

## *The Judgment: Pass-Fail, or Graded on a Curve?*

Last week, we had an interesting discussion in the High School Catechism class. The Bible is clear that those who do not have faith in Jesus will be sent to Hell at the Judgment Day. But some people claim that the punishments of Hell will be worse for some people than for others.

So the question was posed: Will God punish some sins differently than others? Isn't every sin just as bad in God's sight?

Since we didn't have time to do the question justice during class – and since the teacher wasn't entirely prepared for the question – I promised a more complete answer later. And ... it's later.

From the start, we have to admit: Every sin *is* equally condemnable.

God, who is holy and perfectly just, requires perfect compliance with His Law. To break even *one* of His commands is to violate the heart of the Law's demand to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. "For whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (Jas. 2:10).

Therefore whoever breaks even *one* command deserves – and, apart from faith in Christ, will receive – God's wrath and the tormenting isolation of Hell.

Since any sin – be it a "white lie," a mass murder or the love of false gods – will send a person to Hell, it's true that every sin is (in that sense) equally hateful to our holy God.

But that's not the whole story.

God is perfectly *just*. His judgment corresponds perfectly to each crime.

He revealed that truth to Israel in commands like Lev. 24:19-20, in which God calls for human judges to dispense justice that suits the crime – fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. God's justice is *fair*.

We find that fairness expressed *positively* in God's promise to reward those who belong to Him through Christ. For instance, in 1 Cor. 4:5, Paul tells us that Jesus will reveal men's hidden deeds and the purposes of their hearts. "Then each one will receive his commendation from God." The implication is that each person's reward will correspond to what that person has done.

Paul explains this in more detail in 1 Cor. 3:10-15. He depicts the Christian life as being like a building constructed on a solid foundation, which is Christ. Whatever men build on that foundation – what they do with the life that Christ redeemed – God will judge, like a jeweler judges the worth of metal with a fire.

The apostle says: "If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:14-15). His worthless works won't condemn him, since Jesus' work covered his sin. But neither will he receive a reward from God for how he used his gifts.

Scripture speaks often of the various kinds of rewards God promises to give to His saints in recognition of their faithful service. (See, for example, Matt. 10:40-42; Matt. 19:28-30; Luke 12:31-34.) All who belong to Him in Christ will be blessed beyond measure – yet they will *not* all receive the same reward.

And as it shall be with the saints, so shall it be with the wicked. All who reject Christ and persist in rebellion against God shall be condemned to the eternal torment of Hell. But Hell will be more terrible for some than for others.

Again, the Bible says each person will be judged "according to what they had done" (Rev. 20:13). They will give account for every careless word (Matt. 12:36-37) and for every deed, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

But the standard by which men are judged will differ according to what God entrusted to them. "All who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law" (Rom. 2:12). Likewise, God will hold to a higher standard those who were teachers of God's people during their lives (Jas. 3:1), since they had a deeper understanding of His will.

And Jesus warned the inhabitants of cities where He worked miracles that their punishment will be greater than those of pagan cities. They had heard the Son of God and had seen miracles attesting to His divinity. They *should* have been led to repent – as many pagan cities would have done, had they heard and seen Jesus. So Jesus tells them it will be more bearable on the Judgment Day for Tyre and Sidon, even for Sodom, than for them (Matt. 11:20-24).

Ultimately, what counts with God is how we respond to what He gives us. Those who have been given only the light of nature will be judged with less strictness than those who have the Bible. Those who saw God's work in the saints will be held to a higher standard than those who never met a Christian.

That's *just*. It's evidence of God's *fairness*.

And His justice extends past the verdict to the *sentencing* of the ungodly.

In a parable related in Luke 12:43-48, Jesus said: "And that servant who knew His master's will but did not get ready or act according to His will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."

That's God's justice. All who reject Him will be punished. But some will deserve a punishment more harsh than is merited by others.

That's why the apostle can warn us in Heb. 10:28-29 that none will deserve a greater punishment than the one who rejects the Son of God and treats the blood of the Covenant as something common.

God is *just*. And in justice, some men will be worthy of a punishment more *harsh* than others receive. Therefore God will give them what they deserve.

Unless, that is ... unless they trust in Jesus Christ, who has taken our justice on Himself, so that God "might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

And *that* is justice we can *celebrate!*