



Are We Justified By Works?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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Are we justified by works? That is, does God require us to do any works in order to be forgiven of our sins and be saved eternally? Or, does He only require that we mentally acknowledge Him?

Most religious organizations today teach the doctrine of “faith only” and claim that any works that are done in connection with salvation cannot be necessary. Therefore, they claim that baptism (specifically) cannot be necessary for salvation – since it is a work that we do. Yet, what does the Bible say about the necessity of works? Let’s investigate.

Two Conflicting Positions

2 Timothy 2:15 instructs us to be diligent and rightly divide the word of truth. This means that we must accurately handle God’s word – and be diligent to properly interpret it! There are two equally false and dangerous conclusions that can be reached regarding the necessity of works. Both of these conclusions are reached by failing to accurately interpret God’s word and discover the entirety of His teaching on the subject. Yet, Psalm 119:160 says, “The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.”

The first of these false positions says that anything man does in connection with salvation cannot be necessary. This position would cite passages like Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 4:1-8.

- 1) 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.”
- 2) Romans 4:1-8: “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found 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 accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the

blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.’”

The second of these false positions says that mankind can work to earn his own salvation by doing good deeds. This position might cite passages like James 2:14-26.

- 1) James 2:14-26: “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus 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 without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe — and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.”

So, is there a contradiction between these three (and similar) passages that has forced man to these two opposing points of view about the connection between works and salvation? Absolutely not! Since God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), His word is perfect (Psalm 19:7; James 1:25)! And, if His word is perfect, it simply cannot teach two conflicting doctrines!

The responsibility that we have, then, is to study these passages to see how they *harmonize* – rather than interpret them in a way that causes them to conflict! So, how can we understand these passages in a way that salvation is by faith and “not of works” (Ephesians 2:8-9) – and that we are “justified by works, and not by faith only” (James 2:14-26)? In addition how can it be true that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works (Romans 4:1-4) – and that Abraham was justified by works (James 2:21-23).

There is an interpretation of these passages (and similar passages) that harmonizes the Bible’s teaching about God’s grace, faith, and works! Let’s investigate, specifically, how these passages about works harmonize – and come to the proper understanding of what God expects from us!

Not Justified By Meritorious Works

Man, once he has sinned, cannot *do* anything to deserve his own salvation. Romans 6:23 clearly states that the “wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Thus, what we deserve for sinning is spiritual separation from God (death) – and eternal spiritual death in Hell fire (Revelation 21:8). This is true even after sinning only one time.

Furthermore, there is nothing that we could do to earn the forgiveness of our sins and reconcile ourselves to God! Eternal life in Heaven is truly the “gift of God” that no sinner deserves!

This is the focus of the passages in Ephesians 2 and Romans 4 (which we read earlier). These passages demonstrate that if we could work to earn our own salvation, we would have something to boast about – in ourselves (see Romans 4:2; Ephesians 2:9). Instead, these passages emphasize the fact that we are saved by God’s grace and mercy – in connection with our full trust and dependence upon God.

Abraham is said to have been counted as righteous because of this complete trust in God – and not by his own works. In fact, the passage in Romans 4 goes on to describe how that Abraham was counted as righteous even before he was circumcised (see Romans 4:9-12).

So, from these passages, we can properly conclude that we cannot earn/merit our own salvations by doing good works. We are completely reliant upon God’s grace and mercy to save us. And, our responsibilities are to put complete trust in God. Therefore, even baptism (as a work of *merit*) cannot save any sinner! For, we could simply never repay the debt that we incurred because of our sin – by ourselves! We needed a ransom sacrifice to save us!

Justified By Obedient Works

While we are not saved by *meritorious* works (works that are done in an attempt to earn/deserve our own salvations), we still are taught by the Scriptures that we must do some things in connection with salvation.

James 2:14-26 repeatedly teaches that faith without works is a dead faith – and that a dead faith cannot save. Verse 19 states that even the demons believe and tremble; but, implies that they will not be saved because of their belief. Then, notice verse 24 specifically: “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.”

Watch as other Bible passages also teach the necessity of works for salvation – and demonstrate that salvation is *not* by faith only.

- 1) Matthew 7:21-23 demonstrates that some will be condemned to eternity in Hell who believed in Jesus and called Jesus “Lord” – because they failed to *do* the will of God.
- 2) Hebrews chapter 11 repeatedly demonstrates that true faith is shown by works (compare with James 2:18) rather than without works.
- 3) Hebrews 5:9 says that Jesus Christ became the author of eternal salvation to all those who *obey* Him.
- 4) 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 says that those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ will be punished with everlasting destruction.
- 5) Acts 2:37-38 asks and answers the question, “what shall we do?” Now, please realize that if God did not expect us to *do* anything, He would indicate such in His response to this question. However, Peter (speaking by the inspiration of God’s Holy Spirit) responded:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins....”

So, while we are not saved by meritorious works (works by which we attempt to earn or deserve salvation), God does require works for salvation. However, these are works of *obedience*. This is the type of work that is under consideration in James chapter 2. This is the type of work that justified Abraham. This is the type of work that was involved in the examples in Hebrews 11. For, this type of work works with our faith to demonstrate our complete dependence upon God for salvation! We are *not* saved by faith only (i.e. just by acknowledging our belief in God or Christ). Instead, we are saved by faith that demonstrates full confidence in God by being obedient to Him. Baptism is one of the works of obedience that God requires of us in order to be saved (see Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Galatians 3:26-27; 1 Peter 3:20-21). Repentance (Acts 17:30; Luke 13:3) and a confession of our faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37) are also required. Then, God requires us to live a faithful Christian life by being obedient to Him (Revelation 2:10; 1 Corinthians 15:58).

Now, please understand that these works of obedience are *not* equal to works of merit. Works of merit attempt to earn salvation through good works. However, works of obedience recognize that we are still “unprofitable servants” and that we have simply “done what was our duty to do” after we have performed these works (according to Luke 17:10).

Conclusion

The Bible teaches that there are different types of works. Some have no part in salvation (i.e. works of merit) – and some are required for salvation (i.e. works of obedience). Certainly, God *does* require that we be obedient to His instructions in order to demonstrate our faith in Him and be saved!

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