

Review of John Piper's sermon on Rom. 2:6-10 given on 6th Dec 1998

by Daniel Chew

This is a review of a sermon given by renowned pastor and author Dr. John Piper in his series through the book of Romans. Dr. John Piper is indeed a person who has labored mightily for the Lord and who is passionate regarding our Lord. He is also a Calvinist and esteems God highly. As such, I do respect Dr. Piper but I am convinced Pastor Piper is wrong here in his exposition of this passage, and thus I would like to review this sermon of his, which can be found here (http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/BySeries/2/1060_The_Final_Divide_Eternal_Life_or_Eternal_Wrath_Part_2/).

Now, of course, the question may be asked as to why I decide to review his sermon. First of all, I think the passage and the truth it conveys, which is a reflection of the Covenant of Works, is important. Pastor Piper at the least undermines if not denies the reality of the Covenant of Works through his exposition of Rom. 2:6-10 in this sermon. As New Covenant Theology, the Covenant theology embraced by most Reformed Baptists, denies the very concept of the Covenant of Works, and it is possible that Dr. John Piper is a New Covenantal Theologian, I think it is a good idea to take on this subject of the Covenant of Works, which I am convinced is restated in Rom. 2:6-10.

Since such is the case, I think it would be good to first exposit on the passage of Rom. 2:6-10, before reviewing Piper's sermon to that effect.

Exposition of Rom. 2:6-10

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. (Rom. 2:6-10)

This passage is set in the larger context of the book of Romans in the context of Romans 1-3:20. The book of Romans is a very theological book which portrays the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in its full glory. Romans 1-3:20 focuses on the depravity of men in order to show that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), while after that the Gospel is proclaimed starting from Rom. 3:21 onwards, covering various topics such as justification, propitiation, the place of works in the life of a Christian, predestination and election etc. Therefore, we can see that the larger context is with regards to salvation and the Gospel, and the intermediate context in Rom. 1-3:20 is with regards to the proving of the depravity of Man.

As we read through the book of Romans, it can be seen that Romans chapter 1, as it starts off the main argument in verse 18, focuses on how Man is depraved and has been given over by God to his lusts and passions in varying degrees. It shows how Man, although he knows in his heart through General Revelation that there is a Creator who deserves to be worshipped (Rom. 19-20), chose instead to worship idols created by his depraved heart (Rom. 1:21-23) and thus became fools (Rom. 1:22), causing the wrath of God to pour out against them (Rom. 1:18) in giving them over to sensuality and sexual pervasion (Rom. 1:24-27) and finally into moral anarchy and debauchery (Rom. 1:28-32), culminating in approving of others who sin, in calling good evil and evil good (Is. 5:20).

This, however, seems to apply to the Gentiles. This is especially so in the societal and religious context at that time, with the Gentiles being morally squalid and decadent, with abominations such as temple prostitution, orgies, and 'loving' homosexual unions going on especially within the liberal Greek culture. The pious Jews, who have preserved the worship of the one true and living God, utterly despise the Gentiles partly for their disgusting immorality. As they worship Yahweh, the one true and living God, they could claim to be exempt from the judgment that falls upon the unbelieving Gentiles. The Apostle Paul then carry on in chapter 2 to indict them and all 'morally upright' people of their own sins, which is explicitly stated to be one of hypocrisy (Rom. 2:21-24), in order to finally show and prove that every single person; all Man, is guilty of sin.

It is in this specific context that the passage of Rom. 2:6-10 must be examined. The interpretation of the passage must of necessity harmonize with the overall thrust of this passage, since otherwise that would make what the Apostle Paul wrote, and by extension part of Scripture, incoherent and nonsensical. It is with this view that we look into the immediate context of the passage.

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. (Rom. 2:1-11)

From the context, it can be seen that the topic is with regards to salvation and condemnation in the sight of God, which is especially expressed in verses 9-10. It is stated that those who truly 'seek for glory and honor and immortality' will be saved, while those who 'are self-seeking and do not obey the truth' will be condemned before God. From the parallelisms between verses 7 & 10, and verses 8 & 9, it can be seen that 'seeking for glory and honor and immortality' is equated with 'doing good', while 'self-seeking and do not obey the truth' is equated with 'doing evil'. Furthermore, by looking at the contrasts, it can be seen the action of doing good is not 'self-seeking' and is a contrary attitude to 'not obeying the truth'. Therefore, seeking for glory and honor and immortality here can only occur in a setting whereby the person obeys the truth of God in holy and righteous living which is expressed in being not self-seeking, a condition which fallen humanity can never attain at all since we constantly rebel against the truth of God in life and doctrine (Rom. 1:21).

Now, after warning the hypocrites that they are storing up wrath for themselves (Rom. 2:5), Paul proceeded to say that God will render to each person according to his works (Rom. 2:6). Now, as we have seen, the larger context is focused on salvation, or how to get right with God. Following the strong denunciation of immoral people in Rom. 1:18-23, and a preliminary hit on the self-righteous religious people in chapter 2 verses 1-5, in order to place all Man under condemnation (Rom. 3:19-20), Paul seems to break his chain of thought in writing verse 6, or is he? What does he intend to do by introducing this pattern of thought in verse 6-10, and ending with verse 11?

To answer this question, we must learn to look at the passage from the viewpoint of a religious Jew, perhaps like a member of the very religious Pharisees like Saul (Paul) before his conversion. They obey the Law of God in order to merit salvation (albeit more political than spiritual) as how they view the law given in the Torah and as primarily seen in the Ten Commandments. Specifically, they remember the blessings and curses given in the Law and also they have seen in their own history the judgment and wrath of God fell on their ancestors for violating the Law and the Covenant He made with Israel. Granted, some of them may do so for pragmatic reasons, in the same way as why prosperity 'gospel' adherents in modern times desire to tithe (To get benefits). However, this is definitely not true of the multitude of truly pious and zealous Jews, who would rather revolt against Roman rule than to submit to it and earn huge sums of money by being a tax-collector. To such Jews, therefore, obedience to the commands of God is done not for material gain but truly for salvation.

Therefore, when Paul wrote verses 6-10, he is indeed affirming the viability of works in gaining salvation. He affirms with the Jews that truly if you want to be saved through works, then it is theoretically possible for such to be done (Gal. 3:21b). However, as he shows and will continue to show, what is demanded to earn salvation by works is perfect obedience to the Law, for a slight infraction would be as if the whole law was broken (Jas. 2:10). Since such is the case, no person can be justified by the law, for the Law condemns all who fail to meet up to its high standard (Gal. 3:10).

Rom. 2:6-10 and the Covenant of Works

Now, we have seen that the passage of verses 6-10 shows the principle that there is a way of salvation by works, which is perfect obedience to the Law. What does this then have to do with the idea of the Covenant of Works?

The Covenant of Works is a concept found primarily within Covenantal Theology which states that God made a Covenant with Adam that basically states that if Adam obeyed God's command in the Garden of Eden regarding eating of the fruits, he would gain eternal life, but if he disobeyed, he would die. New Covenantal Theology denies that there is such a covenant in the Bible. It is not my intention here to defend the Covenant of Works in its totality, but just to mention why it can be and must be seen here in this passage.

The reason why the Covenant of Works can be seen in this passage firstly is because this passage and its context is on the topic of salvation. Throughout the Scriptures, if one were to believe in the biblical doctrines of predestination and election, then one can see a Covenant of Grace in which God saves His elect from their sins by choosing them before the foundation of the world unto salvation. The Father predestines them and draws them, the Son dies for them, and the Holy Spirit regenerates them into newness of life. Since salvation is by God's decree through His grace and planned before the foundation of the world, there must be a unity between both the Old Testament and the New Testament with regards to soteriology, which can be seen in Rom. 9 through the usage of Old Testament examples to illustrate the glorious truths of sovereign free grace and election. And if all this are so, then the passage of Rom. 2:6-10 as a salvific passage must be a reflection of the Covenant of Works, since in all other areas of Scripture, Man can only be saved by the grace of God apart from works.

The Covenant of Works must be seen as being reflected in this passage because various doctrines depend upon it, most notable being the doctrine of the active imputation of Christ's righteousness to us believers. If Rom. 2:6-10 is not a reflection of the Covenant of Works, then it cannot be taken to mean anything about salvation being attainable by works in any sense, as that is what the Covenant of Works means. If that is so, then the passage becomes incoherent, and the Covenant of Works is undermined as it has one less Scriptural support. Theologically, denying the Covenant of Works

undermines the doctrine of active imputation of Christ's righteousness to us believers, since that depends on Christ having merit salvation through His righteous living as a representative of humanity in being 100% Man. If truly indeed the Covenant of Works does not exist, then Jesus could not himself merit eternal life while living on earth, and thus he is in some sort of salvation limbo as with regards to his humanity. Is anyone going to seriously say that Jesus did not merit salvation with his sinless life; that Jesus because of His bearing a human nature cannot go into heaven unless He Himself died on the Cross to earn salvation for his human nature? Yet, that is what the denial of the active obedience of Christ, and to a lesser extent the Covenant of Works, will lead to. If righteousness can only come to Man via the death of Jesus on the Cross, then Jesus with regards to His humanity must also be redeemed via the Cross, which is a blasphemous notion indeed.

Of course, some people may object by saying that they do agree with the overall concept of the Covenant of Works, but not that there is indeed such a Covenant made with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Such is definitely much better. However, it suffers from the fact that the command made to Adam and Eve have the components of God, a covenanted people, a promise of eternal life if the command is kept, and a promise of death if it is violated; in other words the various components that make up a Covenant. This is of course similar to the Mosaic Covenant with its promises of blessings if kept and punishments if broken. As we have seen in Gal. 3:21b, the Mosaic Covenant has a theoretical possibility of meriting salvation, if it is kept in its totality.

As an aside, one verse which proves the linkage of the Covenant of Works, its reflection in the Mosaic Covenant, and the active obedience of Christ can be seen in Mt. 5:17, whereby Jesus told the magnitudes that He has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them all. Of course, it is true that Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets by fulfilling the various prophecies and signs that point to His coming. However, the main point of this passage can be seen in the context whereby in verses 19 and 20, Jesus mentioned about the righteousness that must exceed the scribes and the Pharisees in order for anyone to enter the Kingdom of heaven, which is a phrase salvific in nature. Therefore, verse 17 is primarily concerned with saying that Jesus is fulfilling all the demands of the Law in order to merit eternal life in His active obedience, which would then be imputed to our account as our righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

With this settled, let us analyze Pastor John Piper's sermon on Rom. 2:6-10.

Analysis of Piper's sermon on Rom. 2:6-10

Before going into Piper's take on Rom. 2:6-10, I will just like to point out that in general Piper throughout this sermon is not exactly consistent both logically and scripturally. One glaring problem which does not bode well is his propensity throughout this sermon to referencing various other verses which have no relation whatsoever to the immediate context of Rom. 2:6-10. In other sermons that I have heard, mostly he does quotes verses that have something to do whatsoever with the subject matter being discussed in the text he is exegeting. However, he does not do it in this sermon, which we shall see throughout this review.

In this sermon of his, Piper starts his exposition by giving two possible renderings of the text. The first possible rendering is the traditional rendering which I have shown to be true above, while the second possible rendering is the one Dr. Piper believes in. In his own word, Piper states that this passage is saying that "God never promised that eternal life would be based on, or merited by, perfect obedience, but He has always commanded that there be a life of obedience to vindicate the reality of faith, which unites us to God as our righteousness". Piper states this and then proceeds to attempt to defend this particular interpretation of his with 5 reasons, which we shall analyze later.

First, let us try to unpack what Piper is saying by that phrase of his. The first part of course is an emphatic denial of the first view (i.e. the Covenant of Works view), of which Piper would repeat later with emphatic universal denials (which makes me wonder why Piper even bothers to maintain the related truth of double imputation, but that is another topic). As for the latter, Piper seems to think that this passage teaches a view somewhat akin to Jas. 2:14-26; that Paul is here telling us and especially his intended audience of the Jews and those who are self-righteous, that they must produce works in accordance with their professed faith in Christ. Now, of course, such a view of the passage clashed violently with the flow of the Roman epistle. Of great concern of course is that Paul hasn't finished with his display of the sinfulness of Man, but yet somehow the concept of faith which is not mentioned anywhere in Romans 2, and which is alien to the entire flow, has been somehow smuggled in into the passage of Rom. 2:6-10. How can religious non-believing Jews get the idea that Paul is talking about faith in this particular passage is beyond me. Granted, the entire book of Romans is about the Gospel and about the great truth of justification by faith alone. However, that does not mean that every single chapter is talking about faith, anymore than saying that the book of Songs of Songs is talking about God's plan of salvation since that is what the Bible is talking about. Piper here has committed the fallacy of division, of assuming that what is true about the whole is necessarily true of its parts. (For those who are interested, Songs of Songs is a celebration of love – marital love and its spiritual application in the love of Christ for His Church, related to but not on the topic of God's redemption per se.)

Piper's first point in defense of his interpretation is that the passage does not sound hypothetical, saying that a simple reading of it would show that the verses actually states that those who DO actually do good works will be rewarded by eternal life (v. 7) and those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness will be rewarded by the wrath of God poured out against them. This objection, however, is a weak one, since the traditional view has always states that the passage does state and meant that literally, and the only reason why they are hypothetical is because of the Fall of Man resulting in Man not being able to fulfill them. Thus, they function in exactly the same way as the command of God for all Man to repent of their sins and turn to Christ. Piper is a Calvinist, so he will agree that God has not decreed that all should be saved, and yet didn't God promise salvation for all who will repent of their sins? Only Arminians and various shades of Pelagians and semi-Pelagians would take this command of God and say that this implies that Man somehow has the capability and free will in and of himself to repent. Why then the double-standard? This passage therefore is of a similar category, and is only rendered hypothetical because of the fallenness and depravity of Man. In fact, the one example which I can and will raise as to someone who actually fulfills the conditions of works leading to eternal life is of course our Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the Law on our behalf (Mt. 5:17).

Piper's second point is much better, although it still does not prove his point. Piper states that verses 4 and 5 seem to show that Paul does not have perfect obedience in mind since God is here asking for repentance, and therefore verses 6-10 is written with an eye to the concept of repentance. In other words, Piper states that the converse of verse 5 is true; that those who are repentant will not face the wrath of God. So far all seem fine. However, there is one major flaw with this argument advanced by Piper. We must remember the intermediate context and the whole context of the passage, and to know that Paul is here trying to indict the Jews as being law-breakers, finally culminating in the harsh collation of statements from the Old Testament about the total depravity of Man in Rom. 3:10-18. Since this is so, even if Piper's point is correct and the passage of verses 6-10 was written such that repentant sinners would be included as being worthy of eternal life, the larger context demands that those whom he writes about are not repentant and thus they can be said to be worthy of condemnation (Rom. 3:8ff, 9-12). Otherwise, how can Paul states that Jews are not better off and that there is none righteous (Rom. 3:10), since according to Piper's scheme, those who are said to repent in chapter 2 verse 5 are to be deemed righteous in verse 7 and thus cannot be placed

together with the category of all people in Rom. 3:8 and verses 10-18? Piper's point thus is invalid, as it would go against the flow of Paul's argument to talk about repentant sinners here.

When looking deeper into Piper's argument here, it can be seen that Piper has actually committed a logical fallacy here which destroys his argument and shows it to be a *non sequitor*. He assumes that just because a statement says that not repenting would give bring about wrath and fury means somehow that it must states that repenting will bring about eternal life (If $\sim p$, then $\sim q \rightarrow$ If p , then q ?). This is of course a logical fallacy. While true in the larger context of the Gospel and salvation, that is not what Paul was driving at in this particular passage, and to say that Paul is mentioning this biblical concept here is plain eisegesis. And eisegesis is wrong even though the concept derived from it which is preached about is correct, as it shows great disrespect to the Word of God.

The third point by Piper to attempt to defend his position is taken from Rom. 6:22, or more specifically the similarity Rom. 6:22 has with Rom. 2:7. However, this is exactly how eisegesis works, especially since the contexts of both verses are different. Just because the two verses are similar and come from the same epistle does not mean that there is any similarity whatsoever to its meaning, unless the context has been proven to be similar too. From the contexts of Rom. 2:7 and 6:22, we can see that the contexts are vastly different. Rom. 2:7 was written to unrepentant, self-righteous Jews while Rom. 6:22 was written with regards to the situation of Christians who will have already come to know of the free justifying grace of God through the teachings found in the previous chapters of chapters 3, 4 and 5. Therefore, Piper's point here is invalid.

Piper's fourth point commits the same error as his third point in doing eisegesis instead of exegesis. Rom. 8 is talking about the new life of a Christian and thus has a completely different context from Rom. 2, even though the wording of the verses may be similar. To say with Dr. Piper that "Verse 13 of Romans 8 is the exposition of how to do Romans 2:7" is totally erroneous and shows the complete failure of abiding by and following the context of the passages of Scripture.

Piper's final point is taken from the book of Galatians, of which I agree with him that it is closest to Romans in its doctrinal emphasis on justification by faith alone. However, that does not necessarily mean that similarity in phraseology would equate similar meaning, as even within the book of Romans they do not mean the same thing when the context is different. Gal. 6:8-9, when examined in context, shows that it is similar to the wording of Rom. 8:12-13 and the context are similar too. Therefore, this final point is also invalid, because it does not address the context found in Rom. 2.

After analyzing the various reasons given by Dr. Piper as to why he thinks his interpretation is correct, it can be seen that all his reasons do not hold up under scrutiny. As such, his interpretation of Rom. 2:6-10 in this sermon of his is in error.

Now, Piper's exposition of Rom. 2:6-10 in this sermon is very worrying indeed, as he seems to be mentioning a judgment according to a life of works, though energized by faith. In this, he seems to be no different from the semi-Pelagian view of Roman Catholicism which similarly believes in salvation by faith expressing in love or good works instead of faith alone. Of course, this is neither what Dr. Piper actually believes nor what he preaches, but he is treading on very thin ground with regards to this issue. It is of course noted that Piper is here reacting to the antinomian, 'cheap believism' heresy put forward by heretics such as Zane Hodges, which neatly divorces faith from good works and make salvation attainable by just a tick on a decision card for Jesus. However, Piper's approach is the wrong approach to tackle the antinomian heresy. The main weapon against antinomianism is not to emphasize the importance of works in the lives of a Christian in the area of salvation, as it may mislead others to the other extreme, but to emphasize the reality of a new regenerate nature which hates sin and love God in the soul of a true Christian. In my opinion, the primary rallying call against antinomianism should not be the demands of Christ or the necessity of

works in the lives of a true Christian, true though they be (and we should talk about them too), but the truth stated in 2 Cor. 5:17; that Christians are new creatures in Christ and possess a new nature in Him. When we realize this more deeply, then we are better equipped not to sway towards any extreme in our response to this error, and not wrongly react against antinomianism by embracing works righteousness and legalism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that Rom. 2:6-10 teaches the concept of the Covenant of Works. Contrary to Piper's interpretation, the passage is indeed mentioning something which we as believers cannot fulfill, and which is only fulfilled by Christ on our behalf. Piper's (over)concern about antinomianism has also been shown to skew his discourse off center, which is totally unnecessary and shows it as being over-reactive, instead of purely exegeting Scripture and letting the chips land wherever they are as the Spirit does His work through the proclamation of the Truth of Scripture in the hearts of Man.