

Faith and Works

Opening Hymn: #174—My Faith Looks Up to Thee

Rom. 4:4,5 [Phillips] If a man **works**, his wages are not counted as a gift but as a fair reward. But if a man, irrespective of his work, has **faith** in him who justifies the sinful, then that man's faith is counted as righteousness.

There has long been a kind of “tension” between the relative importance of faith and works. This was not true in Old Testament times. There the emphasis was on works. In fact the word “faith” appears only twice in the KJV Old Testament.

Exod. 24:7 And [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we **do**, and be obedient.

Certainly during the time of the law dispensation **works** did affect how much favor Israel received from God. (See Deut. 11:26-28) Eventually the Pharisees developed a strict set of rules which they thought obligated God to bless them if those rules were carefully followed. How foreign to them would be the idea that anyone could come to God in simple faith. This was the teaching of Paul's letter to the Romans and Paul had himself been a Pharisee.

Martin Luther, the famous sixteenth century reformer, “discovered” in the scriptures the doctrine of justification by faith. The importance of this doctrine in Luther's mind came partially in reaction to the Catholic Church's selling of indulgences—special documents that granted a release from purgatory in exchange for money. These are the words that so influenced him:

Rom. 1:16,17 [NIV] I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by **faith** from first to last, just as it is written, “The righteous will live by faith.”

In his own private wrestling with this scripture Luther was greatly troubled. Who are those who live by faith? Answer: the righteous! Luther felt condemned. He knew he could not live by faith because he was not righteous. It was only later he came to understand that the “righteousness of God” was not something that condemned man, but that offered man a great gift by accepting Christ's righteousness and not counting him as sinful:

Ephes. 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through **faith**; and that not of yourselves: it is the **gift** of God:

Luther's theology students were bewildered when he began to preach this “new” idea. Here's the way it was dramatized in a film on Luther's life:

Student: Then man can do nothing about his sinfulness?

Luther: Yes

Student: God is to do everything?

Luther: Yes

Student: Then I may do as I please? I can sin as much as I want to. . . makes no difference?

Luther: Yes. *[pause]* You may do as you please. Now, tell me, what pleases you?

Student: What pleases me?

Luther: Imagine it. No more laws, no more punishments. What do you do? Drink yourself senseless? Make faces at the duke?

Student: Sir, I don't understand.

Luther: Well, you say to me, "You may do as you please." I say to you, "What you do, comes from what you are, what you are in your heart."

Student: But Doctor Luther, we **are** taught to do good works. "Every tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."

Luther: Is it the apples that make the apple tree? I thought it was the apple tree that made the apples. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit." That is the line **before** the one you gave me. If you're a good man, you'll do good works . . . not to prove anything, not to gain anything, just because that's how you are, how you are in your heart.

Student: Then what does it take to be a good man?

Luther: Faith.

Student: *[with sarcasm]* Sir, every peasant in Germany has faith!

Luther: So?

Student: Will heaven be filled with German peasants?

Luther: Might be.

Student: *[introspectively]* Can't be that easy.

Luther: You think faith is easy?

Justification by faith offers the sinner a new standing with God. But faith in what? The scriptures are clear: faith in Jesus Christ that he was the son of God, that he died as a ransom or corresponding price for Father Adam to redeem humanity, and that by accepting this sacrifice as benefiting us personally, we are saved from sin and death.

Gal. 2:16,17 [NIV] A man is not justified by observing the law, but by **faith** in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

"Our faith is an astounding thing astounding that I should believe him to be the Son of God who is suspended on the cross, whom I have never seen, with whom I have never become acquainted."—**Martin Luther**

Acts 16:30,31 Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And [Paul and Silas] said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

This was against the teachings of the Pharisees and the law in general. Paul and Silas did not require the keeping of new moons and Sabbaths, circumcision, ritual washing of the hands, fasting—there is nothing here except simple faith. Through faith comes blessings from God for his children, for indeed we become His children through faith:

Gal. 3:26 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

Heb. 11:6 Without faith it is impossible to please God.

Works

James 2:20-24 Faith without **works** is dead. Was not Abraham our father justified by **works**, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? ²³And 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.

In Romans chapter four Paul talked about Abraham and said he was **not** justified by works. A casual reader of the Bible might wonder whom to believe. But there is no contradiction. “Abraham **believed** God.” Abraham had faith. How do we know? He showed his faith by his willingness to sacrifice his most precious possession, his son.

Here’s how Bro. Russell described what “belief” means:

“This word **believe** has a most important bearing on the entire matter. If we should say to you that if on your way home today you would stop at a certain house, of a certain number, you would find in a particular corner under the steps a little bag, and that it contained valuable treasure which should be yours—if you believed our words, you would go and get that bag. If you said that you believed us, and then went another way altogether, we would be sure that you had not believed us. Your course [of behavior] would prove it.”—*Our Most Holy Faith*, ppg. 273,274

Are works important? Of course! Each message to the seven churches (Rev. 2 and 3) contains the words, “I know thy **works**.” Works are an indicator of the depth of one’s faith. When to the church at Laodicea we read, “I know thy **works**, that thou art neither cold nor hot” (Rev. 3:15), we automatically know a great deal about that church’s **faith**. The apostle Paul, whose letter to the Romans so inspired Luther, also wrote:

Rom. 2:6,7 [NIV] God will give to each person according to what he **has done**. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life.

Hebrews 11 mentions many of the great heroes of faith: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and others. All **did** something: Noah built an ark, Abraham left his own country for an unknown one, Moses left the court of Egypt, Rahab protected the spies. Could you imagine anyone being on this list who did nothing? Their faith permitted them to do great things:

Heb. 11:33,34 [They] through **faith** subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

But the problem with works is that we can so easily deceive ourselves into thinking that God is obligated to reward us because of what we do for him. That seems to be why Balaam offers bullocks and rams on seven altars before seeking a vision from God. He appears to think if he gives God a special gift, surely God will do a little something for him.

In the time of our Lord, the strict, religious moralist was the Pharisee. More than anyone else, he tried to live by an exacting and demanding code. And what happened? Generally he became exceedingly self-righteous:

Luke 18:9-14 [NIV] To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evil-doers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts him-self will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus once told his disciples that the service they render is like that of a slave who serves an earthly master: whatever we do, it is because it is expected of us. We do not **earn** some special reward:

Luke 17:10 [Weymouth] So you also, when you have obeyed all the orders given you, must say, “There is no merit in our service: we have merely done our duty.”

I suspect if we could really look objectively at whatever service we render, there might be some question if we have even done our duty!

[**CAREFUL**] There is a disturbing trend making its way through the world today, a trend that even infects some in our fellowship. It is the emphasis on what we perceive to be our needs and how well other people and other organizations are meeting those needs. Example: if one partner in a marriage perceives his or her needs are not being met, divorce is the usual solution. If one’s religious affiliation does not meet one’s needs, changing the affiliation is quick and easy. But too often in discussing one’s needs, nothing is ever said about one’s responsibilities. In fact today it appears that no-one feels responsible for anything. If your spiritual needs are not being met by the studies, what responsibility do you have to do something about it? Few think they have any responsibility.

What “needs” does the slave described by our Lord in Luke 17 have? None! He has a duty to perform and he is expected to do it. Consecration is a serious matter. It’s like signing a contract that can’t be canceled if we later find we don’t like it or that it doesn’t satisfy our personal “needs.” That’s why it is so important to count the cost. Leaving the truth and the brethren in a search for others who understand

us, who help us with our problems, who reassure us of our personal worth as individuals, who appreciate us for all we do . . . is like selling our birthright for a mess of pottage.

Eccles. 5:4,5 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.

I am sad when I see someone leave our fellowship for what they think are “greener pastures” in the nominal systems. I hope they’ll eventually reconsider and come back to be with us even if they don’t necessarily return to the same ecclesia they were with.

The Parable of the Penny

Matt. 20:1-15 [Phillips] The kingdom of heaven is like a householder going out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. He agreed with them on a wage of a silver coin a day and sent them to work. About nine o’clock he went and saw some others standing about in the market-place with nothing to do. “You go to the vineyard too,” he said to them, “and I will pay you a fair wage.” And off they went. At about mid-day and again at about three o’clock in the afternoon he went out and did the same thing. Then about five o’clock he went out and found some others standing about. “Why are you standing about here all day doing nothing?” he asked them. “Because no one has employed us,” they replied. “You go off into the vineyard as well, then,” he said.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last and ending with the first.” So those who were engaged at five o’clock came up and each man received a silver coin. But when the first to be employed came, they reckoned they would get more; yet they also received a silver coin each. As they took their money they grumbled at the householder and said, “These last fellows have only put in one hour’s work and you’ve treated them exactly the same as us who have gone through all the hard work and heat of the day!”

But he replied to one of them, “My friend, I’m not being unjust to you. Wasn’t our agreement for a silver coin a day? Take your money and go home. It is my wish to give the late-comers as much as I give you. May I not do what I like with what belongs to me? Must you be jealous because I am generous?”

Americans have a keen sense of fairness. By law we force employers to pay overtime, give work breaks, and especially not discriminate. Now suppose you were one of those who had worked all day in the hot sun. How would you feel if you saw those who worked just one hour get as much money as you? Do you feel you have grounds for a discrimination suit? What would you say in court? “The vineyard owner is giving away his money and he’s giving more to others than he’s giving to me.”

In Los Angeles the hiring of day laborers occurs on numerous street corners every day. People primarily from Central and South America stand around hoping someone will hire them to do anything. Nannette and I have hired a few from time to time. They never discuss wages, they never try

to negotiate any of the terms of employment. They are always grateful that at least for one day, they will have enough to eat.

The basic needs of all mankind are the same: food, clothing, medicine, a warm, dry place to live. That was true of the laborers in this parable. The householder knew this so he gave to each one not according to his **accomplishment**, but according to his **need**. He did it without any injustice or hardship to any of the workers. What a wonderful picture of the benevolent providences of the Heavenly Father.

Some might say (at least to themselves) that this parable teaches that hard work for the Lord will not be specially rewarded. But does anyone serious think there is **anything** they can do for the Lord that obligates him to give them a better reward than someone else? That is what the scribes and Pharisees thought, which is why this parable ends with the words, “So the last shall be first, and the first last.” In other words, those who consider themselves to be first in rank and honor because of what they think they do for God might really be last:

Matt. 7:21-23 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful **works**? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

This scripture teaches that no-one will get into the kingdom because of works.

Lessons for Us

Bible Students need to beware lest their love for study, for understanding the “deep things of the truth,” not be considered as “works” that obligates God to do something for them. “We have the truth! God hears our prayers. We are in covenant relationship to God.” We understand the deep things of the truth.

“What is it that is written in our hearts? Is it the knowledge of chronology? Is it the unraveling of types and shadows? Is it the cracking of hard theological nuts in respect to differently understood passages of scripture? . . . No, it is none of these! We might have all knowledge respecting chronology and history, might be able to quote every text in the Bible, and . . . yet not have the Epistle of Christ written in our hearts.”—*Question Book*, p. 235

Some Bible Student ecclesias in American feel they have a greater commitment to the truth than others. Little is said about faith in these ecclesias, but much is said about which volumes are being studied. Like the Pharisees, it is easy to become self-righteous about our code of conduct compared to others.

Exod. 19:5,6 If ye will **obey** my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people . . . ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.

In the preceding verse, God says he had brought Israel “unto myself.” This is what follows redemption: Fellowship with God. And we retain this fellowship by **obeying his voice**. It is not enough to **know** the will of God. It is not enough to **approve** of His will. It is not even enough to **want** to do His will. We must really **do** it.

In this text God does not ask faith from Israel, though of course faith brought them to the point where they could enter a covenant relationship with Him. He asks for obedience. His will must be done on earth as it is done in heaven. What we do shows whether our whole heart, with all its strength of will, has accepted the will of God, whether we are willing to live it and sacrifice anything to make our own be the doing of His will.

Titus 2:14 A peculiar people, **zealous of good works**.

“Let us thrust in the sickle of Truth with energy and courage, remembering that we serve the Lord Christ... Let us remember, too, while using all the wisdom we can in this service, that the Lord’s object in giving us a share in His work is not so much what we can accomplish, as in the blessing that the labor will bring upon *us*.”—*Manna*, November 30

“Our faith in Christ does not free us from works, it frees us from **false opinions** concerning works.”—**Martin Luther** (from Henry Gisbrandt)

Notice the words in verse 3 of our closing hymn:

In **work** that keeps **faith** sweet and strong.

Closing Hymn: #312A—Let Me Walk With Thee

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