

Different Kinds of Works

It must have been in my great source of enlightenment, The Reader's Digest (!), that I read this quip about how golf got its name. It was explained that it was named "golf" because that was the only four-letter word not already taken. I suggest that otherwise it might have been named "work", for it is commonly considered by religious teachers as an ugly, four-letter word. The teachers got first claim on that word!

Throughout my life I have heard the singular emphasis placed on "salvation by faith," with John 3:16 being the favorite proof-text. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" That is truly good news! We are saved by faith. However, that abbreviated text leaves out works and many other factors relating to salvation. There are some things generally overlooked, also. "Believes" denotes continuous action. It is not something that happened at a point in the past -- "once believed." Believing is something a person must do -- an accomplishment. It does not explain that belief / faith is dead if it is factual without responsive action -- works. Too, that text leaves out the necessity of repentance -- a responsive action. Can belief save a person who is impenitent?

The next favorite proof-text reads: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God-- not because of works lest any man should boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9). Repentance is in response to faith and becomes a necessary prerequisite to salvation -- a work. In order to rule out any works relating to the reception of grace, it is often explained that the Holy Spirit must give the sinner both repentance and saving faith. Otherwise, the sinner would be bearing "fruit that befits repentance" which John the Baptist called for (Matt. 3:8). Yet, if a certain level of faith is necessary for receiving grace, would that not make that attainment of faith meritorious?

We will have little chance of understanding the relation of grace, faith, and works until we have clearer definition of these three elements, especially works. Students do not always recognize that there are different kinds of works / actions / responses. Let us consider some of them.

WORKS OF JUSTIFICATION. Jesus did these for us. A person can do meritorious good works, but no one can do works that merit justification. Jesus asked, "*For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?*" (Matt. 16:26). That's not "What will a man sell his life for?", but "What do you have with which to buy your life when forfeited?" Bill Gates, the poster boy of wealth, has not a penny with which to redeem his life. The rich young ruler probably would have built a new synagogue to inherit eternal life, but Jesus headed him off from any such hope. He thought to gain life by achievement, but Jesus wanted him to ask for the free gift.

You might outdo Mother Theresa in doing good works, but all of the marvelous deeds of a lifetime could not blot out one sin, remove its guilt, or relieve its consequence. “..he saved us, not because of DEEDS DONE BY US IN RIGHTEOUSNESS..” (Titus 3:5). THIS IS REFERRING TO MERITORIOUS DEEDS, NOT TO OBEDIENCE TO THE GOSPEL IN ACCEPTING GRACE.

WORKS OF ACCEPTANCE. Ephesians 2:8-9 refers to works of which persons may BOAST because of their value or efficacy. Accepting a gift is not such a work. It is not an achievement, not a deed done in righteousness. If a widow with starving children learns of the free gift of food she can receive through food stamps, does she earn the food or contribute to its cost by applying for the food stamps and then taking the stamps to the grocery store to exchange for food? Has she done any work-deed enabling her to boast?

You may be hopelessly in debt. A rich uncle may send you a check to cover all your debts. He could boast of paying your debt. But your accepting the check, having faith in its value, depositing it in your account, and writing checks to each creditor would give you nothing of which to boast. Your actions would have done nothing to earn a penny of the gift. You would have only met necessary conditions of receiving the gift/check/grace which you believed would cover your debt.

When a person hears the gospel of the grace of God in Christ, believes it, determines to forsake his sins, and submits to baptism according to divine instruction with the promise of forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), he is only accepting the gift. He can boast of no achievement. He offered nothing to atone for the least of sins. It was salvation as a result of faith in the gospel of the grace of God in Christ. Grace is available for every person in the world, but not all people accept it.

Some today advise seekers of salvation, “There is nothing you can do; it all was done for you nearly 2000 years ago!” We would ask, then, why all are not saved. All have not ACCEPTED it. God does not save persons against their will. Meeting conditions of acceptance, such as believing and submitting to baptism, are not “DEEDS DONE IN RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Titus 3:5). No one can claim that such obedient actions are works of merit adding to Jesus’ atonement.

It is in this context of doing MERITORIOUS DEEDS, which would give a person cause to BOAST or think he added to his salvation, that Abraham is mentioned as an example. Notice, “*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 reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now to one who works, his WAGES are not reckoned as a gift but as his DUE. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.*” (Rom. 4: 2-5). This in no way denies that Abraham produced active evidence of his faith before God credited it for righteousness, but it definitely denies that he did anything that had EARNING POWER or MERIT that would allow him to boast of having done deeds that would put God in

debt to him. This is in harmony with Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 3:5, and all other related references.

Although James (Ch. 2:14-26) was writing about fruitful works of disciples, the truth he expresses is universal. There he uses Abraham as an example of one justified by works. Paul presented Abraham as our example of one being justified by faith rather than works he could boast about (Rom. Ch. 4-5). Sincere students have been perplexed by their apparent disagreement. We can see their harmony, however, when we understand the point each was emphasizing. Paul was saying that Abraham did not ACCOMPLISH or EARN justification by any DEEDS OF ACHIEVEMENT OR MERIT. James was saying that Abraham's faith was neither DEAD NOR BARREN AS FACTUAL FAITH WOULD BE WITHOUT EXPRESSION IN ACTION. Rather, his faith was MADE PERFECT / COMPLETED by his WORKS / ACTIVE EXPRESSION. PAUL AND JAMES TOGETHER WERE SAYING THAT ABRAHAM DID NOTHING TO MERIT HIS JUSTIFICATION BUT IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM BECAUSE HE ACTED UPON FAITH. What is so unsavory about that?

The aversion that has been nurtured against the essentiality of baptism has led sincere people to think others are baptized as a meritorious work rather than an action of accepting obedience. They insist that no such accepting action is required. But, strangely and inconsistently, they will most always urge the sinners to do something in response to their faith. In my youth the popular instruction was to "pray through" -- a work. Now it is some version of "accept Jesus in your heart and pray the sinner's prayer." -- a work. They steer the sinner from divinely prescribed action to a procedure of man's own device. Divinely prescribed actions of acceptance are rejected as being WORKS / DEEDS of which one might BOAST.

All this reminds me of the sarcastic jibe that "Salvation is free; it just costs ten percent of your income plus 'love offerings'!"

WORKS OF THE LAW OF MOSES. In confronting believers who still kept the Law of Moses, Paul declared, "*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse*" (Gal. 3:10). Again (5:2-4), "*Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace.*" If a person could have been justified by works of the Law of Moses, then Christ died for nothing! So if a disciple turned back to the law for justification, he was deserting Christ and his grace. That's for sure.

Let me ask you men -- were you circumcised? Uh oh! If you circumcise your sons, are you not doing a work of the law? If you do it in an effort to be justified by it, you have fallen from grace. If you give a tithe because Moses commanded it and you seek justification by that work of the law, you have fallen from grace. Although those are works, they are not opposed to grace unless you seek to be justified by them. "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working*

through love” (5:6). And faith working through love is not justification by works but by faith made perfect / complete by works.

Many sincere people think the Law of Moses was replaced by a supposed law of Christ. Even if that were true, we could not be justified by keeping it, for law offers no justification. Violation of law brings sin, but keeping of law cannot bring remission of the sin. Only grace can do that. One cannot be saved partly by grace and partly by law.

WORKS OF OBEDIENCE. Someone asks how we can obey if Christ gave no law. Christ gave no written code (See Rom. 7:6). “Law” can mean a code of law or a principle of action. Jesus gave no code, but he gave two “laws,” or principles of action, to govern all our conduct. Actually, it is only one principle with two applications. Christ’s law is “love”; his laws are “love God” and “love man.” Love is the rule/law/principle to guide all our conduct. Need I give a list of familiar scripture references to prove that?

When we are demonstrating love, we are obeying the Lord. Just one passage will illustrate both the specific and the general application of this. *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in the spirit of gentleness...”* (Gal. 6:1). This is a specific instruction for showing love. Without defining what burdens are, the next sentence calls for general application: *“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”*

Thus by such obedience we sanctify/commit/present ourselves as holy. *“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’”* (1 Peter 1:14-16). Need we belabor the point that these works of obedience are essential to our continued holiness? So, *“Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord”* (Heb. 12:14).

WORKS OF MERIT - GOOD WORKS. We can do no work/deed meriting justification, but that does not mean that we can do no good, meritorious works. We are “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God--- not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Eph. 2:8-10).

There are various meanings of the word “merit,” but we are referring to works of a praiseworthy quality and works that are the basis of one’s deserts. We are called upon to do many things in this classification. Even though you may claim that it is only through the Spirit that one can do good works, unbelievers and atheists can also do them.

Paul wrote to believers, *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body”* (2 Cor. 5:10). Even though these works do not accomplish our justification, they weigh heavily in our sanctification and holiness without which we cannot see God.

In the judgment scene depicted in Jesus' familiar parable, he taught, *"Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, etc. . . ' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, etc. '"* (Matt. 25:31-46). The complicated theories concerning the sovereignty of God in our lives must not be used to negate these plain texts, and many others like them, which call for individual responsibility and accountability. Such continued good works are vital, essential expressions identifying "everyone that believes" on a continuing basis.

WORKS THAT MEET CONDITIONS. Some of these categories of works overlap. We surely must recognize that some promises are made on condition of our responsive action. For sake of brevity, I will mention only a few. *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). *"If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you"* (Matt. 6:14). *"If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live"* (Rom. 8:13).

Under this heading, we will refer back to Romans 4 which tells of God's reckoning Abraham's faith for righteousness. Continuing in v. 5, Paul wrote, *"So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works; 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon sin'"* Is he indicating that a person who has factual, or even trusting belief, is forever immune from sin and its consequences? The person to whom sin will not be reckoned is the one who continues to meet God's conditions -- God's "ifs". *"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth, but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us"* (1 John 1:6-10). This is a truly comforting promise.

"Work" meriting grace -- bad word! "Work" accepting grace -- God blesses! Grace is received only through faith but not through faith only.

I have tried for brevity, presenting only enough to establish my points. Yet, this has become too long. Thank you for staying with me. Much, much more supporting truth can be offered but I will leave this for your prayerful consideration.

(Cecil Hook; March 2002) []

