

The “Sin” of Trying Too Hard

The genuine people of the cotton patch community with whom I grew up might have lacked the sophistication of the present age but many of them exceeded in religious zeal. There was greater concern for doctrinal correctness among disciples than in today’s more subjective “feely” approach. My nurturing was among people who wanted to be right with God above all else in those difficult times of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression.

Scriptures which demand action like these listed here were emphasized most: *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”* (Matt. 4:4). *“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’”* (Matt. 7:21-23). *“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”* (Luke 6:46).

In Christ’s visitation he would be *“inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus”* (2 Thes. 1:9). Those 3000 believers on Pentecost who submitted to Peter’s terms to *“repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38) were pointed to as examples of those who obeyed the gospel.

Other exhortations were toward continued working for the Lord. *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples... . If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love”* (John 15:8, 10). *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body”* (2 Cor. 5:10). These are but a few examples of the many passages emphasized with urgency. Judging from what we hear from the pulpits now, those passages seem to have faded from the Bible.

While we recognized the grace of God like in singing *“Jesus paid it all; all to him I owe,”* we also urged in song *“Work for the Night Is Coming,”* we recognized our vulnerability in singing *“Watch and Pray,”* and we expressed our trust in singing *“Blessed Assurance.”* These people were studious to learn the will of God and diligent in putting what they learned into practice. Do you consider that to be contrary to the will of God? What would be their sin other than trying too hard?

Here we will note Paul’s caution that a wrong attitude is forbidden on either side of an issue: *“One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him*

who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him” (Rom. 14:2-3; NIV. Read the entire chapter.).

You may say they were trying to work their way into heaven by trying to keep all the commandments while the scriptures teach that it is by grace through faith apart from works. Not knowing the hearts of all, I will grant that a few might have labored under such a misunderstanding. However, I think that generally they understood that we are saved through the principle of grace through faith which saving principle did not come by the ingenuity or working of man, and that the principle of faith includes “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). This would call for a life of faith producing obedience rather than saving faith being experienced at a certain point in time which makes one a child of God whose soul is forever secure, thereafter being held accountable and condemned by no sin or infraction through the remainder of life.

So, for argument’s sake, let’s grant that a person is saved eternally the moment he or she believes before any responsive action or work is performed. Would not the persons whom I have described above have been saved eternally the moment they believed even though they thought responsive obedience of faith was essential in accepting grace? Would they lose that salvation if their faith led them to believe that baptism is essential to accepting grace? Would their salvation be lost if they believed that they must continue their works of obedience until death which might come half a century later? Could they not be diligent in making their calling and election sure? Would God say to them, “I’m sorry, but you were trying too hard. Depart from me!”?

“But they are denying the sufficiency of the atonement,” someone explains, “thus they fall away from grace.” Then Paul’s words are quoted: “*..by works of the law shall no one be justified,*” and “*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you are fallen away from grace*” (Gal. 5:4). “By the law” is then explained to be by works of law. However, Paul was referring to the law of Moses which offered no justification. Those being obedient to Christ are not seeking justification by the law of Moses as the Galatians were. This is not a very good proof-text to support justification by faith without works of obedience, for the next sentences further clarify, “*For through the Spirit, by faith, we WAIT for the hope of righteousness. For IN Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but FAITH WORKING through love.*” He had already recalled that “*as many of you as were baptized INTO Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:27). They could not be SEVERED from Christ if they had not already been IN CHRIST, and they could not have FALLEN FROM GRACE had they not already been IN GRACE.

Some who rightly denounce the possibility of one producing works of merit enabling boasting, in effect, boast of having meritorious faith by which they were saved. As we can ask how many good works are necessary for salvation, we can also ask how much faith is necessary for salvation. Which requires more human effort?

Here I will adapt a familiar parable of Jesus (Luke 18:9-14). Warning! For mature readers only! “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: Two men went to church to pray. Leading the congregation in prayer, the first man stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God I thank you that I am not like other men who think they can still lose their salvation by sinning. I thank you that because of my faith you have given me eternal salvation and a feeling of closeness and security with you. I fast often and give tithes of all I get to show my love for you. I thank you that I am not like this poor fellow who feels so vulnerable that he tries to keep all your commandments.’ But the second man, sitting in the back pew, would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, but whispered in trembling voice, ‘Father, I try hard to understand what you want me to do and I try hard to obey your commands, but I am too weak and erring. I fail! God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ I ask you, did (a) this man or (b) the first man go down to his house justified rather than the other? Every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

No, trying too hard is not the deadliest sin on the list!

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(Cecil Hook: November 2003) []