

SALVATION--BY FAITH OR BY WORKS?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 29, 1957 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee.

From time to time each of us needs to pause to reaffirm his highest loyalties. Above everything else our loyalty is to Christ. We are determined to follow wherever he leads. We are dedicated to the truths of God, as revealed in and through Christ. In studies such as the one we are about to make we are seeking to know God's will rather than to defend that which we have inherited. We are not so much concerned with justifying our own beliefs as in making sure that we believe what God would have us believe. With these reaffirmations in mind we approach the study of the important theme: "Salvation--By Faith or By Works?"

The doctrine of salvation by faith alone is widely held in the modern religious world. It is an important tenet in the doctrinal structure of many present-day churches. Typical statements of the doctrine are the following: "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort." (*Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Article IX, page 69, edition of 1940). "We believe that the great gospel blessing which Christ secures to such as believe in him in justification that it is bestowed, not in consideration of works of righteousness which we have done, but solely through faith in the Redeemer's blood ..." (*Church Manual Designed For the Use of Baptist Churches*, J. M. Pendleton, A.A, Article V, page 48). These two creedal statements concerning justification by faith only are typical of the beliefs of a number of other churches.

We Are Saved By Faith

With this idea clearly in our minds, let us approach the Holy Scriptures to see if this teaching is of God. Immediately, we begin to think of passages which establish the foundational place that faith occupies in salvation. Among the more prominent are these:

Hebrews 11:6-- "And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him."

John 3:14-16-- "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life."

John 5:24--"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life."

Romans 1:16-17--"For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith."

Romans 3:21-22, 28--"But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe; for there is no distinction ... We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."

Romans 5:1--"Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Eph. 2:8-9--"For by grace ye have been saved through faith; and that not of your selves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory."

Acts 16:31--"And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house."

I John 5:4-5--"For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. And who is he that over cometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Early in the 16th century, Martin Luther, who had been an unusually devout Catholic priest, began to be repelled by the widespread Catholic practice of salvation by works. Pilgrimages, the climbing of stairs on the knees, special fast days, vigils, the counting of beads, and other such works which fit into the salvation-by-works-of-merit doctrine were particularly offensive to him. It was while he was delivering lectures on the book of Romans that he openly revolted at the idea of the merit system and began to advocate salvation by faith alone. The text of scripture which led him to make such a drastic break with his tradition was Romans 1:17, "For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith." When he found that the book of James contained passages which seemed to set forth the opposite idea, he called that book "a right strawy epistle." In fact,

when he translated the New Testament he numbered the books from one to twenty-three, then indented on the title page, and listed without numbering them the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, thus indicating his feeling that they were inferior to the other twenty-three books and that perhaps they should be left out entirely.

We Are Saved By Works

At this point it might seem that we have established the theme of salvation by faith alone. Before closing the Bible, however, there are some other passages of scripture which must be heard. Notice these:

Matt. 7:21, 24, 26--"Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven ... Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock ... And every one that heareth these words of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man who built his house upon the sand ..."

Romans 6:17-18--"But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered; and being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness."

James 2:17, 24, 26--"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead in itself. Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith. For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead."

I Peter 4:17--"For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begin first at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?"

II Thess. 1:7-9--"And to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

From the reading of the second group of scriptures we learn that obedience is also a part of achieving salvation. This is another way of saying that works are involved. Thus far, we have read a number of passages of scripture which, by themselves, would lead one to believe that faith is the basic requirement for justification. Then, from other portions of the New Testament, we have read scriptures that equally plainly declare that obedience (or works) is necessary for justification. It would be quite understandable if the reader were somewhat confused at this point.

How Does Faith Save?

There are several questions which will go far to remove the confusion that may have resulted from the reading of the above mentioned scriptures, however. They are: "Are we saved by faith only? When does faith save? How does faith save?" The answer to all of these questions is found in a brief but very important verse of scripture: "Faith working through love." (Gal. 5:6).

As support of the idea that faith, in order for it to be saving faith, must be an obedient faith, we turn to the book of Romans which is generally considered the strongest of the faith-emphasis books of the New Testament. It is quite interesting to notice in the opening paragraph of that book that the apostle Paul says, "Even Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we received grace and apostleship, unto obedience of faith among all the nations." (Romans 1:5). Then, in the closing sentence of the last paragraph, after the apostle Paul had discussed faith thoroughly in the intervening chapters, he said, as his final word, "But now is manifested, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, is made known unto all the nations unto the obedience of faith: to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever, Amen." (Romans 16:26-27). In both these passages it is very obvious that the apostle Paul is speaking of obedient faith as the means of achieving justification. Paul's faith is not faith alone in the sense of mental acceptance of an idea, but rather an attitude of heart which leads one to obey the commands of God.

No one doubts that faith saves, but not everyone takes time to notice how faith saves. Notice these examples: in Acts 16:31 the Philippian jailor was told, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." Then verses 32 and 33 indicate how his faith saved him, for they mention, "And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately." His faith led to obedience, which made salvation possible. Another example is found in Galatians 3:26-27. The first of these verses says, "For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus." The second verse shows how, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ." Again, it is faith working.

Hall of Faith (Working)

Come next to the 11th chapter of Hebrews, sometimes called the "Hall of Faith." In this chapter a number of Old Testament worthies are singled out for special commendation because of their faith. In each case the faith is made known by certain acts or deeds. In Hebrews 11:4 we read, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." In verse 5 we read, "By faith Enoch ...

had been well-pleasing unto God.” In verse 1 we find, “By faith Noah ... prepared an ark.” In verse 8 it is Abraham who “obeyed to go out.” In verse 17 it is Abraham who “offered up Isaac.” In verse 24 Moses is mentioned because he “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” In verse 29 the Israelites are singled out for praise because they “passed through the Red Sea.” In each of these examples the faith stands alongside the works which they did.

Every believer who is saved is an obedient believer. As negative evidence of the truth of this statement we notice an incident recorded by John, “Nevertheless, many of the rulers believed; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the glory that is of men more than the glory that is of God.” (John 12:42-43). This is the case of men who believed on Christ, but because of certain pressures they did not make it known. No one would contend that their faith saved.

John 3:16 is widely known, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.” In the same chapter the 36th verse reads, “He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.” In this latter verse those who believe on the Son have eternal life; but those who obey not the Son--the opposite of believe on the Son--shall not see light. Here, disobedience is the negative side, while believing is the positive side.

Three Kinds of Works

When one reads the book of Romans and finds the apostle Paul’s negative statements concerning the “works of the law” and then finds James speaking of the necessity of works, he sometimes finds himself confused. This confusion is a result of a misunderstanding of the way the word “works” is used in the New Testament. The word “works,” is used in at least three different senses in the New Testament. For example, sometimes the inspired writers speak of the “Works of God” as in John 6:28-29: “They said therefore unto him, What must we do that we may work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them. This is the work of God that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” Jesus said that believing on him is a work.

A second very different kind of works is characterized by the expression “works of the law.” The apostle Paul says, “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified---... Also, we reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yea, of Gentiles also,” (Rom. 3:20, 28-29). In this passage the apostle is saying that no one can be justified or saved by the works of the old law of Moses. These are quite different from the works of God mentioned above.

Still a third kind of works is referred to in the expression “works of men.” In Ephesians 2:8-10 we read, “For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them.” This passage plainly says that we do not save ourselves, and that the works of men are not able to bring salvation. However, we are created in Christ for good works and we are to walk in them. The only conclusion we know to draw is that man is not saved by those works which he himself devises--pilgrimages, fasts, vigils, and such like, nor by the works of the law of Moses--but by faith which leads one to obey the commandments of God, thus doing the works of God.

God’s Grace and Man’s Faith

To say it another way, God extends his grace toward man, freely without any merit on man’s part. In turn, man offers God an attitude of faith, which also involves obedience to God’s commands. Faith is a condition of heart, which involves obedience. We do not earn salvation by works. We must, however, comply with God’s conditions in order to receive his gift of salvation. For example, no man can be saved without believing in Christ as the Son of God (Heb. 11:6); no man can be saved without repenting of his sins (Acts 17:30); no man can be saved without confessing Jesus before men (Romans 10:9-10); no man can be saved without being baptized (John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21). God gives salvation as a gift, for as Jesus said. “Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded of you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do.”(Luke 17:10) We merely do the works of God--obey God’s commandments--and thereby meet the conditions on which he is willing to give salvation to us. Salvation is by faith which works.