

Faith and works

Legalism or Obedience? Salvation Based on Merits or out of Grace?

In the following treatise you can learn why we believe and how we understand that we have been saved by grace through faith. **IS THERE A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN FAITH AND DEEDS?—Faith without deeds is impossible.**

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In this passage Paul points out that a Christian has eternal life solely by God's grace and not as a result of his own works. God sent His Son to the Earth out of compassion and love for the people so that they may be saved from their sins.

Christians before their repentance were dead in their sins, they lived according to the lifestyle of the world following the desires of their flesh (Ephesians 2:1-3). It was God who brought them to life so that they leave their sins and walk in holiness:

So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, (...) that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in {the likeness of} God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 4:17 and 22-24)

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1)

God saved mankind by sending Jesus who proclaimed God's forgiveness, and called the people to repent from their sins and to have a deep, joyful relationship with God, bearing fruit for Him (John 10:10).

Sin separates us from God:

Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden {His} face from you so that He does not hear. (Isaiah 59:1-2)

Therefore, Jesus calls all those who want to live with God **for a consistent fight against sin**. We have received grace and forgiveness from God so that **we do not live in sin anymore**.

I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more. (John 8:11b)

For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in {further} lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. (Romans 6:19)

And working together {with Him,} we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain. (2 Corinthians 6:1)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to

deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age. (Titus 2:11-12)

In fact, all admonishments and encouragements of the New Testament could be quoted which show that **God gives His grace to live a holy life**. By neglecting this, one takes God's grace in vain and gives a false testimony about God to other people, as he does not reflect in his life **God's power which can purify from sin**.

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

So the opinion—shared also by Martin Luther—that Christian life is outwardly invisible is not acceptable¹. Emphasising **the fruits of Christian life and holiness** cannot be called legalism. It is not about the law of the Old Testament nor a mere human effort or performance but a fight for holiness by the power of Jesus' salvation, the relationship with God and the help of the Holy Spirit. In fact, faith without works is not possible:

“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, {being} by itself.” (James 2:17)

James' thoughts are not in contradiction with Paul's teaching in the Letter to the Romans. Paul in Romans 4 contrasts the works of the Old Testament law with the grace and faith freely given by God in Jesus, whereas James speaks about **the worthlessness of believing in God's existence without works**. Paul writes against those who still want to be justified by keeping the Old Testament law; James writes against those, who testify their faith only by their words but do not fight for holiness in their lives and it is not visible that they are followers of Jesus. As faith in God does not only mean acknowledging His existence (James 2:19), faith in Jesus Christ cannot simply mean acknowledging the historicity of Jesus' life and believing some facts about Him (including His death and resurrection).

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:36)

Jesus identifies faith with obedience. Note that Jesus speaks about obedience and not about a life improved in some points (giving up bad habits, sins condemned even by worldly laws; kindness, humanitarian or religious acts etc.). Jesus calls people to follow Him, as He called the rich young man, who lived a life according to God in several points but was not ready to give the first place to Him and follow Jesus. (Matthew 19:16-26) As John says:

The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. (1 John 2:6)

Jesus completely devoted His life to those who needed help; he wanted to show them God's love and lead them to God. **He calls all those who want to follow Him to do the same**.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

As Christians we want to live worthy of the call of Jesus. **This does not mean that we are sinless or perfect; yet, it is a wholehearted endeavour to be holy and blameless like Jesus and not just a powerless attempt. It is a fight** which Paul describes in a very encouraging way in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but {only} one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then {do it} to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

We cannot excuse ourselves with the weakness of man as Jesus was also aware of it (Hebrews 12:1-4), yet He spoke clearly about what He demands from His followers:

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. (Matthew 16:24b)

Sin cannot become normal for a Christian. If we fall, we should stand up again taking power from God's forgiveness (1 John 2:1) and **fight against sin till the end** (Hebrews 12:1-4).

No one can make himself worthy of the eternal life simply by his deeds. But the deeds show if someone has real relationship with God, if he has really repented, if he has accepted God's grace, if he believes in Jesus, if the power of Jesus' salvation has become reality in his life. If yes, then it will be visible in his life.

...show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (James 2:18b)

This is the reason why the New Testament often speaks about **the last judgement as based on deeds**.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

So, the opinion that faith in Jesus' death and resurrection is enough in itself for salvation is wrong; but so is the other extreme that we can gain merits in front of God by good works. The latter is refuted also in Jesus' parable of the unworthy servant:

So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done {only} that which we ought to have done. (Luke 17:10)

Conclusion

The word of God is reality also today and is able to change the lives of those who want it, who freely decide to serve Jesus taking the easy yoke of Jesus (Matthew 11:30) submitting themselves to the law of freedom (James 1:25 and 2:12) and not to the law of the Old Testament, **bearing fruits for God, testifying about the power of His grace**. They are those who hear and understand the word of Jesus:

I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock {with} one shepherd. (John 10:14-16)

Footnotes:

1. "A Christian person is not made up of his outward conduct; Nor does he behave according to the external situation, but according to the inner one. That is to say, it is a different heart, a different courage, will and mind, which does the same works as another does without this kind of courage and will. For a Christian knows that everything depends on faith. Therefore he behaves, stands, eats, drinks, dresses, works and lives like any other common man in his position, so that you won't notice his Christianity..." (*Weihnachtspostille 1522: Luther deutsch, Erg.Bd. Lutherlexikon, p. 57f*)

"A Christian cannot be discerned according to his external life. For it is no less impure and dilapidated than the life of a non-Christian. Therefore they have to pray daily, 'Forgive us our debts'. Whoever wants to see and discern a Christian rightly, let him do it according to faith. For according to our flesh and blood we are sinners and, like all people, must suffer death and expect all manner of troubles here on earth, yes even more than other people who are non-Christians. For Christians feel the sin much more than other people." (*Hauspostille 1544, Von der Frucht der Auferstehung Christi: Luther deutsch, Erg.Bd. Lutherlexikon, p.58*)

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