

Faith and Works

Is justification from sin by faith or works? Is one opposed to the other? Is there a conflict between James and Paul? One would expect that such fundamental questions could be answered clearly and confidently with unity by those who believe the Scriptures. Sadly, this is not the case. There are three false views that conflict with each other.

At one extreme there are those who contend that works effect salvation apart from faith. For example, every group that practices infant baptism must concede that whatever advantage the baptism of a baby is alleged to have, it is not associated with faith, since no infant can personally believe. Clearly, some endorse the idea that works save without faith. Some of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic church are embodied in the system of works.

During the Reformation Movement most Protestants reacted adversely to the "works system" of Roman Catholicism. They adopted the opposite extreme view that works play no role whatever in salvation. Some alleged that salvation is on the basis of "faith alone," while others like radical Calvinists argued that God chose the redeemed before the world began and that redemption, therefore, is entirely unconditional.

The more strict disciples of Calvinism contend that there are no conditions at all in the plan of salvation. They believe that the alien sinner comes into possession of spiritual or eternal life without any condition on the sinner's part. They do not even acknowledge that faith is a condition of salvation.

Then, there is the common claim of many Protestants that faith alone saves. Martin Luther was so adamant regarding the doctrine of "faith only" that he smuggled the word "only" into the text of his German translation in Romans 3:28. Lenski, a Lutheran commentator, attempted to defend Luther's addition to the Bible by suggesting that although the term "only" is not found in the original text, the "sense" of it is. Shall we conclude that Luther was more adept at rendering the "sense" of what it meant than Paul was?

What does James say?

There has been much controversy over the instruction in the book of James regarding faith and works. Clearly, James taught that justification is as much by works as it is by faith. James 2:24 says "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." Luther found this idea so obnoxious that he rejected the inspiration of the Book of James and called it a "right strawy epistle." Luther suggested that the book was not even authored by James.

But the divine writer James clearly affirmed that faith without works cannot save in James 2:14. Is James speaking here of the alien sinner or the Christian? The question is academic. James is discussing the principle of faithful obedience to whomever it applies; whether an Abraham, or a Rahab. James asserts that works is the only logical way to prove one's faith. James never denies the importance of faith.

We are going to see from Scripture that Jesus, James, and Paul were in agreement with each other.

What is the role of works in God's plan of redemption according to the Bible?

It is frequently asserted that whereas "works" are the result of salvation, they do not play any role in securing one's redemption. There is simply no truth to this idea.

Jesus plainly taught in John 6:27 that one must "labor" for that spiritual sustenance which "endures to eternal life" and that even faith itself is a divinely appointed "work" in John 6:29. Jesus also said in Matthew 16:27 that "He will reward each according to his works." In Revelation 2:26 Jesus promised victory to those who "keep My works." Revelation 22:14 says "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city."

The inspired apostle John admonished Christians to be careful "that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward" (2 John v. 8).

Paul warned Christians to be aware of the fact that they will be judged according to their deeds in Romans 2:6. He said the same thing in 2 Corinthians 5:10. He wrote that Christians are to "have an abundance for every good work" in 2 Corinthians 9:8. He explained in Ephesians 2:10 that we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works." Paul added in Philippians 2:12 that Christians are to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." He said in Colossians 1:10 that we are to be "fruitful in every good work." It sounds like Paul and James do agree on the faith and works doctrine.

1 Peter 1:17 also is in agreement that Christians will be judged "according to each one's work." Peter also said in Acts 10:35 that "In every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

It is utterly incredible that some, professing an acquaintance with the New Testament, deny the role of works or obedience in the sacred scheme of redemption.

But some argue that the Scriptures state that we are not saved by works (Ephesians 2:9) Yes, that is correct. But the New Testament also asserts that we are saved or justified by works (James 2:14,21,24,25).

Since the Bible, being the word of God, does not contradict itself, there must be a sensible explanation to this.

There are different kinds of works described in the Bible.

Works of the Law

In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes it clear that no one can be saved by keeping the works of Moses' law. The apostle argued that "a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" in Romans 3:28. The term "law" in this passage is broader than the Mosaic system, though it certainly includes that law.

This does not suggest, however, that obedience to Christ may be ignored. In the same letter, Paul affirmed that these saints in Rome had embraced freedom from the penalty of sin as a result of having been obedient from the heart to that form of doctrine to which they were delivered. See Romans 6:3-4,17. Paul taught the necessity of obedience to the commands of Christ as clearly and strongly as James did.

The works of the Mosaic law could not save because they required perfect compliance which no person could achieve (Galatians 2:16; 3:10-11). Moreover, the law of Moses had only the blood of animals, which could not atone for sin in the absolute sense (Hebrews 10:4). The primary focus of the Hebrew system was to direct attention to the coming Messiah (Galatians 3:24-25). It was never designed to provide the ultimate phase of God's plan of salvation. Had the Mosaic law that kind of power, Christ need never have died as the sin-offering (Galatians 2:21).

Works of human merit

In his Ephesians letter, Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

The works here are charitable works which men pile up, imagining that such will justify them, while they, with a smug self-sufficiency, ignore the sacrifice of Christ and his redemptive system.

For example, the Red Cross is famous for its benevolent efforts, but there is no justification from sin to be found therein, because its "works" are human benevolent efforts, wholly separate from the mission of the Son of God. The man who boasts: "I am a good person; I do not need Jesus Christ," is still lost in sin.

Works of obedience

These works mentioned in the Bible are designated as "works of God." By this expression it is not implied that these are works which God himself performs. Rather, they are works ordained of God, to be obeyed by men, that are related to our salvation. It takes both faith and works to receive our justification.

Consider a text in John 6:28-29. Observe that this “work of God” required a human response, that of believing. Regarding the term “work,” as here used, is sometimes the equivalent of “obedience.” If, therefore, all “works” are excluded from the plan of salvation, faith itself would be eliminated, for it is identified as a work. Work is not a dirty four letter word in the Bible.

It must be noted as well that “repentance” is a component in God’s scheme of redemption (Acts 2:38; 3:19). And yet, repentance is classified as a “work.” Jesus said in Matthew 12:41 that the people of ancient Nineveh “repented” when Jonah preached to them. The book of Jonah explains the meaning of this. God saw their “works, that they turned from their evil way” (Jonah 3:10). There is no question about it, works of a certain sort are a part of the salvation process.

The apostle Paul referred to "obedience to the faith" in Romans 1:5; 16:26. He wrote in Galatians 5:6 that Christians are to have a "faith working through love." Paul also wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 about "your work of faith, labor of love."

Then consider Hebrews chapter 11. Every example of the great people of faith was accompanied by obedient action. Works of obedience go hand in hand with faith.

Is baptism a work of merit?

The truth is, most denominational folks have little difficulty in acknowledging that both faith and repentance are requirements for the remission of sins, even though they are classified as works in the Scriptures. The real point of contention is baptism. They feel that if it were conceded that baptism is essential to salvation, this would be equivalent to saying that forgiveness is earned. Baptism, they say, is a work of human merit. Under this assumption, many sincere people exclude it as a requirement for salvation. But this reasoning is false.

In the first place, the only passage in the New Testament that even remotely identifies baptism as a “work” is found in the book of Colossians. There, Paul describes it as a working of God in Colossians 2:12. He writes, "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." The act of submitting to immersion is not meritorious. The operation is a “working of God” designed to provide pardon upon the basis of Jesus’ death and resurrection. One is spiritually blessed by the working of God when he submits to baptism. Nowhere does scripture come anywhere near suggesting that submission to God’s command, “be baptized” (Acts 2:38; 22:16), is a meritorious work. Baptism as an act of faith is a condition of salvation or remission of sins.

Second, the Bible specifically excludes baptism from that type of works that have no relationship to salvation. In Titus 3:5 Paul affirmed that we are “not [saved] by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” The “washing of regeneration” is a reference to baptism and is plainly placed in contrast to those human “works” that are unable to save.

Faith and baptism are two of the conditions preliminary to receiving salvation according to Jesus in Mark 16:16. Jesus affirmed in Mark 16:16 that "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." The construction of the Greek grammar makes it certain that both belief and baptism precede salvation. The Lord did **not** suggest that one may be saved in the absence of both faith and baptism. He did **not** contend that he who is baptized is saved without faith. He did **not** state that he who believes is saved and may optionally submit to baptism. The accurate picture involves faith, baptism, and salvation in that order.

The conscientious Bible student needs to clear from his mind the false notion that “works” are separate from God’s plan of salvation. Simply accept the complete and unified teaching of the New Testament. The Bible does not contradict itself. When we use the Bible to interpret the Bible, we can understand the Bible.