

Faith and Works

Legalism or Obedience? Is Salvation Based on Merit or by Grace Alone?

The aim of this article

In the following article we will explain why we believe and how we understand that we have been saved by grace through faith. Is there a contradiction between faith and works?—Faith without works is impossible.

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. (*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:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ...you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (*Ephesians 4:17,21-24*)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to 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 shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear 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**.

Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more. (*John 8:11b*)

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness

leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. (*Romans 6:19*)

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. (*2 Corinthians 6:1*)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives 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**.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to 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 acceptable.[1] 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:

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (*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).

Whoever **believes** in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not **obey** the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains 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:

Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which 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: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people 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 in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should 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 would come after me, let him 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 strength 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 a 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, NASB*)

This is the reason why the New Testament often speaks about **the last judgement as being based on what we have done.**

For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (*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 also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty." (*Luke 17:10*)

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. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (*John 10:14-16*)

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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. 57 f*)

"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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