

100 BIBLE LESSONS

Give these lessons to people you visit, youth groups, hospital patients, church visitors and new members. Use them in Sunday School, bus ministry, jail services, nursing homes, Christian schools, small discussion groups and many other places. God's Word will answer your questions and help solve your problems.

LESSON 42 – FAITH AND WORKS

In our study today we shall examine the relation between faith and works. This is an important subject, which is referred to in many different passages of the New Testament. Yet it is one about which remarkably little teaching is given in most Christian circles today. As a result, a good many Christians today are left in a condition of confusion or partial bondage, halfway between law and grace. Not a few Christians also, through ignorance on this point, are led astray into false teachings which lay unscriptural emphasis on the observance of some particular day, or the eating of certain special foods, or other similar matters of the law.

It will be helpful to begin our examination of this subject by a few simple words of explanation. What exactly do we mean by "faith," or by "works"? The answer quite simply is that by "faith" we mean "that which we believe," and by "works" we mean "that which we do."

Thus we can express the relationship between faith and works as taught in the New Testament, by the following simple contrast: Faith is not based on works, but works are the outcome of faith. Or, in still simpler words: What we believe is not based on what we do, but what we do is the outcome of what we believe.

Let us begin by considering the first part of this statement: Faith is not based on works; or, what we believe is not based on what we do. The whole of the New Testament bears consistent testimony to this vital truth.

In John's Gospel, chapter 19, verse 30, we read this account of the final moments of the sufferings of Jesus upon the cross: "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost."

The Greek word here translated "It is finished" is the most emphatic word that could possibly be used. It is the perfect tense of a verb which itself means to do a thing perfectly. We might perhaps bring this out by translating: "It is perfectly perfect." In other words, there remains nothing more whatever to do. All that ever needed to be done to pay the penalty of men's sins and to purchase pardon and salvation for all men has already been accomplished by the sufferings and death of Christ upon the cross. To suggest that any man might ever need to do anything more than Christ has already done to purchase salvation would be to reject the testimony of God's Word and to discredit the efficacy of Christ's atonement. Thus, any attempt by any man thereafter to earn salvation either wholly or in part, by his own good works is in effect an insult both to God the Father and to God the Son. It carries the implication that the work of

atonement and salvation, planned by the Father and carried out by the Son, is in some sense inadequate or incomplete. This is contrary to the unanimous testimony of the entire New Testament.

This fact that nothing more can ever be done by any man to earn salvation is continually and emphatically taught by the apostle Paul.

For example, in Romans chapter 4, verses 4 and 5, Paul says this: “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Notice the phrase “to him that worketh not, but believeth.” In order to obtain salvation by faith, the first thing that any man must do is “not to work” – to stop working – to stop trying to do anything whatever to earn salvation. Salvation comes through faith alone, through doing nothing whatever but believing. So long as a man tries to do anything whatever to earn salvation, he cannot experience the salvation of God, which is received by faith alone.

This was the great mistake which Israel made, as Paul – himself an Israelite – explains. For he says in Romans chapter 9, verses 31 and 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.” Again in Romans chapter 10, verse 3, Paul says concerning Israel: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.” Why did Israel fail to obtain the salvation which God had prepared for them? Paul gives two reasons, which go very closely together: First, “because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law”; and second, because they “went about to establish their own righteousness.” In other words, they tried to earn salvation by something which they themselves did in their own righteousness. As a result, they never entered into God’s salvation.

The same mistake, which was made by Israel in Paul’s day, is being made today by many millions of professing Christians right around the world. There are many millions of sincere, well-meaning people in Christian churches everywhere who feel that they must do something to help to earn their salvation. They devote themselves to such things as prayer, penance, fasting, charity, self-denial, the careful observance of church ordinances, but all in vain! They never obtain true peace of heart and assurance of salvation, because – like Israel of old – they seek it not by faith, but by works. They go about to establish their own righteousness, and in this way they fail to submit themselves to the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ alone.

Paul teaches the same truth very clearly in Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, where he says to the Christian believers: “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.”

Notice that Paul says: “Ye are” – already- “saved.” This proves that it is possible to be saved here and now, in this world, and to know it. Salvation is not something for which we have to wait until the next life. We can be saved here and now.

How can his present assurance of salvation be received? It is the gift of God’s grace – that is, God’s free, unmerited favor towards the sinful and undeserving. This gift is received simply and solely through faith – “not of works, lest any man should boast.” If a man could do anything whatever to earn his own salvation, then he could boast of that which he himself had done. He would not owe his salvation entirely to God, but would owe it, in part at least, to his own good works, his own efforts. But when a man receives salvation as a free gift of God, simply through faith, then he has nothing whatever to boast of.

Paul emphasizes this again, in Romans chapter 3, verses 27 and 28: “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”

In Romans chapter 6, verse 23, Paul presents the total contrast between that which we earn by our works and that which we receive solely by faith, for he says: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” There is a deliberate contrast between the two words “wages” and “gift.” “Wages” denotes that which we have earned by that which we have done. On the other hand, the word translated “gift” – in Greek “charisma” is directly related to the Greek word for “grace” – “charis.” Hence, the word denotes explicitly a free, unmerited gift of God’s grace, or favor. Thus, each of us is confronted with a choice. On the one hand, we may choose to take our “wages” – that is, the due reward for our works. But because our own works are sinful and displeasing to God, the “wages” due to us for them is “death” – not merely physical death, but also final, eternal banishment from the presence of God. On the other hand, we may choose to receive by faith God’s free “gift.” This “gift” is eternal life, and it is in Jesus Christ. That is to say, when we receive Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, in Him we receive the gift of eternal life.

The same contrast is presented again by Paul in the Epistle to Titus, chapter 3, verse 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.” Nothing could be plainer than this: “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.” If we desire salvation, it cannot be upon the basis of any works of righteousness which we have done, but simply and solely upon the basis of God’s mercy. Our own works must be first excluded, in order that we may receive God’s mercy in salvation.

In the second part of this same verse Paul tells us four positive facts about the way God’s salvation works in our lives. First, it is a “washing” – that is, we are cleansed from all our sin. Second, it is a “regeneration” – that is, we are born again, we become children of God. Third, it is a “renewing” – that is, we are made new creatures in Christ. Fourth, it is “of the Holy Ghost” – that is, it is a work of God’s own Spirit within our hearts

and lives. None of this can in any way at all be the result of our own works, but all of it is received simply and solely through faith in Christ.

If salvation is not at all by works, but solely by faith, we may naturally ask: “What part then do works play in the life of the Christian believer?” The fullest and clearest answer to this question in the new Testament is given by James in his Epistle, chapter 2, verses 14 through 26. This is what he says:

“[14] What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? [15] If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, [16] 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? [17] Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. [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. [19] Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. [20] But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? [21] Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? [22] Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? [23] 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. [24] Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. [25] Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? [26] For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

In this passage, James gives several examples to illustrate the connection between faith and works. He speaks of a Christian who sends away a fellow believer, hungry and naked, with mere empty words of comfort, but without food or clothing. He speaks of the devils – or demons – who believe in the existence of the one true God, but find no comfort, but only fear, in their belief. He speaks of Abraham offering his son Isaac in sacrifice to God. And he speaks of the harlot Rahab, in Jericho, receiving and protecting Joshua’s messengers. However, it is in the last verse, verse 26, that James sums up his teaching about the connection between faith and works by the example of the relationship between the body and the spirit. He says: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

It is this reference to “the spirit,” in connection with faith, that provides the key to the proper understanding of the operation of faith in the life of the believer.

In an earlier study on faith we have already referred to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 13: “We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak.”

Here Paul states that true, scriptural faith is something spiritual – it is “the spirit of faith.” Through this we are able to understand James’ example of the body and the spirit. In the natural order, so long as a man is alive, his spirit dwells within his body. The spirit is

itself invisible, but from within it directs and controls all that the man does with his body. Every action of the man's body is an expression of his spirit within him. Thus, the actual existence and character of the spirit within the man, though invisible, are clearly revealed through the behavior and the actions of the man's body. When the spirit finally leaves the man's body, then the body ceases from all its actions and becomes lifeless. The lifeless inactivity of the body indicates that the spirit no longer dwells within.

So it is with the "spirit of faith" within the true Christian. This spirit of faith is alive and active. It brings down the very life of God Himself, in Christ, to dwell within the believer's heart. This life of God, within the believer, takes control of the whole nature of the believer – his desires, his thoughts, his words, his actions. The believer begins to think, to speak, and to act in an entirely new way – a way that is totally different from what he would have done previously. He says and does things which he neither could nor would have done before the life of God came in, through faith, to take control of him. Thus, his new way of living – his new "works," as James calls it – is the evidence and the expression of the faith within his heart. But if none of the outward actions are manifested in the man's life – none of the works that correspond to the faith which he professes – then this proves that there is no real living faith within him. Without this real living faith, expressed in corresponding actions, his profession of Christianity is no better than a dead body, after the spirit has left it.

We may briefly consider, in order, each of the four examples which James gives, and see how each illustrates this principle:

First, James speaks of the Christian who sees a fellow Christian naked and hungry, and says to him, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but nevertheless does not offer him either food or clothing. Obviously, this man's words were not sincere. If he had really desired to see the other person warmed and fed, he would have given him food and clothing. The fact that he did not do it indicates that he did not really care. His words were a mere empty profession, without any inward reality. So it is when a Christian professes faith, but does not act according to the faith which he professes. Such faith is insincere, worthless, dead.

Secondly, James speaks of the demons who believe in the one true God, but tremble. These demons have no doubt whatever about the existence of God, but they know also that they are the unrepentant enemies of God, under his sentence of wrath and judgment. Therefore, their faith brings them no comfort, only fear. This shows that true, scriptural faith is always expressed in submission and obedience to God. Faith that continues stubborn and disobedient is dead faith, that cannot save from God's wrath and judgment.

Thirdly, James gives us the same example of faith as that given by Paul in Romans chapter 4 – the example of Abraham. In Genesis chapter 15, verse 6, we read that Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." Living faith in God's Word came into Abraham's heart at this time. Thereafter, this faith was expressed outwardly in a continual walk of submission and obedience to God. Each act

of obedience that Abraham performed developed and strengthened his faith, and made him ready for the next act.

The final test of Abraham's faith came in Genesis chapter 22, when God asked him to offer up his son Isaac in sacrifice. Concerning this we read in Hebrews chapter 11, verses 17 and 19: "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac ...accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead ..." By this time, through continual exercise in obedience, Abraham's faith had been developed and strengthened even to the place where he really believed that God could raise up and restore his son to him from the dead. This faith in Abraham's heart found its outward expression in his perfect willingness to offer up Isaac, and it was only the direct intervention of God that kept him from actually slaying his son. Concerning this, James says: "Faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect." Thus we may sum up Abraham's experience as follows: His walk with God began with faith in his heart in God's Word. This faith expressed itself outwardly in a life of submission and obedience. Each act of obedience strengthened and developed his faith, and made him ready for the next test. Finally, this interworking of faith and works in his life brought him to the climax of his faith – to the point where he was willing even to offer up Isaac.

The fourth example which James gives of the relation between faith and works is that of Rahab. The story of Rahab is related in chapter 2 and chapter 6 of the book of Joshua. Rahab was a sinful, Canaanite woman, living in the city of Jericho, which was under the sentence of God's wrath and judgment. Having heard of the miraculous way in which God had led Israel out of Egypt, Rahab had come to believe that the God of Israel was the true God, and that He would give Canaan and its inhabitants into the hand of His people Israel. However, Rahab also believed that the God of Israel was merciful enough and powerful enough to save her and her family alive. This was the faith that Rahab had in her heart.

This faith in Rahab's heart found expression in two things that she then did. First, when Joshua sent two men ahead of his army into Jericho, Rahab received these two men into her home, hid them, and enabled them to escape again. In doing this, Rahab risked her own life. Later, in order to claim God's protection upon her home and family, she hung a line of scarlet from her window, to distinguish her house from all the others. This was the same window that Rahab had previously helped the two men to escape through. As a result of these two acts of Rahab, her house and family were saved from the destruction that later came upon all the rest of Jericho. Had Rahab merely believed secretly in her heart in the God of Israel, but been unwilling to perform these two acts of faith, her faith would have been merely a dead faith, and it would have had no power to save her from the judgment that came upon Jericho.

The lesson for us as Christians is that, if we profess faith in Christ, we must be willing to identify ourselves actively with Christ's cause, and Christ's messengers, even though it may mean real personal sacrifice, perhaps the risking or laying down of our very lives. Secondly, we must be willing to make a definite, open confession of our faith, that marks us out from all the unbelievers round about us. The scarlet line speaks

particularly of openly confessing our faith in the blood of Christ for the remission and cleansing of our sin.

For a final summary of the relation between faith and works we may turn once again to the writings of Paul.

In Philippians, chapter 2, verses 12 and 13, Paul says: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure." Here the relationship is plain. First, God works in us both to will and to do. Then we work out, in our actions, that which God has first worked in us.

The important thing to realize is that faith comes first, then works. We receive salvation from God by faith alone, without works. Once having received salvation in this way, we then work it out actively in our lives by our works – by the things that we do. If we do not actively work out our salvation this way, after believing, this shows that the faith which we have professed is merely dead faith, and that we have no real experience of salvation.

We do not receive salvation by works. But our works are the test of whether our faith is real and the means by which our faith is developed. Only real, living faith can make a real, living Christian.

Adapted from the teaching of Derek Prince. For Bible study purposes. Not to be sold.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do we mean when we say "faith" and "works"?
2. What does John 19:30 mean when it says "It is finished"?
3. In order to obtain salvation by faith, a man must stop doing what?
4. Explain in your own words what Ephesians 2:8-9 means.
5. Explain in Romans 6:23 the total contrast between what we earn by our works and that which we receive solely by faith.
6. If salvation is not at all by works, but solely by faith in Jesus Christ, then what part do works play in the life of the Christian believer?
7. We do not receive salvation by works. But works are the test of whether our faith is real. Give four examples from James 2:16-25.
8. What situation among the people is James addressing in James 2:14-26?

