

Are we Saved by Faith or Works?

What is salvation by grace? Most of us have heard the phrase but how many have truly understood? We are saved by Jesus himself - who applies his righteousness to us as an **act of grace** (unmerited favor). This is technically called justification. Most Christians agree with this concept, but the relationship of **works** to faith, is often disputed.

[Ephesians 2:8-9](#) For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - not **because** of works, lest any man should boast.

We see here that it is our faith that appropriates this grace and that our works do not count. Our performance (works) **is not** the basis of our salvation, our faith **is**. However, as James tells us - **faith without works is dead**.

[James 2:17](#) faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by **action**, is dead.

Here is where the trouble starts. Some Christians don't like that statement (faith without works is dead). They consider it legalism to bring works into the picture at all. Others, concentrate so heavily on works that their relationship with Christ becomes a dead religion, where self effort and works have replaced faith.

Let's be clear on one thing before I attempt to go further. I am not speaking of works of the law (Mosaic) which has **passed away** (2 Corinthians 3:7). If you are in doubt about whether the law of Moses still stands, read this article called [Law vs Grace in the New Covenant](#).

For our purposes here, good works refer to fulfilling the *law of Christ* which can be summarized as - *faith **working** through love* ([Gal 5:6](#)). Love for God and man which shows itself in selfless concern for the spiritual and physical welfare of others. Good works are the **evidence** of true faith.

[Matthew 7:12](#) So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Some Christians quote the following verse and say - what does it matter what I do? I believe, therefore I won't be judged. Judgment is for those without Christ.

[John 5:24](#) Truly, I tell all of you with certainty, whoever **hears** what I say and **believes** in the one who sent me **has eternal life** and **will not be judged**, but has **passed from death to life**.

Christ does not lie - his promises are sure. However, **presuming** on his grace is not a wise course of action. Christ searches your heart and knows if your belief is **authentic**. There is a little more to faith than is apparent from that isolated verse. The word "hears", is in the sense of **obeying** what is heard. If you do not do the will of the Father, if you neglect good works and practice evil, you will indeed be judged.

[Matthew 7:21](#) "Not everyone who keeps saying to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will get into the kingdom of heaven, but **only the person who keeps doing the will of my Father in heaven**. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name, drove out demons in your name, and performed many miracles in your name, didn't we?' Then I will tell them plainly, **I never knew you**. Get away

from me, you **evildoers!**”

We see above that those who do evil, **even though they profess faith**, are condemned **by their actions**. Christ knows whether your walk with God is genuine and has been given the right to decide upon who he will apply the merits of his sacrifice.

John 5:22 The Father judges no one, but has **given all authority to judge to the Son**.

Our works matter. People are rewarded and punished (sheep and the goats) according to **their actions**.

Matthew 25:31-46 He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you **did not do** for one of the least of these (neglected works), you **did not do for me**". Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the **righteous** to eternal life.

Rom 2:6 For he will render to **every man according to his works**.

Rev 20:12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were **judged** by what was written in the books, **by what they had done**.

In common language – talk is cheap. Many people *talk the talk* but don't *walk the walk*. True faith produces obedience when brought to maturity. In **James 2:19** we read, *the demons also believe, and shudder*. So faith is more than belief (which even the demons possess), true faith results in obedience.

Is there a Conflict or Contradiction?

Paul cited the story of the Old Testament patriarch, Abraham, and emphasized it was **his belief** that was accounted as righteousness.

Romans 4:2,3,13 "If, in fact, Abraham was **justified by works**, he had something to boast about - but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham **believed** God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'

However, James also cites Abraham, but **seemingly** draws a different conclusion.

James 2:21-24 Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous **for what he did** when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his **faith** and his **actions** were working together, and his **faith** was **made complete** by what he did. ...You see that a person is **justified** by **what he does** and **not** by **faith alone**.

There is no conflict here. Abraham's obedience was not what saved him, in the sense that it added nothing to the perfect record and sacrifice of Christ - which is the righteousness that justifies all of us. However, his obedience (works - actions) made his faith **complete**. He was credited with righteousness because his **faith** was evidenced by his actions - showing his belief to be genuine. Faith and works go hand in hand.

James is attacking all forms of antinomianism (presumption - lawlessness). You cannot do (or neglect to do) anything you want and be saved by faith. Paul argued that **trusting in one's own works is deadly**

while James teaches that *lifeless faith is also fatal*. They complement each other - **James deals with antinomianism, Paul with legalism.**

Faith is never alone

John Calvin said: *We are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone*. Calvin could rightly make this claim because the **only** place where *faith alone* is mentioned in the Bible, is in a **negative** sense.

James 2:24 ...a person is justified by **what he does** and **not** by **faith alone**.

Saving faith involves assent to God's truth **1 Thessalonians 2:13**, obedience **Romans 1:5, 16:26** and it must be working in love **Galatians 5:6**. **True faith is never alone**. If you have faith without **love** for example, you are **nothing**.

1 Corinthians 13: 2 ...if I have a **faith** that can move mountains, but have not **love**, I am **nothing**.

Faith is a life-long process

Faith is also a life-long process, not a one-time experience.

Philippians 2:12 **continue** to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Paul does not assume his salvation is secure.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 ...I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be **disqualified** for the prize.

There would be no need to *test ourselves* if salvation was a one time mental assent to the truth - with no requirement for obedience.

2 Corinthians 13:5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; **test** yourselves. Do you not realize that **Christ Jesus is in you**—unless, of course, you **fail** the test?

Jesus spoke of the same thing when he said:

John 15:6 If anyone does not **remain** in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

We are quite clearly told (in fact warned), that we can **fall away**. We must hold on to faith, to the very end, or we will not share in Christ.

Hebrews 3:13-14 Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, **leading you to fall away from the living God**. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today”, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, **if** only we **hold to our first confidence firm to the end**,...

Our faith can be shipwrecked (**1 Timothy 1:19**), departed from (**1 Timothy 4:1**), disowned (**1 Timothy**

5:8) wandered from (1 Timothy 6:10), and missed (1 Timothy 6:21).

What is saving faith?

Faith that yields no deeds is not saving faith. We are justified by **true** faith which is ***faith that works through love*** Gal 5:6. Apple trees do not **strain** themselves trying to produce apples and they don't produce them in order to **become** apple trees. They produce apples **naturally**, because they **are** apple trees. In the same way, we do not perform good works in order to **become** saved but because we allow the Spirit of God to work **in** us - good works are the **natural** result.

Love (implanted by God) is the motivation, **not** earning salvation. We simply co-operate with the Holy Spirit. We become a new creation (born again), as we **respond** to his will. When the Spirit convicts us of sin - we repent, when the Spirit prods us to help the less fortunate – we answer the call. When the Spirit gives us a gift – we use it according to his will. We do not resist, or quench, the Spirit of God working in us.

John 14:23 Jesus answered him, "**If a man loves me, he will keep my word**, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

Gal 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, **but faith working through love**.

Col 1:10 lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, **bearing fruit in every good work** and increasing in the knowledge of God.

1 Jn 3:23-24 And this is his commandment, that we should **believe** in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and **love one another**, just as he has **commanded us**. **All who keep his commandments abide in him**, and he in them. And by this we know that **he abides in us**, by the **Spirit** which he has **given us**.

Faith that Works

Salvation by grace through faith, can be likened to a road with two equally dangerous ditches on either side. One ditch, legalism, teaches works (self-effort) to **earn** salvation. The other ditch is antinomianism (presumption – ignoring the *law of Christ*) where there is a **profession** of faith that acknowledges God but does not result in **obedience** to God. This produces a monstrosity, the **carnal** Christian, who feels assured of their salvation while denying God's ability to sanctify those he justifies.

To stay centered one must have **faith that works** (Gal 5:6), or it is not **genuine** faith. Our **works do not have any merit in our salvation** which is a **free** gift. In fact, our righteousness is but filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) compared to the righteousness of Christ - which he **freely** provides. The Spiritual life imparted by God, motivates us to take **action** against the evils and ills of this world (and in our own lives). It becomes **natural** for us to act righteously in love and abhor sin.

Our works strengthen, exercise, perfect, complete and demonstrate our **faith**, so faith and works go together like a hand in a glove. It has been said that "*faith is the **cause** of good works and good works are the **effect** of faith*" Gordon H. Clark.

*It is not that we must work to **achieve** faith, but if we have faith, it will naturally produce (and be*

strengthened by) good works. If we stifle the God given call to action, we cripple and kill our faith.

We have nothing to boast about because our salvation **is not based on our performance** but on **God's gift**. Even the **desire** to perform good works, comes from God. Faith itself is a **gift**, so in all ways salvation is the gift of God. (Philippians 1:29; 1 Corinthians 3:5; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 2:8, 9).

It is denying the power of God, to teach or believe that the Spirit will live in you but not **motivate** and **empower** you to perform good works. Those he justifies he also sanctifies.

2 Timothy 3:5 having a form of **Godliness** but **denying its power**.

If we do not exercise and strengthen our faith through action - **it dies**. Without faith there is no grace through faith, without grace through faith, there is no salvation by grace.

Good News

If after reading the above, you feel your salvation is not as secure as you had perceived it to be, don't despair. Remember, God will **finish** the good work he started in you.

Philippians 1:6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath **begun** a good work in you will perform it **until** the day of Jesus Christ...

Holy living is called for 1 Peter 1:16, but in reality we are struggling sinners. We are to seek perfection Matthew 5:48, but **our** performance is never the basis of our salvation, the perfect life of Christ is. There are many battles to face, as we submit to being slowly transformed and matured by the work of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:17 For what the flesh wants is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit wants is opposed to the flesh. They are opposed to each other, and so you do not do what you want to do.

We **all** make mistakes along the way. Habitual sin should disappear from our lives but even mature Christians sometimes stumble. However, we are declared righteous and perfect before God because Christ applies his spotless record and sacrifice as a free gift of grace – to cover our short comings.

James 3:2 For we all **stumble** in many ways...

Philippians 3:12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already **perfect**: but I follow after...

1 John 1:8 If we say that we have **no sin**, we are **deceiving ourselves** and the truth is not in us.

1 John 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that **ye sin not**. And **if** any man sin, we have an **advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous...

The Ministry of the Spirit

What Father doesn't **expect** his children to make mistakes and **discipline** them in love, as he brings them to maturity. The only unpardonable sin is to shut out the Holy Spirit from working in you (Mark 3, Matthew 12). The Spirit is our connection to God. If you don't have the Spirit you do not have the

Father or the Son.

Romans 8:9 But ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. But if any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

The Spirit's ministry works through our conscience and convicts us of sin. He produces the fruits of righteousness in our lives. He is the **only one** who can empower you to overcome. You are powerless against sin without him and self effort will not prevail - even if righteousness is your goal and you are thoroughly schooled in doctrine.

The Apostle Paul expressed this well when he compared his righteousness as a Pharisee (blameless under the law) to the righteousness provided freely by Christ and the ministry of the Spirit.

Philippians 3: 2-9 I consider them (works of keeping the Mosaic law) **rubbish** in order to gain the **Messiah** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of **my own** that comes **from the law**, but one that comes through the **faithfulness of the Messiah**, the righteousness that comes from God and that **depends on faith**.

If we were perfect, we wouldn't need grace. God declares us all sinners but grants mercy and forgiveness to us **freely** because of what Christ has done for us. Some choose not to accept God's provision, do to unbelief or attempted self righteousness. Some choose not to, because they love their sin more than God and the Spirit's call for repentance and action are brushed aside.

Authentic faith **responds** to God's grace. The person of faith says to God from the depths of his being - I **accept** your free gift of salvation by grace and **submit** myself to spiritual rebirth through the work of the Holy Spirit. I have **faith** that your Son's perfect sacrifice justifies me **fully** and I also have **faith** that your indwelling Spirit **will** transform me. I **will** co-operate as best I can, to the Spirit's call to repentance and action.

What about those who do not know the plan of redemption or the teachings of Christ. Perhaps they live in a remote jungle - unreached by missionaries. They have had no instruction in the doctrines and terms that scholars and theologians constantly debate. Christianity is fragmented into over 5,000 bickering denominations and factions who all feel their way is best. What about the many people who have abandoned organized religion all together, because they know instinctively that what is in their heart is authentic but what is found in many Churches is not.

Love – the Better Way

Some Christian scholars and theologians have tremendous knowledge **about** God but don't **know** God, in a intimate, saving relationship. Lack of love reveals their spiritual condition.

We should expose error of course, we should expose false systems of thought and the institutions that promote them, but we must **love** the people caught up and blinded by these things. Hate begets hate and love begets love.

1 Cor. 8:1-3 We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but **love** builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who **loves** God is **known** by God.

I think that we will be shocked at who makes it into heaven and who doesn't. Christ looks at our hearts, not our intellectual prowess; at our actions, not just our words; at our love for others, rather than our strongly held dogmas.

Love is the greatest gift and it comes to us from God himself, through his Spirit. If you have a heart of love, then his Spirit is working in you. Ignorance or misconceptions about doctrine are not good things. A lack of proper understanding tends to hinder our spiritual growth but it is not totally fatal to the ministry of the Spirit. Only our willful rejection, prevents him from producing love and righteousness in our hearts.

1 Corinthians 13:2 If I have the **gift of prophecy** and can fathom **all mysteries** and **all knowledge**, and if I **have a faith** that can move mountains, **but have not love, I am nothing**. If I **give all** I possess to the poor and **surrender my body** to the flames, **but have not love, I gain nothing**.

In a sense, if we **don't** have love – it matters little what else we do have. In a sense, if we **do** have love, we have all that we need. We have **God in us**, because God is love.

1 John 4:8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love

Some scholars get their *hackles up* at such *oversimplifications*, but in essence the Gospel of grace is simply God given love, discipline and forgiveness. It is his gift to us, his provision for salvation which was purchased and revealed by his Son and is administered by his Spirit. It's a gift from first to last, we simply choose to accept or reject God's grace.

Allow God to put his Spirit of love in you and he will take care of the rest. His love will motivate you toward good works. He will discipline you like a son when you stray, but also forgive you and remember your sins no more. His Spirit will guide you to the truth and place helpful people in your path at just the right time. He will build your faith and lead you on the narrow way. Prayer will become second nature and the Bible will become your favorite book. Holy living and righteousness will inevitably result. A child can understand concepts like love, discipline and forgiveness, but theologians often make it difficult for even the learned to understand the path to God.

The very fact that you are interested in an article about salvation, demonstrates that the Spirit of God is still working on your heart. You have not committed the unpardonable sin and shut out the Spirit completely. If you fall, get back up - God's grace is greater than your sin and his Spirit can overcome the flesh. Patience and perseverance may be required, but the hope that comes **through faith** does not disappoint.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been **justified** by **faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus the Messiah. ...and we boast because of our **hope** in God's glory... Now that we have been **justified** by his blood, how much more will we be **saved from wrath** through him!

2 Corinthians 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may **abound to every good work**.

To err is human, to forgive divine. Alexander Pope (1688 - 1744)

Christian holiness is not a matter of painstaking conformity to the individual precepts of an external

law-code; it is rather a question of the Holy Spirit's producing His fruit in the life, reproducing those graces which were seen in perfection in the life of Christ. F.F. Bruce, Tyndale Bible Commentaries - The Epistle Of Paul To The Romans. Vol. 6, pg. 162.

Ken Rich

kengrich@yahoo.ca

<http://indiegospel.ning.com>