

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, JUDGED BY WORKS

Key question

How are we to reconcile the tension between the work of faith and the works of faith?

Key text

Ephesians 2:8-10

“⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, that no one should boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Introduction

There is a tension in the N.T. teaching about the believer's freedom from the shame of his sin. In one sense, the believer IS perfectly holy before God “IN CHRIST BY FAITH” (1 Cor.1:2, 30, 6:11) But in another sense, the believer is capable of and guilty of sinning (1 Cor.3:3; 1 Jn.2:1-2).

Heb.10:14 contains both ideas, “*For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are (being) sanctified.*” **1 Jn.2:2** “*and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*” We might say that all who are by faith united with Christ are free from SHAME (legal condemnation) (Rom.8:1) but not from ACTS OF SIN (temporal ungodly behavior - Rom.7:21).

Illustration #1: The O.T. High priest needed to sanctify himself through ceremonial washing before he could enter the temple and perform his duties. This ceremonial washing was distinct from the priest's temporal imperfections. He could have had unresolved “sins” in his life and yet if he were properly “washed” in accordance with the Law, he was considered “holy” and fully qualified to perform his priestly functions. This ceremonial cleansing finds a parallel in the believer's water baptism (1 Pet.3:21). We who are “in Christ” are fully acceptable to stand before God as saints (being legally perfected in Christ) even though we are still in process with respect the managing our temporal lives.

Illustration #2: The owner of a family business is grooming his son to one day be the CEO of the business he will inherit by law. He has his son work for him as an employee so that he might learn the business and win the respect of the employees he will one day manage. If the son shows up late for work, is sloppy in his performance, and mistreats other employees, he will be corrected by the father but not fired (as he would be were he not the son). In other words, the son's delinquency does not effect the son's legal position but it does effect his temporal relationship with the father. Christians (being “in Christ”) are like the son, our sins do not disqualify us from our place in the kingdom (or with respect to God's love) but they do effect the way God deals with us because of who we are in relationship to Him.

Illustration #3: There are three great **imputations** (crediting or reckoning of one party's identity, work, or words to another's account - Philemon 1:18-19) in Scripture:

1. The imputation of **Adam's sin to the human race** (Rom.5:19).
2. The imputation of **man's sin to Christ** (2 Cor.5:21a).
3. The imputation of **Christ's righteousness to believers** (2 Cor.5:21b).

Positional and Progressive Sanctification

Our position in Christ	Our experience in Christ
regeneration	trust
sealing with the Spirit	assurance of salvation
indwelling of the Spirit	filling with the Spirit
justification	free from condemnation
part of the body of Christ	fellowship with believers
Children of God	Disciples of Christ
Static	Dynamic
Complete and perfect	Incomplete and imperfect

Distinctives of Positional Sanctification

- It is **non-experiential** - it consists of facts about us that may not be felt by us.
- It is **not progressive** - it is complete and cannot be improved upon.
- It must be **learned** through teaching - it is known through the revelation of Scripture.
- It is **acknowledged through faith** - it is accepted only as we believe what the Bible says.
- It is not related to human merit.
- It **fully satisfies** the demands of a perfectly holy God.

The implications

- a. **The Gospel** is simply the message of Good News concerning Christ and his kingdom. It is important to make a distinction between the Gospel preached **BY** Jesus and the Gospel preached **ABOUT** Jesus by the Apostles (principally Paul). The first is to be understood as a part of the Old Covenant culture of Judaism, which focuses attention on the promised **FUTURE** coming of Messiah and his Kingdom. The life and teaching of Jesus is highlighted so as to identify and authenticate the King and his kingdom. The second is to be understood as a part of the New Covenant culture of the Body of Christ, which focuses on the **PAST** Passion of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus is highlighted (1 Cor.15:1-4) and it is called "Paul's Gospel." The difference is illustrated most dramatically by three observations:
 1. The Gospel preached by Jesus was to be preached to the Jews only (Matt.15:24). The Gospel preached by Paul was preached to the whole world (Acts 1:8).
 2. The call to "*repent and believe the gospel*" (Mk.1:15), which was preached by Jesus did not include details about the significance of the death and resurrection, preached

by Paul, which were yet future and unacknowledged by the disciples until after Pentecost (Mk.16:14, Lk.24:13-34).

3. The Apostles were obsessed in their teaching with Jesus Christ but the focus was on the significance of his death and resurrection almost exclusively. They seldom quote him, or refer to his moral teaching, miracles, and ministry until the Cross and Resurrection.
 - b. **(R)epentance** that leads to eternal life is a transferring of faith, hope, and love to Christ from (dead works - Heb.6:1, 9:14) anything other than Christ. This is a (strategic) turning that is generally a “once for all time” conversion. The daily **(r)epentance** from specific “sins” is a turning away from specific temporal (tactical) sins. This repentance is not necessary to maintain God’s love but it is necessary to maintain our temporal witness and wellbeing (health and growth) as disciples.
 - c. **Forgiveness** of sins is something that is a “standing order” that automatically, and perpetually covers our sins (past, present, future). It is also a perpetual, relational dynamic whereby I affirm (agree with, confess) God’s holy calling and gracious provision (1 Jn.2:1-2).
 - d. **Water baptism** is a dramatic picture of our death to the Law (Rom.6:1-7, 7:1-6) with its authority to condemn or condone us on the basis of our performance. Because we have died to the Law, our sins of any sort (past, present, future) are no longer an issue in our eternal relationship with God. The only issue standing between the holy God and sinful man is Jesus. Our faith in Christ is now the deal breaker or maker (Jn.3:16-18, 5:24).

Romans 7:1,4,6 “the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?” “you were made to die (in baptism) to the Law through the body of Christ,” “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound,”
 - e. **Eternal judgment** on the basis of our works is given more attention in the observations that follow.

This issue was a basic issue in the Protestant Reformation

Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ centered in what Christ has done **FOR** the believer (Positional sanctification, imputed righteousness) acquired by faith or is it about what his Spirit does **THROUGH** the believer (Experiential sanctification, infused righteousness) acquired by faithfulness?

There are three basic positions on the nature of faith and works for justification before God.

1. **Confession of Faith position:** This position teaches that faith (as intellectual consent and confession) is all that is needed for final justification: Some teach that justification is based solely on what Christ has done **FOR** us. Anything beyond “faith as intellectual consent” constitutes meritorious conduct. *In my view this position does not place enough emphasis on the **depth of the faith commitment** that links the individual to the Word of the Cross.*
2. **Work of Faith or the Obedience WHICH CONSISTS OF faith ALONE position:** Here, faith (linked with regeneration) is all that is needed for final justification: This position teach that justification is based on what Christ has done **FOR** us and **IN** us but not **THROUGH** us. *In my view this is a more accurate reflection of the Christian Gospel message and encounter.*
3. **Work(s) of Faith or the Obedience RESULTING FROM faith position:** Here, faith (linked with righteous living) is needed for final justification: This position teaches that final justification is based on what Christ has done **FOR** us, **IN** us, and is doing **THROUGH** us. *This position does not place enough emphasis on the **holiness of***

*God. It makes too much of the imperfect experiential righteousness (fruit of the Spirit) in the final judgment. It makes the Spirit the real redeemer. It also does not seem to respect **the Cross**, where believers share in the death of Christ with the effect of being out from under the condemning reach of the Law.*

Illustration

A man has a disease that is diagnosed with a blood test that contains a “marker” that is normally present with the disease but is not the disease. The physician treats the disease based on the marker found in the blood test. He does not treat the marker but the disease that the marker reveals. In this sense we can say that the marker is the sign but not the essence of the problem. By way of analogy, we can say that the final judgment looks at our works as a marker but not the essence of the issue of justification, which is faith.

1. The illustration (above) is what the “work(s) of faith” position (#2c above) might use but it will not do justice to the texts they try to explain because these texts view our works not as a marker but as the issue.
2. The Roman church tries to solve the problem of imperfect righteousness by “extending the time” with Purgatory. The Protestant church (High Calvinist) tries to solve this problem by “lowering the bar” with “direction of life” being an adequate expression of “good works”.
3. If the “good works” needed to pass the judgment are simply “a life going in the right direction” and not perfection, as most “works of faith” proponents insist, how does this satisfy the Scriptures that speak of judgment on the basis of works. Are we really to conclude that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is saying, “What is needed is just a life with the right direction & desire”? I think he is calling for a whole lot more than that. A life going in the right direction is a good indication of spiritual life but it is wholly inadequate to justify a person before God at the time of conversion or at the final judgment.
4. The “Work of Faith” position (#2b above) supports the idea that true faith will always be marked by a new heart direction in life, but such a “direction & desire in life” may be seen only by God - not always by man. The outer life, which is seen by man will always fall short of the glory of God and need the imputed righteousness of Christ to stand before a perfectly holy God. The fruit of the Spirit in this corruptible flesh will never measure up because it is not perfect.
5. NOTE: There are those who believe that the conflicted teachings on faith and works are real and to be read as an unavoidable paradox. This view assume that the Biblical writers represent differing theological positions and that even individual author’s works represent differing stages in their own theological development or different occasions for their teachings. In my opinion this makes the Scripture nearly incomprehensible and the Gospel a foggy enigma.
6. There are also some who feel the whole framework of faith and works is misunderstood. Covenant nomism is a term used to describe a system that sees works as a marker identifying those who are recipients of a gracious covenant relationship with God. In other words – those who are included within the community of God’s people are there by grace but are maintained as authentic by works, which identify them as a part of the covenant. This view sees Christianity as a slightly modified Judaism. It is a dramatic challenge to the traditional reformation understanding of Paul’s view of Judaism and Christianity.

A. Why is this issue important?

1. The Gospel is GOOD NEWS for sinners not saints.

- a. If the Gospel is good news it must be much more than the declaration that the Kingdom has come and all those who can qualify for participation can submit their moral performance record to the judge.
- b. Can we really believe that those who have true faith will be able to - with the power of the Spirit, the guidance of the Scripture, and the grace of God, - face the judgment with joy, peace, and little to worry about, for they will consistently and fully walk in a manner worthy of their high calling?
- c. Can we affirm that all those who don't produce good works so as to satisfy a holy God are in reality false believers and will be excluded from any mercy?
- d. Indeed this is hardly good news for the people that I am around. And I might add it could not be good news for the Apostle Paul either who counted himself a wretched man, the chief of sinners, and groaning with all nature as he waits for his adoption.
- e. There has got to be a better explanation. And I believe there is.

2. The Gospel is COHERENT in that it is centered on the Cross of Christ.

- a. The centrality of the work of Christ in the redemption of man as a work of grace is central to the Christian message. If the Gospel message is not coherent with respect to its basic thesis – the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith apart from works – then we have no sure hope outside our performance.
- b. This does not mean that there will not be differences in understanding of minor details but with respect to the heart of the message we should expect fundamental congruity. The grace and peace of God through the work of Christ is fundamental. To suggest that the final judgment on the basis of works (that do not fall short of the glory of God) is the ultimate doorway to eternal life is to make a mockery of the Cross & resurrection of Christ.

B. There are points of general agreement.

1. The Apostles teach a gospel of justification before God by faith apart from human merit (good works).
2. In the end, every person will be judged on the basis of their works - good or bad.
3. In this life, no person lives a perfectly holy life.
4. Those who are ultimately saved are apparently judged as perfectly holy.
5. True believers have differing interpretations as to how these apparent contradictions can be harmonized.
6. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works is beyond dispute in that he gives a rationale for it in Rom.3-5.
7. What is in contention are the frequent references in Scripture of final judgment on the basis of works. How are these passages to be understood? Are the texts contradictory? Do the authors intend to leave us a paradox? Are the various authors and letters reflecting differing contexts? Is there a way of harmonizing the texts?
8. If the Gospel is good news it must be much more than the declaration that the Kingdom has come and all those who can qualify for participation can submit their moral performance record to the judge.

C. The Biblical texts involved:

1. Some texts supporting justification by faith alone:

Jn.3:16,36, **5:24, 28-29**, 35,39-40,47, 11:25-26, Rom.4:4-5, 8:31-39, 11:6,29, 1 Cor.6:19-20, 2 Cor.5:8, **Gal.1:6-9, 3:13**, Eph.2:8-9, Phil.1:21-24, 3:20-21, 4:3, Col.3:3-4

2. Some texts supporting judgment by works alone:

Ecc1.3:17, Job.34:10-11, Ps.62:11-12, Prov.24;12, Isa.59:18, Jer.17:10, 32:18-19, Ezek.24:14, Hos.12:2

Matt.6:1-6,14-15, 7:15-23, 10:41-42, 12:33-37, 16:27, 25:31-46, Mk.13:13, **Jn.5:25-29**, **Rom.2:6-13**, 14:10-12, 1 Cor.3:8-17, 6:9-11, 2 Cor.5:10, 11:15, **Gal.5:16-26, 6:7-9**, **Eph.5:5-6, Col.3:5-6, 24-25**, Heb.10:26-30, 1 Jn.2:3-6, 3:3-10,24, 4:11-12,17, 5:3,18, 1 Pet.1:17, 4:17-18, 2 Pet.1:5-11, **Rev.14:12-13, 20:11-15**, 21:7-8, 22:12

3. Some texts supporting faith that works:

Gal.5:6, Eph.2:8-10, Phil.2:12-13, **Jas.2:12-26**, Rev.14:12

4. Some texts supporting believers struggle with sin:

Rom.7:14-25, 8:10-13, **Gal.5:13-6:10**, Eph.6:10-19, Phil.3:12-16

D. The Work(s) of faith position (faith with righteous living)

1. In summary:

- a. *The faith that saves also produces works that pass the test at the final judgment.*
Rom.8:3-13, Gal.6:7-9, Phil.2:12-13,
- b. Christians are justified by faith alone but true saving faith always yields a holy life by the power of the Spirit and the grace of God, that will pass the final judgment, which is on the basis of works.
- c. Good works cannot gain salvation but are necessary for salvation as a sign of saving faith.

2. Assumptions:

- a. True saving faith cannot exist without a holy life. All true believers will live a holy life that only true believers can live because of the indwelling power of the Spirit.
- b. “*Good works*” means new direction and desire, not moral perfection.
- c. The Scriptures (O.T., Gospels, Acts, Epistles, Rev.) consistently teach these truths – justified by faith alone, judged worthy by works.
- d. “*Repentance*” in Scripture, when linked to salvation always refers to repentance from moral transgressions not just the transferring of hope from self to Christ (the sin of unbelief).
- e. “*Perseverance*” in Scripture always refers to maintaining a holy life not just continuing in faith.

3. Challenges:

- a. While it is true that all true believers will have a change of heart, is that change always evident to others and who is to judge what that looks like?
- b. Is the righteousness that God demands, relative or perfect, partial or full, based on good intentions and right direction or performance? Are the “final judgment by works” passages satisfied with simply a new direction in life without perfect holiness?
- c. Do the various Biblical authors always use the same terms in the same ways (see “in me” with John in Jn.15:2 & “in Christ” with Paul in Eph.1)?

- d. Is the repeated repentance from moral transgression, which should take place often throughout life, distinct from a onetime repentance unto salvation that reflects a transfer of faith to Christ?
- e. How are we to understand the “sanctified” Corinthians (1 Cor.1:2) who are acting like “mere men (of the world)” (3:1-4)?
- f. Does “perseverance” demand a continuation in a life of practiced holiness or rather continuation in faith, grace, love, & hope. (Heb.10:36, Col.1:21-23)
- g. Why are true believers warned to persevere if their perseverance is assured and they cannot fail?
- h. Is the Gospel really good news for us now if, in the end, our yet unfinished holiness in this life is what will determine our eternal fate?
- i. Can there really be any assurance of salvation before the end of this life as we do not know that we might die with some unresolved moral conflict?
- j. What about deathbed conversions, the thief on the cross, Etc.?
- k. How can both Paul and James be teaching justification by faith apart from works while at the same time be teaching works are necessary for justification?
- l. How is this position, in any significant way, different than Judaism or Romanism, which say that in the end human good works (empowered by the grace of God) are the issue?
- m. Is the real source of our salvation the Holy Spirit (not Jesus Christ) as he (the Spirit) produces the fruit of righteousness through us that is necessary to pass the final judgment?
- n. How can eternal life be a “reward” and “inheritance” (Col.3:23-24) if it is a free gift (Eph.2:8-9)? Does this warning suggest that there is a judgment of believers that does not deal with salvation or damnation?
- o. Is there not a distinction between (full, fixed) “positional holiness” that comes from being “in Christ” by faith and (incomplete, changing) “practiced holiness” that comes from the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives?
- p. Does not Paul in Rom.6:1 suggest that the grace that he is teaching with respect to justification, if properly understood, will raise a logical question about the danger of moral laxness? And does he not answer that objection by appealing not to fear but to our identity and freedom?
- q. How can Paul in Rom.8:31-39 with great confidence challenge his readers to bring a charge against those whom God has chosen, given that they may fall short in some way?
- r. Rev.20:11-15 suggest that those who’s names are written in the book of life will not be judged while others will be judged for their works from another book. Does this suggest that believers will not face the Great White Throne Judgment?

E. The Work of faith position (faith with regeneration)

1. In summary:

- a. *Faith is the one and only work that God requires of believers for salvation. Jn.6:29, Rom.1:5, 1Cor.3:10-17, Rev.20:11-15*
- b. Christians are justified by faith alone and will face the final judgment with everyone else on the basis of works, but their works will not condemn them as Christ’s merits are imputed to them. Christians will however, have their works and motives exposed (judgment of disclosure) bringing loss or gain of “rewards” (not salvation).
- c. Believers are justified by a faith, which will produce good works but these works are not and cannot be necessary for justification without contradicting faith

righteousness for one simple reason – our good works (even by the Spirit) in this life are imperfect, and inconsistent.

2. Assumptions:

- a. There are different judgments for those in Christ and those outside Christ. (They may take part at the same time as part of a general judgment.)
- b. Good works needed to pass the final judgment cannot be less than moral perfection, which Christ alone could and did provide.
- c. The teaching of the O.T. and the Synoptic Gospels are a part of the O.C. era and reflect Moses emphasis on works more than on the crucified and resurrected Christ.
- d. The Gospel preached by Jesus is distinct in emphasis from the Gospel about Jesus (preached by the apostles).
- e. “Repentance” in Scripture, when linked to salvation always refers to repentance from hope in anything and everything but Jesus to faith in Jesus, not to renouncing and forsaking all sins.
- f. “Perseverance” in Scripture often refers to continuation in faith, grace, hope, & love more than in continual good works.
- g. Salvation is a free gift that comes through faith in Jesus Christ (i.e. Rom.4:1–8; Gal.2:16; Eph.2:5, 8–9; Phil.3:9; 2 Tim.1:9; Titus 3:5), but rewards come as a result of work and perseverance (i.e. 1 Cor.3:14–15; 9:24–27; Jas.1:12; Rev.3:11). “And whatever you do, do your work heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, since you know that you will receive from the Lord the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Col.3:23–24).
- h. Eph.2:10 makes it clear that we are saved FOR (not BY) good works. This cannot be true if in the end our justification rests on good works. The final judgment for believers, which is on the basis of works is therefore best understood as for something other than eternal life.

3. Challenges:

- a. If there are two distinct judgments, why is there not more clarification on the two judgments in Scripture?
- b. Why are there so many warnings to believers with respect to moral behavior in this life? Some of these warnings seem to be related to eternal life, or Kingdom participation.
- c. How consistent is Jesus in sticking to a Jewish O.C. perspective, especially in John’s Gospel?
- d. How are some of the difficult passages in Paul (Rom.8:3-8) to be understood?
- e. Why, in passages like Rom.2:6-10, is there no indication that this is a hypothetical situation as claimed by the “work of faith” position?
- f. Why do the Gospels not reflect the essence of Paul’s gospel more clearly than they seem to?

A closing word

It has often been said that good works are the **fruit** of justification, not the **root** of justification. This is true and provides an excellent illustration of what I understand to be the correct posture in the debate between saving faith and good works.

The root of justification is **faith**, which both justifies (gives life to) and normally bears fruit. But it must be noted that it is at this point the illustration is most appropriate. It is all too well known and true that a plant can be very much alive and yet not always bear fruit (OUTWARDLY). The superficial observer may not see the life without the fruit but the careful observer will recognize that there is more to being alive than just bearing fruit.

I believe the best explanation of **James 2** makes a distinction between justification before man (usefulness in this life) and justification before God (security with respect to eternal life).

I also believe that the best explanation of **Romans 2** is to see it as a logical bridge between Romans 1 and 3, which underscore the just wrathful judgment against all humanity because it falls short of the glory of God. Romans 2 underscores the important point that neither by God's electing choice, nor by possession of the holy Law, nor by the power of the Spirit can a person be vindicated. There is in the end no one who is righteous. Neither the Flesh, nor the Law, nor the Spirit can redeem man.

It is the word of the **Cross** not the flesh, the Law, or the Spirit that is the power of God unto eternal life. Clarifying, and emphasizing the distinction between the work of 1) the Law, 2) the Spirit, and 3) Christ is critical. The Spirit is NOT our Redeemer no more than the Law is our Redeemer.