

OVERCOMING & REWARDS

Tonight I would like to look at the concept of Christian rewards. In case you haven't realized it yet, the vast majority of today's Christians have a strong aversion to any teaching or idea that dares to *elevate* any Christian, or group of Christians, above other Christians in the coming kingdom. It's a very strong bias, and it was put there by preachers and Bible teachers who refuse to acknowledge what the Scripture teaches about rewards. Instead of being taught what the Bible actually says, Christians are taught that they will all receive the same rewards *by grace*.

This mind-set has been ingrained so deeply in the hearts of most Christians, it causes them to instantly reject any idea or thought which suggests that some believers will be greater, or have better rewards, in the kingdom than others. Most of today's believers cannot and will not accept the fact that those who have paid a greater price to be faithful to Jesus, *deserve* more honor and glory. We need to consider very carefully what the Scripture actually says, lest we find ourselves part of this deception:

*He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, **some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.***

Matthew 13:22-23

In Matthew, Jesus said those who received the seed, which is the Word of God, on good ground bring forth various levels of "fruit"—thirty, sixty, and one-hundred fold. That fruit is the fruit of the Spirit, which is the nature and the character of God. So according to Jesus, believers can come forth in varying degrees of Christ's character and likeness. We do not automatically bring forth one-hundred fold fruit just because we have accepted Jesus as our Savior.

*Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in **a great house** there are not only **vessels of gold and of silver**, but also of **wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour**. If a man therefore purge himself from these, **he shall be a vessel unto honour**, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.*

II. Timothy 2:19-21

The apostle Paul said in God's great "house" there will be "vessels of honor" and "vessels of dishonor". Please notice that *both kinds* of vessels will be in God's house. That means they *all* belong to God. Paul was not contrasting the saved with the lost. Rather, he was contrasting two different kinds of *believers* in God's kingdom. He was telling us that in the kingdom, people will experience different spiritual states of existence, and the determining factor in whether we end up a *vessel of honor* or a *vessel of dishonor* is whether or not we depart from iniquity and purge from ourselves the wood, hay and stubble. Wood, hay

and stubble symbolize the old Adamic nature. Gold and silver represent the nature of God. In other words, those who allow God to change them from wood, hay and stubble (the image of Adam) to silver or gold (the image of Christ) will be vessels of honor. But those who do not, will end up vessels of dishonor in God's house (kingdom). Two classes of *genuine* believers—the honorable and the dishonorable.

*Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, **he shall be called the least** in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, **the same shall be called great** in the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:19

In this teaching, Jesus states quite frankly that in His kingdom, some will be called “great” and some will be called “least”. Once again, the contrast is not between the saved and the lost. Both the greatest and the least are clearly said to be in God's kingdom. If there are those who are *great* and those who are *least* in the coming kingdom, would it be unreasonable to assume that there will be others who fall somewhere in between—who are neither the greatest or the least?

Please notice what will *determine* who is great and who is least. The determining factor is not belief *in* Jesus but obedience *to* Jesus. Obedience will determine which group of saints we are joined to in the kingdom. There is no way around the meaning of Jesus's teaching here. There will be levels of greatness in the coming kingdom, and the level of greatness you and I come forth in will be determined by what kind of obedience we give the Lord Jesus in *this* life!

So there are *three* possible levels of Christ-likeness we can come forth in; there are *two* possible kinds of vessels we can come forth as; and there are at least *two* different possible levels of greatness we can come forth in, in Christ's kingdom. Looks like the traditional view of rewards isn't holding up so well when it's compared to the *whole council* of God's Word!

*And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even **the garment spotted by the flesh**.*

Jude 1:22-23

*Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and **keepeth his garments**, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.*

Revelation 16:15

Here is another division of people—and I believe they are God's people. The division is between those who keep their garments clean and those who allow them to become spotted. Since both groups have a “garment”, we can be sure that they are *genuine* saints. Fake Christians may look like Christians and talk like Christians and go to church with true Christians; but fake Christians have no GARMENT to spot. Only a genuine believer gets one of those garments. So all of these people are God's people. Of course, since it's not *clearly* stated that these people will be part of God's kingdom or part of His house (as in the

previous passages), I suppose there is room for discussion as to whether or not they are *still* saved, once they have spotted their robes. But as we shall see in a few minutes, there are passages in the New Testament which show very clearly that there is room in God's kingdom for *miserable* failures. I would also suggest that some of the examples I've just presented—like the “least” in the kingdom and especially the vessels of “dishonor”—could also be considered failures, just like those who allow their garments to become spotted.

Therefore, I don't view these people who have spotted their robes as apostate and on their way to Hell. In any case, it's not clearly stated that they are lost, so there is just as much of a chance that they are dishonorable vessels as it is that they are apostate. Take your pick. As for me, I see them as weak and unstable Christians—and if this be true, then what you have is another division of God's people into those who keep their garments clean and those who don't.

Jesus said those who keep their garments clean will: “...walk with me in white for they are worthy” (Rev. 3:4). Opinions vary regarding what it will mean to walk with Jesus in white; but whatever it means, one thing is certain: those who allow their garments to be spotted will *not* be able to walk with Jesus in white. Neither will they be able to walk with *other believers* who are walking with Jesus in white.

Yet another division of God's people is between overcomers and non-overcomers, and this can be seen in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. There, Jesus challenges *the saints* in the churches of Asia Minor to overcome the things that were hindering them, and in some cases, destroying them. There is a clear distinction made between those who overcome and those who don't overcome—and both kinds of people are *genuine* believers.

Of course, the leaders of the Church System assure us that if we are saved, we are *already* an overcomer. They say no further effort is required on our part to be an overcomer. Just believe—believing is overcoming. Few of them stop to consider the fact that Jesus was speaking to local New Testament fellowships when He challenged the people in those churches to “overcome”. If being saved *equals* overcoming, then why did the Lord tell those who were *already* saved that they still had to overcome? The outcome of this error is that only the overcomer is saved because only the overcomer is a true Christian.

Then there are those at the other end of the spectrum, who have left the Religious System, who realize that being a Christian doesn't automatically make you an overcomer. But because of what Jesus said to the church of Sardis about not having their names removed from the Book of Life *if* they overcome, these people think the only ones who will be saved are the ones who *actually* overcome. For them, it's an all or nothing proposition—overcome or burn. Thus, the outcome of both these errors is that *only* the overcomer is saved. I'll come back take a closer look at what Jesus said to the church of Sardis in a few minutes because what He said there is still causing confusion among some of God's people.

Another division of believers can be seen in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Lord's ministry revealed that not all those who followed Him shared the same degree of closeness TO Him. Neither did they all share the same knowledge OF Him. On what grounds are we assuming things will be any different in the kingdom? The Scripture teaches very clearly that we will reap whatever we sow (Gal. 6:7-8). The level of closeness to, and intimacy with, Jesus that you and I *sow* in this life, is the level of closeness and intimacy we will *reap* in the coming kingdom.

For many Christians, their intimacy and closeness to the Lord is pretty far down on their list of priorities. Their family relationships, their homes, their jobs, and other things come before their relationship with Jesus. They may believe in Him; they may serve Him in some capacity; they may be genuine Christians; but they are not CLOSE to Him. They have not taken the time to develop a deep, intimate relationship with Him. Yet they assume that when they are “raptured” all this will change and their relationship with Him will instantly become what it was already supposed to be.

Sorry folks! It ain't gonna happen that way. In the kingdom, we are going to REAP precisely the kind of closeness to Jesus that we have SOWN in this life—and many will weep on that day, when they realize what their daily choices (what they have sowed, day in and day out) has earned them.

The Lord had a number of different *groups* following Him, some closer than others. Those furthest from Him were *the multitudes* who followed Him because they wanted something *from* Him—which was healing for their various physical diseases. A little closer to Him was a *large group of disciples* that followed Him for a season, most of whom turned back because they could not handle what He said about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (*John 6:66*).

A little closer to Him was an *inner circle of twelve* disciples who lived and walked with Him throughout His entire ministry. These twelve men had a much more intimate relationship with the Master than the other two groups. To them Jesus explained the meaning of His parables and teachings and His mission. To them He revealed that He was Israel's Messiah.

Among that inner circle of twelve there existed an even smaller *circle of three* disciples: Peter, James and John. These men were shown things that the rest of the twelve were not. They were with Jesus at the mountain of transfiguration and saw Him display His future glory. They saw Him talking to Elijah and Moses and heard the Father speak out of heaven to them.

Finally, among the three, there was *one* (John) who laid his head on the bosom of Jesus at the last supper, and who stood by Him at His crucifixion. John refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” four times in his Gospel—thus leaving us with the distinct impression that out of the multitudes who followed Jesus, he had the closest relationship of all with Him

Just as it was during His earthly ministry, so it will be in the coming kingdom. People will come forth in various *proximities of closeness* to the Lord, based on what they have been sowing during this life. This idea that most Christians have, that Jesus is going to return in glory, change us into what we should *already* be, and then whisk us off to heaven where we will all share the same rewards, is a lie. It's just a worthless human tradition. Listen to the words of Jesus, when speaking about His return in the book of Revelation:

He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.

Revelation 22:11-12

The Lord is not returning with some kind of “magic wand” that will instantly change filthy believers into clean believers, or turn unrighteous believers into righteous ones, or unjust ones into just ones. Every person—Christian and pagan alike—will reap what they have sown in this life. The grace of God does not change what we reap, it changes what we sow! If the Holy Spirit can not change what we sow today, then tomorrow some of us may wake up and realize that we are *least* in the kingdom, or that we are a vessel of *dishonor* in God’s house, or that we cannot walk with Jesus (or the victorious saints) in white. Others will wake up and realize they have forfeited their salvation altogether.

The desire to lump all God’s people together and have them all come forth on the same spiritual level, enjoy the same closeness to the Lord, and receive the same rewards and glory, does not come from the Spirit of God. It comes from a combination of bad doctrine and *blind* presumption. I say “blind” presumption because such a view *purposely* ignores all the things the Scripture says that contradict it. The Scripture declares repeatedly—in almost every book of the Bible—that every person will be judged and rewarded according to his or her works; according to how they have lived in this life.

Protestant religious leaders have been rejecting this fundamental truth ever since the Reformation because they assume such a view condones Roman Catholicism, which is a works-righteousness system. Roman Catholics seek to *earn* their salvation by doing good works, by participating in the Mass, and by going to confession each week. The leaders of the Reformation, after realizing that all this was a lie, proceeded to over-react and say that just as we cannot earn salvation, in like manner, we cannot earn any of the rewards that are associated *with* salvation. Instead, we should just believe that the rewards found in the Scripture automatically come with salvation.

Thus, the concept of “*package deal Christianity*” was born. For centuries, religious leaders have gone through the Bible and gathered together all the promises and rewards spoken of, and combined them into a “package deal” called salvation. *Package deal salvation* says that if you are saved, then you get all the promises and rewards mentioned in the Bible. There are no degrees or levels of glory or reward. That’s why Christians react with such hostility when someone suggests that some believers may get *better* rewards than others in the kingdom, or that some believers might partake of certain rewards that other believers will *not* partake of. This whole idea is anathema to them.

Whenever you suggest such a possibility, most Christians not only reject it, many times they go ballistic. Then they try to justify their ungodly reaction by accusing the person who dared to suggest such a thing of trying to exalt himself above the rest of the brethren. They say it’s just that person’s flesh that wants to rule over other believers, and the guy is accused of being arrogant, of promoting *elitism* in the body of Christ, and of trying to be better than the rest (ie: a “super-saint”), or more holy than the rest.

But the truth is, it’s the average Christian who is wrong because they are rejecting the clear message of the Scripture when it comes to rewards—and *the reason* they reject it is because they can’t stand the idea that someone might have something better than THEM in the kingdom! They can’t stand the idea that someone might have a better resurrection, or get more glory; or be closer to Jesus; or have more authority than THEM in the kingdom. They want everyone to be the same. They want everyone to have exactly the same rewards, not because they are interested in justice and equity, but because they don’t want anybody else to have *more* than they do or be *better* than they are in the kingdom. Their attitude comes just as much from wicked heart motives as it does from being influenced by wrong doctrine..

Even when people are forced to deal with the passages which talk about people “losing” their rewards, religious leaders still *refuse* to acknowledge the implications of what is said. They will make a passing comment about the possibility of losing some rewards, but you will NEVER find them describing WHICH rewards can be lost, or what it will MEAN for a person to lose his rewards. It’s all kept very vague—and even after they admit a person can lose some rewards, everyone continues to assume that he will still partake of the rewards laid out in the first three chapters of Revelation, for you see, those rewards are all considered to be part of the “package deal”. So regardless of what *other* rewards we may lose through rebellion and carelessness, we can rest assured that we will never lose the ones in Revelation.

Well, if every true Christian is going to automatically get the rewards listed in Revelation chapters two and three, regardless of what they do or how they live in this life, then WHO CARES what other rewards we may lose?! I mean, hey, the rewards that come as part of the “package deal” are pretty impressive! Regardless of what else we might lose, we will still:

- (1) *be able to eat of the Tree of Life*
- (2) *not be hurt by the second death*
- (3) *receive Hidden Manna and a White Stone with a new, secret name engraved on that stone*
- (4) *receive the Morning Star and rule over the nations with Jesus*
- (5) *be clothed in white garments, keep our names in the book of life, and have our names confessed before the Father and His angels*
- (6) *be a pillar in God’s temple and have the names of God, Christ and the New Jerusalem written on us*
- (7) *sit in Christ’s throne*

Is there anybody in this room who *wouldn’t* be satisfied with all these rewards? Would you really care if you lost some other reward, as long as you still received all these rewards? Probably not. One of the greatest needs of the hour is for God’s people to realize that we are making our future place in the kingdom by how we live *today*. We have to break free of the mind-set that causes us to assume all believers will eventually end up with the same rewards and glory. It is totally unscriptural and goes against every principle of God’s perfect justice and equity.

Those who hold this view can’t understand the concepts of “*the remnant*” or “*the overcomer*” because they assume all true believers are overcomers, and that all true believers are the remnant. In their minds, the terms Christian and overcomer are synonymous—one equals the other. So when you start talking to them about *non-overcoming* Christians, their brains short-circuit because that concept doesn’t compute. There is no such thing as a non-overcoming Christian in their minds. To them, a non-overcoming Christian is not a genuine Christian.

The same is true when you start talking about the concept of a “remnant”. Right away there will be a problem with terminology because the only concept of a “remnant” most church people have is that the remnant are those who are saved and the rest are lost. In their view, the remnant are the *true* Christians and the rest are just *religious people* who go to church. So when you start talking about a remnant who are part of the TRUE church, once again, you short-circuit their brains because such a concept doesn’t compute. They can’t grasp the concept of remnant *within* the true church because that goes against everything they have ever been taught about the church. In their minds, the remnant *is* the true church—the

rest are those who claim to be Christians, but who are actually part of the false church. Their package deal Christianity makes them incapable of understanding that there is a small remnant of *totally* victorious saints within the larger church, which only walks in *partial* victory.

Again, the bottom line is that in their view, *only* the overcomer or the remnant are genuine believers. This makes it hard to even have a coherent discussion with the average church goer because right away there is a BIG problem with terminology. The terms “overcomer” and “remnant” will mean one thing to you; but it will mean something *completely different* to them. So before any meaningful conversation can even take place, there will have to be a theological discussion to determine the meaning of these words—and the conversation will probably never get past *that* fundamental issue because how one defines these terms reflects his overall view of salvation.

Once again, *package deal Christianity* blinds people to the reality that some saints will gain total victory over Satan, sin and self (and be rewarded accordingly), while others will only gain a partial victory over these things (and be rewarded accordingly).

Package deal Christianity is part of the whole Evangelical “saved by grace” theology, which states that we will all be rewarded by grace—not according to what we have done or failed to do in this life. It’s all of God. He does it all. Grace is the great EQUALIZER. It makes sure that everyone gets the same rewards, regardless of how they lived, regardless of how obedient or disobedient they were, regardless of how faithful they were to Jesus in this life.

In fact, whenever you try to tell people who believe in package deal Christianity that they are making their place in eternity right now by how they live, or that they will gain or lose the rewards in Scripture by the *choices* they are making every day, they immediately accuse you of trampling upon God’s grace. They look down their self-righteous noses at you and declare with all authority that to even suggest such a thing is heresy. They utterly reject the idea that our own personal effort, or our own choices, could possibly *affect* what God has *sovereignly* chosen to give us. They are convinced that sovereignty and grace are the great equalizers, and they will make sure we all get what God has predestined us to have. In their minds, receiving the package deal doesn’t depend on anything we do or fail to do—it depends on God alone. It’s all of God and none of us, so we can’t stop God from giving us what He wants to give us.

The fact that the terms Christian and overcomer are *not* synonymous is revealed by what is said in the beginning of Revelation. There, Jesus sent a message to the seven churches in Asia, and that message was the call for the people in those churches to “overcome”. The people in those churches were *believers*. They were God’s people. However, there were certain issues they were facing which had to be overcome—and for a couple of those churches, the issues they needed to overcome were so serious, if they didn’t get the victory over them, they were in danger of being cut off from Christ.

The implication of what is said in these chapters is very clear—if you aren’t already disposed to reject it. The saints in those congregations were not walking in TOTAL victory over the things that were hindering them from reaching full sanctification. They were only walking in PARTIAL victory. The Lord challenged them to attain full victory over these things. In other words, the issue in Revelation chapters two and three is *the difference* between partial victory and total victory. Since Jesus challenged true believers who were already walking in partial victory to attain total victory, what that means is that Jesus’ *definition* of an

overcomer is one who gets total victory over all the things which seek to hinder him spiritually. This is the meaning of the vision of the 144,000 who stand on Mt. Zion with the Lamb, and who follow Him where ever He goes (*Rev. 14:1-4*).

That's not a picture of the WHOLE church. It's a picture of a REMNANT of believers within the church who have gained total victory over everything that seeks to hinder them from attaining the fulness of Christ. Most of those who make up the TRUE church will not attain the fulness of Christ. To maintain that they will is to live in a religious fantasy world. The remnant on Mt. Zion are the overcomers.

Once this becomes clear, the next question is: what happens to those who are not part of that overcoming remnant? What happens to those who don't get total victory over the things that keep them from attaining full sanctification? What will happen to those who only get *partial* victory? Will they be damned? The number of people who would say "yes" is surprising.

Last year, I got into a discussion with one individual about this issue in my chat room and soon realized that he thinks all non-overcomers will be lost. He said very frankly that overcoming is not an option; that we *must* overcome to inherit eternal life. That guy is still around and he is still propagating that error and confusing people.

Whenever you start talking about overcomers, the first thing you need to do is DEFINE the term. So the basic issue or question is: what exactly is an overcomer? Another way to put the question is this: exactly *how much* overcoming must a person do before they can qualify as an "overcomer"? Does overcoming 25% of the things that are hindering us from attaining the fulness of Christ qualify us as an overcomer? How about 50%? If we overcome 50% of the things that hinder us from attaining the fulness of Christ, does that make us an overcomer? What about those who get victory over 75% or 85% of the things that hinder them from reaching the fulness of Christ? Are they overcomers or not? Just how much overcoming does it take to make you "an overcomer"?

Well, as far as I can see, the *definition* of an overcomer, according to what Jesus said in Revelation, is one who gets complete victory over *everything* that stands in the way of full sanctification. If that's the definition; if that's the standard; then those who only get partial victory cannot really be called overcomers—can they? That's why I refer to them as "non-overcomers". I don't refer to them like that in order to belittle them. I'm not talking about them in a condescending way when I say they are non-overcomers because they are still my brothers and sisters in Christ. They are part of God's family.

When I talk about non-overcomers, I'm *not* talking about people who don't overcome anything. Certainly these brethren have overcome *some* things. Some of them have overcome *many* things. But they haven't overcome *all* things—and that's the definition of an overcomer! An overcomer is one who gets *total* victory. So if the definition of an overcomer is one who gets the total victory, than anything less than total victory makes us a non-overcomer. It doesn't make us apostate or unsaved; and it doesn't make us horrible people. It just makes us what we are—partial victors.

We've got to understand that there are going to be all kinds of people in God's kingdom—and they're not all going to be vessels of honor. They're not all going to be the greatest. As a matter of fact, there is room in God's kingdom for not only non-overcomers (ie: partial victors), but for utter failures as well!

*Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. **If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.***

I. Corinthians 3:12-15

This passage is very hard on the “overcome or burn” view because Paul clearly says the one who loses his reward (ie: suffers loss) will still be saved. You got that? The one who **LOSES HIS REWARD** can still be saved. What do you think it will be like for this kind of individual in the coming kingdom? Have you ever thought about it? He’s saved but he has no reward. That’s pretty intense. This kind of person is certainly not going to get the rewards that go to the overcomer. I mean, it would be quite a stretch to say that someone who has lost his reward, and who has to be saved by fire, is an overcomer! I don’t think we’ll see that guy on Mt. Zion with Jesus and the rest of the 144,000—do you? I don’t think he will be able to walk with Jesus in white, or with the *victorious saints* who are walking with the Lord in white—do you? Yet Paul said he will be “saved”.

*It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that **the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.***

I. Corinthians 5:1-5

Here is a case where a believer was walking in open, blatant, sexual sin. If some of us were faced with this same situation today, our first response would be to say that this guy is not a genuine believer and that he never was a believer; and we would be quick to assign him his well-deserved place in Hell.

But look at what Paul said—and even more importantly, what he didn’t say. Paul didn’t say: “*Well, this mans actions prove that he is not a genuine believer*”. He didn’t say: “*Well, since this guy won’t repent, deliver his soul to the flames*”. What Paul said was, deliver him to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his “*...spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*”. Once again, I think it would be quite a stretch to maintain that this guy, who has to have his flesh destroyed by Satan in order to have his spirit saved in the Day of the Lord, is an overcomer! I don’t think this guy will be on Mt. Zion with Jesus and the rest of that 144,000—do you? I don’t think he will be able to walk with Jesus in white, or with the *victorious saints* who are walking with the Lord in white—do you?

Now it just so happens that the Corinthians ended up disciplining this guy and he eventually repented. But this doesn't change the way Paul was obviously *thinking* when he told them to deliver him to Satan for the destruction of his flesh that his spirit might be saved in the end. The very fact that Paul made such a statement reveals that he didn't hold the "overcome-or-burn" view. As it is with all false teachings, you can make the "overcome-or-burn" view fit certain verses of Scripture here and there, but you can't make it fit the whole council of God's Word.

Before moving on, I want to go back and look at what Jesus said to the church of Sardis because some people like to take what was said there and misapply it to all people everywhere in order to support this "overcome-or-burn" error.

One reason there is so much confusion about the concept of overcoming is because people view it as a static thing. They don't understand that overcoming is a *relative* issue. Even though the definition of an overcomer—in my view—is one who gains total victory over everything that hinders him from reaching the fulness of Christ, it's still a relative issue because we are all different. We have all come from different backgrounds, different cultures, and different levels or depths of sin. That means we don't all necessarily have the *same things* to overcome.

Even though each one of us has a sin nature that is *capable* of committing the vilest of sins, not every one of us has experienced the *same level* of wickedness in our lives. Not everyone has become a *murderer*, even though the nature we have is quite capable of committing murder. Not all of us have been *strung out on drugs*, even though the nature that's in each one of us is certainly capable of doing that. There is a big difference between what our sin nature is capable of doing and what we have *actually* done before we came to the Lord. So even though we all have this nature in us that is totally depraved, we have not all necessarily experienced *full measure* of that depravity.

What that means is this: we don't have to overcome ALL sin; we only have to overcome OUR sin. There are many things we don't have to overcome because we have no desire to partake of them. People who have never been involved with *alcohol* do not have to overcome the sin of drunkenness because they have no desire to drink; nor will they ever have to overcome an addiction to it alcohol. Someone who has never been involved in *gambling* will not have to overcome the sin of gambling because they have no desire to gamble; nor will they ever have to overcome an addiction to gambling.

I have things in *my* life that I must overcome that you may not have a problem with in *your* life—and visa versa. The Scripture says that it is required of a man that he hath, not what he doesn't have (*II. Cor. 8:12*). God is only requiring us to overcome OUR sins; the things that are hindering US from attaining the fulness of Christ. The deeper in sin we were before our conversion, the more things we will probably have to overcome in our lives. But again, not everyone sinks to the same level of wickedness and iniquity in experience. Consequently, we all have different things to overcome.

Also, the various things we must overcome don't all necessarily have the same potential of *damning* our souls if we fail to overcome them. For example, a person who never gets total victory over something like *procrastination* is not in the same situation as the person who can't get total victory over the something like *pornography*. Some of the things we must overcome are much more deadly than others. Some things have the potential to *slay* our spirit man and separate us from Christ eternally. But not everything in our lives

is that deadly. Some things are more like short-comings, and they don't get us cut out of Christ if we fail to get victory over them. Of course, failing to get victory over them will affect our place in Christ and our place in the kingdom, that's for sure. So we can't adopt an "*I-don't-care*" attitude towards them. But my point is, not everything that's wrong with us will get us cast into the Lake of Fire if we don't get complete victory over it. It's not an "*overcome-everything-totally-or-burn*" proposition.

These are important things to keep in mind when you read what Jesus said to the churches in Asia. Just as each person has his own particular things to overcome, and not everything he must overcome is *equally* deadly, so it is with *entire* congregations. Each of the churches in Revelation had certain things to overcome, but not all of those things were equally deadly.

It's one thing to miss a particular reward if we fail to overcome something. But it's quite another thing to be eternally cut off from Christ if we fail to overcome something. This is an important distinction that must be kept in mind when considering the concept of overcoming, and when reading what Jesus said to those churches. Most of the overcoming in that portion of Revelation pertains to receiving or not receiving certain rewards. However, the situation of the church at Sardis was a little different:

*And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that **thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.** Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, **that are ready to die:** for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. . .He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and **I will not blot out his name out of the book of life,** but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

Please notice what it is this church must overcome. Jesus said they had a reputation (name) that they were spiritually alive, but in fact, this church, as a whole, was spiritually dead. When you are spiritually dead, that means you are no longer partaking of salvation. This church was apostate. Being apostate (ie: dead spiritually) is a pretty serious thing to overcome—wouldn't you say? Jesus said this congregation only had a few people (names) who had not completely defiled their garments, and as a result, had gone into apostasy. This is why He warned them that if they didn't overcome that condition, they would have their names removed from the Book of life.

Can you see how wrong it is to take what is said about this particular church and apply it to *all* Christians? The majority of the people in that church were apostate. If you are in that condition and you don't overcome it, certainly you are toast. But not all of God's people have to overcome *that* condition. To apply that condition and possible outcome to all of God's people, under the guise of defining what it means to be an overcomer, is to wrongly divide the Word of Truth.

One of the rewards for the overcomer is ruling the nations with Jesus in the next age (*Rev. 2:27*). But what about non-overcomers? Will non-overcomers receive this same reward? Everyone says “yes” because everyone believes ruling with Jesus over the nations is part of the package deal. But I would like to point out that Paul said we will reign with Christ **IF** we suffer.

*Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: **If we suffer, we shall also reign with him:** if we deny him, he also will deny us:*
II. Timothy 2:10-12

Under normal circumstances, we all know what the word “if” means—don’t we? It’s a *conditional* term. If we suffer, we will reign with Christ when He returns. If we do not suffer, we will *not* reign with Christ when He returns. That’s what Paul said and that’s what he meant.

*For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: **And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.** For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*

Romans 8:15-18

Paul said **IF** we suffer, we will be joint-heirs with Christ when He returns. Here again, under normal circumstances we all know what the term “if” means—don’t we? If we do *not* suffer, we will *not* be a joint-heir with Christ when He returns. The meaning of these passages is very clear—unless you have already been brainwashed by the religious traditions of the Church System—in which case the word “if” means absolutely nothing! We will reign with Jesus whether we overcome or not. We will reign with Jesus whether we suffer or not. We will be joint-heirs with Jesus when He returns, whether we suffer or not. You can see the *direct link* between overcoming and suffering, and reigning with Christ in the next age when you read Revelation chapter twenty:

*And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw **the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands;** and they lived **and reigned with Christ a thousand years.***
Revelation 20:4

These people got the victory over the Beast—they were overcomers. They got the victory over the Beast through suffering—they were beheaded. Therefore, they will reign with Christ.

*And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: **for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.** And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, **Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb.** And he saith unto me, *These are the true sayings of God.**

Revelation 19:6-9

A few months ago, I did a message on this passage where John is told the Lamb's wife "made herself ready" for the marriage. I said how the majority of Christian are being taught that they don't have to make themselves ready for this marriage because they are *already* ready by grace. They are told that they are already ready simply because they are a believer.

Of course this view is exactly the opposite of what is clearly stated in the passage itself—but nobody seems to notice or care. John clearly said the Lamb's wife made herself ready. That means: (1) just being saved doesn't make a person ready for the wedding. There is a preparation that must take place *after* we have become a child of God. (2) it's the WIFE who makes HERSELF ready. The responsibility of being prepared for the wedding is clearly on the wife, and she will carry out that responsibility.

Again, this view directly contradicts the "*It's-all-of-God-and-none-of-me*" doctrine. If the responsibility for the wife being ready for the marriage rested on God alone, the voices of heaven certainly would have said something much different. They would have said: "*Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and the Lamb has made his wife ready*". But that's not what they said. They said what they meant and they meant what they said.

Well then, what about the Christians who have NOT made themselves ready by that point? Will they enter into the marriage anyway? I don't think so. The only people who are going to enter into that marriage are the ones who have made themselves ready. So what's going to happen to the ones who have not made themselves ready? Are they going to be sent to Hell, or what? What's going to happen to the guy who lost his reward and has to be saved by fire? The guy is still saved; but he certainly didn't "make himself ready" for the marriage!

You see, the "package deal" can't fit the entire Scripture. There are too many places where it directly contradicts the plain meaning of what's being said—and this is one of them. So you're faced with a choice. Either you can conclude that the ones who didn't make themselves ready for the marriage are eternally lost; or you will have to conclude that they are still saved, but they will *not* enjoy the things that go along with being married to the Lamb at that time.

You see the problem—don't you? Everyone has been taught that they will be part of the marriage *by grace*. Being part of the marriage doesn't depend on anything you or I do (or fail to do) in this life. Partaking of the marriage is part of the package deal, which you and I will automatically get because we are Christians. But what if this whole view is wrong? What if the Scripture really means what it says? What

if partaking of the marriage is a REWARD? What if partaking of the marriage *isn't* part of the package deal of salvation? Well, that's exactly what I believe and that's exactly what I'm presenting to you tonight. Partaking of the marriage at the first resurrection is a *Christian reward* that can be gained or lost—and it's gained or lost by how you and I live right now. It's gained or lost by the choices we make.

Now, back to my question. What about the ones who lose that reward? What about the ones who don't make themselves ready for that marriage because of all the grace, grace, grace garbage they've been fed their whole lives? What's God going to do with them? Cast them into Hell? If not, then they must go into the kingdom age *along with* the ones who did make themselves ready for the marriage.

So now you have a scenario where some Christians are married to Jesus and are ruling and reigning over the nations with Him, but others are not. Well, what might the relationship between the *Christians* who entered the marriage and who are now ruling the nations, and the *Christians* who didn't enter that marriage and are not ruling the nations, look like? It's an interesting question, isn't it? The only answer I can see is that some Christians will be ruling over *other* Christians in the Millennium.

Personally, that kind of a scenario is distasteful to me. The thought of ruling over other Christians doesn't bless me at all. I have another possible scenario that is more palatable—at least to me—but it requires an honest look at the two resurrections described in Revelation.

I think I'll continue this next week. But before I end, I want to say a little something about trying to attain the rewards that are laid out in Scripture. This whole idea is wrong in the eyes of many people. They believe it encourages selfishness and striving against other brethren. They say we shouldn't be trying to gain rewards; we should only be concerned with obeying and pleasing the Lord. They say that if we will focus on obeying and pleasing Jesus, then He will make sure we get whatever rewards we need or deserve. I disagree. The apostle Paul was clearly striving after more than just obedience to the Lord or to be pleasing to the Lord. Listen to what he says in First Corinthians:

*To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? **So run, that ye may obtain.** And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. **I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air:***

I. Corinthians 9:22-26

Here, Paul tells how he is running in a race in order to win a PRIZE (ie: reward). He describes this prize as an “incorruptible crown” and he says he is running the race to win. He says he doesn't run “uncertainly”. That means, he doesn't run in ignorance. He knows what he's striving to attain. Also, he said doesn't just beat the air. In other words, he makes his punches count. He's not running around like a chicken with it's head cut off. He knows what the prize is, he's giving the maximum effort to win that prize, and he is using wisdom regarding the need to fight against the things that would *disqualify* him from the race.

Paul's attitude and vision are quite different from today's Christians, who have no idea they must strive to WIN that incorruptible crown. He's a far cry from the "I've-got-it-all-by-grace" crowd. And please notice that he specifically admonishes the brethren to do the same thing he was doing. He said: "*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain*". It's a shame that so many people ignore his words. Listen to what he says in Phillipians:

*That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; **If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead**. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: **but I follow after**, if that **I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus**. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, **I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus**.*

Philippians 3:10-14

Here again, Paul talks about gaining a PRIZE (ie: reward). That prize is has to do with perfection and resurrection. He said that he had not yet attained the prize, he was following after it. That is, he was in *constant pursuit* of it. He said he was trying to "apprehend" the thing for which he was apprehended by Jesus. In other words, Jesus called Paul and showed him a prize that He wanted Paul to win or apprehend. Now, it's Paul's responsibility to apprehend or attain the thing God is offering him.

After *many* years of being a Christian; after *many* years of planting churches all over the world; after *many* years of building up the churches he had established; after *many* years of developing a deep relationship with Jesus and walking in radical obedience to Jesus; at the end of his life, Paul was still striving to win *that* prize. He was still striving to hit that "mark".

The fact that Paul was striving to obtain the rewards of the gospel does *not* mean that he was walking in selfishness, or that he was trying to exalt himself above the brethren, or that he was trying to be better than others or more righteous than others. The fact that he was trying to attain the rewards of the gospel does not mean that he was trying to be some kind of "super-saint", or that he was trying to create an elitist group within the church. Nor does it mean that he was seeking after rewards instead of Jesus. He was *obeying* Jesus by striving to obtain those rewards. He was *pleasing* Jesus by striving to obtain those rewards. He was *strengthening his relationship* with Jesus by striving to obtain those rewards. And he was *setting a godly example* for the rest of the brethren by striving to obtain those rewards.

Listen my friends: it's the VOICE OF SATAN that tells people they don't have to *strive* and *labor* to attain the rewards of the Gospel. It's Satan that tells people they will automatically get these rewards by *grace*, or because God is sovereign. Satan want's you to become a *passive* Christian because passive Christians are no threat to him. He want's you to become a *passive* Christian because he knows you will lose the rewards God has prepared for you from the foundation of the world.