

Week 18

Salvation: Faith vs. Works

Key Verse

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

+ Introduction

The question of *faith* versus *works* is a question that has split churches, brought tension to relationships, been debated for centuries, and continues to be a relevant question today. When one thinks of salvation, is it based on *faith* or *works*?

In the debate, one view believes that salvation comes by faith and faith alone. There is another view that salvation comes by works added to faith. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church taught that salvation was possible through "good works," or works of righteousness, that pleased God.

Martin Luther created quite a stir in the 1500s because of his adamant belief that salvation is exclusively based on faith and not works. Martin Luther's belief and his writing of the 95 Theses began the reformation and development of the Protestant movement. ¹ The debate, discussion, and tension continue to this day. It is nothing new in the scheme of humanity. The Apostle Paul and even James had to deal with this issue in the 1st Century church, as is evidenced in very specific ways in the books of Romans, Ephesians, and James.

Over the past several weeks, we have looked at the various aspects of salvation and what it means to each of us. Today we will consider Salvation: Faith vs. Works and what the Bible says about this topic.

+ Faith

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 as a result of works so that no one may boast."

If this were the only verse that needed to be read and interpreted about how one obtains salvation, it would be relatively easy. Paul does not overcomplicate the concept. It is almost like a simple math equation. It is "by grace" that you have been saved. Paul explains that salvation does not begin with you; it starts with God. God knows you have done nothing to deserve this salvation. However, because of His "grace," God offers this gift of salvation. Grace provided the one-time payment for eternal redemption - the blood of Christ, who came to earth and died for the forgiveness of our sins (Ephesians 1:7).²

Notice that Paul writes that you "*have been*" saved, which is past tense. It is complete. It has been accomplished. The price has already been paid. This is the work God does for us, and it is a finished work (John 17:1-4; 19:30). We can add nothing to it (Hebrews 10:1-14); we dare take nothing from it. One sacrifice, the Lamb of God, has finished the great work of salvation. God did it all, and He did it by His grace.³

God has initiated this gift of salvation by the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus on the cross. There is nothing for us to do in this equation other than having faith. We are saved by grace, but we appropriate this *grace through faith*.⁴ Faith is not just a gut feeling or a wishful thought. Faith is not something that is just a concept in the mind of a person. Faith is much more than any of those things. Adrian Rogers explained the connection between grace and faith:

"Here is how salvation works and the new birth comes about. I put my faith in God's grace. It is not the faith that saves; it is the grace that saves. Faith just lays hold of that grace. Think of grace as God's hand of love reaching down from heaven, saying, 'I love you. I want to save you.' It is a nail-pierced hand because He has paid for our sins. Think of faith as your sin-stained hand, saying, 'God, I need you. I want you.' And when you put your hand of faith in God's hand of grace, that is salvation."⁵

The Greek word for "grace" is *charis*. The word means, "goodwill, loving-kindness, favor of the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues."⁶ The word is used 148 times in the New Testament, in 23 out of the 27 books.

The Greek word for "faith" is *Pistis*. The word means "conviction of the truth of anything, belief; in the NT of a conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things, generally with the included idea of trust and holy fervor born of faith and joined with it."⁷ The word is used over 200 times in the New Testament.

It was foundational for Christ Followers to have faith in God completely, including this gracious gift of salvation. Faith is based on trust, reliance, and dependence. In the case of eternal salvation, faith is wholehearted acceptance of the fact that what God says is true, trusting that the gift of salvation will be exactly as He has promised.⁸

Hebrews 11:1 gives a wonderful definition of faith. "*Now faith is the certainty of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen.*" Faith assures us that our hope is real, even though we cannot yet see it.⁹ There is confidence that comes with this kind of faith. The biblical object of faith is the person

and work of Jesus Christ. True faith has always been the identifying mark of the people of God.¹⁰ Paul wants us to understand the practical side of how faith is foundational for salvation. Yet, he always wants us to realize that salvation is a gift.

Faith is not a "work." It does not merit salvation; it is only the means by which one accepts God's free salvation.¹¹ Even Paul discusses this issue in that it is *not of yourselves* (v. 8). Paul would write the believers in Rome and Galatia these words,

ROMANS 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)*

GALATIANS 2:16 *yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (ESV)*

We live in a culture of work and wages. People are paid either by the hour, salary, or commission. If someone is going to get compensation, there is work involved. It was no different in the 1st Century. However, it is a free gift based on the grace of God and the faith of an individual when it comes to salvation. It is not based on keeping the law of the Ten Commandments, nor is it based on attending church every week. It is based only on faith in Jesus Christ. But what about works?

+ Works

JAMES 2:17 *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

James is the half-brother of Jesus. He had an up-close and personal look at the Son of God during the childhood and teenage years. James came to an understanding of who Jesus really was after the resurrection. And in being a Christ Follower, James wrote this epistle to a group of believers that were dispersed in a large region (James 1:1). In this letter, he wants to make sure these people understand their faith, salvation, and purpose.

Over the years, people have used this verse to support "works-based" salvation. However, in context, James is not supporting works as much as he is finetuning the look of genuine faith.

Let's take a closer look at the verse in context,

JAMES 2:14-17 *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

James is asking a question to believers. These are not non-believers. James wants them to really consider their life as a Christ Follower. They say they have faith in Jesus. They say they have faith in eternal life. They say they have faith in salvation. But is that faith making a difference in how they

live their lives on earth? James is of the mindset that you are saved not just for the hereafter but also for the here and now. It would be like someone who has a driver's license but never drives. How is that person different from someone who does not have a driver's license? The emphasis is not on the true nature of faith but the false claim of faith.¹² It would be classified as all talk and no walk.

The second question James asks is the one that captures everyone's attention at the end of verse 14, "*can that faith save him?*" James is obviously a practical thinker and not merely academic or theoretical. Merely claiming to have faith is not enough. Genuine faith is evidenced by works.¹³

James does not want these people to be stagnant and inactive. As a believer in Jesus Christ, there is to be a change from the inside out. There should be evidence of the faith that led to salvation. James is saying, let your walk match your talk. Chuck Swindoll puts it like this,

- Genuine faith is not indifferent, but involved.
- Genuine faith is not independent, but in partnership.
- Genuine faith is not invisible, but on display.
- Genuine faith is not intellectual, but from the heart.¹⁴

+ Salvation

In its broadest sense, salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.¹⁵ Salvation is a relationship that is birthed. And like a baby born out of the womb, there is life. But that life is not stagnant. That life grows. There are various growth stages for that baby to become a toddler, and then a child before becoming a teenager and adult. And if that baby stops growing physically or mentally, there is a diagnosis that something is wrong.

When someone becomes a Christian, accepting that free gift of salvation based on faith, there is a new birth, a new life. Both Paul and James say that there should be evidence of that salvation based on faith.

Paul would put it like this in his letter to the Ephesians:

EPHESIANS 2:10 *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

This verse follows what he said about faith, grace, and salvation not being based on works, so no one should boast. But almost without taking a breath, he writes that we are "*His workmanship.*" The New Living Translation uses the word "*Masterpiece.*" God created us anew in Jesus Christ. We have a brand-new life. And Paul makes it clear that we are saved for a purpose. There is life to be lived for Jesus Christ on this earth, not just sitting and waiting to get to heaven one day. We are to walk in the good works as a Christ Follower.

James would put it like this in his letter.

JAMES 2:26 *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*

The word used for *dead* is the Greek word "*Nekros*." It means "*one that has breathed his last, lifeless.*"¹⁶ It is the word that would be used for a corpse. There is no life in the corpse. The corpse is not moving or interactive. The corpse is not growing. The best way to know that a body is living is to see it moving and functioning. James wants believers to live out their faith, to put feet to their faith. To walk in a manner that sets them apart from those who do not have faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul would even say it like to this to the Ephesians:

EPHESIANS 4:1 *Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,*

Walking is movement and forward motion. It is to show evidence externally of what has been transformed internally.

+ Conclusion

Hebrews 11 gives a definition of faith, as stated earlier, and gives examples of how works lived that faith out. Consider the following:

- By faith, Abel offered. (v. 4)
- By faith, Enoch walked. (v. 5)
- By faith, Noah built. (v.7)
- By faith, Abraham left. (v.8)
- By faith, Moses crossed the Red Sea. (v. 29)
- By faith, Rahab hid. (v. 31)
- By faith, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel, and others performed acts of righteousness and conquered kingdoms. (v. 32-33)

Paul and James ultimately wanted the same thing. They both wanted people to be saved. They both wanted people to have faith. They both wanted people to grow in their faith. They both wanted people to live out their faith. Chuck Swindoll explains that Paul and James are two sides of the same coin:¹⁷

Paul

"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

Romans 3:28

Uses "justified" to mean "Pronounced righteous in the sight of God."

Shows how an unbeliever becomes a Christian.

Emphasizes the root of salvation.

Stresses inward disposition.

Demonstrates God's part with human participation.

James

"You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." James 2:24

Uses "justified" to mean "proved righteous in the sight of others."

Shows how a believer lives as a Christian.

Emphasizes the fruit of salvation.

Stresses outward actions.

Demonstrates human part with God's help.

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¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/martin-luther-and-the-95-theses>

² Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights: Galatians and Ephesians*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, IL; 2015, p. 191.

³ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary-NT*; David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, CO; 2007, p. 593.

⁴ Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights: Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 191.

⁵ *The Baptist Faith & Message*, LifeWay Press, Nashville, TN; 2020, p. 71.

⁶ www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights: Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 191.

⁹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/faith-vs-works.html>

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck editors; *The Bible Knowledge Commentary New Testament*; David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, CO; 1983; p. 624.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 825.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights: James, 1 & 2 Peter*, Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, IL; 2014, p. 57-58.

¹⁵ *The Baptist Faith & Message*, LifeWay Press, Nashville, TN; 2020, p. 65.

¹⁶ www.biblestudytools.com/lexicon

¹⁷ Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights: James, 1 & 2 Peter*, p. 57-58.