

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Things which accompany salvation: Faith and Works

If, as Christians, we are to consider a possible contrast between the terms “faith” and “works”, necessarily we must study the use of the two terms in the Bible, the Word of God.

First, what is faith?

In general, faith may manifest itself in belief in a record or witness, or in a person. In either case, it bears the character of trust. In the case of a person, that springs from confidence in the person trusted, which itself depends on knowledge of that person. Then, if I have faith in the person, I accept the validity of what he says and does, because of who he is, and because he has proved himself to be completely reliable and trustworthy. Our faith in God, then, depends on and acts upon our knowledge of Him.

We have the witness of the word of God that “*God is faithful*” (1 Corinthians 1:9 and 1 Corinthians 10:13). That is, He is completely reliable and trustworthy in all He says and does, because of Who He is, and because He has proved Himself to be so. He is always, and at all times, absolutely consistent with the revelation that He has given of Himself. Because of this, we can have faith - total, complete trust, in Him. This also means that, once I am enabled to determine what He says, clearly and unmistakably, on any particular topic, I am morally compelled to act upon the revelation He has given.

Let us consider three broad but vital aspects of true faith.

- First of all, that fundamental, basic faith which gives us a standing before God - saving faith;
- Then, there is that principle by which the Christian lives his or her life upon earth - living faith for the life of faith; and
- Thirdly, there is that aspect of faith we need to apply in the service we undertake for our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ - working faith.

Now, why is faith necessary for the Christian at all? As always, Scripture itself gives the best answer. 2 Corinthians 3:5 tells us, “*We are not of ourselves sufficient.*” One of the most difficult lessons we Christians have to learn is that, however long we live the Christian life, however much we mature, in ourselves we are no better than when we first trusted Christ. We need to remind ourselves, continually, that, in ourselves, we are no more capable of living the Christian life now, or serving our Lord and Master, than we were of deserving or earning salvation in the first place.

It is clearly not God’s intention that we should ever be left independent of Him. In view of our obvious inconsistency, and basic unreliability, this is just as well. The resources God has put at our disposal are tremendous. But, we are never left independent. We can only use these resources rightly by the exercise of faith.

So, what introduces us into the life of faith in the first place? The word of God refers to “*the obedience of faith*” (Romans 1:5 and Romans 16:26). This is that application of faith without which we could have no standing before God - no link with Him at all. As we read in Ephesians 2:8: “*By grace are ye saved through faith...*”

This, then, is that saving faith by which we avail ourselves of all that God so freely gives us in His “*so great salvation*” (Hebrews 2:3). This is that basic, fundamental faith without which we have not even begun to enter on the Christian life. Remember, unless we have begun in faith, we have not begun at all.

Perhaps we do well to challenge ourselves with the question, “Have we begun at all?” “Have we exercised that basic, saving faith by which God introduces us into the life of faith?” If not, we are wasting our time looking into any detail of the subject.

Unless that basic link of union with Christ has been forged by faith in the gospel of God concerning His Son (see Romans 1:1-3), we have no claim at all on the many joys and blessings of the life of faith.

In Galatians 2:20 we get the secret of the life of faith, that is, living faith. The JN Darby translation says, *"I live by faith, the faith of the Son of God, Who has loved me and given Himself for me."* The Christian life (my life) is a life of faith. It is centred, and finds its object, in the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me. Christ, then, is the Object of the life of faith.

As also we read in John 14:1: *"Ye believe in God; believe also in Me."* This was Christ's instruction to His disciples. Hitherto, God had been an object for their faith. They had believed in God. While He had been with them, the Lord Jesus had been an object, not for their faith, but for their sight. But when He had gone back to heaven, He too would be withdrawn from their sight (cp 2 Corinthians 5:7). So, likewise, He would be an object for their faith. *"Ye believe in God; believe also in Me."*

The Apostle Paul could say: *"For me to live is Christ"* (Philippians 1:21). Christ was the object and motive of Paul's existence, and this by faith. Faith is for the small things as well as the large. It is encouraging to note that each step, however small, taken in faith, however small, prepares us for the next, greater, step. Most of us usually find it much more difficult to have faith for the small things than for the large. In the (apparently) small things, we tend to walk by sight, and not by faith. But, remember. The Scripture says: *"The just shall live by faith"* (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38). That is, faith is the principle by which the Christian's life is lived.

Works

Now, how about what the Bible says about our works, that is, our activities, our lifestyle?

The Bible refers to two sets of works. First in time, there were those activities that we engaged in before we trusted the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. The Bible describes them as *"dead works"* in Hebrews 9:14, and *"wicked works"* in Colossians 1:21. They are all likened to *"filthy rags"* in Isaiah 64:6. That is because they were the fruit of our old nature which we inherited from Adam. That old nature dominated us before we trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour. We were happy to engage in those activities before our sins were forgiven. In God's sight, the old nature is now dead and therefore inactive. It is up to me as a believer on the Lord Jesus to accept and act upon what God says. Of course, that requires faith, living faith, to act upon what Scripture tells me is God's view of things.

The Bible is quite clear. For those who have turned in faith to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, those activities are judged as completely dead and finished in the sight of God. We do well to accept God's judgment and act upon it. That is, we no longer allow the old nature to act as if Christ had not died for our sins. Instead, we allow the Holy Spirit to guide and empower our new nature to act in a way that is well-pleasing to God.

That is the way we are to live and work as Christians.

Actually, if the Lord will, in five weeks time we are due to have a talk considering the differences between our old nature before conversion to God through Christ, and the new nature God has now implanted within us.

I would now suggest that the simplest and certainly a very clear way to consider the distinction between our faith and our works is to see what the Bible says about the truth of justification.

Justification

The Book of Job is possibly the oldest book in the Bible. In it, Job twice poses similar questions. In Job 9:2, he asks, *"How should man be just with God?"* In Job 25:4, he raises the query, *"How can man be justified with God?"*

It is sometimes suggested that to be justified is to be made "just as if I'd never sinned", which probably appeals because it is a play upon words, and the sound of them. At first, this sounds fine:

- "Wipe the slate clean";
- "Cancel all the debt";
- "Clear the decks completely";
- "Let me have another go"; and
- "Let me start again from scratch."

Unfortunately, my personal experience of life is that such an approach would be no good, certainly for me. Knowing myself as I do, I have to say that if I was given a second chance, the opportunity to start again, make a fresh start, I would undoubtedly go twice as far in the wrong direction, at twice the speed, than I did the first time round!! No! It would do me no favour at all to be given a second chance, without the power to respond to God's declared way of earning the blessing, if such a thing were possible.

There is no doubt that the fundamental concept in justification is that it clears me of every charge that a holy God can righteously lay against me. That is what I would call the negative side of the very positive truth of justification; the righteous dealing with every valid charge that was previously hanging over me. It is a very good start, but it is only a start. It would be a very sad thing indeed if I was content to enjoy the fact of my being cleared of every charge of sin, but did not progress on to the very positive truth. That is that God has, in a very definite way, pronounced me to have a fully righteous standing before Him.

That I have such a standing is without any shadow of doubt. Listen to what The Apostle John has to say in 1 John 4:17: *“Herein is love with us made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as He is, so are we, in this world.”* Think about that!

The love of God has reached its object when believers on the Lord Jesus Christ are absolutely convinced that they need have no fear in respect of the day of judgment. And why? Because Christ has fully answered to God in respect of every righteous demand that a Holy God can make against sinners, that is, you and me.

In the New Testament, we read of several aspects of justification. As far as the distinction between faith and works is concerned, let us consider two of these aspects of justification, which actually use the very words that give us the title of this talk, faith and works.

First of all, then, we are justified by faith. Romans 5:1 says, *“Wherefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Without the sovereign work of God, there would be no blessing to secure or enjoy. But, once it has been established, it is to be enjoyed, by the apprehension of faith. What God has planned, provided, procured, and proved, opening out such a vast panoply of blessing, faith possesses, or grasps, by simple trust. Take that grand mnemonic of the word faith. **F-A-I-T-H. Forsaking All, I Take Him.** That's the answer. Personal trust in the One Who died for your sins! That is the response that grasps this wonderful blessing of justification. Faith accepts as a free gift what we could never deserve or achieve by any performance of our own.

By the way, have you ever considered this tremendous fact. If we had been in any way capable of living and acting in a way that could satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God, there would have been no need at all for Him to send His only Son into the world to be our Saviour.

Now, equally true, because equally scriptural, let us move on and come to what to some minds appears to present something of a problem. That is, we are also justified by works.

As we have seen, Scripture certainly affirms that if we are justified at all, we are justified by faith, simple trust in the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). Faith is an essential prerequisite to the reception of justification.

But, Scripture affirms just as clearly that works are as vital to justification as faith. And what do we understand the word “works” to mean? A normal, standard dictionary will tell us that the noun “works” refers to activities that achieve some specific object. The object sought relative to our souls is that we might be cleared of every righteous charge that might be levelled against us.

Does the Bible give us a ready solution, or declaration? Is there a ready solution? Oh! Yes! The secret is implied in Romans 4:2, *“if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory, but not before God.”* Again, in Galatians 3:11, *“no man is justified by law in the sight of God.”* So, then, we are justified in the sight of God by the value to Him of the work of Christ for God's glory, and on our behalf. That having been settled, once and for all, before God, we are under a moral obligation to be justified before men on the basis of our works, the lifestyle that men can see. Our works demonstrate the effect of justification in us. If our faith possesses justification, our works proclaim to men the fact that we are justified. As we learn in Philippians 2:12, we are to work out what God has worked in.

Listen to how James puts it in James 2:21-24: *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar. Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect. 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. Ye see, then, how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way.”*

The absolute, perfect standards acceptable to a Holy God exceed by far our achievements, standards of conduct and moral outlook, which the Bible refers to collectively as our “works.” Indeed, God describes our achievements as dead, and wicked. That is the fruit of our having descended from Adam and having inherited his corrupt, sinful, fallen nature.

By faith, we are justified before God, having accepted by faith the significance of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Romans 4:24-5:1).

In contrast to that, by works we are justified before men. This is the proof, the demonstration, to others, that we have indeed exercised faith in the God Who justifies freely.

The clinching argument to me is this. If there was anything that we could, or would, do that could possibly meet God's absolute, holy, righteous standards, there would have been no need for God to send His Son into the world, to be our Saviour, to clear the debt that we owe to God.

We have attempted to distinguish between the faith that has saved us and the faith by which we live. It does indeed take faith, living faith, to act upon what Scripture tells us is God's view of things.

Let us rejoice in the fact that we are justified before God by our faith in the work of Christ on our behalf when He died for our sins on the Cross. In the light of that, let us seek grace from God that our inward faith in Christ is balanced by the way we live and work before our fellow men.

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