

Inheriting the Kingdom of God

The apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Thessalonica, speaks of *the righteous judgment of God*, and being *counted worthy of the kingdom of God* ([2 Thess. 1:5](#)). Why does he use such terminology? How can one be *counted worthy* of the kingdom of God? Is Paul teaching works-salvation?

Of course not! Paul is not speaking about matters of salvation. He is speaking to saints about sanctification, particularly, the culmination of it – meeting Jesus at the Judgment Seat. On that day, the works of all who are in Christ will be tried by fire, to determine *what sort it is* ([1 Cor. 3:13](#)). If one's work abides (being of the gold-silver-precious stones type), a reward will be given. On the contrary, if one's work is burned (being of the wood-hay-stubble type), all will be lost, yet the individual will be saved eternally.

What is the reward? What is lost or forfeited? While the rewards and losses are much more complex than described in this article, I believe the primary question at hand is whether or not a born-again believer qualifies to inherit the kingdom of God. There is obviously much at stake. Consider the following Scripture passages.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. ([1 Cor. 6:9-10](#))

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. ([Gal. 5:19-21](#))

But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ([Eph. 5:3-5](#))

I believe these verses are typically misinterpreted. Those who lean toward Arminian theology say that Paul is warning believers they will lose their salvation if they persist in grievous sins, particularly sins like those listed. This view must be rejected on the preponderance of Scriptural evidence to the contrary. Believers are eternally secure.

Another common misconception is held by Calvinist-leaning theologians, who claim those who persist in these sins demonstrate that they were never saved in the first place. This view is based on the Calvinist tenet that insists true believers will persevere (i.e., behave) as saints throughout the Christian life.

But Paul does not assume these folks are unsaved. He assumes they are saints who have continued in sin. For example, in the Ephesians passage, he says, *let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints*, clearly recognizing the possibility that this kind of sinful behavior can persist in the lives of genuine Christians, even if it is not appropriate. His purpose, therefore, is to issue a stiff warning: if you persist in this kind of behavior, you will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Many have been taught that inheriting the kingdom of God is the Scriptural equivalent to inheriting eternal life, but it is not particularly how Paul uses the term. In the context of these Pauline passages the phrase *kingdom of God* does not merely denote the eternal realm of God. It makes no sense to admonish believers to be counted worthy of the kingdom or to live in such a way so as to not forfeit the kingdom, if by *kingdom of God* he means eternal life. Paul is not off on the doctrines of justification or eternal security. (I say that tongue-in-cheek).

No, Paul uses the phrase the *kingdom of God* in an eschatological sense, to refer to the millennial reign of Christ. Thus, at stake is whether believers who persist in unrighteousness will inherit the millennial reign of Christ. Ray Baughman, makes this point emphatically in his book, *The Kingdom of God Visualized* (Moody, 1972, p.140). Commenting on the Galatians passage, he says, "This does not refer to eternal life but to any place of responsibility in Christ's kingdom. He is speaking of a habitual way of life rather than individual acts of sin."

Thus, Paul's clear warning is that believers who persist in certain sins will not inherit the millennial kingdom. (Incidentally, the list of sins is not exhaustive, for Paul adds the disclaimer, *and such like*, leaving the list open).

The key word here is *inherit*. Thayer gives three definitions for this word that are especially helpful.

1. to receive a lot, receive by lot
2. to receive the portion assigned to one, receive an allotted portion, receive as one's own or as a possession
3. to become partaker of, to obtain

For Paul to teach that persistently sinning Christians will not inherit the millennial kingdom is not the same as saying they will not be in the millennial world. To illustrate this point, think of what Jesus said in the Beatitudes, *Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth* ([Matt. 5:5](#)). We are all physically present on earth, yet only the meek *inherit* the earth. That is, they receive it as their allotted portion, given to them by God as an inheritance. Others do not share in that blessing.

Presumably, the same is true with respect to the millennium. All believers will be physically present in that world but apparently not all will become partakers of (or participants in) Christ's millennial kingdom. They will not inherit it. No doubt, that will result in missed opportunities, shamefulness, and much sorrow. Theologians differ as to the details, but what is clear from the Scriptures is that the millennium will not be experienced in the same way by all believers.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why, at the conclusion of the millennium ([Rev. 21:4](#)), God will wipe away all tears from the eyes of His saints prior to their entrance into heaven. Why will there be tears during the millennium, a great time of joy on earth? Understandably, many Christians will be agonizing and weeping over the fact that they persisted in sins throughout their pre-millennial earthly existence. They did not appropriate the provision of Christ for living a victorious life.

The writer to the Hebrews, like Paul, also seems to warn his audience of the dire consequences of persisting in sin, reminding that *our God is a consuming fire* ([Heb. 12:29](#)). He also uses a haunting illustration to convince his audience. In Hebrews 3 he tells of the Exodus generation – who, although they were saved people, having been redeemed at the first Passover! – chose to test God repeatedly in the wilderness due to their wicked heart of unbelief.

As a result, God swore (declared an oath) that He would not let them enter into the promised land, the land of God's rest. The promised land is not a type of heaven. It is a type of entering the realm of spiritual victory and, ultimately, the millennial rest of Christ. Nevertheless, a whole generation of wayward believers were not allowed entrance into promised rest, including Moses and Aaron! The passage ends with a strong admonition and reminder:

Exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end. ([Heb. 3:13](#))

In the context, being made a partaker of Christ is being a participant in His millennial kingdom. Oh, may we seek the Spirit's enablement for getting victory over sin!