

Part A - Salvation, Part B - Judgment, Part C - The Ages to Come

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A-6: Salvation by Works? (Part 1)

My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!'—if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead. But someone will say, 'One person has faith, another has actions.' My answer is, 'Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions.' ... You see, then, that it is by our actions that we are put right with God, and not by our faith alone.

(James 2:14-18, 24 - Good News Translation)

Salvation by works? Such an idea borders on the heretical, we may think. But let's explore this question from different angles. We may, if nothing else, gain a better understanding of that oft-heard saying, "You can't work for or earn your salvation."

By this is meant the idea that salvation is a free gift, given freely without strings attached. And this principle, outlined in the New Testament, offers comfort, especially to those who feel unworthy sinners; it doesn't matter how bad we've been, we can qualify for salvation.

God's grace (His favor), His salvation can operate in many ways: to bring present victory in our personal lives and circumstances; to bring healing in body, mind, and spirit; to take Earth's government out of the hands of evil rulers, replacing them with the meek who shall inherit the Earth; to restore and regenerate Earth's natural environment. "Salvation"

then can be understood in different ways, covering the entire scope of human life and environment.

But let us narrow the focus down to that aspect known as personal salvation - the transition that happens when one *“has passed from death into life”* to become a citizen of the Kingdom of God. (John 5:24)

Salvation simply means that God has bestowed His grace (divine favor) on a person and released them from their former destiny towards an undesirable fate in the Afterlife and grants him or her entrance into the Kingdom of God. And it is a gift, freely given to us of the human race.

None of us, because of our inherently sinful nature, can claim to be worthy of that gift. Yet we can look at the example of king David who, despite having committed some real crimes during his lifetime, felt assured that he would end up in Heaven, not Hell, or some other less-than-desirable region of the Celestial Realm. *“For You will not leave my soul in Sheol... But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave [Sheol], for He shall receive me.”* (Psalm 16:10, 49:15)

What spoke for him was the fact that he listened to his conscience, acknowledged his errors, and sought forgiveness. In other words, his heart was inclined towards a love for God, not indifference or rejection. Unlike king Saul he underwent genuine repentance and changed for the better because of his love for God.

When a person loves someone, the last thing he or she wants to do is hurt or offend them; that probably will happen anyway in spite of all one's good intentions. And so it is with God; He is moved by our love for Him, and His love for us inspires within us the desire to avoid sinning against Him. He is more concerned about this - our love for Him - than on how we measure up on the “sin” scoreboard.

Salvation - to enter the Kingdom - is not a complicated procedure. God has made it easy. *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3:14-15)

In this reference to the children of Israel, Moses had fashioned a bronze

serpent; the people needed only to look on it to get healed from the curse of serpent bites that were ravaging the wilderness camp. ([Numbers 21.9](#)) Likewise, to gain release from the curse of Death and Hell in the Afterlife, it is a simple matter of believing in Christ.

But then we might recall the statement, *“even the demons believe”*. (James 2:19) And they certainly don’t have eternal life, but eternal damnation.

So then, there must be something more to this step of “believing” than meets the eye. And that extra something is explained further ahead in the same passage. *“All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.”* (John 3:20-21, NLT) So here we see that mysterious factor which seems to complicate the simple step to salvation for some people.

For to take that step means renouncing one’s wrongdoings, the setting aside of one’s pride; it’s turning around and going in a new direction... towards the Light and the Kingdom, what the New Testament calls “repentance”. More than just “faith”, it’s also a matter of doing *“what is right... what God wants”*. Or as some translations say, it’s a matter of doing *“what is true... so that it may be clearly seen”* that one’s *“works have been carried out in God.”* (ESV)

And for those who *“do evil”* and would rather not that their *“sins be exposed”*, then submission to Christ’s authority becomes difficult; it requires a shattering of their old ways and attitudes. But for those *“who do what is right”* and *“are doing what God wants”*, it is easy for them to *“come to the light”*; they are already walking in love and humility.

Of course, a person has to be willing to receive the gift. For to enter the Heavenly Realm does take some humility. In the brilliance of God’s Light one cannot help but admit to being wrong about a few things, or at the least, recognizing that one’s own natural strength or goodness may not impress God as much as we would like to think. It also takes courage - to face one’s fears and go in a new direction.

Many people cannot bring themselves to that point. We see this in the

case of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ; one recognized his shortcomings; the other couldn't and turned away.

Not everyone has lived lives of what we usually think of as sin, like the thieves on the Cross. Many people, in their natural state, are decent law-abiding individuals. For them that conviction of sinfulness is going to be rather weak. They may not sense that need or shortcoming until they are near death's door (and in that way they are no different from the thieves).

Their whole lives they thought they could save themselves. But as the apostle Paul wrote, *"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."* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The example of Naaman in the Old Testament offers a helpful illustration of what this salvation process entails. ([2Kings 5](#)) The commander of the Syrian army, Naaman, had journeyed to Israel to visit the prophet Elisha in hopes of finding a cure for his leprosy. The prophet's answer was simple: *"Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean."* (5:10)

But since the prophet did not roll out the VIP treatment for him with a grand welcome ceremony and display of healing power, *"Naaman became furious"* (5:11) Finally, Naaman humbly yielded to the prophet's instructions and bathed in the Jordan River and was healed... not only of his leprosy but of his pride also. When not yielded, humbly, to the will of God, Naaman's healing was impossible; but once he yielded, it was a simple matter.

We may conclude then that "believing" includes more than mere acknowledgment or mental understanding of who Christ is (for even the demons have that). As far as personal salvation is concerned, it is a matter of receiving Christ, which means submitting to His authority, which, in addition, means renouncing the works of Darkness in one's life.

"Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2Timothy 2:19) It's a humbling and going in a new direction. Coming to Christ and moving toward righteousness go hand in hand; they are inseparable (just as faith and works are inseparable). And what is

“righteousness”? This cannot be defined very easily, and certainly, it will manifest in different ways for different people.

At the outset Naaman had hope - an inkling of faith that it was possible to get healed of his leprosy. But that wasn't enough until he humbled himself. This we might label as the “works” factor in the equation, that mental or spiritual effort on the part of the believer which causes him or her to complete their faith by putting it into action.

This leads us then to the controversial question, can we be saved by works as implied in the above story and in the Scripture, *“Those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants”*? (John 3:21, NLT) In the New Testament it almost seems as if there are contradictory teachings on this issue.

If we go by what the apostle Paul said, then we might figure that justification comes only by faith. To prove his point, Paul uses the example of Abraham who *“believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness”*. (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:1-8). The apostle James, on the other hand, using the same Scripture about Abraham, concludes, *“You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.... Faith was working together with his works.”* (James 2:24, 22)

True, *“Abraham believed God and it was counted to Him for righteousness”*, but that belief was accompanied by the “work” of taking Isaac to the mountain and getting ready to sacrifice him. *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?”* (James 2:21)

If Abraham had not done so, then it would have meant he didn't believe and/or refused to obey what God had told him. Whether it's no faith or disobedient faith, without the deed to accompany that faith, it could not have *“counted for righteousness”*. And the result would have been no salvation or blessing - in this case, the promise of being *“a father of many nations”*. (Genesis 15:6, 17:4)

Well, there is a fine line here. To do *“what God wants”* is not self-works. As the apostle Paul explains, *“By grace are ye saved. . . and that not of yourselves... not of works, lest any man should boast.”* (Ephesians

2:8-9, KJV)

But to give a more accurate perspective, he continues, *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”* (2:10) Paul places great emphasis here on the role of *“good works”* in the lives of believers.

The apostle James expresses it well when writing about the faith of Abraham: *“faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.”* (James 2:22, ESV)

There are two very different ways that *“works”* can manifest in a person’s life. One is the self-righteous way - through works done *“of yourselves”* - of seeking merit through an outward show of goodness by which a person can *“boast”*; and this doesn’t count in God’s eyes. *“Seeking to establish their own righteousness,”* as Romans 10:3 puts it.

One person could do something and God would count it to them for righteousness. Someone else could do the same thing and it would be counted against them because it was being done with the wrong motive. Often people’s seemingly good or religious acts are a covering that makes themselves look good on the outside. But the reality is, they are not doing what God wants them to do. They are not worshiping *“in spirit and truth”*. This was a serious shortcoming over which Jesus admonished the Jewish rulers. (See [Matthew 23:27-28](#).)

Another example in the Old Testament: the prophet Isaiah admonished those who had a certain level of *“faith”* and took *“delight in approaching God”*. (58:2) But their *“works”* of fasting and prayer were not the kind of works God was pleased with. *“Why have we afflicted our souls, and You [God] take no notice?”* the people would complain. And the Lord told them to get busy and *“loose the bonds of wickedness... let the oppressed go free... satisfy the afflicted soul, etc.”* ([Isaiah 58:3,6-7,10](#)) Their faith without the right kind of works was dead and was robbing them of God’s blessing.

In his epistles Paul had to focus much attention on the religious *“works”* that were commonly followed by the Jewish people (who were

having quite a bit of influence in the new and growing movement of Christianity). The issue was, is it true that the *“true worshipers”* are supposed to *“worship in spirit and truth”*, as Jesus taught? ([John 4:23-24](#)) Or did a person also need to keep some kind of religious *“works”*, such as the laws of Moses or circumcision, in order to win God’s approval?

In the right time and place, before the full realization of God’s grace/favor in Christ had become known or had taken effect, those *“works”* were sufficient to find favor with God, especially if they were being carried out in genuine faith. Otherwise, as Paul goes on to explain, if such *“works”* come *“of yourselves”* and cause one to *“boast”* in themselves instead of in God, this could not win God’s approval or acceptance. And this Paul explains in passages like [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) or [Titus 3:5](#).

The Gospel of John offers a look at *“works”* from a different angle. ([John 3:20-21](#)) If a person does *“what is right”*, then he or she will *“come to the light”* and it can be seen *“that they are doing what God wants.”* And if they’ve *“come to the light”*, it means they are *“saved”*. Believing in the *“Light”* is the same as believing *“in God’s one and only Son”*.

This may seem like an odd assertion to make. But just prior to the use of the word *“light”* here in verses 20-21, the phrase *“in the NAME of the only Son of God”* is used. (3:18, ESV) And this is the usual translation found in most Bibles. As outlined in a [previous post](#), the *“name”* of Christ covers a lot of territory. And this seems to be why Christ referred to Himself here in a more all-encompassing way as the *“Light”*. For many have followed the *“Light”* without knowing the specific person who came in the flesh and was the manifestation of that Light in our broken world.

And those who follow the Light, their *“works”* are the right kind; they’re not *“boasting”*, they’re just doing *“what is right”* - not at all like the works done by those whom Paul was referring to. In the days of the Early Church many Jewish people preferred to keep on with their old *“works”* of the Law, not because they loved the Light, but because they *“loved the Darkness”* - the darkness of their own religious pride and self-reliance and self-righteousness. ([John 3:19](#)) These were works by which they could *“boast”* and had nothing to do with loving the Light.

The passage in [John 3:18-21](#) focuses on whether or not a person loves Darkness or Light. To those who love the Light rather than the Darkness, God pours out His “grace”. And automatically, they will be *“doing what God wants”*. However, it is not those “works” that bring salvation, but it is the fact that he/she loves the Light. If a person doesn’t love the Light, then the “works” will not be there, or whatever works they do will not glorify God or be of any real benefit to humanity. In this darkened state a person cannot expect to be eligible for or receptive to God’s “grace”.

Those who *“are doing what God wants”*, we could say, are working out their *“own salvation with fear and trembling”*, knowing that *“it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* (Philippians 2:12-13, ESV) To *“work out your own salvation”* means that one’s personal choice and effort are involved. God can’t do everything; there is the “work” side of our “faith”.

Here is where that peculiar human attribute known as “choice” enters the picture - what sets human beings apart from the animal kingdom. If there were no “work” (no involvement, no step of faith), that means no choice would be needed. And if there is no choice, then it is all left up to God - total pre-destination.

But that is not what God desires, nor how He has designed the drama of human experience and history; He wishes for us to trust and respond, as in a relationship, and thus He has given us humans freedom of choice. And choice means faith shifts from contemplation into action. As far as personal salvation is concerned, there should be some kind of conscious acceptance which will manifest in some positive way; or conversely, a conscious denial, turning away, and rejection

(Jesus:) I intentionally created people with the capacity to choose good or evil. I wanted them to be free to love Me—or not. Love that has no choice is not real! [from *Dear Jesus* by Sarah Young, Thomas Nelson, 2007].

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Romans 10:17) Faith recognizes God’s urging - His voice, His word to us personally; we believe what we cannot see - and most importantly, we respond and *“work for his good pleasure”*. *“My sheep hear My voice, and I*

know them, and they follow Me.” (Philippians 2:17, John 10:27) Like a torch in the night, faith illumines the path ahead, but, of course, we have to take the steps (take action, do the work).

Sometimes we hear the “*voice*” but don’t “*follow*”, which shows that faith was not “*completed by works*”; faith was either non-existent, or it was a weak faith that wouldn’t obey or follow through. (James 2:23, ESV)

“O you of little faith,” Jesus remarked on a few occasions. (Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, Luke 12:28) Thankfully, Jesus understands and is merciful towards our human weakness in having faith, in finding it difficult to see beyond visible circumstances and to trust in God’s power and faithfulness.

At this point it might help to see what the Scriptures have to say about this issue of salvation where the emphasis lies with the conduct of individuals more than their belief systems:

- The story of Zacchaeus: ***“Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham.’”*** (Luke 19:8-9)
What was it that saved Zacchaeus? His faith? No doubt that had a great deal to do with it. ***“For with the heart one believes unto righteousness.”*** (Romans 10:10) But the turning point for Zacchaeus didn’t fully come until he declared his intention to help the poor and those whom he had wronged. ***“With the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”*** (Romans 10:10) This was the “work” of his faith, without which Jesus could not have promised salvation for Zacchaeus.
- In the Old Testament, the key to salvation was understood in very simple terms: ***“Turn away from evil and do good; so shall you dwell forever.”*** (Psalm 37:27, ESV) ***“Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.”*** (Psalm 62:12 - NIV, quoted in Romans 2:6)
- During his visit with the prophet Daniel, the angel Gabriel declared that those who will be highly rewarded at the end of Earth’s final ***“time of trouble”*** were ***“wise”*** and ***“turned many to righteousness”***. (Daniel 12:3)

- John the Baptist warned the *Pharisees and Sadducees* to “*bear fruits worthy of repentance*”. (Matthew 3:7-9)
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ stated, “*by their fruits you will know them.*” He was referring there to “*false prophets*” who have their “*sheep’s clothing*” of brilliant ideas and belief systems, but the real gauge of their trustworthiness was to take a look at their fruits, the results of their ideas and actions. “*A tree is known by its fruit.*” (Matthew 7:15-20, 12:33)
- In the Parable of the Final Judgment, Jesus talks about dividing the sheep from the goats - those who are ready for Heaven and those who are not. We learn here what the deciding factor is - not religious beliefs, but charitable or non-charitable acts of compassion during their earthly lifetimes. To them (“*the righteous*”) it was granted to “*inherit the kingdom*”. They had cared for the “*least of these My brethren*” - not for show or thought of reward, but simply out of compassion. In fact, they were not even aware that they had done anything worthwhile in service to Him: “*when did we see You hungry... thirsty... a stranger... naked... sick, or in prison?*” Many of them did not know who Christ was, yet by helping the less fortunate, they were serving Christ without realizing it. “*As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.*” (Matthew 25:31-46)
- A similar idea appears in Matthew 10, where the deciding factor is whether or not people receive the people whom God sends to them. “*He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.*” (10:40-42, NIV)
- And a few more Scriptures about the Final Judgment: “*the dead were judged according to their works... those who have done good and those who have done evil” (Revelation 20:12-13, John 5:29) “[The Son of Man] will reward each according to his works.” (Matthew 16:27)*

Whom God is looking for then is the person “*who does what is true*”. (John 3:21, ESV) “*Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts.*” (Psalm 51:6) “*The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for*

the Father is seeking such to worship Him.” (John 4:23)

“Doing what God wants” may be nothing more than a repentant heart - “a response to God from a clean conscience”. (John 3:21, 1Peter 3:21 - NLT) The thief on the cross, for example, showed “a clean conscience” toward God. He manifested great faith, trust, even insight when he uttered his cry, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42) Such “works” as this final confession may seem small to our human eyes, but in God’s eyes it is big.

Unlike the other thief, he was honest and not proud, able to acknowledge that he had led a sinful life. On top of that he had the courage and humility to throw himself upon God’s mercy. His repentance was the act of one who “does what is true.” And those who “worship the Father in spirit and truth” are the ones whom “the Father is seeking.” “Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being.” (John 3:21, 4:23, Psalm 51:6 - ESV)

Not everyone, of course, has led a life of extreme sinfulness like the thief on the cross. Many peace-loving people try to obey their conscience, and it could be said of them that “they are doing what God wants” . For them that conviction of sinfulness may be rather weak; as a result, unlike the thief, they may not sense much need for a big act of contrition.

Does that mean we can be saved by works? Not quite. But Scripture does make it plain that we are judged by our works. In the end, Salvation is still a gift, one that we must choose to accept. But the opportunity to even make that choice may not present itself if one has been “practicing evil”, or if it is presented, one may find it difficult (because of pride), or may feel unworthy, to accept the gift; and in many such cases, he or she turns away. ([John 3:20](#)) Thankfully, many also receive God’s gift and experience marvelous deliverance from their former sinful lives.

And for those who have led good lives (according to their conscience and the Light given to them) but have not had the opportunity to come to Christ before approaching death’s door (as did the thief on the cross), then it only seems reasonable that that opportunity would be offered to them in the Afterlife. If they have had a decent opportunity in this life but refused it, well, that is a different story. But in the end only God knows

fully the state of a person's heart and whether or not they have come to the Light or are on their way towards the Light.

How do you respond to Jesus? That's what it boils down to. Maybe someone never heard or saw the need in their life, but when finally they meet the Lord in some way, because their works were done in God, they respond favorably to the invitation and are welcomed into the Kingdom.

Now it is possible to go too far in the direction of "works". Our human nature tends to divert easily from the path of unreserved faith in God. The natural mind is ever active, weighing up the "logical" explanation for everything, and insisting that action is needed in order to get results.

Action is important, but it doesn't substitute for faith; it has to work in conjunction with faith, otherwise we'll find ourselves spinning in place or moving along very slowly. It's the combination of faith plus effort that moves us forward at a quick yet relaxed pace.

There is the example of the situation that came up amongst believers in the Ephesian church. Its members were found wanting because they had lost their *"first love"*. (Revelation 2:4) They were failing to let go of self-effort (works) so that (through faith) they could have more communion with God, the result of which would allow Him more room to work through them.

The only way we can become abundantly fruitful is to understand the Lord's fruit-bearing process. As we lay down self-effort, our natural human independence, and seek communion with Him, abiding in the Vine, then His power, His will, and His desires will be realized in our lives, which then will bear fruit that remains throughout eternity! — George Whitten, ["Abide"](#)

And we might consider also the example of the reformers during the Church Age, who struggled to return the Church to its *"first love"* - to reinstate the belief that salvation is the gift of God, not dependent on works but on faith alone. Prior to the Reformation era of history, Popes and clergy taught that salvation came by works. And the kind of works they emphasized were those that increased the temporal power of the Church establishment, not God or His people.

In the early 1500s Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers repudiated this perversion of the Gospel; they re-introduced the knowledge of God's grace - salvation as God's free gift, accessible by faith and not by works. The pendulum began then to swing to the side of "faith" - away from the pointless and ritualistic "works" that were being promoted in those days.

But nowadays, in some Christian circles that pendulum has swung too far into a sort of easy-believism. Born-again Christians should, of course, be happy and overjoyed to have found God's favor through Christ, their salvation, but they must beware of getting too familiar and slipping into an attitude of "it doesn't matter what one does because God will always forgive". Well yes, that is true; He will forgive... but regardless, it will still cost something. (More information on this in the section ["Rewards, Rehabilitation, or Both?"](#))

We know that the Lord loves us unconditionally and He forgives us for our sins. At times we feel the Lord's presence intimately and are keenly aware of His love, grace, and mercy. This doesn't mean, however, that He's so chummy with us that He will turn a blind eye if we repeatedly, intentionally, and on an ongoing basis, step outside His will, disobey His Word, ignore His still, small voice speaking to our hearts, and disregard the principles He's put forth in His Word. We need to maintain a healthy fear of the Lord in our lives. (["In Partnership with God," Roadmap series](#))

As one Bible commentary has put it,

A misapplication of the concept of salvation by grace alone has led to a dichotomy [division] between faith and works. Salvation is not achieved by works, but neither is it without works. (Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46 from *NLT Study Bible* 2nd edition, pg. 1631. See [Appendix](#) for full quote.)

To divorce works from faith leads to "easy-believism". And related to this, when we make a huge distinction between Heaven and Hell, this also can become a form of easy-believism. Believers, of course, do not go to the real Hell of the *Lake of Fire*. But the point here is this: to exempt born-again believers from any sort of accountability, to think that there won't

be any (loving) chastisement for unrepented sins, is a form of easy-believism. And this subject will be explored more thoroughly in upcoming posts.

The safest conclusion? Faith and works cannot be separated. There is always this interplay; the one cannot exist without the other. Abraham showed his belief in the difficult thing God had asked of him by setting out to do it. *"Faith was completed by his works."* And for this reason Abraham *"was called a friend of God"...* in contrast to those whom James mentions later will not or cannot obey and thus become *"a friend of the world"* and *"an enemy of God"*. (James 2:22-23, 4:4 - ESV)

The Lord loves our faith and our belief in Him even though we can't see Him. He also loves our response - when we show our faith by our works. This constant interplay between faith and works is a bit mysterious, but one thing seems certain: the two complement each other, and neither can exist in isolation. To stay on God's track means to keep the right balance between the two.

An old Scotsman operated a little rowboat for transporting passengers. One day a passenger noticed that the good old man had carved on one oar the word "Faith," and on the other oar the word "Works." Curiosity led him to ask the meaning of this. The old man, being a well-balanced Christian and glad of the opportunity for testimony, said, "I will show you."

So saying, he dropped one oar and plied the other called Works, and they just went around in circles. Then he dropped that oar and began to ply the oar called Faith, and the little boat just went around in circles again-this time the other way around, but still in a circle.

After this demonstration the old man picked up Faith and Works, and plying both oars together, sped swiftly over the water, explaining to his inquiring passenger, "You see, that is the way it is in the Christian life. Dead works without faith are useless, and 'faith without works is dead' also, getting you nowhere. But faith & works pulling together make for safety, progress, and blessing."

[Good Thots, 1987, Page 1035]

So if we perceive that our spiritual life seems to be going nowhere,

then maybe it stems from this imbalance - lack of faith or lack of works. This controversy over which is more important - faith or works - can be argued either way, it seems. Much depends on the circumstances, as noted in the above examples of Paul and James and the different emphases they used in ministering to different sets of people and their weaknesses.

About all we can say on this is that both faith and works are important; they complement each other and need to be combined. Faith without works is incomplete, and works without faith is also incomplete.

As mentioned before, there are two kinds of “works”. In Abraham’s example, we know that his “works” resulted from what God had told him personally.

How things changed in the days of the Early Church. God had introduced the new way of faith in Christ’s sacrifice, and as a result the apostle Paul got embroiled in the task of instructing the Jewish people about their insistence on keeping the laws of Moses. Their “works” ministered to their pride and self-righteousness and did not glorify God. It was just a going-through-the-motions ritual, based on legalistic reasoning and self-effort. an external activity, which they hoped would leverage the hand of the Almighty in their favor. Their law-keeping had an outward show of goodness, but now those “works” had become a sign of their rebellion against God’s call and how He wanted them to follow - not from a distance, but with the desire to engage in personal interaction with the Father.

Even in Old Testament days, the prophets frequently had to expose the disconnect between the people’s obedience to the external requirements of the law and their inner state of being. King David expressed this well. *“Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being, and You teach wisdom in the secret heart... For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise .”* (Psalm 51:6,16-17, ESV)

No wonder then that Paul made the statement, *“We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”* (Romans 3:28; see also Romans 5:1, Galatians 2:16, 3:24) And more broadly, we could

apply it to any scheme or imagination that causes us to fall for our human tendency to *“walk by sight”* instead of *“by faith”*. (2Corinthians 5:7)

On the other hand, the apostle James emphasizes the “works” side of the equation because he was dealing with those who thought they could get by with their belief system only - *“faith without works”*. (2:20) Perhaps they were smug and content with their Christian “faith” but were not practising it.

Back in those days of the Early Church, the apostle James may have noticed among his flock of believers a certain disconnect between faith and works. James countered those who thought they could have *“faith without your works”*, saying, *“I will show you my faith by my works”*. Because *“faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* (2:18, 17)

An over-emphasis on *“faith”* (belief system) doesn’t count for much because *“even the demons believe.”* (2:19) Citing the example of Abraham, James states, *“You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”* (2:22, 24 - ESV)

Then we may ask, what if a person is not justified by works even though they came to Christ at some point in their life? In that case, they will still belong to the Kingdom but will have to endure the shame of having lived a misspent life.

Although Paul wrote much about how the works of the Law could not bring salvation, that did not mean that he thought works were not necessary. For he also wrote, *“[God] will render to each one according to his works.”* To those who continue *“in well-doing... he will give eternal life.”* But for evil-doers, *“there will be tribulation and anguish.”* (Romans 2:5-11, ESV)

So when Paul quotes from Genesis, *“Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness,”* it doesn’t mean that works were not involved. (Romans 4:3) Paul was simply putting more emphasis on the “faith” side of the equation because he was addressing a Jewish society where the faith-works pendulum had swung too far to the side of keeping an outdated brand of works (the Law), and this was interfering with their

acceptance of the new way of faith in Christ.

In the years following the establishment of the Early Church, various Gnostic heresies began to spring up. One of these over-emphasized the division between the physical and the spiritual domains, which resulted in two false teachings: 1) Since the “spirit” was saved (and therefore “good”), then it didn’t matter what the body did; one could indulge in any kind of corrupt behavior, and it would be okay - faith without works. 2) Since the “body” was evil, then the way to salvation was asceticism, strict denial of bodily/worldly pleasures - works without faith. These Gnostic practices were like the extreme end result of the *“faith apart from works... body apart from the spirit”* attitudes that James was confronting. (2:26, ESV)

Christ set the example for us. Unlike the followers of Gnosticism, He did not operate by self-effort or self-will: *“I can of Myself do nothing... I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.”* He *“walked by faith, not by sight,”* abandoning Himself to what God was leading Him to do, saying *“as I hear, I judge”*. (2Corinthians 5:7, John 5:30)

Not pre-conceived notions, not a set of rules (like the Laws of Moses), not society’s conventions, just simple obedience to the will of God; and this, of course, required Him to spend a great deal of time in prayer and meditation with the Father. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul mentions something similar: *“He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?”* (3:5)

As Ephesians 2:8 makes clear, the gift of God’s favor, the *“grace”* aspect of salvation, is dependent on faith. *“By grace you have been saved through faith”*. (2:8) And this faith, as James made equally clear, cannot exist *“apart from works”*; otherwise it is *“dead”* - non-existent, in other words. (James 2:26 - ESV)

So we might paraphrase Ephesians 2:8-9 thus: *“For by grace you have been saved through your living faith (not a dead faith without works), and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of self-works lest you should boast in yourselves.”*

To resolve this faith-versus-works question, much depends on how we define “works”. Christ once made this intriguing statement when asked by the people, *“What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”* Probably they were thinking in terms of some physical activity, rituals, or good deeds. He answered, *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”* (John 6:28-29)

In our earthly realm, spiritual reality is difficult to perceive; thus, that step of believing in Christ is in itself a “*work of God*” - the “*work of faith*” as the apostle Paul calls it. (1&2Thessalonians 1:3,1:11) *“Even the demons believe”*, but with their kind of believing, there is no “work” of submission or yieldedness to the authority of Christ, no acceptance of God’s free gift, only stubborn denial and refusal. (James 2:19)

The journey to Salvation, although it is a spiritual journey, does take a little effort - mental or spiritual effort we might say; it’s a struggle sometimes to believe and to submit. Paul may have had this in mind when he taught, *“if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* (Romans 10:9)

This is not as easy as it looks, for it might require humility to swallow one’s pride or courage to clamp down on one’s fear or insight to believe and accept the truth. By understanding “works” in this more encompassing way, we see that there can be no such thing as faith without a “work” of some kind or other.

Not everybody gets to this level of understanding and faith, but if they do make this confession of faith, they’re given the certainty, the assurance of having entered the Kingdom of God. If one hasn’t reached that level of understanding but has followed the Light, then Scripture seems to allow for this - for those who have a less informed knowledge of the Gospel and the true identity of Christ; and such followers of the Light, we may see them as “pre-Christians”. This understanding is a major theme woven throughout this series of posts, but especially in the post [“Who Are God’s People?”](#)).

Salvation can manifest in different ways: as a confession of faith (like the thief on the Cross), or receiving and taking care of one of God’s

workers ([Matthew 10:41-42](#)), or helping the disadvantaged (as expressed in the Parable of the Judgment in [Matthew 25](#)), or who knows what myriad of other ways that in God's eyes would count as solid manifestations of belief and trust in Him?

We could look at the example of the *"lukewarm"* church of Laodicea. It would be a struggle for them to undergo the difficult process of re-dedicating themselves. They thought, *"we have need of nothing"* but couldn't see that in God's eyes they were *"wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."* (Revelation 3:17)

Christ assured them, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him."* (3:20) Christ is knocking at our heart's door, but if there is no response, if one doesn't make the conscious effort, an act of will, by which he or she *"opens the door"*, then there is no communion or fellowship with Christ; salvation, or re-dedication in the case of the Laodiceans, is hindered.

This is similar to what was said earlier about a person's response to God's call. Without the "response", if eyes are blind, ears deaf, hearts hardened, then, Christ said, *"they cannot turn to me and let me heal them"*. (Matthew 13:15, NLT) "Faith" receives the call of God, and this results in "works" - the response to that call, in whatever form it may take. *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."* (John 10:27) So, looking at "works" from that perspective, we can easily agree with what James wrote, concerning the journey to salvation, *"that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."* (James 2:24)

Even that Scripture (Ephesians 2:8-9), where Paul states that salvation is by faith and not works, is followed by, *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* (2:10) Paul places great emphasis here on the role of *"good works"* in the lives of believers.

The wording here suggests that the *"good works"* don't just happen by themselves. *"We should walk in them"*, as Paul writes. In other words, our own will and choice have a great deal to do with how *"His workmanship"* turns out. Each of us has a destiny to fulfill, which *"God prepared beforehand."* But unless we do our part, it will become an unfinished

destiny. Faith and works must operate together.

This question about how to define “works” is a rather fine point of theology perhaps. However, by clarifying it, we open the door to becoming more accommodating and charitable towards unbelievers. Especially important is the understanding that “works” does have some role to play in the salvation process.

By excluding “works” from the Salvation equation, we shut out many an unbeliever who, although he or she may not have much to show in the way of “faith” (or Christian understanding), do have plenty to show in the way of “works”.

And Scripture makes allowance for this. Christ is called *“the true Light which gives light to every man.”* (John 1:9) The Light of God can penetrate its way into receptive souls anywhere, influencing them to *“practice righteousness”* during their earthly lifetimes. And *“everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him... everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”* (1John 2:29, 4:7) *“Then shall He reward everyone according to his works.”* (Matthew 16:27)

Only through Christ can we be saved. But if that’s true and the above Scriptures are also true, then it must be that, for many souls whom we might think are “unsaved” non-believers, Christ greets them as they depart from this life to enter the Spirit Realm. And He welcomes them into the Kingdom. (Matthew 16:27, 1John 2:29, John 1:9)

We might think of their “faith” as a desire to live in a godly way, prompted by their conscience, subconsciously perhaps, and in God’s eyes this would mean a lot. Just because it can’t be seen or measured, doesn’t mean faith is not there. Fortunately for many of us, God does not judge by the *“outward appearance”* but *“looks at the heart”*. (1Samuel 16:7)

But we human beings prefer to categorize things and think we understand how God works and to imagine we have a corner on God’s favor. To some extent that may be true, but we should be able to concede that God accepts many people who don’t happen to think or believe just the way we do.

The apostle Paul made note once about those *“Gentiles”* (unbelievers) who *“by nature do the things in the law... who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness.”* (Romans 2:14-15). Indeed, conscience is often described as God’s presence in man. (See [Appendix 2](#) in Post A-2 for some interesting quotes on this subject.)

If a person is pursuing godly ideals of truth, love and concern for others, then the Lord will surely take note of this. And if it happens in a cultural setting where Christian beliefs are unknown or prohibited, this also He will take into account. *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* (John 20:29)

Those *“books”* mentioned in the *Revelation Book* are keeping track of our activities, both good and bad - and will serve as the basis for judging who, among non-Christians, is worthy to have their names written in the Book of Life. (20:12)

We should concede then that many souls have been influenced by *“the true Light which gives light to every man.”* (John 1:9) And so it should not seem surprising that God would bring them the opportunity in the Afterlife to find the faith that was missing during their earthly lives. Or in many cases, that happens in this life supernaturally through the power of dreams or visions.

A welcoming attitude towards unbelievers, by the way, is one of the striking features in Mormon doctrine. In their understanding there exists a variety of potential outcomes for souls in the Afterlife. Importantly, they believe that those who did not have the chance to receive Christ during their earthly lives will get that chance in the Afterlife. In addition, some souls may experience a temporary hell after death but will have opportunity to repent before the Final Judgment. Whatever else we may think of Mormon doctrine, their viewpoint on the Afterlife may be one of the reasons why God has blessed the Mormon Church and allowed it to grow. *“Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”* (Matthew 7:20)

To the minds of those outside the Christian faith, this kind of outlook surely would sound more reasonable, appealing, welcoming, and less

forbidding than the standard, black-and-white conception of Heaven for born-again Christians and eternal Hell for everyone else.

APPENDIX: Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46 from *NLT Study Bible*

Faith and Works (25:31-46)

The parable of the sheep and the goats is an example of the indissoluble link between faith and works. The connection between faith, works, and final approval is a consistent feature of Jesus' teachings (e.g. 7:13-27; 13:3-9, 18-23; 16:27). For Jesus, works are a sure indicator of faith, which begins with repentance (3:8-10) - a conversion of the heart and mind that involves turning away from sin to God (4:17; see also 3:2; 11:20-24; 12:38-42).

Jesus did not teach salvation by works - he taught the necessity of a conversion (an internal reorientation toward God by an act of God's grace), which results in a life of obedience. Good works are the natural consequence of a relationship with Jesus Christ (see, e.g., 7:15-20; 10:32-33; 12:33-37; 13:10-17; 15:15-20; 16:17).

Jesus promises blessing and reward to those who live in accord with God's will (5:3-12). Consequently, righteousness is required of those who want to enter the Kingdom (5:20-48; 7:21; 22:11-14; 23:3). Faith that does not result in works is not saving faith (Jas 2:14-26). A misapplication of the concept of salvation by grace alone has led to a dichotomy between faith and works. Salvation is not achieved by works, but neither is it without works (see Gal 5:6, 21; Eph 2:10; 5:5; Heb 2:1-4; 1 Jn 1:5-10; Rev 21:8).

(from *NLT Study Bible* 2nd edition, pg. 1631, Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois, USA, 2007)

[**\[RETURN\]**](#)

HELL IN HEAVEN? HEAVEN IN HELL? (A-6)

Continue to [A-7: Salvation by Works? \(Part 2\)](#)