

Mixed Messages Mislead

One of the age-old disputes between various denominations is the grace vs. works argument.

Which is it? “Is it Paul’s positions in Ephesians, that “It is by grace we are saved through faith and not of works, lest any man should boast? Or is it this snippet from James, “Faith without works is dead?”

I hold with the first, that the true ‘way’ to salvation is via the free gift to all of mankind via Jesus’ “finished” work on the cross. It seems odd then that so many pulpits seem to want it both ways, implying that we could lose our salvation if we don’t “show our faith by our works.” The motivation for the mixed message may be fear. That if we don’t push works too, no one will want to volunteer to do the many things needed to take the burden off the minister when he needs volunteers each Sunday to run a church.

Several teachers have recently made the point that the “faith without works is dead” argument is taken out of context and is a gross over-simplification. James himself tells us that his point is aimed at those who come upon one needing help, like the wounded guy in the ditch whom some pass by, saying “be blessed, be healed of your wounds,” but never think of stopping to help that person themselves. That’s what James means by saying “show me your faith by your works, by using it to help or heal a person who needs it.

In the center of all this sits the simplicity of the gospel of grace. If by one man, (Adam), sin came into the world, so by one man’s (Jesus’) sacrifice, salvation was purchased for any and all who believe.

And Abraham is the Old Testament prototype of the man who is saved by grace:

“Abraham believed God and it was accounted unto him as righteousness.” Thereby believers by faith are “heirs of faithful Abraham.” (Luke ch. 4) Thus whosoever shall

call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, shall be saved. That seems about as clear and simple as it sounds.

I doubt that the thief on the cross who asked Jesus, “remember me when You come into your kingdom,” would have been given the provisos some pulpits seem to imply are needed to secure one’s salvation. He might have answered, “I’d like to go ask people for forgiveness and do some repenting, but I’m sort of stuck here.”

So is there any place in Christianity for works at all? The answer, I think, is our motivation. If our “good works” are motivated merely by the desire to gain the admiration of others and demonstrate our holiness, that would seem to be a motive aimed more on self promotion than on the sincere desire to make salvation as simple and easy as Jesus wanted it to be.

All the other bells and whistles, spoon vittles and trimmings seem to me to be the trappings of religiosity rather than the personal relationship Jesus so much desired. “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” That’s a clear invitation to let the Lord fight our battles. It’s interesting that Jesus is called the “Alpha and Omega.” The Hebrew alphabet character for Alpha, “Alef” is the picture of an ox. That’s perfectly in keeping with bearing burdens. If a weaker ox is yoked with a strong one, the stronger bears most of the weaker ox’s burden. So Jesus bearing all of our sins is apt indeed.

So if our joy in having all of our sins past, present and future washed away by the blood of the “Lamb of God” who takes away away the sin of the world, then our motivation is grace-inspired, creating the desire to spread the good news to all the poor and the humble of a weary world, that all they need for salvation is to believe. That would inspire all in the body of Christ to share their gifts: teaching, music, helps, leadership etc., to spread the good news of the Gospel of Grace, that who/so/ever believes and calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved!

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