

Will God Save Me Because of Faith or Works?

Many today believe this question to be so obvious that it is borderline offensive. "By God's grace we are saved through faith, which is completely separate from our works", one might say. Perhaps you feel the exact same way, but have you ever considered that our faith and works should not be separated? Please allow me to argue that if we say we have faith we must also have works, because God's word states the two cannot be separated, and in fact, God does not consider it "faith" if there is no obedience.

Typically, when considering this question, Ephesians 2:8-9 is used to prove we are not saved by works at all: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

In addition to this verse, one may also use Romans 4:1-8 to make the same point: *"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'"*

Please do not misunderstand: these passages are abundantly clear. My question is: Does this imply that God does not expect/demand our obedience? We should be familiar with Peter's reference to Paul's letters, *"There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures"* (2 Peter 3:16). We want to make sure we have a correct understanding of God's word. I'm confident that none of us desire to be categorized as "ignorant and unstable".

1. Let's consider Ephesians 2:8-10.

A. *The history of the saints in Ephesus: Acts 19*

- i. Paul spent 3 years (Acts 20:31) in Ephesus. As his work began, Paul found followers that had not yet heard of the Holy Spirit or baptism in the name of Jesus. Paul baptized these men and laid hands on them (giving them spiritual gifts). Paul attempted to teach the Jews about the kingdom of God for three months, but because of their unbelief he turned his attention to the hall of Tyrannus where he reasoned with them for two years. We learn in this chapter that Jesus was extolled among the Jews and Greeks. As recorded in Acts 19:18-20, *"Also many of those who were now believers came confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."* Paul was also under attack from a silversmith named Demetrius and his friends who practiced similar trades. Paul made it out of Ephesus alive, but we see in this chapter that it was at times a dangerous situation. He loved the brethren which is

made clear in chapter 20. What's the point? I want us to take note that following God cost Paul something and it cost the "new" believers something as well. Please keep this in mind as we continue on.

B. Ephesians 2:8-9: A brief summary of Paul's letter

- i. Paul begins the letter by bringing to mind all of the spiritual blessings found in Jesus Christ. He encourages the brethren by applauding their faith and by assuring them he keeps them in his prayers. He reminded them of the greatness of Jesus, who is head of the church, which is His body. As he continues on (chapter 2), Paul reminds the Gentiles how they used to be dead (spiritually) because of the sins "in which you once walked". However, the wonderful news was that they were "made alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved." Truly, God's kindness and grace was manifested in Jesus. Now we come to 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast.*"

C. However, we need to finish the thought as seen in the next verse, Ephesians 2:10:

- i. "*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*"

- a. If you're paying attention, you probably noticed something in this passage: **works**. What's going on here? First Paul states that we're not saved by works, but yet he's saying that we are God's workmanship and should walk in them? You're exactly right and there is no contradiction. Let's consider Paul's history with the brethren in Ephesus.
 - Paul did many works for God. Now, these works did not save him in the sense that Paul earned his salvation apart from the Lord, but it simply means he was a faithful servant by showing obedience to God. He "worked" for the Lord. Why would anyone have an issue with this understanding?
 - The disciples who were unaware of baptism in Jesus' name were obedient to Paul's instruction. They showed a work of faith. Did God owe them anything? No. However, what if they rejected Paul's instruction and refused to be baptized in the name of Jesus? They would have not shown faith in God because they would not have been obedient to the Creator. Why would anyone have an issue with this understanding?
 - The other brethren who accepted God's word were saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus, but even these brethren repented of sin and showed their "work" by giving up their magic arts and burning their books associated with their practice. This gave glory to God! They were being His workmen! Again I ask: Why would anyone have an issue with this understanding?
 - Now, let me ask you a question: what if the new believers in Ephesus refused to give up their magic arts? What if Paul refused to stand up for God's word when persecution/trials came his way? Would it not be true that it would show a lack of faith on their part? If they showed a lack of faith in God, could they have been saved?

- b. Is it not true that God has a right to demand our obedience? But, isn't it also true that if we are not obedient to God we are showing a lack of faith and will not be acceptable to Him?
 - Isn't this exactly what God told Cain before he killed his brother, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).
 - Jesus also taught His apostles about faith by saying, "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10). The point is very clear, yet today, it seems as though we have turned around to the Master and said, "I don't have to do anything. Save me."
 - Does this type of mentality harmonize with the Gospel? Many Jews felt they could save themselves purely because of their works. That is one extreme. Have we not created another extreme by saying we don't have to do anything to be saved?

2. Let's consider Romans 4:1-8.

A. *Understanding the overall picture in Romans 1-4*

- i. Paul has already pointed out that both Jew and Gentile were guilty of sin. It was critical that the Jew come to grips with reality: Just because God chose your nation to give the commandments, worship, etc., and to bring about the Messiah does not mean God will automatically save you. Paul already made the point that there were Gentiles who showed much more faith in God than many of the Jews. They needed to be reminded that God alone is righteous, just, and the Justifier. To drive this point home Paul uses Abraham as an example to show that someone could have been saved before being circumcised and being under the Old Law. The Jews thought that being a Jew would save them. They thought that because of their works done according to the Old Law they would be saved, forgetting that the Old Law was not the end all and they all stood condemned before God because, "For all who rely on works of law (Old Law) are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of Law, and do them'" (Galatians 3:10).

B. *Explaining Romans 4:1-8*

- i. When Paul mentions that Abraham had nothing to boast about he is referring to the idea of being saved by a system of works. Abraham, though a great man, was not perfect. He also fell short of God's glory. He was a man who believed in God who would save him. Abraham was not a "worker" in the sense that he thought he could be such a great man that God owed him anything. He understood the need for God. Such men as Abraham, like David, understood that believers are forgiven, and should not be arrogant "workers".

C. *A closer look at the use of Genesis 15:6*

- i. *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”* This verse is found in Genesis 15:6, but cited in Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2. We will see that believing in God is equivalent to being a man of faith/obedience.
- a. Romans 4:3,22: As already discussed, Genesis 15:6 is first used in verse 3 to show that God did not owe Abraham anything, but credited righteousness to him. As we continue on in Romans 4, Paul goes on to explain how Abraham was a man of faith by the life that he lived. In Romans 4, Paul says that says Abraham’s faith was counted to him as righteousness because he trusted that God would give him and his wife a child even though they were very old. He did not waver and this was long after God had made his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.
 - b. Galatians 3:1-9: In this passage, Paul is upset that his brethren had been “bewitched” and turned back to the Old Law. He reminds them that it was the preaching of the gospel, the faith they had, which had brought about their salvation along with other blessings. He reminded them that those of faith are the true sons of Abraham, including the Gentile nation. He uses Genesis 15:6 in this passage to show how God made this great promise to Abraham long ago. But, we must consider something: What kind of man was Abraham when God considered Abraham righteous? Well, at this point in time, Abraham had already obeyed God and left his home and protection (Acts 7:2-4). He left a past of idolatry (Joshua 24:2). I fear we often forget these facts. God did not randomly choose Abraham. He chose a man who would follow Him.
 - c. James 2:14-26: In this passage, James is comparing the idea of having faith OR having works. He makes the point that such a thing does not exist. Please pay attention to this passage in particular. This goes back to the very beginning of the article. Can you truly separate faith and works? Well, let’s allow the Bible to speak for itself. James wrote, *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’ – and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”*
 - d. First of all, see how Abraham’s faith was fulfilled by doing something. He was a worker, but not a “worker” in the negative sense used in Romans 4. He was obedient. This was completed when he offered his son Isaac. Of course, if you’ll remember, Abraham was stopped when, *“the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ Do not lay your hand on the boy or*

do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” (Genesis 22:11-12). You see, we do a great injustice to Abraham when we say his faith was simply some “belief” in God. His belief came at great cost. Romans 4 explains that his faith required him to not waver even when God told him he would have a child at 100 years old. Galatians 2 references a time when God commanded him to leave his world of idolatry and go to a land that he was unfamiliar with (Hebrews 11:8-9). James 2 states that his faith was proven by offering his son. A man of faith looks like a lifelong of obedience.

- e. Secondly, the statement of “faith only” is simply not true. James had to battle this mentality close to 2,000 years ago and it is no different today. The only place in the Bible that records the words “faith only” is found here in James 2:24, *“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”* There is no contradiction in scripture. James is only stating what should be obvious: there is no such thing as believing in God, yet not being obedient to our Creator. Should we really be fighting against this? Paul is making the point that none of us perfectly keep God’s commandments and so God owes us nothing. We cannot be saved by a “system of Law”. He hits the topic of “works” from one angle. James hits it from another angle: “At the same time, don’t claim to have faith in God but not obey him. That’s a dead faith”. As Jesus said, *“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”* (John 14:15). We all agree that Jesus had the right to say such a thing and He is worthy of our obedience.

D. *Do we want to be saved like Abraham?*

- i. John 8:31-39, *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in Him, “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered Him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill Me because My word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” They answered Him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the words Abraham did.”*
- ii. According to Jesus, Abraham was a man of works!

3. Let’s address a few more passages:

A. Don’t these following passages prove that we must do something to be considered faithful?

- i. Matthew 5:23-16. Why would Jesus say that individuals who practice these types of behavior inherit the kingdom of God if our “works” do not matter?
- ii. Acts 2:40. Why would Peter instruct others to “save yourselves from this crooked generation” if nothing we do actually matters?
- iii. Galatians 5:22. What’s the point of encouraging the brethren to be led by the Spirit instead of the flesh if our works don’t matter?
- iv. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:16-21; Colossians 3:5-11, etc. Why would it say that individuals who practice these types of behavior will not inherit the kingdom of God if our “works” do not matter?

- v. 2 Corinthians 5:10, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."* Can this passage be any clearer?
 - vi. Titus 3:4-14. Notice how Paul reminds Titus that we are not saved by our good works, but then turns right around and insisted that the brethren devote themselves to good works and not be unfruitful.
 - vii. Hebrews 11 – The entire passage is about those who acted by faith. The passage goes on to show what men like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, etc. did to be pleasing to God. Would you consider any of these individuals to be faithful if they had rejected God's instruction?
- B. Do the following passages prove that our works are responsible for losing our salvation?
- i. Romans 2:1-5. Notice God's wrath is being stored up against these Jews because they were acting hypocritically.
 - ii. Galatians 5:4. Because they turned back to the Old Law (circumcision) they had been severed from Christ and fallen from grace.
 - iii. 2 Peter 2:20-22. Because of accepting false teachings they had turned back to be entangled in the world.
 - iv. Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-30; 12:15. He's writing to Christians yet telling them they can "fail to obtain the grace of God". They can fall away and even get to a point where it is "impossible" to be restored.
 - v. 1 John 1:5-7. Why would John warn Christians of "walking in darkness" if our works don't matter? Because, if we "walk in darkness" we do not have fellowship with the Father.

It is very clear that God's word teaches there is no such thing as a separation of faith and works. To say that we can save ourselves apart from God's grace is completely false and sinful. However, to swing the complete opposite direction is equally as sinful, because it is against God's word, and we are essentially saying, "Save me Lord, but don't ask me to do anything that is an inconvenience." Is that how we feel? I pray we do not and that we reconsider this false teaching that so many hold to today.

Do you have faith in God? How has the Bible defined faith? Have you shown by your works that you truly believe in the Savior?

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