

What does the Bible say about Faith and Works?

Pastor Mark Tossell

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

Ephesians 2:8-10

The words “faith,” believe” and “believeth” occur in 369 verses of the New Testament. The words “works” and “worketh” occur in 132 verses of the New Testament. If there is any doctrine that has been misunderstood, misapplied, and misused, it is the doctrine of faith and works. For example, cults such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons use their unscriptural teachings on works to keep their followers under subjection and draft them into missionary work. The Roman Catholic religion has probably sent more people to Hell than any other false religion by deceiving Catholics into trusting good works and the Sacraments for their salvation. The Church of Christ has confused and damned many by their heresy that one cannot be saved without being baptised into their church and diligently following the Law of God as they interpret it. The Seventh Day Adventists, too, have damned untold thousands with their teaching on works salvation. The modern-day charismatic movement has confused millions with their vague, unscriptural mixture of faith and works whereby a born-again Christian can lose their salvation if they don’t follow Jesus closely enough. I do not make such weighty and solemn remarks without sufficient evidence. I have personally spoken to thousands of people about their eternal soul, and have found only a minute minority that has a clear assurance of their salvation. Why do so few have such assurance? Why do most religious people think that one cannot know for sure that one is saved and going to Heaven? **Because religious groups today have gone away from a clear, Scriptural interpretation of the Bible in their misunderstanding and perverting of the doctrine of faith and works.**

I want to use Scripture to interpret Scripture in this study, because we know that, “... no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.” (2 Peter 1:20) I know that I will be accused of bias because I am a Baptist pastor. But, it may interest the reader to know that thousands of Baptist churches are divided on this issue. Let me divide our study up into several sub-headings to make this very important subject crystal clear. Make no mistake: To misunderstand the relationship of faith and works with regards to salvation, Christian testimony, and eternal security is to flirt with disaster and everlasting damnation. Let me explain.

1. What is faith?

What is faith? Well, firstly, faith is not just a mental assent to a fact, nor is faith a religious feeling or experience. **Faith is simply resting upon and wholly trusting in God and His Word.** According to Holman’s Bible Dictionary, “The Greek noun, *pistis* (faith), is related to the verb *pisteuo* (I have faith, trust, believe). Classical Greek used *pistis* and *pisteuo* to mean “trust” or “confidence.” In the New Testament “faith” is used in a number of ways, but primarily with the meaning “trust” or “confidence” in God. Mark 1:15 introduces and summarises the Gospel with Jesus’ charge to his hearers to “repent ye, and believe the gospel.” (The word usually translated “believe” in this verse is the verb form of “faith” for which there is no English equivalent. The call is repeated as “Have faith in God,” using the noun form, in Mark 11:22.) Thus, Jesus called His hearers to place their confidence in God.” Easton’s Bible Dictionary says concerning faith, “Faith is in general the persuasion of the mind that a certain statement is true (Phil. 1:27; 2 Thess. 2:13). Its primary idea is trust. A thing is true, and therefore worthy of trust. Saving faith is so called because it has eternal life inseparably connected with it. It cannot be better defined than in the words of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism: “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.”

Every religion in the world today, except Bible Christianity, teaches that we work our way to God and Heaven. Religions teach that people get to Heaven either through obeying divine laws or through spiritual enlightenment. But, this is impossible. How can we get into Heaven, a perfect place, if we have sinned against God by breaking His laws? The Bible says, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;” (Romans 3:23). Our sins keep us out of Heaven. No amount of good works, education, religion or enlightenment can take away my sins. That’s where faith comes in. Faith says that I can get to Heaven and have a relationship with God only because of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for me. The death, burial and resurrection of Christ is my sole hope for Heaven. When I put my trust alone in Christ for my eternal salvation and turn away from trusting my religion or good works, that is **saving faith**. I express that faith by calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

Romans 10:9, 10, 13 “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation...For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

The basis of that saving faith, my dependence upon Christ, is the Word of God:

Romans 10:17 “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

2. What are works?

Good works are simply obedience to the Law of God. Examples of good works include prayer, Bible study, giving to the poor, evangelism, truthfulness, love, etc.

The religious Jew in Jesus’ day was known for his careful maintenance of good works, seeking to fulfil the law of God. Rather than come to God through faith in Christ, they sought to become righteous by obedience to the Law:

Romans 9:31, 32 “But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone;”

In the context of religion, good works are that means whereby a person seeks to find favour with God. Such means include baptism, church membership, confirmation, communion, penance, confession, the mass, enlightenment, giving, prayers, etc.

3. Works do not save you or help to save you.

Galatians 2:16 “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in **Luke 18:9-14**,

“And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

The Pharisee in this parable was a very outwardly righteous man, but also a very proud man. As the Lord Jesus put it, he trusted in himself that he was righteous, or good. When the Pharisee prayed, he did not humble himself before a holy God, but rather boasted and thanked God that he was so much more righteous than the sinful publican. The publican, on the other hand, would not even lift up his eyes to Heaven, because he was ashamed of his sin. He knew he was a sinner and was not worthy of God’s least blessing. The publican humbled himself before God, and asked Him to be merciful to such a sinner as he. Probably the Pharisee looked at the publican and despised him as the publican prayed, thinking in his heart that God would hear the polished prayer of a religious leader, but would never hear the requests of a ungodly publican. But, look at the response of God to the two men who prayed. Jesus tells us plainly that the publican “went down to his house justified rather than the other...” What does it mean that the publican was justified, and the Pharisee was not? To be justified means to be completely pardoned, forgiven, and declared innocent by God. Jesus was saying that the sinful publican would go to Heaven, forgiven of his sins, whereas the religious Pharisee would be separated from God forever in Hell, in spite of his righteous acts.

The great difference between coming to God by faith and coming to Him by works is the matter of humility and unworthiness compared with pride and self-righteousness. The problem faced by those who seek to justify themselves by good works is found in **Romans 3:10**,

“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:”

There are many, many clear Scriptures which prove that we are saved by grace through faith plus nothing. The first five chapters of the book of Romans discuss that subject in great detail. Much of the book of Galatians discusses salvation by faith without works. Here are just a few examples:

Ephesians 2:8,9 “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Galatians 3:22-26 “But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.”

Titus 3:5 “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;”

Romans 3:19-22 “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:”

Acts 16:30-31 “And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”

John 6:29 “Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.”

John 3:18, 36 “He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”

Isaiah 64:6 “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”

Trying to mix faith and works for salvation is like trying to mix oil and water - it is impossible. Either you are saved by faith, or you are saved by works - it's one or the other:

Romans 11:6 “And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.”

4. Works do not keep you saved.

Because many professing Christians do not understand the doctrine of faith and works, many believe that our good works keep us saved and on our way to Heaven. I have met people who claimed to be saved, but felt they would go to Hell if they did not continue to follow Jesus. However, God's Word teaches undeniably that we are kept saved by the same Power that saved us - the power of God.

1 Peter 1:3-5 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

If you are saved, if you have trusted Christ as your Saviour, you have eternal life. You are not waiting for it. It is yours today! You have already passed from death unto life, and are now a citizen in heaven, with an inheritance waiting there for you in your name.

John 5:24 "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

*** What about passages that suggest that I could lose my salvation?**

Firstly, people often get confused by ambiguous passages because they are reading a corrupt version of the Bible. Secondly, the golden rule of Bible interpretation is to understand the few ambiguous passages in light of the abundance of clear passages. Scripture never contradicts itself. The more you read, study and memorise Scripture, the more you will be able to understand difficult passages. Note that people often misinterpret Scripture when they do not study the context of the passage and the theme and purpose of the book.

Consider these few examples of clear Scriptures that prove our eternal security:

1) We cannot lose our salvation because it is dependent on the love of Christ.

Romans 8:35,38,39 "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

2) We cannot lose our salvation because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 1:13 "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,"

3) We cannot lose our salvation because we didn't earn it in the first place.

Titus 3:5 "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;"

4) We cannot lose our salvation because God owns us.

1 Corinthians 6:19,20 "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

5) We cannot lose our salvation because Jesus said we will NEVER perish.

John 10:28, 29 "And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand."

6) We cannot lose our salvation because God promises to continue His good work in us that He began even before He saved us.

Philippians 1:6 "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:"

7) We cannot lose our salvation because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day that we get our new bodies.

Ephesians 1:13, 4:30 "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise... And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."

8) We cannot lose our salvation because God is able to keep our souls safe until we get to Heaven.

2 Timothy 1:12 "For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

You may be wondering if good works are even important if they do not save you or keep you saved. Good works are very important in the life of a Christian, as we shall see.

5. Works are evidence of your salvation.

I have heard people argue that if we are saved by faith alone, then we are given a license to sin and live as we please. Nothing could be further from the truth! The Bible teaches that when we get saved, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us. He begins to work on us and change us from within. The Bible says that,

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."
2 Corinthians 5:17

A real Christian has a new nature, a new desire to do right, to please God, and to do **good works**. For a person to claim to be saved and yet to live just as ungodly as he did before salvation is hypocrisy and foolishness. Certainly a person does not become a mature, spiritual believer overnight, but it is impossible that he should be indwelt by the Holy Spirit without some change taking place, without bearing some spiritual fruit.

How are people to know that we are Christians? They surely cannot see the faith in my heart, nor can they inspect my name written in Heaven! They can only know by my **changed life**. For example, Jesus said,

John 13:35 "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."

Just as an apple tree brings forth apples and an orange tree brings forth oranges, so does the born-again Christian bring forth good works as fruit of their salvation.

6. What about James 2:20?

James 2:20 is a favourite crutch used by people who try to prove that works are involved in saving us and keeping us saved. It is a Scripture that is especially twisted by the Jehovah's Witnesses to support their heresy. The verse says,

"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"

The argument given is that faith alone is not enough to save us - we must add works to our faith. Yet, this would certainly contradict **Romans 4:5**,

"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

Let us be careful to take James 2:20 in context:

James 2:14-25 "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not

Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?"

This passage uses Abraham as an example of how we are justified by our works. But, compare this with **Romans 4:1-3**,

"What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

Do we have here a contradiction in Scripture? Of course not. We just need to use to use sound principles of hermeneutics (Bible interpretation) to understand the situation. The key verse to understanding James chapter 2 is verse 18,

"Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and **I will show thee my faith by my works.**"

The truth taught by James 2:14-25 is twofold:

- 1) **Works justify you before men.** Works show this world that you are a Christian, that you are real.
- 2) **Works are evidence of living, saving faith.** Real faith always produces works.

For example, the Lord Jesus commanded us,

Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Anyone can say that they have faith. Anyone can claim to be a Christian. But, we show the reality of our faith and maintain our testimony before men by our works. We are justified before God by our faith, and before men by our works. A faith that does not produce any works, that does not result in a changed life, is a dead, lifeless faith - it is not a real, saving faith. Thus the Scripture:

"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"

To use this verse as proof of salvation by works would be to contradict hundreds of plain and simple verses about salvation by faith. To do so would be dishonest and heretical.

7. Works are required by God.

The Lord does not require us to earn our salvation by our good works, nor to maintain our reservation in Heaven by our saintliness. But, God does most certainly require the Christian to honour and please Him with a life of good works.

Titus 3:8 "This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men."

God does not save the sinner then leave him to do his own thing until death or the Rapture. The Lord has a plan and a purpose for every Christian:

Ephesians 2:10 "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

The Lord Jesus commanded that we be faithful in our good works for the sake of our Christian testimony:

Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Why should we perform good works if we are going to Heaven regardless? It's very simple: I do not work to be saved; I work because I am saved. I love and serve God because He first loved me:

1 John 4:19 "We love him, because he first loved us."

How do I prove my love for Christ? By simple, childlike obedience:

John 14:15 "If ye love me, keep my commandments."

8. Is “easy believism” too easy?

Sometimes after I have finished explaining simple plan of salvation to someone, they respond that “it sounds too easy.” Is that true? Is “easy believism” too easy?

Firstly, if the Lord wants everyone to go to Heaven, and He does, then why would He make it hard to be saved?

1 Timothy 2:3, 4 “For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.”

Secondly, salvation is easy for us, but it certainly is not easy for our Lord. It cost Him His only Son:

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Thirdly, getting saved is easy. Living for God is not so easy. It is a constant battle with the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

Conclusion

I believe that the most important question in the world that we must answer before we die is,

“Can I really know for sure that I am saved and going to Heaven?”

It is amazing how many churchgoers I meet that seem adamant about the “fact” that we cannot know for sure that we are saved today and on our way to Heaven. They must not have read 1 John,

1 John 5:11-13 “And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

The apostle Paul knew that he was going to Heaven:

Philippians 1:21-23 “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:”

The seventy disciples knew they were going to Heaven:

Luke 10:20 “Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.”

How can you know for sure? You must receive Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour. How? By FAITH! Trust Christ ALONE for our salvation. How do you verbalise your faith? Call upon the name of Jesus to save you.

Romans 10:13 “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Do you want Jesus to take you to Heaven one day? If you do, then bow your head and pray this simple prayer:

Dear Jesus, I know I am a guilty sinner, and I know I deserve to go to Hell for my sins. I understand that I cannot earn my way to heaven by religion or good works. I trust you now as my personal Saviour, and call upon you to save me from Hell and take me to Heaven. Please give to me your free gift of eternal life. Amen.

Simply take God at His Word and believe that He has saved you according to His eternal promise.

We would love to help you know more about God and His Word. If we can be of assistance to you, please contact us at:

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