

Saved by Faith and Works

It took me about ten years of teaching the NT to realize that the way I had been taught “saved by faith, not by works” was not quite right. There were too many places in the NT that made works, obeying Jesus, a part of the salvation package. Most of these come from Jesus himself.

It took another fifteen years to sort of figure out what the NT was actually saying about faith and obedience in our salvation. I am no great theologian, and don't work fast, but there are some things that are pretty clear in the NT, and I will tell you those.

My method here is simple, three questions. First, what does it say? Read the Bible carefully, what does it actually say? Second, what does it *not* say? What are *people* saying about this topic, or about this Scripture, but *the Bible* does not say that? Look for differences between common teaching and what the Bible actually says. There are differences.

Third, could it mean what it says? Maybe not, maybe this Scripture is an exaggeration, or just a figure of speech. But maybe it means just what it says. The third question needs patience too. That method and much time is how I got to these things.

Why Teach This Now? Because we're Reading Jesus' Parables

In Jesus' parables, obedience to God is often how we receive eternal life. That's already happened in the sower and the seed, and the unrighteous manager. I steered around the troublesome works topic, but let's not do that anymore. Let's tackle this head on. It will come up with some regularity in the other parables.

Now I will tell you some things I learned from the Bible about faith and works.

Salvation and Eternal Life are Always Gifts of God's Grace

I was taught that if my obedience or my works were involved in salvation at all, then I was trying to *earn* salvation, I was trying to *deserve* it. But the Bible never says that. The texts that do require our obedience never say that if we obey, we have earned or deserve God's gift.

Salvation, and forgiveness of sins, and eternal life, and the Holy Spirit, are always gifts of God's grace. Pure grace. They come out of God's generosity to people, based on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. It is always God's grace toward us, God's kindness to us, God's love, his *undeserved gift of salvation given to us because of Jesus Christ. Always.*

In my thinking, if obedience was involved, then I was earning salvation. And that, my brothers and sisters, is one of the things the Bible does NOT say, not ever. Obedience IS involved, and eternal life is still ALWAYS a gift.

Jesus said, “*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom has arrived. So repent and believe this good news.*” Mark 1:15. What did he say we should do? Repent and believe. “Repent” means decide to live in God’s ways, decide to follow Christ. And “believe” that in this God is offering salvation.

Repent and believe. In other words, obey God and trust in God. And do remember that this is good news! The gospel was good news for ordinary people.

It was good news for ordinary people when Jesus preached it, it was good news when Peter preached “repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins” in Acts 2. And it was good news when Paul went through the cities of the Roman world and preached the same thing.

Sometimes the Scripture just talks about the “believe” part, and sometimes just the “repent” part, but both are mentioned often enough that we should always assume both. We decide to live in God’s ways, and we put our trust in Jesus the Lord.

But no one is earning anything, or deserving anything. We are just grabbing on to Jesus, taking hold of Jesus. In the Bible people *inherit* the kingdom, or *enter* the kingdom, or *receive* the kingdom, but we never *earn* it or *deserve* it. It is always a gift of God’s kind grace to sinners.

Our Problem (One): All or Nothing Thinking about Obedience

When we turn to Christ, our lives are different, we have a new direction in our lives, because we have received the Holy Spirit. And, there is still a lot of junk in our lives.

The all or nothing thinking says that if I still sin, if there are still places in my life that regularly get me in trouble, if I still stumble in many ways, as James says we all do, then I did not ever repent, or give myself to Christ. If I don’t obey in everything, then my life has not been changed.

That all or nothing thinking is a vicious destructive lie. Christ has made a big difference in our lives, and there is still selfish junk in our lives. This is me, Ed Neufeld. Christ has made a huge difference in my life, and, I still stumble in many ways.

It is not ideal, but it has always been like this, never been any other way. Since when did anyone have to be perfect to be one of Jesus’ people? That has never happened.

We who have deeply changed lives still have selfish junk in our lives. This is consistently true in the Bible of those who repented and believed and received eternal life and the Holy Spirit. Don’t believe the all or nothing lie about obedience. Think about the ways God has changed your life.

Our Problem (Two): Anxiety about God’s Angry Displeasure – Not Known in Biblical Times

We’re treating these as two separate problems, our all or nothing thinking about obedience, and our fear of God’s angry displeasure. But they are not separate, they are closely tied to each other.

A peculiar anxiety has come into the people of God, an anxiety not known in biblical times, either OT or NT. God's people worry about God's angry displeasure when we have parts of our lives that do not honour God, when we have sin in our lives. In the OT, not true.

I will use the Psalms as my OT thermometer. Out of 150 psalms, about five are psalms of confessing personal guilt. Five out of 150, that's one out of thirty, one day a month Israelites concerned about their personal guilt. Many of us can't imagine so little concern.

And about fifteen psalms include words like these: "I've led a blameless life, God, I've lived faithfully to you, so you should help and rescue me." Help me, God, because I always obey you. Why could they pray that, and we can't? We know about their lives, they were not perfect people, Israelites that followed God were like us, obedience and weakness mixed together.

Our failures before God get swelled up out of proportion somehow, block everything else out. Did not happen to them.

The NT is similar. The NT believers did not worry either about God's angry, punishing displeasure about their sin.

In Romans 7, Paul despairs that he does the sins he wishes he could quit, and he does not do the right things he wishes he could do. It is really the only text in the NT that goes on like this, and that itself should tell us something. But even there, Paul's disappointed with *himself*, but has no fear or anxiety about *God's* angry hand looming over him. He ends, "wretched man that I am!"

But in that whole section, he never says anything about living under God's displeasure, or getting closer and closer to God's angry frustrated punishment. He does not even hint that God is disappointed. He does not like himself, in Romans 7, but there's no distress about God!

Once in a while, NT writers give God's people a severe warning, because they are living in a way that will take them out of the kingdom of God. It is rare. And even including those texts, there is no evidence that this worry about God's angry displeasure ever haunted believers.

A lie has entered the church, from the accuser, to take away the joy of the good news. In NT, when people felt like this, they repented and came to Christ, and then the problem was gone. Didn't come back.

Somewhere we need to say to ourselves, "my worry about God's frustration with me comes from a lie. It has taken away the joy that God wants me to have. I will stop believing it."

Saved by Faith in Christ, Not by Moses' Law

When Paul says we are saved by faith, not by works, he is talking about works of Moses' Law. We sometimes include all works, all obedience, because we are anxious and worried.

But when Paul says we are saved by faith, not by works, the Law of Moses is close by in that letter. Always.

Here's something the Bible does not say: the Bible never says we are saved by trusting Christ rather than by obeying Christ. Never. "Faith not works" never comes up when we are talking about following Christ. That's what the Bible does not say. When we follow Christ, obedience and trust go together.

How could anything else make sense? Jesus taught people how to live. How can I go to Jesus and say, "Lord, I'm putting my trust in you, I'm putting my life in your hands," and then ignore how he said people should live? What kind of faith is that? No faith at all.

And now, we are back to all or nothing thinking. The accuser says, "yes, you trust in Christ and your life is different because of it, but what about those ways you *don't* obey him? Those places you *don't* do what he said? What about those? The answer is that Jesus saves his people from their sins.

There is a "Christ way" to be saved, and a "Moses way" to be saved. When Paul said "faith in Christ not works of Law" he was saying, "the 'Moses way' to be saved does not work, only the 'Christ way' works." But Paul never put a wedge between obeying Christ and trusting Christ. That's one of the things the Bible does not say.

Summary

Quite a few of us have this worry or discouragement about how we still disappoint God. "Saved by faith not by works" has assured us and calmed our fears. The problem is sometimes we go past the Scripture is separating faith from works. Obedience never earns salvation or eternal life, but it is a part of receiving them.

So I want to do two things today. One, I would like to reduce anxiety about how our failures disappoint God, and I would like to increase our joy. Two, I would like to pass on a more biblical view of how faith and obedience go together.

Wise and Foolish Builders – Matthew 7:24-27

This is the Scripture that I am not getting to today. Jesus contrasted two builders. A wise builder built his house on a rock, and when the storm came, the house stood firm. The foolish builder built on sand, and when the storm came, it completely destroyed the house.

Jesus says the wise builder is the person who hears his words and does them. The foolish builder is the person who hears Jesus' words, but does not do them. That's the issue: do we do what he says, or not. Most commentators understand the storm to be final judgement, and I think they are right.

Later, Jesus said final judgement was like Noah's flood. People were living without a care in the world until the day Noah entered the ark, and then the flood came and took them all away. This storm that comes on the two builders is like that. The wise builder is like Noah in the ark.

Jesus divides people into those that hear his words and do them, and those that hear his words and don't do them. This is one of those places where Jesus teaches salvation by works. Obviously there is faith here, one has to believe that Jesus' words are the key to eternal life.

But perfection was never a part of this. Jesus knew that there were people who were attracted to him, but in their heart of hearts, they had no intention of changing how they lived.

That's who he is warning here: those who liked Jesus and his teaching, pulled toward him, but no repentance, no real willingness to live in Christ's ways. THAT is what Jesus is going after. And if that's you, pay attention. But I *know* you people, and that's *not* you.

Jesus Changes our Lives – Changed Lives are Acts of God's Grace

The first line about salvation is in Matthew 1: "name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." We are saved by a person, by Jesus. There is no magical saving power in either faith or in obedience. One person has the saving power, Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord from heaven.

To be saved, we need to be one of his people. Jesus saves his people from their sins. That's why his call was "follow me" or "come to me." Be one of his people, he saves them.

And to the first disciples he said, "you follow me, and I will make you what you should be." Think about that. How do we get to be what we should be? We attach ourselves to Jesus, and he takes it from there. You follow me, and I will make you what you should be.

There are quite a few Scriptures like this. *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion for the day of Christ Jesus* (Php 1:6). *It is God who works among you, to will and to act for his good pleasure* (Php 2:13). *May the God of peace make you holy through and through. May you be kept blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it* (1 Thess 5:23-24).

We need to be thanking God for all the obedience that comes fairly easily to us, the parts of our lives where we do not struggle, the places where we commonly do the right thing. Those are from God, the Holy Spirit. It is not arrogant to thank God for those.

Praise God that he has changed our lives! That his teaching and his Spirit have shaped us. Thank God for this. Jesus said, you follow me, and I will make you what you should be. There is much evidence of that in this room. Why would we not dare to thank God for this?

At the end of Acts 3, Peter says this: *God raised Jesus and sent him to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.* Or like this: *God raised Jesus and sent him to us, to bless us, by turning each of us from our sinful ways.* WE have been turned from sinful ways. This is a part of God's grace to US. It is a blessing from God, why would we not thank him?

“Father, thank you for this blessing, that you are making us what we should be, that you have turned us from many sinful ways.” God calls us to obedience, but he's working hard to see it done.

When Paul wrote his letters to churches, this was his common opening. He thanked God for how the believers' lives had been changed, and he wanted the churches to know that. He thanked God. It had been God's work. God had blessed them by turning them from sinful ways.

God has blessed us by turning us from all kinds of sinful ways. And of course there is still junk in our lives, *as there was in all those churches as well.* We must get rid of the all or nothing thinking, which says if we still struggle with sins that we have not really repented and our lives have not been changed.

Why should this take away our joy? Changed lives still have sin in them. Don't let that rob you of your joy and gratefulness for how your lives are different.

And the Scriptures call us away from that sinful junk that's still in our lives. But normally not with threats of God's angry displeasure. Rather, the Scripture calls us to “live lives worthy of the gospel,” it calls us to “live worthy of the calling with which we were called.”

Scripture gives careful teaching about what does and does not fit being children of God, that's the normal way we are motivated, not warnings of God's displeasure. And this careful teaching comes right beside thanksgiving to God for how he has blessed us by turning us from sin and changing our lives. Amen.

Father in heaven, thank you for sending your Son Jesus, who saves his people from their sins. Thank you that when we come to him, he works to make us what we should be. Thank you that you sent him to us to bless us by turning each of us from our sinful ways. We praise you on this day for how much you have changed our lives. And Father, we ask that we have more joy and thankfulness, from how you have changed our lives, than distress, from how we still sin. Free us from all worry about you that does not come from you. Help us rejoice and be thankful for what you have done for us. Amen.