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B-6: Heaven’s Class Structure - No Envy or Comparing

At this point a big question that may come to mind is, “How will I know if I have attained that elite ‘discipleship’ status? Will I wind up in that privileged group?” This can be a difficult issue and perhaps even a cause for anxiety among believers.

To be sure, if a person focuses too much on the “reward” angle, then that probably means he or she is getting off on the wrong track in their thinking. It can lead to worry and self-effort on the one hand (which is lack of confidence in God) or lead to getting lulled into a false sense of security on the other hand (over-confidence in one’s so-called “elite” status).

But when the heart and mind are truly focused on the Creator, all thought of “reward” or “status” becomes secondary, even vanishes. A soul that is in love with their Maker has an overriding concern to honor and please God, which includes unselfish and loving conduct towards others. And nothing else really matters.

We are promised a reward, but our relationship with God is not a matter of deserving, bargaining for, or working to attain or earn it. As servants of the Lord, we work for Him in order to fulfill our duty to Him. What we receive from God is a gift from His hand, not a payment for services rendered. No matter how hard we work, how much we do, and how long we serve the Lord, under no circumstances do we put God in our debt. We serve Him because He saved us... we are grateful... we love Him. And it’s because our service to Him is motivated by love and gratitude, not reward, that He rewards us. (from [“The Parable of the Obedient Servant, Luke](#)

17:7-10 in the series *The Stories Jesus Told* By Peter Amsterdam, 17 October 2017).

This doesn't mean to say that the thought of "reward" in the Afterlife should be ignored. It helps to remind ourselves of that from time to time. It comforts us to know what awaits us once our earthly troubles are over; and it acts as an incentive to keep going during rough times, and also, as a guide to making smarter life decisions which will pay off in longer-term dividends in the Afterlife.

But it is not wise for an individual or group to dwell too much on what they may think is their "elite" status. If one is over-confident, this can lead in the wrong direction - towards complacency, self-righteousness, and that dangerous feeling of "I've arrived", thus hindering a person from moving forward in his or her spiritual life. Or it can work the other way - towards discouragement and the temptation to operate in the arm of the flesh, or just to give up, thinking one is not eligible or can't make it into that special category.

This sense of "eliteness" may have been one of the underlying problems in the churches that Christ was addressing in Revelation 2-3. For example, Christ said of the Laodicean church, *"You say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.'"* (They thought they were "elite" because of their wealth.) But in reality they were *"wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."* (Revelation 3:17)

Some of the churches weren't living up to their full potential, allowing certain ungodly practices and doctrines to flourish within their spiritual walls. These churches may have thought they were doing okay, but Christ warned them that they could lose some of their "elite" status if they didn't shape up. They were still the *"elect"* and *"chosen"*, but the destiny and plan that God had laid out for them or for individual members might not unfold as much or as well or not at all unless they repented and made some needed changes in their mindsets, attitudes, and practices.

As the *"elect"*, they had that privileged status, which Jesus expressed in this way: *"many are called, but few are chosen."* (Matthew 22:14) Out of the multitudes who hear the Gospel, only a few respond. These who are *"chosen"* are also known as the *"elect"* (from the same Greek word

eklektos). But even these “few” are a very large group. This is the picture we are given in Revelation 7. Here is described John the apostle’s vision of “a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands.” (7:9)

An angel explained to John, “*These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*” (7:14) Evidently then, these were the “elect” who were living during “the great tribulation” prior to Christ’s Second Coming and were resurrected at the *Last Trumpet*. (Matthew 24:31) And what John saw did not even include all the other “elect” who had died in ages past and were resurrected also at this time. (For more information see [Footnote.](#))

So from this we may conclude that the “elect” are not some kind of exclusive club of a few extra-special elite members, but the “elect” includes a wide range of multitudes of people. And a wide range of levels of dedication and reward. But where God draws the line and how He judges between different classes of “elect” souls is impossible to answer. God knows the hearts of mankind, and so He certainly knows. But if we try to define who is higher or lower on the scale, whatever our measuring stick might be, our estimation is sure to be skewed and inaccurate.

And perhaps God prefers to keep it a mystery. He would rather we focus on engaging with Him personally as we “*diligently seek*” after God and His plan, rather than focus on working our way up on what we might think is some ladder of spiritual merit or accomplishment or get embroiled in comparing ourselves with others. (Hebrews 11:6)

Oh, brothers and sisters, I think we can serve God from some other motive than that base one of trying to be greater than our brethren in heaven!...

Surely, brothers and sisters, if any of you can have brighter places in heaven, and more happiness and more joy than I, I will be glad to know it. The prospect does not excite any envy in my soul now, or if it did now, it certainly would not then, for I should feel, that the more you had, the more I should have!...

I believe that our union with each other will be so great that

distinctions will be utterly lost, and that we shall all have such a joint communion, and interest, and fellowship, that there will be no such thing as private possessions, private ranks, and private honors—for we shall there, to the fullest extent, be one in Christ!
(“[Grace Exalted - Boasting Excluded](#)” sermon by *Charles Spurgeon*, 9 January 1862)

Among the “*elect*”, there are, in all likelihood, many degrees and diversities of reward (similar to what was brought up in the previous section about different levels of “overcoming”). But to venture into any further detail on this subject would be a matter of conjecture. It would be safe to say this much though: as our earthly lives were lived according to God’s rule of love, such will be our inheritance when we reach those heavenly portals.

And although there will be “status”, status won’t matter. Everyone, from the lowest to the most exalted, will experience fulfillment, acceptance, reward, and happiness. There will be “grades” in Heaven, yes, but at the same time, because of Christ’s personal love for each of his children, no one will feel unimportant or excluded, and any feelings of arrogant superiority will find no place There whatsoever.

This peculiar paradox of equality in Heaven, co-existing with varying levels of honor, can be understood from the various parables that Jesus told... such as the one about the landowner who hired laborers for his vineyard at different times - “*early in the morning... the third hour... the sixth and ninth hour... the eleventh hour*” [6 am, 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm, 5 pm]. In the story all were paid the same wage, regardless of when they started working and in spite of the objections of the early starters:

“And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive’...

And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained

against the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' But he answered '... I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.'

(Matthew 20:6-14)

In this parable Jesus seems to be saying that, as far as general salvation is concerned (entrance into the Kingdom), there is no partiality with God; everyone who comes to Christ enters the Kingdom, *"has passed from death into life"*. (John 5:24) They are citizens of the Kingdom, and like citizens of an earthly kingdom, there are all kinds of different types and levels and personalities. But all are citizens and eligible for the same basic wage of citizenship.

The parable ends with an interesting conclusion: the landowner says, *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"* (Matthew 20:15, ESV) Christ seems to indicate here that there will be *"eleventh hour"* salvations, late-comers who don't receive Him until their deathbed, or even afterwards in the spirit realm. Why? *"Because no one hired us."* They had not heard the Gospel message during their lifetimes.

Then we hear the landowner's reproof to the early laborers. It is as if the Lord was saying, *"Am I not allowed to bring salvation to these 'latecomers', just as I have to you who were Christians during your earthly lives?"* And *"do you begrudge my generosity?"* (or, *"should you be jealous because I am kind to others?"* - NLT) - meaning *"would you oppose My plan (with doctrinal barriers of exclusivity) when I am a benevolent Savior who would extend My gift of salvation, even to those whom you feel aren't supposed to have it?"*

Then if that reproof didn't get the point across, the Lord concludes by saying, *"So the last will be first, and the first last."* (Matthew 20:16) That is, many of the latecomers could wind up being more highly honored than some who thought they were supposed to be higher on the scale.

We see the same principle at work in other parables: the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector - *"everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"*; and the Parable of

the Two Sons - “*tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you [“chief priests and elders” who act as if you’re supposed to be first].*” (Luke 18:9-14, Matthew 21:23,28-32)

The gift of salvation is open to all; they are “*chosen*” because they have chosen to accept Christ, whether that happens early in life, late in life, or in the next life. However, the privileges of honor and reward will depend on other choices one has made in life, choices that were guided by conscience and whatever “*Light*” was given to a person during his or her lifetime.

A lifetime of being kind and concerned for others would count as “*deeds done in God*”; and it may well be that many of these, who were about as “*last*” as it is possible to get as far as salvation is concerned, will wind up “*first*” - highly honored in the Kingdom. In other cases, those “*deeds*” may be nothing more than a repentant heart (“*he who does the truth*”) after a lifetime of sin - like the thief on the cross, or king Manasseh - rewarded with the basic right of entrance into the Kingdom. (John 3:21, 2Chronicles 33)

Footnote:

Who then was this “*great multitude which no one could number*” whom the elder reveals to John will have “*come out of the great tribulation*”? (Revelation 7:9,14)

Going back a few verses, John the apostle describes the scene of 144,000 Jewish saints. (7:4-8) The judgment angels were about to blow their trumpets in preparation for the Second Coming. But before doing that, they are instructed to wait until the servants of God are marked with their seal of God’s protection against the upcoming plagues.

It seems the Lord was giving John, who was Jewish, some re-assurance that, despite the falling away of the majority of the Hebrew nation at that time, there would in the End emerge this group of 144,000 who will have turned to Christ during that final era of history.

Then the scene shifts dramatically. From the close-in view, God’s

“camera” zooms out for a wide-angle view - of “a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations [not just the Jewish nation], tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (7:9)

This seems to reveal that the 144,000, who also appeared “before the throne”, are only one small branch in the great family of God’s people to emerge out of and through that final era known as the Great Tribulation. (14:3)

As to how there happen to be 12,000 Jews in each of 12 Hebrew tribes is difficult to fathom. The Jews dispersed after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and have become hopelessly intermingled with each other and with other non-Jewish nationalities.

One possible answer is that, in the Kingdom of Heaven, as part of our inheritance, God gives His children reminders of the features and experiences that we enjoyed during our earthly lives. For Jewish people the 12 tribes of their patriarchal history is a treasured memory that God perhaps will allow them to retain.

Anyway, that is one theory (and there are many others) to explain this puzzling passage about the 12-tribe organization of these 144,000 Jewish saints in the Heavenly Realm.

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