

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS

In chapter 2 of his book, James brings out the relationship between faith and works. This often is a controversial subject among believers because these two things — faith and works — *apparently* are antithetical to one another. This can particularly be a problem when you read James' writings over against parts of the apostle Paul's writings where Paul presents a different aspect of the relationship between faith and works.

Faith as a gift

In Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul says, ⁸ "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast." Here it is very clear that to be saved is through faith. And Paul even adds that it is not of ourselves; it is the gift of God. What is the gift of God referring to in verse 8? If we look at the grammar in the Greek language, we can see that the gift of God includes faith as well as salvation. In other words, faith is a gift. Did you know that faith is a gift? We may say, "I do not have faith." But if we do not have faith, that means we do not have the gift of God. Faith is not something that we naturally have. Faith is the gift of God received by us. It is something given to us. It is the same when we give a gift to someone. We do not want them to pay us for it. We want to give them something free. So also faith is a gift. This is a marvelous realization. In fact, it can take the pressure off when we realize it.

Then we need to enjoy this gift. We need faith to live the Christian life. To live the Christian life is to live by faith. Paul says in Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith." Then in 2 Corinthians 5:7 he says, "We walk by faith." Many times

we say, "If I only had faith. I just need more faith." When problems come our way or when someone needs to be brought to the Lord and it seems impossible to us, we say, "If I just had the faith." Or if someone needs to be healed, we say, "I need faith." Where do you get faith? Consider these practical examples in the light of Ephesians 2, which tells us that faith is the gift of God.

Of course, salvation is not of ourselves; it is altogether out of God. But then notice what Paul says in Ephesians 2:9: "Not of works." Faith is not of works "lest anyone should boast." "Works" here refer to the works of the law. This tells us that faith is not given to us because of something we have done. Faith is not derived out of ourselves or anything we do to merit it.

Faith comes by hearing

To understand how the gift of faith comes to us is very simple. Turn to one verse, Romans 10:17. Paul begins, "So then faith comes," by what? "by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" or, literally, "through the word of Christ." The New American Standard Version translates it, "by the word of Christ." The point is that faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. So tell me about Christ. Let me hear about Christ. Let the word come. Let me come under a hearing.

The hearing is a hearing about Christ. It is the word *of* Christ, or you could say the word *about* Christ. It is the word that is coming to me telling me about Him. That word coming provides a hearing, and that hearing is the very atmosphere in which faith comes. If I could put it in this way, faith is delivered to me as a gift on the "platter" of the Word. When the Word comes, faith comes. Faith arrives and

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appears when the Word is here, when we hear the Word. So it is not a matter of looking for faith or hoping for faith; it is a matter of just coming under the hearing of the Word. Read the Word, listen to the Word, interact with the Word, and faith is given as a gift from the Word. That is why we all need to have a life in the Word. We need to live this way. I say all this in a preliminary way to give us a background for understanding faith.

An apparent problem between Paul and James

When Paul talks about us being right with God, he says that it is by faith and apart from works. In Romans 4:2-6 he says, ² “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ ⁴ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. ⁵ But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, ⁶ just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.” Could anything be clearer? Paul neatly emphasizes, almost overly so, that it is not works that justifies us. We are justified apart from works. If it is works, then it is a matter of debt. If it is grace, then it is something God has done freely. So here in Romans, Paul is making it very clear that faith comes to us and we are made right with God apart from works.

Now, in seeming contrast, let us go to the book of James. I just want to pose the problem. In James 2:14 he says, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” If I have just read Paul I am going to say, “Amen, faith can save him.” But James seems to be questioning that. Then in verses 15-17 he presents a practical expression of our living faith: ¹⁵ “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? ¹⁷ Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” Then in verse 18 he anticipates the objection to his words: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

And in verse 20 James drives his point home again: “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” Then in verses 21-23 he gives Abraham as a prime example of a man who was justified by works. And in verse 24 he concludes, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” We might respond, “James, don’t say that. Paul says a man is not justified by works, but now you say that a man is justified by works, and not by faith

only.” How are we going to solve this problem? This is what is so wonderful about the Bible. Don’t ever prejudge the Word superficially. Don’t just look at an apparent contradiction and say, “This cannot be true.” Always give the Bible credit over your mind. Give the credit to the Word of God — that maybe there is something we do not yet see or understand or perceive. Maybe we need to understand something, and that understanding will unravel the puzzle and help us to see what the relationship is between Paul’s speaking and James’ speaking.

Initial faith

Faith comes by hearing. This faith is what we can call initial faith, and this is our first relationship with God under the gospel. Paul’s word is so clear — we do not do anything out of ourselves, out of works, to merit God’s favor. It is all God’s grace. It is what He did in His Son on the cross. He shed His blood for us. His redemption was accomplished there by His crucifixion and by the fact that He bore all of our sins. There was nothing we could do to merit favor, but God did something outside of us in the Person of His Son on the cross to cause favor to come to all of us when we believe. So we can see that initially in our salvation we are saved absolutely by grace and through faith. This is the way it happens.

And as we go on, *continuous faith* is supplied to us in the same way *initial faith* came. There was the first time we believed, and then there was the day after and the next week and the next month and now. We not only need faith for the first time, but we need faith every day in order to live by faith. So there is initial faith and there is continuous faith.

Continuous faith

Let us look at initial faith in Galatians 3:2. Paul says, “This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” How did you receive the Spirit? Paul is obviously helping the believers to know the answer just by his very question. It was by the hearing of faith. That is initial. They received the Spirit — the Lord came in — and it was by the hearing of faith. Then look at verse 5: “Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” This shows us that faith is not just a matter of receiving the Spirit initially, but also of having the Spirit supplied continually. And both are on the same basis — the hearing of faith.

Faith comes to us initially and continuously by hearing. That is why before I was a Christian, I needed to hear the gospel. And after I have become a Christian, I need to be filled with the Word of God everyday so that my life is not lived out of

my own resources, but it is lived out of the revelation of God's Word — God's speaking to me, my hearing the Word, reading the Word, fellowshiping the Word, singing about the Word. All these are means to keep supplying us with the Spirit, and that Spirit is the Spirit of faith. So this is the nature of faith and how it works. It not only works initially, but it works continuously by this hearing.

Faith and grace

Faith is a gift. In Ephesians 2:8 faith receives the realm of grace. We have to understand faith as a realm that is in the realm of grace and receiving the realm of grace. And faith is the opposite of works — “works of law” and “works of righteousness which we have done” (Rom. 9:32; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5; Titus 3:5). In Romans 11:6 we see that grace and works are the antithesis of one another. And in Romans 4:2-6 we see that faith and righteousness are apart from works.

Faith is opposite to works, yet faith produces good works. We have to see faith and works joined together in Ephesians 2:8-10. Verse 9 says, “Not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Now verse 10 will boggle your mind: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” One verse says, “not of works.” Then the next verse says, “created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

Now let us read Titus 3:5-7:⁵ “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,⁶ whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior,⁷ that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” These words — “not by works of righteousness” — sound just like Paul in Romans. But look at Titus 3:8: “This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.” So right after Paul says, “not by works,” then he says, “maintain good works.” At first glance, this seems like a contradiction.

Good works in Ephesians 2:10 are stored up in Christ. When you receive Christ and I receive Christ, He lives in us. And there are so many practical, specific deeds in relationship to others and in relationship to things that are stored up in His life. We do not just have a statue of Jesus or a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall. He is not a religious figure. He is a Person in me who has compassion for those in need. He is a Person in me who is thoughtful about my relationship with another person — my wife. He is thoughtful about how much noise I make. So I get up in the morning and I am following Christ. And to follow Christ is to be thoughtful about my wife. I have a clarinet and I enjoy playing songs,

but I realize she is sleeping. So for me to follow Christ is not to disturb her rest.

Just do Christ

Christ is not a statue that we worship, but He is a Person and in Him are stored up all the good works. So the Christ in us will be doing good works. Again, Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” So what are good works? Using today's language, good works are just “doing” Christ. Just *do* Christ. We find this word “do” in James 2:13: “For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.” The verb “has shown” is a common translation in the English versions. Yet the Greek word is actually the word for “do.” If you translate this literally, it would read, “For judgment is without mercy to the one who *has done* no mercy.” This is a person who does not do mercy. Mercy — you do it. You have Christ. He is mercy in you toward others, so do mercy — do Christ.

Laboring with grace

You feel the Lord's love. You have felt His care for others. Just do what is in your heart, and that is the Lord. Those are good works. Those are practical deeds. And it is all the Lord. The good works are not even of us, yet they come out of us, they are coming from us. People look at us and say, “Thank you.” But we say, “Thank the Lord.” It is a kind of double take. It is hard to describe this kind of experience, because it is so bound up with Christ. Paul has to talk a certain way in 1 Corinthians 15:10. He had a dilemma just like we have a dilemma when we try to put words to our experience of Christ. Here he says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace toward me was not in vain” — now listen to this — “but I labored.” Paul did it: “I labored more abundantly than they all.” But then on second thought, “yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

So at first Paul says, “I *labored* more abundantly than they all.” The Greek word means toiling, sweating, laboring. It means perspiration. It was that kind of labor. “I labored more than they all.” But what was that in Paul that was laboring, that was working for the churches, helping the saints, doing all those things? What was that? He says, “Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” This shows that you have to attribute every bit of consciousness you have to help others, not to your merit, but to Christ in you. He is energizing you. He is energizing me. And all the glory goes to Him. So when I do good works, I am just doing Christ. I am doing Christ in a practical way.

Good works are concealed in grace

First Corinthians 15:10 shows us that good works are concealed within grace. When grace comes, there are good works within it. So good works are not something separate from grace. Good works are really just an extension of grace. They are an extension of the inner light shining. Matthew 5:16 says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Guess what your good works are! Your good works are just the manifestation of the light shining: "Let your light." Who is your light? The Lord is your light.

Ephesians 5:8 tells us that we are "light in the Lord." So just *let* your light shine. It is not your own good works. It is not what you have done so that you receive a pat on the back. It is not something you are meriting. No. Just let your light so shine. That means let Christ so live in you that people will see how practical, how caring, and how kind He is. They will see how He speaks. For example, I feel like the Lord is so kind to animals. In the morning I find myself looking for our two little dogs. And when I see them, I like to pet them and talk to them, just to express kindness. You know what it means to be kind to animals.

Have you ever considered the Lord's feeling about animals in the book of Jonah? The prophet Jonah wanted to see the whole city of Nineveh destroyed. He didn't have God's feeling of mercy and lovingkindness toward them. Even after they repented, Jonah did not have pity on them. Yet notice how the Lord entreats Jonah at the end of the book: "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much livestock?" (4:11). God says, "Shouldn't I have pity on all these persons *and much livestock*?" That is God. This just shows us that the Christ in us is so kind, and He is in acts of kindness — not only toward human beings but also toward the animals.

Crowned for using grace

Good works are not things that we are doing to merit something. We are just *doing* Christ. And when you do Christ, it is all Christ. You do Him, and it is grace. It is all God. And this is what qualifies us for a crown of life. One day at the judgment seat of Christ, we want to hear the Lord say, "You get a crown of life. You get a crown of glory. You get a crown. Enter into the joy of your Lord." And we are going to say, "Lord, crown? I didn't do anything. You did it all. It was Your grace that did these things in me." And He will say, "But I am rewarding you for your working Me and doing Me. You did Me. You worked Me. You took that grace and you

cooperated with that grace. You lived it out. You expressed it."

So by the Lord's mercy and grace, one day we are going to have a crown. A sister once said to me, "I don't care about crowns. I don't want reward. I just want to see the Lord. I don't care about a blue ribbon or a red ribbon. I don't want a crown." But I said to her, "The crown is really a crown that has been given all due to His grace." So we are going to just cast the crowns at His feet, like it says in Revelation 4:10-11: They "cast their crowns before the throne, saying: You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power."

We have always seen and enjoyed how the Father pours out His love into the Son, and the Son returns the love back to the Father. It is liquid love flowing. The Father loves the Son. The flow of the Father's love goes through the Son and the Son flows it right back to the Father. This is what crowns are all about. Grace has come into us to be kind. And when we live it out, one day at the judgment seat it will come right back to us as a crown. Then we take the crown and cast it at the Lord's feet and sing the song "Amazing Grace": "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun." We are going to have a lot of crowns to cast at His feet because we *did* Christ. Isn't it thrilling that we could know Christ in this way — that He Himself could be expressed through us practically as good works! Good works are just doing Christ in a practical way.

— Bill Freeman

* This month's article is taken from chapter 3 of the book *The Kingdom Life* by Bill Freeman. This book of 227 pages is a study of the Book of James showing the harmony between James and Paul. *The Kingdom Life* may be ordered for \$ 7.95, postpaid, from **Ministry of the Word**, P. O. Box 12222, Scottsdale, AZ 85267 • Phone: (480) 948-4050 • Fax: (480) 922-1338 • Email: MinWord12@aol.com

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