaching of Rev 3:11 as well. Likewise, 2 Cor 5:10 indicates that as a result of appearing before the Judgment Seat of Christ, the believer will be "recompensed for his deeds in the body." Thus, an identifiable link is established between a believer's present conduct and a future, but unspecified recompense.

B. Duration of the Reward or Loss of Reward

While the *duration* of the reward or loss suffered is never explicitly specified, there are a number of indications that it is *eternal*. First, contextual factors in 1 Cor 3:10-15 point toward outcomes that endure forever. That is, the severity of the consequences of the judgment depicted there coupled with the detailed description of both

[11] The passages selected as "primary" for analysis in the dissertation are (1) Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–6); (2) the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30), the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27), and the Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Matt 20:1-16); (3) Paul's teaching concerning the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:10-4:5; 2 Cor 5:10-11); (4) references to believers' crowns (1 Cor 9:25; Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 2:10; 3:11); and (5) the overcomer promises of Revelation 2–3.

the positive and negative effects of this judgment argue against a mere momentary discrimination between believers. To limit the results of this judgment in any way has the effect of nullifying its meaningfulness. Second, the specific terminology employed in Matt 6:19-21 ("treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys"), 1 Cor 9:25 ("imperishable, incorruptible, immortal") and 1 Pet5:4 ("unfading") to describe future rewards and promised crowns is strong testimony to their eternal nature. Third, the duration of the loss of reward would necessarily need to be permanent or else the very purpose of having a judgment would seem to be pointless. However, any regret, remorse or shame experienced (1 Cor 3:15; 2 Cor 5:10; 1 John 2:28) will not endure forever in light of texts such as Rev 21:4. Finally, within dispensational theology the millennium is considered the first phase of the Eternal Kingdom.[12] By implication, the parables describing the reward of Kingdom responsibilities (Matt 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27) imply an everlasting benefit.

C. Criteria for Reception of Rewards

Various *criteria for the reception* of these rewards is indicated in several texts. For example, Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount mentions adherence to Christ's teaching (Matt 5:19) and purity of motive (Matt 6:4, 6, 18) as the basis for future reward. Correspondingly, his parables in Matt 25:14-30 and Luke 19:12-27 emphasize character, faithfulness, and the degree of responsibility and gifting. This latter criterion leads to the teaching of

[12] McClain explains: "As we pass from chapter 20 into 21 of the Apocalypse…the Mediatorial Kingdom of our Lord ends, not by abolition, but by its mergence into the Universal Kingdom of God. Thus it is perpetuated forever, no longer as a separate entity, but in indispensable union with the original Kingdom of God from which it sprang" (Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959; reprint, Winona Lake, IN.: BMH Books, 1974], 513). With regard to the church itself, Pentecost affirms: "The church enters into her eternal state at the rapture" (J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964], 577).

reward in proportion to one's fidelity to the opportunities given for service.

Like Jesus, Paul also mentions purity of motive and faithfulness (1 Cor 4:1-5) as key criteria for reward. In addition, he emphasizes the *quality* of each person's work in 1 Corinthians 3, which in context is related to fidelity to the revelation of God in Christ. He also speaks of personal and voluntary sacrifice for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:24-27) and fruitfulness in evangelism (Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 2:19) as a basis for future reward. In 2 Tim 4:8 Paul highlights finishing one's life and ministry well in view of a longing for Christ's return that has practical import in the life of the believer. Peter promises a special reward for elders who shepherd the church in a Christ-honoring manner (1 Pet 5:1-4). Finally, while the crowns promised in Jas 1:12 and Rev 2:10 most likely refer to the promise of eternal life for all believers, they also highlight the importance of perseverance in faithfulness to Christ in the face of persecution. On the other hand, the lack of perseverance or faithfulness is the implied basis for the loss of reward in Rev 3:11.

D. Nature of the Rewards

While the exact nature of these rewards is not specified, several texts suggest the granting of *varying responsibilities* in the kingdom (Matt 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17, 19). Other texts speak of receiving *praise* from God (Matt 25:21, 23, Luke 19:17; 1 Cor 4:5). Some theologians speculate that the promised rewards are directly related to an enhanced capacity to enjoy fellowship with God.[13] This thought may be the point of the scene depicted in Revelation 4, where twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the throne.

E. The Gracious Basis of Rewards

The *gracious basis* of all rewards is underscored in several texts. One such text is the Parable of the Talents (Matt

[13] This idea will be further explored in the following section of this paper.

25:14-30). Here the surpassing greatness of the reward in comparison with the service rendered underscores the gracious basis of the reward itself. However, this gracious basis is most clearly emphasized in the Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Matt 20:1-16). Here there is also an implicit teaching that those converted later in life will not necessarily suffer a disadvantage with regard to the rewards they may receive for faithful service.

In summary, a number of texts affirm the concept of degrees of eternal reward in a manner that underscores the gracious basis of those rewards. At the same time they link the reception of rewards to the degree to which the believer has faithfully lived his life and conducted his ministry in conformity with the revelation of God in Christ.

III. SYNTHESIS OF THE DOCTRINE OF DEGREES OF REWARD WITHIN A CALVINISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Besides the task of summarizing the teaching on rewards into a coherent doctrine of rewards, it is important to demonstrate the consistency of this doctrine with one's systematic theology. In this regard, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate the consistency and compatibility of the doctrine of degrees of reward within a Calvinistic theological framework.

Because of the inherent emphasis of Calvinism upon the sovereignty and gracious initiative of God, both in salvation and the process of sanctification, any teaching which suggests recognition of the initiative and meritorious activity of human beings would seem to be implicitly, if not explicitly, suspect. However, as will be shown, in the case of a doctrine of degrees of reward such a conflict is more illusionary than substantive.

One way to demonstrate the consistency and compatibility of the teaching of degrees of reward with a

Calvinistic systematic theology is through a response to several objections to this doctrine from a fervent adherent of Calvinism. One such adherent is Craig Blomberg. In a 1992 *JETS* article,[14] Blomberg voices numerous objections, many of a theological nature, to the doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven. His central thesis is that "there is not a single NT text that, when correctly interpreted, supports the notion that believers will be distinguished one from another for all eternity on the basis of their works as Christians."[15] A secondary assertion is that such a doctrine "can have highly damaging consequences for the motivation and psychology of living the Christian life."[16]

To this writer's knowledge, no definitive response to this article has ever been written, though references to some of his objections can be found in a few works.[17] Since Blomberg writes from a Reformed or Calvinistic perspective, a proper and detailed response to these objections will ensure this doctrine can be accommodated within such a framework. The following discussion represents this response.

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[14] Craig Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," *JETS* 35 (June 1992): 159-172. In his introduction, Blomberg states that during the previous twenty years of his Christian life he had "grown progressively more uncomfortable with any formulation that differentiates among believers as regards our eternal rewards" (ibid., 159).

[15] Ibid., 160.

[16] Ibid.

[17] For example, Kim cites a handful of Blomberg's objections in his chapter on "The Problems of Reward," but he chooses not to address them directly (Paul D. Kim, "Reward and Sanctification" [Th.M. Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001], 4). And Lewis and Demarest, Blomberg's colleagues at Denver Seminary, after referring to this article, give a three sentence response at the end of their less than one page discussion of rewards for believers (Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Three Volumes in One* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 3:478).

IV. A RESPONSE TO EXEGETICAL OBJECTIONS

Blomberg's objections to the concept of degrees of reward in eternity can be characterized as exegetical and theological. While nearly all of his exegetical objections are addressed in this author's 2008 doctoral dissertation,[18] it is worth reviewing his principal exegetical objections for the sake of ensuring a proper synthesis with Calvinism.

A. Parable of the Day Laborers (Matt 20:1-16)

He begins with the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), which he claims is viewed by "almost everyone" as "teaching about a fundamental equality here among those who are truly his disciples. All are rewarded alike."[19] Taken in isolation from the rest of Jesus' teaching, one could conceivably conclude this parable negates the concept of degrees of reward. However, while there is an equality stressed in this parable, it is an equality made possible by God's grace. Such grace means that all of God's gifts, whether salvation, or the kinds of rewards to which Peter alludes just prior to this parable (Matt 19:27-30) are not ultimately attributable to human merit. Furthermore, this emphasis upon equality that underscores the gracious initiative of God is not inherently inconsistent with the concept of degrees of reward, unless one insists on a strict monergism to the extent that any role for humanity is denied. In light of numerous texts that exhort believers to *strive*, *persevere* and diligently *labor* (e.g.,1 Cor 15:10; Phil 1:27, 2:12; Col 1:29; 1 Tim 4:10; Heb 10:36; 2 Pet 1:6) such a denial would seem to be a contradiction of Biblical testimony. As Reformed theologian Anthony Hoekema affirms:

> Salvation, to be sure, is wholly of grace; yet the Bible indicates that there will be variation in the

[18] See pages 45-165 of this writer's dissertation, referenced above.

[19] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 160.

> rewards which will be received by God's people.… The relation between our works and our future reward ought, however, to be understood not in a mechanical but rather in an organic way. When one has studied music and has attained some proficiency in playing a musical instrument, his capacity for enjoying music has been greatly increased. In a similar way, our devotion to Christ and to service in his kingdom increases our capacity for enjoying the blessing of that kingdom, both now and in the life to come.[20]

In summary, while this parable does represent a notable challenge to the doctrine of degrees of reward, it can readily be understood as teaching the complementary truth that all such rewards are ultimately the result of the gracious initiative of God. That God chooses to recognize the role of a believer in progressive sanctification in response to that divine initiative does not diminish its glory (cf. 1 Cor 15:10; Phil 2:12-13; Col 1:29).

B. Crown Passages—1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 5:4

Another exegetical objection concerns the crown passages, which Blomberg understands uniformly as metaphors for eternal life.[21] These texts are comprehensively dealt with in this writer's dissertation,[22] where it is concluded that the majority of references are to a reward for faithful service. However, it is worth noting here that Blomberg's approach to these texts appears to be conditioned by his prior commitment to the Reformed doctrine of perseverance, but in such a manner that he allows for virtually no distinctions among Christians in terms of their striving for the imperishable crown (1 Cor 9:25), their longing for Christ's appearing (2 Tim 4:8), or their service as elders in the church (1 Pet 5:4). Thus, perhaps it is Blomberg's

[20] Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 262, 264.

[21] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 163.

[22] See pages 97-142.

particular conception of the doctrine of perseverance, rather than the exegetical evidence itself, that is at odds with the concept of degrees of reward as he understands it.

C. *Bēma*

A third exegetical objection relates to texts dealing with the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10). Blomberg is adamant that "nothing in the text says anything about these distinctions among believers' experiences [at the judgment seat] persisting for all time."[23] However, one may equally inquire: "Where in the text does it state that these differences will be only momentary?" In fact, Blomberg's understanding of Paul's teaching fails to do justice to the importance and gravity of this judgment. That is, Paul's detailed teaching on this subject would appear to be beside the point if both the rewards enjoyed and the consequences experienced have merely *momentary* ramifications. In addition, as already noted, the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25: 14-30) provides a genuine precedent for the granting of personal responsibilities in the future kingdom *in addition to* praise received. Thus, this objection is also at serious odds with the exegetical data.

In continuation of his discussion of the scriptural data, Blomberg states that the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4–5 are likely angelic and therefore irrelevant to the issue of rewards for believers. And even if they do represent the church, Blomburg asserts that the casting of their crowns proves there are no eternal differences.[24] However, as can be cogently argued,[25] the casting of crowns is an act of

[23] Ibid., 165.

[24] Ibid., 164-165.

[25] The fact that this act of worship is linked with the worship of "the four living creatures" (v. 8), who "do not cease" in their worship of the Lord, argues strongly for a *continuous* expression of worship on the part of these elders as well rather than a one-time event. In addition, Quick rightly observes: "[T]hough they cast their crowns before him, they do not cast their *thrones*, nor do they give up their position and proximity to Him. The

worship that *continually* acknowledges the One to whom all glory belongs. Therefore, it does not by itself negate the very real possibility that some will enjoy a greater capacity to worship God or other privileges in eternity.[26]

V. A RESPONSE TO THEOLOGICAL OBJECTIONS

Turning to Blomberg's theological objections, there are at least seven which can be identified.

A. Doctrine of Rewards Produces Sanctification by Works

As noted in the introduction, Blomberg asserts that this doctrine produces "a sanctification by works" that is implicitly contrary to salvation by grace through faith.[27] Ironically, Blomberg himself seems to promote a "sanctification by works"—if not, a salvation by works—when he states: "one of the main reasons for trying to live as good a Christian life as possible is to make sure we do in fact persevere, so that we do not lose out on eternal life altogether."[28] But is it true that by adopting a doctrine of degrees of reward one has thereby abandoned the faith and grace basis of the believer's salvation and sanctification? Harris observes:

> Since the tribunal of Christ is concerned with the assessment of works, not the determination of destiny…the Pauline concepts of justification on the basis of faith and recompense in accordance

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casting of the crowns before the throne is symbolic of the words they say, "Worthy art thou…to receive glory and honor and power"… But this action *in no way changes the glory or honor he has bestowed on them. They keep it permanently*" (Kenneth B. Quick, "Living for the Kingdom" [D.Min. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989], 234, emphasis original).

[26] Blomberg deals with several other texts, most of which are discussed in this writer's dissertation. In some instances, there is agreement with this writer on the misuse of certain texts to validate the doctrine of rewards.

[27] Ibid., 159.

[28] Ibid., 170.

> with works may be complementary. Not status but reward is determined *emprosthen tou bēmatos tou christou*, for justification as the acquisition of a right standing before God anticipates the verdict of the Last Judgment. But, already delivered from *ergōn nomou* (Rom. 3:28) by justifying faith, the Christian is presently committed to *To ergōn tēs pisteos* (1 Thess. 1:3), "action stemming from faith," which will be assessed and rewarded at Christ's tribunal.[29]

Fuller rightly points out that the objection that a doctrine of rewards promotes a works-righteousness that undermines the gracious basis of the believer's salvation is based upon a false assumption of just two options: "either men and women must do sufficient works to earn God's favor, or his blessings are purely of grace, unconditional, with nothing being required of the recipients."[30] However, as Piper states, there is a third option: "[C]onditional promises of grace are woven all through the New Testament teaching about how to live the Christian life [e.g., Matt 6:14; Heb 12:14; Jas 4:6; 1 John 1:7].... Some popular conceptions of grace cannot comprehend any role for conditionality other than legalism."[31] In this regard, believers are exhorted to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). That is, the believer is exhorted to demonstrate a faithfulness that, though enabled by God's grace and empowering Spirit (cf. Phil 2:13), is nevertheless the fruit of personal discipline. Accordingly, Paul underscores the "profit" (*ophelimos*) of godliness, "since it holds promise for the present life *and also for the life to come*" (1 Tim 4:7-8, emphasis added). In the performance of such works of faith there is no implied merit. Fuller aptly illustrates:

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[29] Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2005), 408-409.

[30] Ruth M. Fuller, "A Pauline Understanding of Rewards: Its Background and Expression in First Corinthians" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990), 324.

[31] John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR.: Multnomah, 1995), 12.

> [A] patient has a need, and seeks the physician's help to meet it. Because he or she has confidence in the expertise of this professional, the patient will then carefully follow the health regimen that is prescribed; these are "works"—or an obedience—that stem from *faith* in the physician. The blessings of restored health that the physician is able to provide will not be realized apart from this obedience; nevertheless such obedience cannot be said to have *earned* these blessings, nor has the patient in following the doctor's orders done anything that merits praise.… To the contrary, the praise belongs to the *physician*, whose expertise has made possible the return of health.[32]

Thus, Fuller concludes:

> [W]orks are essential for the receiving of rewards, but there is nothing meritorious or heroic about them, nothing to provide grounds for boasting. Rather, they are works of *faith*, done not to provide some needful service for God but simply in one's own self-interest, i.e., because doing these works is the *sine qua non* for the continued enjoyment of fellowship with God and the rewards he promises to those who trust him. Therefore, far from endangering grace, such works magnify it, for they underscore both the delight…that God has in blessing his children, and the supreme value that he represents to those who thus exert every effort to run the race and win the prize.[33]

In summary, Blomberg's assertion that the doctrine of degrees of reward is theologically at odds with the gracious basis of the believer's life in Christ is shown to be false. Rather there is Biblical and theological compatibility between the teaching of both a grace-enabled faith and life and the call for works of faith (1 Cor 15:10; Phil

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[32] Fuller, "A Pauline Understanding of Rewards," 328-329, emphasis original.

[33] Ibid., 347, emphasis original.

2:12-13) as well as the subsequent recognition of those works of faith done in the power of God.

B. The "Vast Gulf"

A second theological objection is that "the vast gulf" between God's standards and the righteousness of believers diminishes any sense of differentiation that would be eternally significant.[34] However, while this may be true *in the sight of God*, what is important here is whether such differentiation is meaningful *to believers*. Clearly, what is insignificant for an infinite being can nevertheless be quite meaningful to a finite being![35] For example, a twenty-five cent raise per hour would be much more meaningful to a teen earning minimum wage than it would be to a billionaire. Furthermore, what likely makes rewards truly meaningful is their capacity to deepen the believer's experience of and fellowship with God, both in this life and the next. As Kim states it: "The recognition of God is more valuable to those who have a deeper love relationship with God, and positions of service are rewards in that they are opportunities for more complete fellowship with God."[36]

C. Impossible for the Redeemed to Fully Enjoy Heaven

Yet another theological objection to the concept of degrees of reward is that it would be impossible for the redeemed to enjoy heaven with a consciousness that they did not achieve all they could have while on earth.[37] But who says believers will be conscious of their failures for all eternity? Blomberg himself acknowledges that according to Rev 21:4, God will wipe away all tears and pain such

[34] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 162.

[35] As Ken Gardoski puts it: "This is like asking whether Jesus' permanent humanity is significant in light of the vast gulf between the divine and human natures!" (8 February 2008; personal conversation with this writer).

[36] Kim, "Reward and Sanctification," 16.

[37] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 162.

that there will remain "absolutely nothing to make one sad."[38] This implies God may wipe away in some sense any memory that could foster tears or sadness. Alternatively, Michael Stallard suggests God may arrange eternity in such a manner that all potentially tear- or pain-inducing memories will not have the effect of saddening us.[39] While ultimately we must confess our ignorance as to how God will accomplish the promise of Rev 21:4, there is no insurmountable tension between the concept of degrees of eternal reward and possible memory of one's past life as Blomberg alleges.

Blomberg replies that if our memories are erased of all recollection of failure, then the distinctions based upon differing degrees of reward will also be unrecognizable in eternity and that therefore the present purpose of such future rewards—providing motivation for faithful living now—has been negated.[40] In response, Erickson surmises it may be that "the difference in the rewards lies not in the external or objective circumstances, but in the subjective awareness or appreciation of those circumstances."[41] As a result, "[n]o one will be aware of the differences in range of enjoyment, and thus there will be no dimming of the perfection of heaven by regret over wasted opportunities."[42] Kim offers the following illustration:

> Suppose two sons go away to college. One son calls regularly, thinks often of his parents, and misses them dearly. The other son could not wait to leave home, does not call, and is forgetfully busy with his new found friends at school. Both sons return home for Thanksgiving break, and both are "rewarded" with the presence of their parents. They have the same (objective) reward, the same parents, but the first son has a greater

[38] Ibid.

[39] 10 February 2008; personal conversation with this writer.

[40] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 162.

[41] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1241.

[42] Ibid., 1242.

> (subjective) reward in his enjoyment of them. We shall all be with God in heaven, but not all will enjoy him to the same degree.[43]

Thus, the knowledge that in eternity we can enjoy God to the degree to which we are faithful in service to him *now* should provide plenty of motivation to that end whether or not we are objectively conscious of the differences we experience in eternity.

Blomberg continues to object that such speculation is a contradiction of the more common view of rewards "that, subjectively, we all appreciate differing objective realties."[44] However, presently believers are quite conscious of objective differences among themselves in terms of gifting and opportunities. Yet they can—and are even commanded to—be joyful in all circumstances, despite evident differences among them in this life. Is it not conceivable that in eternity, having been freed from sin completely and the temptation to envy, believers will be able to rejoice fully in their diversity? Simply because we cannot find an explicit text that addresses this issue does not invalidate its potential as a valid explanation of what is not yet revealed. At the very least, this is both a logical and reasonable solution to Blomberg's objection.

D. Impossible to Speak of Degrees of Perfection

A fourth theological objection is that since heaven represents perfection, it is impossible to speak of degrees of perfection.[45] Similarly, Erickson asserts: "[W]e will not grow in heaven. We will, however, continue to exercise the perfect character which we will have received from God."[46] But both authors appear to assume that believers will be in a state of pure actuality in heaven with no potentiality. However, in light of the experience of the

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[43] Kim, "Reward and Sanctification," 18.

[44] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 162.

[45] Ibid., 162-63.

[46] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1240.

sinless God-man, who *grew* "in wisdom and stature" as a child (Luke 2:40, 52),[47] is it not reasonable to expect we will also continue to grow in the knowledge of God's infinite Person and through our service for him *learn* from our experiences throughout eternity? Accordingly, Lewis writes:

> The promise of Scripture may very roughly be reduced to five heads. It is promised (1) that we shall be with Christ; (2) that we shall be like Him; (3) with an enormous wealth of imagery, that we shall have "glory"; (4) that we shall, in some sense, be fed or feasted or entertained; and (5) that we shall have some sort of official position in the universe—ruling cities, judging angels, being pillars of God's temple. The first question I ask about these promises is "Why any one of them except the first?" Can anything be added to the conception of being with Christ?… The variation of the promises does not mean anything other than God will be our ultimate bliss; but because God is more than a Person, and lest we should imagine the joy of his presence too exclusively in terms of our present poor experience of personal love, with all its narrowness and strain and monotony, a dozen changing images, correcting and reliving each other are supplied.[48]

It may also be added that all these images present a picture of *continuous activity and learning* in eternity, all of it centered upon the person of Christ. As Piper states it: "Heaven will be a never-ending, ever-increasing discovery of more and more of God's glory with great and

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[47] This thought was brought to this writer's attention by Dr. Michael Stallard. He also added that most likely the sinless Adam and Eve also grew in the Garden before their fall (10 February 2008; personal conversation with this writer). Admittedly, in both examples they were in non-glorified bodies.

[48] C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd., c. 1949; reprint, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 35.

ever greater joy in him… The perfection of heaven is not static."[49]

In summary, though all will surely enjoy "perfection," there will also be opportunity for growth and development commensurate with the new capacities and opportunities enjoyed both as a result of the common experience of resurrection but also, presumably, as result of degrees of reward. Since there is no inherent logical contradiction in such a supposition, and it is therefore a reasonable solution to another of Blomberg's objections to this doctrine.

Furthermore, this understanding is entirely consistent with a steady stream of Reformed thinking on the issue. For example, in a section of his works entitled "Justification by Faith Alone," Jonathan Edwards states

> [t]hat Christ, by his righteousness, purchased for every one complete and perfect happiness, according to his capacity. But this does not hinder but that the saints, being of various capacities, may have various degrees of happiness, and yet all their happiness be the fruit of Christ's purchase.… So that it be still left with God, notwithstanding the perfect obedience of the second Adam, to fix the degree of each one's capacity by what rule he pleases, *he hath been pleased to fix the degree of capacity, and so of glory, by the proportion of the saints' grace and fruitfulness here. He gives higher degrees of glory, in reward for higher degrees of holiness and good works, because it pleases him*.[50]

Likewise, Bavinck states:

> In proportion as a person has been faithful in using the talents given him he will in the kingdom of God receive greater honor and lordship (Matt. 25:14ff).… Thus all, it is true, share in the same blessings, the same eternal life, and

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[49] John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 37.

[50] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974; reprint, 1984), 646, emphasis added.

> the same fellowship with God. *But there is nevertheless a difference among them in brilliance and glory. In proportion to their faithfulness and zeal, the churches receive from their Lord and King a different crown and reward.* [51]

Thus, Blomberg's fourth theological objection is at variance not only with a reasonable expectation of the nature of eternity but also with the teaching of some of Reformed theology's most prominent theologians.

E. God's Bar of Justice Is to Declare Believers Acquitted

In a fifth theological objection, Blomberg asserts that "[t]he purpose of Christians' standing before God's bar of justice is to declare them acquitted, not to embarrass them before the entire cosmos for all their failings (Rom 2:7; Rev 22:14; Matt 12:37a)."[52] However, this assertion does not fully square with clear statements of Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor 3:15; 1 John 2:28) that some believers will experience "loss" and "shame" before the Lord.[53] Whether or not such loss and shame will be observed by "the entire cosmos" is debatable, but that issue in itself does not invalidate the concept of degrees of reward.

F. Doctrine of Degrees of Rewards Promotes Competition and Comparison

Still another theological objection is that the doctrine of degrees of reward implicitly promotes a spirit of competition and comparison through a "performance-centered conception of the Christian life."[54] However, only the perversion of scriptural testimony as to the true basis for Christian motivation would validate this objection. That

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[51] Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 567, emphasis added.

[52] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 167.

[53] See pages 79-95 of this writer's dissertation for a fuller explication of these particular texts.

[54] Ibid., 169.

is, the promises of rewards must be held in balance with other prominent motivations for Christian living and service, such as seeking first the Kingdom of God and his glory in all things (Matt 6:33; 1 Cor 10:31). Certainly, any time one scriptural truth is over-emphasized to the neglect of others error will result. Obviously, the believer's goal in life is not to "beat" or "better" his brothers in Christ, which is a sinful motivation Paul addresses during his imprisonment (Phil 1:15, 17). Rather, it is to strive to "attain" all that God has promised (cf. Phil 3:9-14), to earnestly desire the maximum possible experience of God and heaven. As Kim states:

> For the Christian, if he seeks God for some material gain, some prestige or accolade, then let him be considered mercenary, selfish and a dishonor to God. But if the Christian seeks God for the joy of knowing God, beholding God, glorifying God, then he should hardly be condemned for seeking this reward. Indeed, he is to be praised.[55]

Likewise, Lewis observes:

> I can imagine someone saying that he dislikes my idea of heaven as a place where we are patted on the back. But proud misunderstanding is behind that dislike. In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.… To please God…to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness…to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But it is so.[56]

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[55] Kim, "Reward and Sanctification," 14.

[56] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 36-37.

Thus, while the *idea* of eternal reward can be perverted by sinful motives, its *reality* cannot be questioned when viewed in light of its likely nature: a greater capacity to know and enjoy God.

G. The "Greatest Danger"

Blomberg's final theological objection is the great "danger" presented by this teaching: "The greatest danger of the doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven is that it has misled many people into thinking that the very nominal professions that they or their friends have at one time made will be sufficient to save them, even if they fail to receive as high a status in heaven as they might have."[57] In response, it must be observed that there is a significant difference between those who live in blatant sin and those who "continue to believe but remain unduly immature in their faith (1 Cor 3:3)," as even Blomberg admits can happen.[58] Accordingly, on the one hand, this writer heartily agrees with Blomberg that "saving faith does over time lead to visible transformations in lifestyle and to growth in holiness (Matt 7:15-27; Gal 5:6, 19-24; Jas 2:14-26; 1 John 3:4-10)."[59] On the other hand, in some instances believers are disciplined with premature death, because of sin and rebellion against God (e.g., Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 5:5, 11:29-32; cf. 1 John 5:16). Furthermore, rightly understood the doctrine of rewards does not promote the antinomianism with which Blomberg falsely associates it. Rather a right understanding of the doctrine should motivate the true believer to diligent obedience in pursuit of all God has promised can be his.

Besides these objections, Blomberg makes a couple of theological assertions that call into question the validity of the doctrine of degrees of reward and therefore merit a reply. For example, he asserts that the idea of rewards

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[57] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 172.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

is unnecessary, since "proper Christian motivation for pleasing God should stem from a profound sense of gratitude for what Christ has already done for us."[60]

There are a couple of responses to this assertion. First, assuming the assertion is correct—though no Scriptural support is cited—Blomberg ignores the fact that the Scriptures themselves provide at least twelve additional, distinct motivations for living the Christian life: (1) to express love for God and Christ (John 14:15, 21, 23; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6); (2) to maintain a clear conscience (Rom 13:5; 1 Pet 3:16; 2 Tim 1:3; cf. 1 Tim 1:5, 19); (3) to be an effective (useful) servant for God's purposes (Eph 2:8-10; 2 Tim 2:20-21); (4) to ensure one's life counts for eternity (Matt 6:19-21; 1 Cor 9:24-27); (5) to glorify God (Matt 5:14-16; 1 Cor 10:31; Phil 1:9-11); (6) to bring others to a saving knowledge of Christ (1 Cor 9:19-23; 2 Cor 2:14-17; 1 Pet 3:1-2); (7) to not be ashamed at the Judgment Seat of Christ but rather be rewarded (Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:9-10; 2 Tim 4:7-8; 1 John 2:28); (8) to be properly prepared for the Lord's coming (Matt 24:42-44; Mark 8:38; 2 Pet 3:10-13); (9) to demonstrate one has been set free from the power of sin (Rom 6:1-14; 7:1-6); (10) to experience the fullness of God's love, joy and blessing now (Ps 16:11; Matt 5:8; John 15:10; Rom 6:23, 12:1-2; Eph 3:14-19; 1 Pet 3:9-12, Jude 21); (11) to avoid experiencing the discipline of the Lord now (1 Cor 11:26-32; 1 Tim 5:20; Heb 12:3-11; 1 Pet 1:17; 1 John 5:16-17; Rev 3:19); and (12) to reflect the character and nature of the Father (Matt 5:48; Luke 6:36; Eph 4:32-5:1; 1 Pet 1:14-16; 1 John 2:6). While there is some degree of overlap of the above noted motivations, the point is amply made that to limit Christian motivation to the lone aspect of *gratitude* is not consistent with Biblical testimony.

Second, the assertion itself may be challenged. In this regard, Piper argues the Scriptures *do not* present gratitude as a primary motivator for Christian living as

[60] Ibid., 170.

Blomberg alleges. That is, while the Scriptures do in fact command gratitude as a Christian *duty* (e.g., Eph 5:20; 1 Thess 5:18), they rarely if ever use gratitude as an explicit *motivator* of behavior.[61] For example, it is a lack of *faith*, not ingratitude, God highlights as the reason behind Israel's moral failure (Num 14:11; Deut 1:31-32; Ps 78:15, 17, 22). Likewise, in the NT

> We find Christian obedience called the "work of faith," never of [*sic*] the "work of gratitude" (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11). We find expressions like "live by faith" (Galatians 2:20) and "walk by faith" (2 Corinthians 5:7), but never any expression like "live by gratitude" or "walk by gratitude."… Faith in future grace, not gratitude, is the source of radical, risk-taking, kingdom-seeking obedience.[62]

The danger in making gratitude a primary motivator for Christian behavior is it can easily degenerate into what Piper calls the "debtor's ethic… 'Because you have done something good for me, I feel indebted to do something good for you.'"[63] Likewise, Fuller states: "[I]f gratitude is set forth as a primary motive for obedience, there is an inherent danger that God's grace will be seen not as a free gift but as a gift incurring obligation that must in some way be met."[64]

Third, with regard to reward itself as a viable motivation in Scripture, Turner observes: "More often than not reward is used to encourage those who are suffering for their faith and are in need of endurance rather than to promote self-centeredness. The radical demands of the

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[61] Piper, *Future Grace*, 33-34.

[62] Ibid., 43. Piper does rightly acknowledge, however, there "are ways that gratitude helps bring about obedience to Christ. One way is that the spirit of gratitude is simply incompatible with some sinful attitudes.… There is a sense in which gratitude and faith are interwoven joys that strengthen each other…faith is strengthened by a lively gratitude for God's past trustworthiness" (ibid., 48).

[63] Ibid., 32.

[64] Fuller, "A Pauline Understanding of Rewards," 321.

gospel are made acceptable by the promise of reward."[65] Indeed, several texts appeal to the desire for reward as a motivation for right conduct (e.g., Matt 5:19, 6:4, 6, 18, 33; 1 Cor 3:14, 9:24-25).[66] As Kim observes: "We would affirm that Christ does exhort us to deny ourselves (Mt 10:37-39; Lk 9:23-24, 14:26-27; Jn 12:24-25). However, this call to self-denial is not an end, but a *means* for *gain*: we deny ourselves so that *we might have life*."[67]

In this regard, it is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews, who is seeking to motivate his readers not to abandon their Christian profession, frequently employs the theme of future reward (10:35, 11:6, 24-26). Though these texts do not explicitly refer to a doctrine of degrees of reward, the point is made that in these texts the prospect of a future reward is held out as a legitimate motivation for right conduct. Even Jesus was motivated in part to endure the cross by the promise of the *joy* that awaited him (Heb 12:2). Thus, reward as a valid means of motivation is affirmed in Scripture, contrary to Blomberg's contention.

A second theological assertion Blomberg makes in rejection of the doctrine of rewards is that "[n]othing we could ever offer to God could begin to repay him for the immense gift of forgiveness he has wrought on our behalf through the death of his dear Son."[68] While this is a true statement, in no way does it mitigate against a doctrine of degrees of reward. Nowhere has it even remotely been suggested that in their hope of future reward Christians labor to "repay" God. Rather, God in his grace chooses to bestow upon his children blessings commensurate with their service to him, service which God himself has enabled.

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[65] Layne H. Turner, "The Use of Eternal Reward as a Motivation in the New Testament" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991), 203.

[66] See this writer's dissertation for a fuller explication of these texts.

[67] Kim, "Reward and Sanctification," 7, emphasis original.

[68] Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," 170.

VI. CONCLUSION

The doctrine of degrees of reward has been shown to be compatible within Calvinism with the doctrines of justification and sanctification by faith. Indeed, numerous scholars attest to the validity of the doctrine.

The application of this doctrine to the life of the contemporary church is manifold. First, the doctrine underscores the importance of the diligent performance of works of faith and service against an antinomianism that would so emphasize the grace of God in salvation as to preclude the importance of good works in the life of the believer. Second, this doctrine provides additional motivation and encouragement for perseverance in the Christian life.

Third, the doctrine of degrees of reward underscores the eternal significance of all that a believer does, regardless of position or responsibility in the church. Fourth, this doctrine rebukes half-hearted service and devotion to the Lord with the solemn promise that each will give account and that there is the possibility of genuine loss of some kind at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Finally, this doctrine provides further encouragement for the believer to look forward to the eternal state with eagerness and anticipation. May God's people be encouraged to "run the race" with all diligence so as to "win the prize" and achieve all that God has for them!