

Faith or Works? Both!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a five-part series

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Mark 10:42–45 (CEB)

⁴² Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. ⁴³ But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. ⁴⁴ Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, ⁴⁵ for the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.”

Ephesians 2:8–10 (CEB)

⁸ You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift. It’s not something you possessed. ⁹ It’s not something you did that you can be proud of. ¹⁰ Instead, we are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

James 2:14–26 (CEB)

¹⁴ My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can’t save anyone, can it? ¹⁵ Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. ¹⁶ What if one of you said, “Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!”? What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.

¹⁸ Someone might claim, “You have faith and I have action.” But how can I see your faith apart from your actions? Instead, I’ll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action. ¹⁹ It’s good that you believe that God is one. Ha! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble with fear. ²⁰ Are you so slow? Do you need to be shown that faith without actions has no value at all? ²¹ What about Abraham, our father? Wasn’t he shown to be righteous through his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² See, his faith was at work along with his actions. In fact, his faith was made complete by his faithful actions. ²³ So the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and God regarded him as righteous. What is more, Abraham was called God’s friend. ²⁴ So you see that a person is shown to be righteous through faithful actions and not through faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, wasn’t Rahab the prostitute shown to be righteous when she received the messengers as her guests and then sent them on by another road? ²⁶ As the lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead.

James demands that our faith be practiced, that our lives be characterized by faithful action. Otherwise, he writes, our faith is dead.

This week, James takes us into questions around which much heat has swirled since the days of the apostle Paul. How is it we are made right with God? Is it God’s work alone, an act of grace that reconciles us to our Creator? But if so, what is our part? Does it matter how we live? Surely, striving to live a good life, to love God and others in all we do matters. It must . . . mustn’t it?

Pollsters find that the American people aren’t too troubled by all this. When they ask people about heaven, the vast majority (as much as 85%) will say that they believe they will be in heaven after their death – because they are a “good enough” person. Heaven, thus, is the home of those who are good enough to get there – and that includes almost everyone. This is not surprising. Most people think pretty well of themselves and most of us want to think that we are in control of the things that really matter.

When we put the question to the Bible (i.e., can people be saved by their own efforts?), we find what feels like a contradiction, a disagreement even, within the New Testament. Honestly, that is about how Martin Luther viewed it. Take a moment and read the two Scripture passages from Ephesians and James. . . . Don’t you feel a bit forced into choosing between them?

Doesn't Paul write in Ephesians that we are saved by faith, not works? Isn't the Christian message all about grace; isn't that what makes it good news? But then doesn't James ask sarcastically, "Can faith save you?" Paul seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus' half-brother, seems to make it all about works, what we do and how we live. We wonder, which is it?

But, as in much Christian theology, we don't have to and, indeed, must not choose between them. The Christian faith is built on a series of "ANDs" not "ORs." God is three AND one. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. Salvation is instantaneous AND a process. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we have to *choose* one or the other. Roger Olsen's excellent book, *The Mosaic of Christian Beliefs*, is an overview of the history of Christian theology and is organized into twenty-two chapters, each one devoted to a theological "AND."

Coming to embrace the ANDs and not feeling forced to choose between the ORs is essential to grasping the biblical message.

So, how much of a part do we play in our own salvation? Are we like a drowning passenger who is tossed a life preserver and must grab the life preserver to be rescued? Or perhaps we merely have to hold out our hand to accept the salvation God offers us

Pelagius

Pelagius was a late-4th-century Irish teacher who promoted the idea that we have sufficient goodness in us to find our way to God without God's help. His ideas were labeled a heresy by Augustine and nearly all Christian theologians since. To refer to a theology as *semi-pelagian* is usually taken to mean an understanding of salvation that is too reliant on human effort. There is a strong dose of semi-pelagianism in many expressions of the popular "folk" Christianity of our day. The idea expressed by two-thirds of adult Christians that they are good enough to "get to heaven" is semi-pelagian, at best, and outright pelagian at worst.

by his grace? Many Christians would hold that both of these examples are *semi-pelagian* – still minimizing God's grace, as if God can't rescue us unless we help out. Others would say that we are like the dead and it is up to God and God alone to bring us to new life. But, then, where does this leave our own free will? Does this mean that God drags people into salvation whether they want it or not?

Sometimes these different perspectives are expressed as the difference between *Calvinism*, after the teachings of John Calvin, and *Arminianism*, after the teachings of Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian of the Reformation. In Calvinism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God's sovereignty. In Arminianism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God's love. Because love necessarily entails a free and willing heart (who wants to be "loved" by a robot), Arminians tend to emphasize the role of free will in salvation.¹ Yet, how could there be any role for us to play in our own salvation – after all, as Paul wrote, our salvation is by God's grace and not our own efforts. How do we possibly make any real sense of this?

Roger Olson of Baylor Seminary is an Arminian theologian and offers the following illustration,

which gets about as close to peering within this mystery as we are going to get. This is from his excellent and provocative book, *Questions To All Your Answers*, which I highly recommend.

Let me try out a homely illustration on you. Imagine that we humans are fallen into a deep pit (sin) with steep and slippery sides. We're helpless to free ourselves but must get free or we'll die. There are three Christian views of how we get out of the pit. The semi-Pelagian says God throws a rope down into the pit and says, "Grab the rope and start pulling yourself up and then I'll pull from up here and together we'll get you out." The Calvinist says God throws a rope down into the pit and comes down on the rope, ties it around some people (the elect), and carries them out without their help or

¹ It is important to remember that I'm speaking of emphases not choices.

cooperation. Once they get out of the pit he gives them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and revives them. They do absolutely nothing.

The Arminian [such as John Wesley] says God pours water into the pit and says, “Float!” All people have to do to get out of the pit is allow the water to do its work — lift them out of the pit. That means not resisting it by holding onto things at the bottom of the pit or struggling against the water. If people get out of the pit, the water did all the work. All they had to do is let it lift them up and out by relaxing and floating on it. That “relaxing” is a picture of admitting our need for God to do everything for us because we are helpless sinners. Yes, we have to make a decision. Yes, we have to do the “work” (which is not really work at all) of allowing God to save us. But the initiative and power are all from God.

Well, no doubt the analogy has its limits. All analogies do. But I ask you which is a more biblical picture of salvation as both gift and task? “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8 – 9). Grace is God’s provision and includes everything saving. Faith is our contribution, which is simply receiving and not resisting God’s provision. Grace goes before (prevenient) and enables even our faith.

Salvation is both a gift and a task. Our re-birth into God’s family² is all about God’s grace and his grace alone. We don’t contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . salvation is a process by which we come to entrust ourselves wholly and completely to our Savior (i.e., faith), thus making our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. Furthermore, this gift of salvation must be embodied in how we live, i.e., our “works.” Both Paul and James embraced this AND. Both knew that genuine faith in Christ must result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the “fruit of the Spirit.” Indeed, to say that our rebirth in Christ must result in good works makes it seem like a command or instruction, but that isn’t going far enough. When we come to faith in Christ, we *will* have good works to show for it, we *will* bear fruit. If you claim to have come to faith in Christ and yet have no fruit, Paul would ask you to reconsider where you have really put your trust.

Bearing the fruit of servanthood

Faith AND works. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God’s saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our “works”) is the embodiment of our faith. It isn’t so much that the good works are an “ought,” but that they are the *inevitable* outworking of genuine faith. Thus, to reiterate, the New Testament writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God’s kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God’s way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren’t to be just hearers of Jesus’ words, but doers of them (see also James 1:22). And before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and make still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born into Christ, but we are made into disciples. Salvation encompasses acting like the people into which God has already made us, ready to serve others in the faithful practice of our discipleship.

In today’s passage from Mark, Jesus leads his own disciples towards servanthood. They aren’t to live as the world lives. Instead, whoever among them aspires to greatness in

²Though “born again” is often used to denote some particular group of Christians, that is a mistake. In the Bible, all Christians, i.e., all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have been born a second time, or born againagain. Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3 sets forth the essence of this claim and Paul develops it further in his letters.

the family of Christ must be the servant of everyone. The organization chart is to be turned upside down. And as the exemplar of a servant leader, Jesus will give his own life in service to his disciples and to all humankind, he will be “a ransom for many.”

Servant?

The Greek word used in Mark 10:45 is *diakonēsai*, translated “serve.” In a standard Greek/English NT dictionary, its meaning is “serve, wait on; care for, see after, provide for.” *Diakonēō* (the root) is distinct from the Greek words *douleúō* (to serve as a slave), *therapeúō* (to serve willingly), *latreúō* (to serve for wages), and *leitourgéō* (to do public service). The word, *diakonēō* distinctly refers to a personal service.³ Jesus demonstrated this service when he washed the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. They were aghast of course. Slaves were to wash feet, not the Lord!

It is this personal service that James (the half-brother of Jesus) focuses on in his letter. After Jesus’ own costly and personal service, James writes, how could disciples possibly claim to have faith in Jesus and yet fail to serve those in need? Hungry people need food, not just encouragement. Freezing people need a coat, not merely a warm hug. As James pointedly notes, our faith will be demonstrated by what we do, far more so than by what we say. Echoing Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, James insists that professions of faith will be seen in actions, and if they are not, then the faith is absent. The true disciple is the one who hears and does (Matthew 7:24-29).

When we join the Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving as a greeter, or doing mission work, or heading down to our medical clinic in Costa Rica . . . there is no end to the opportunities. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, “Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity.” We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

It is both faith AND works!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How can we become more comfortable with the ANDs of the Christian faith? How can we use our intellects wisely and not allow our desire for “the answer” to drive us toward thinking we have to choose between faith and works – or that God has chosen?
2. We live in a very achievement-oriented community and many of us come from professions filled with hierarchies of power and knowledge. In the church, there are no hierarchies of service – one way of serving the church is not spiritually superior to another. As Paul says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” (1Cor 12:4-6) Do you find this hard to really accept? Is our seeming need for hierarchy a barrier to service? Or is it a lack of confidence? Or a lack of training? How do we overcome this?
3. James speaks of practicing our faith in faithful action. We don’t mean a utilitarian, “whatever works,” sort of faith. We mean simply that our rebirth in Christ must be borne out in how we live. Do we build up the body of Christ? Are we a good witness to Jesus in all that we say and do? Do we seek to help those in need and minister to those who suffer? Do we build our houses on sand, only hearing Jesus’ words or do we build them on rock, on being doers of the Word? Do we? That is really the question for us all.

³From the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by Kittel, abridged by G. Bromiley.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday Leviticus 19:1-18 God instructs Israel on love as caring. See esp. v.18</p>	<p>Tuesday Joshua 24:14-28 The renewal of the covenant and the people's promise to serve God.</p>
<p>Wednesday Luke 6:27-36 Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.</p>	<p>Thursday Matthew 25:31-46 The judgment of the nations – the parable of the sheep and goats</p>
<p>Friday Romans 4 Paul argues that getting right with God had always been about faith – beginning with Abraham.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

