

Reward / Punishment

There is a question that arises on occasion that has quite often been the source of confusion for some. I was asked to bring a lesson of the idea of degrees of punishment. Are there levels of torment or punishment in hell? This idea is most often raised by passages such as...

2 Peter 2:21-22

1

21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. **22** It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."

At first glance, it might appear that Peter is saying that if one had never know the way of righteousness, even though they would suffer for a lack of obedience, those will be better off in punishment than those who did know the way of righteousness and chose to return to the way of Satan. Both will be punished, but the punishment for the one will be worse than the punishment for the other. It is interesting to note that whenever this concept is discussed in the scriptures it is always in the context of either one having known the way of truth and then fallen away or as Christ describes in...

Matt 18:4-6

2

4 Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **5** And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; **6** but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

For the one who deceives or causes an innocent to fall away or not come to God, it would be better to be drowned in the depths of the ocean.

I guess, in reality, the point becomes somewhat moot when it is understood that regardless of whether or not there are degrees of torment to be found in hell, the truth is that we don't want to be there at all. Many years ago, after a discussion with some of the Latter Day Saints, I was told that I was a good guy and that I would not be punished but would receive a small reward in heaven, not the full reward that others would receive, but a small one. My response to that is that I would rather have an apartment at the very outskirts of heaven than the greatest mansion available in hell. I recognize that that is a silly statement. I just don't believe that that is the way things are going to be.

Another side to this discussion is the idea of degrees of reward, which this Mormon gentleman was referring to, the thought being that if there are levels of punishment then there must be levels of reward.

The first question I want to address is the idea of...

3

1) Are there levels of reward

Matt 20:1-16

READ

1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** And he went out about the third hour and saw others

standing idle in the market place; **4** and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. **5** Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. **6** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' **7** They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' **8** "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' **9** When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. **10** When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. **11** When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, **12** saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' **13** But he answered and said to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? **14** Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. **15** Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' **16** So the last shall be first, and the first last."

It is at this point that many say, "That is just a parable." But let us remember what a parable is. Vines defines it as...

4 Parable (NT:3850)

Lit. denotes "a placing beside" (akin to *paraballo*, "to throw" or "lay beside, to compare"). It signifies "a placing of one thing beside another" with a view to comparison (some consider that the thought of comparison is not necessarily contained in the word). It is generally used of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson, e. g., those in Matt 13 and Synoptic parallels.

Christ's "parables" most frequently convey truths connected with the subject of the kingdom of God. His withholding the meaning from His hearers as He did from the multitudes, Matt 13:34, was a divine judgment upon the unworthy.

We often, for simplicity sake, say that a parable is an earthly story with a spiritual meaning. With that thought in mind then we must understand that in the parable that Jesus gave in Matt. 20, He is giving an Earthly story that the people can understand. They knew about landlords and working for their wages. They understood that if a wage was offered and agreed upon then that is what was being worked for. In the story, each group of workers agreed upon the wage that they would receive for the work they were doing. There was nothing either unfair or deceptive in what the owner offered. It was his choice and prerogative to offer whatever he chose to offer for the work he wanted done. It is only in the eyes of the workers that fair or unfair becomes an issue. That is the point being made in verse...

5 **14** Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. **15** Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous? **16** So the last shall be first, and the first last."

Christ tells this story to illustrate a spiritual principal concerning the kingdom of Heaven. Nowhere in the scriptures do we see any reference or suggestion that there is anything other than the reward of Eternal Life given to those who faithfully obey Christ, God, and the Word.

Gal 6:8-10 6

8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. **9** Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. **10** So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

Eternal Life is the promise made to all who sow to the Spirit, who faithfully obey from the heart the will of God. There is nowhere that the scriptures indicate that there is going to be any greater or different reward for any who are faithful.

That said, it then brings us to the next question...

7 2) Are there degrees of punishment

As we have already seen in 2 Peter 2 and Matt. 18, the wording of those passages could be understood to say that there is going to be some sort of level or degree of punishment in Hell, eternal punishment. But there is also a different understanding that should be noted.

Luke 16:19-23 8

19 "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. **20** And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, **21** and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. **22** Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. **23** In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.

Here is the story that Christ tells of the rich man and poor Lazarus, who lay at his gates hoping for just some scraps to eat. They both die and go to the Hadean realm to wait for Christ to come when all the dead will be raised. The rich man finds himself in torment and anguish because of the deeds he has done in his life. In his anguish, we are told that he looks across the gulf into Abraham's bosom and sees Lazarus being comforted. Note the conversation that is then had between him and Abraham.

Luke 16:24-26 9

24 And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' **25** But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. **26** And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'

The rich man wanted some small relief from the torment he was in and begged Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and just touch his tongue. Abraham then tells him that that is not possible because of the gulf that separates Tartarus from Paradise, the place of Torment from the place of comfort. The rich man's next comment is for me, telling...

Luke 16:27-28

10

27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house— **28** for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

The rich man was aware of where he was. He was aware that there was someplace different where there was comfort and not torment, he saw and recognized Lazarus being comforted there. This is again one of those things that scholars are at odds over. Is this a true story or a parable? When the parables of Christ are looked at, what is seen is generality. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who. Generality, but in this story we see specifics. The poor man is named, Lazarus. The rich man says he has five brothers. The story doesn't fit the pattern of the parables that Christ told to illustrate spiritual lessons. But let's assume for a minute that this is a parable. Remember what a parable is; an earthly story illustrating a spiritual lesson. So even if this is to be understood as a parable, Christ is telling a story founded in truth to illustrate His point. What we see in this, is that the rich man was aware, he recognized where he was and where he could have been. What we don't see is that Lazarus had any awareness of the rich man or the torment that he was in. This seems to make a lot sense. Eternal life will be a life of joy and happiness in the presence of God. It seems improbable that there could be any distraction or influence towards sadness or tears. We all have friends or family that have chosen to have no relationship with God through Christ. If we are aware of their torment, that would be an influence to sadness. But on the other hand, think how that concept of awareness while in torment would have an effect on someone. Remember what Peter said...

2 Peter 2:21-22

11

21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. **22** It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."

How is going to feel if after having experienced the joy of a relationship with God through Christ, we wind up with the rich man in torment looking across at those in comfort and realize what we could have had. How much greater is that going to make the torment knowing what could have been. Or, what about those who finally recognize that Christ is the Son of God and the scriptures are His revelation to show us how to come to God and realize those that they led astray and caused to stumble. It will be bad enough to know that we blew it, but what a terrible thought to know that our stubbornness, our pride and arrogance, have led others away from God. Now look at the thoughts that Christ says concerning leading the little ones to stumble...

Mark 9:42

12

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea."

Luke 17:1-2

13

1 He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! *2* It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble.

What I see in these passages is that it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone about the neck than to be responsible for leading someone astray. This should illustrate for us the vital importance of being right with God and making sure that we don't lead others astray. The thought of being found guilty of the Law of God and condemned because of the deeds that I have done...

Titus 1:15-16

14

15 To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. *16* They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

Peter says...

15

“Like a dog returning to its vomit”

This is what it is like to have known God and then to have fallen away. Paul says in...

2 Cor 5:10

16

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

There will be an accounting for how we choose to live our lives. The deeds of this body will be revealed, whether good or bad.

There is nothing in the scriptures to indicate that there will levels of reward, and the passages that talk about “It being better,” can be understood in ways other than degrees or levels of punishment. But regardless of how we choose to understand this discussion. The real point of it is that there is a punishment reserved for the wicked...

2 Peter 2:9

17

9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the Day of Judgment,

And there is a reward reserved for the righteous...

1 Peter 1:3-4

18

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, *4* to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

So, the final question is, where is our reservation?