

Effective Faith Includes Effective Works

Our tendency is to stay in a rut or to over-correct. We bounce from one wall to the other in our over-emphasis of different elements relating to our discipleship. After centuries of development of a system of doctrine based on sacraments and correct performance of works, some reacted to emphasize total sovereignty of God in the life of the disciple. Claims developed that God chose certain ones to be saved, gave them faith, repentance, and regeneration and then ruled their lives by his Spirit, all of which brought total security.

A more balanced understanding was reached by Martin Luther who concluded that salvation is by faith alone but not by faith which is alone.

In our Movement which veered to the right into legalistic works we are seeing a refreshing emphasis on grace, but it is becoming a mixed blessing in bouncing to the concept of the total sovereignty of God with all its attendant implications. So we are joining with others in making “works” a dirty word. The concept that we may perform prescribed works as a condition of accepting grace and of continuing in it is denied and decried

In several lessons we have considered the principle of faith which includes obedience of faith. Here we will elaborate further on Paul’s teaching: *“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). Who will say that we cannot do good or righteous works when that’s what we were created for? Who will say we can deny the purposes of God and be saved as long as we have faith? Who will say that doing those good works is an effort to add to the atoning sacrifice of Christ? Except for the universalist, who will say that reception of the grace of God and continuing in it is without conditions of acceptance on our part?

“The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (James 5:16). In this simple statement James assures us that effective faith includes effective action which is rewarded. And he also indicates that a man may be righteous. He did not state, “The prayer of a believer reckoned as righteous has great power.”

God blesses us according to our favorable conduct. The Beatitudes clearly indicate that. He reacts to our conduct whether good or bad: *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Matt. 6:14-5). Did Jesus say we must earn forgiveness? No, but forgiveness is conditional.

After one's conversion, his entire "walk" as a disciple determines whether he continues to access the grace of God or has received it in vain. "We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain," Paul pled with his people (2 Cor. 6:1). He wanted them to "Walk the walk; not just talk the talk." Vine defines "walk" as figuratively "signifying the whole round of the activities of the individual life, whether of the unregenerate or of the believer. It is applied to the observance of religious ordinances." (He also gives fuller definition and references.)

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," Paul declares and then identifies them as those *"who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."* Then he warns and promises, *"To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace"* (Rom. 8:1, 4, 6). And, *"You were called for freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh..."* (Gal. 5:13). Let us pursue this thought about our walk as it relates to spirit or flesh and the consequences of the wrong walk.

The word "spirit" is capitalized or lower case according to the judgment of the translators. My thought is that it should not be capitalized in this passage and some others, for the conflict is not between God's Spirit and our flesh but between our spirit (inner man) and flesh. Our walk is determined by our choices, not by overpowering of the Holy Spirit. If we are overpowered by the Spirit, Paul's warnings are meaningless and foolish.

So he writes (Gal. 5:16f), *"But I say, walk by the spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the spirit you are not under law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like."*

Wow! Paul got carried away! He lapsed into a hell-fire-and-brimstone mode as though he thought we could lose our salvation over such sins. He seemed to forget that Jesus forgave us before we were born! Is that true? Without skipping a beat, he continued:

"I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." A double warning against loss of our inheritance! This is in harmony with many other warnings that he and other inspired writers gave us. Peter has urged, *"Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world"* (1 Peter 5:7-9).

In walking the walk, however, we can be assured that *"the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its*

passions and desires.” Paul lays out the choices for us to make. The right choices of upright conduct are effective. They are works of righteousness, not meriting the grace of God but keeping us in a sanctified life of fellowship with him.

Does our vulnerability create a see-saw, constantly off-and-on relationship with God? No, God does not leave us as hapless, helpless victims without power or protection. Many assurances to the contrary are offered such as this comprehensive declaration by John: *“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to 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. My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him; he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked”* (1 John 1:5 -10, 2:1-6).

John describes present tense, continuous walking the walk in relationship with God and all disciples. Notice the conditional “if” throughout his statement. These conditions are no more frightening than a protective wall about us would be, for within them continuous cleansing is applied as we stumble along in our walk.

There is a continuous condition to continuous cleansing: “if we confess our sins.” God has never forgiven his children who willfully turn away from his fellowship, flaunt sin, or become hardened beyond repentance. Of such it is written, *“For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt”* (Heb. 6;4-6). This one reference makes the point sufficiently without piling on numerous other supporting texts. For sake of brevity we have limited the use of supportive texts.

Yes, effective faith includes effective works. Our actions count for good or ill. No actions of ours have the power to remit one sin, but all are involved in our walk with God, our living relationship with him.

(Cecil Hook; October 2002) []