

Faith, Works, and Assurance

Many of our confusions around assurance of salvation stem from inadequate understandings of the relationship between faith and works. People who want to emphasize either the importance of good works or the unimportance of good works often make overstatements that fail to take all scripture into account. I will begin by responding to two such inadequate views. Then I will explore in more detail what scripture teaches about faith, works, and our assurance of no condemnation.

A View that Connects Faith and Works Wrongly

This view begins by noting that assurance of salvation requires more than simply believing that Christ died for our sins. The devils also believe and tremble (James 2:20*). Eternal life requires more than confessing Christ as Savior; people must also confess Christ as Lord and bring forth fruit that fits with repentance (Romans 10:9; Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). There are plenty of Biblical examples that connect faith and works: The people of Nineveh showed repentance by proclaiming a fast and putting on sackcloth (Jonah 3:5). God forgave them because they turned from their evil ways (Jonah 3:10). This is taken to prove that God does not forgive apart from good works. Abraham our father was justified by works (James 2:21). A person is justified by works, and not by faith only (James 2:24).

This view elaborates on the notion that obedience is a component of faith. True believers please God completely in their doctrinal beliefs, spiritual desire, obedience, applications of Scripture, and submission to the church. A true believer then, will have pure doctrine and not be guilty of failures due to blind spots, lack of knowledge, or insufficient effort. He will live in victory and submit to and obey spiritual church leaders (Hebrews 13:17). Thus, it is said, although the person who comes to God must have faith (Heb. 11:6), a person cannot claim to be a true believer unless he lives a life of irrefutable good works. The sinner is saved by grace through faith, but continued salvation and assurance depend on obedience.

A View that Separates Faith and Works Wrongly

This view starts from the premises that everyone is born with a sin nature and deserves God's wrath because God imputed the sin of Adam to all his descendants. Since God imputed our

sins to Christ on the cross and vented his wrath on sin by punishing our sins in Christ, God can show mercy to sinners and impute the righteousness of Christ to those who trust on Christ. God justifies the believer and declares him righteous based on Christ's work on the cross and Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Justification is not based on our good works, on Christ's work in us today, or on our level of victory over sin.

This view asserts that if faith and works are connected in any way, this would mean a person is lost every time he sins. Since no one can live a perfect life, works have absolutely nothing to do with going to heaven. Rather, Jesus' perfect work is our ticket to heaven. The trouble in our churches, according to this view, is that teachers and preachers always talk about the importance of good works. Worse yet, they say that the good works God wants of us are whatever our parents and the church ask us to do. Anabaptists are as bad as the Pharisees—they have turned Christianity into a religion of works.

Evaluation of Above Inadequate Views

The Bible clearly teaches that a person is either in a state of faith or in a state of unbelief. Being "in faith" does not mean that either our faith or our works are perfect. We do not have to live a perfect life before we have assurance of salvation. Initial salvation involves forgiveness for past sins and brings us into a relationship with Christ. He himself is pleading for the believer who trusts and follows him. The Bible teaches the need for ongoing growth in obedience; however, a person is just as much a believer the day he first believes as he is five years later, after he has grown in obedience. The Bible nowhere teaches that a person loses his salvation every time he sins. This means a person may still be "in faith," though he does not always produce the work that pleases God.

However, not everything that people call faith, counts as actually being "in faith." Faith that does not work is a dead faith, and a dead faith is not a saving faith, and therefore falls under unbelief. It is wrong to teach that Christ's perfect life or perfect death is a substitute for the works that God wants believers to do, as if the believer has no responsibility to follow Christ in obedience. Works are connected to salvation because one cannot persist in disobedience to God and claim to be saved. Any past or present work of Christ on the cross, or in our lives, or on our behalf that does not bring us to true faith and obedience ("faith-life") does not satisfy God. Therefore, this faith does not justify or save us in God's eyes.

The Bible teaches that one gets to heaven neither by works apart from faith nor faith apart

from works. People go to heaven because they have faith like Abraham that God “counts for righteousness.” This kind of faith does the works that please God, even though neither the faith nor the works are perfect. According to Romans 1:4-5, God’s purpose in the death and resurrection of Christ is to bring people to the obedience of faith. God wants to bring people to a trust in him that results in a life characterized by growth in holiness; this is the faith-life that satisfies God.

It is true that believers should be concerned about whether their present level of obedience is pleasing to God. This suggests that since one may not be following Christ in obedience, there is always need to be open to a more Scriptural form of obedience as part of one’s ongoing growth in post-conversion transformation. But the fact that there is need for post-conversion transformation does not bring a person’s salvation into question.

One can turn away from trusting Christ and reject him, thereby losing salvation. Loss of salvation is the result of rejecting Christ as the source of salvation. This lack of faith is then expressed in one’s lack of doing good works. This lack of faith is unbelief. Commission of a single sin does not result in loss of salvation. Rather, one who persists in sin or in a state of rebellion toward God is not “in faith.” God is the judge of when a person is no longer in faith.

The inadequate views discussed above also imply false assumptions like the following:

- While faith is by grace, works are the product of human effort.
- Faith has no part in the works that follow salvation.
- Faith and works are one and the same.
- Works maintain our salvation (rather than the faith that initiated salvation and makes good works possible).

When it comes to church requirements, it is true that submission to the body of Christ is an important part of obedience. However, it is not true that one is at risk of losing one’s salvation by even raising a question about the church’s (or church leader’s) understanding of which good works God requires. Neither is it true that God will honor any and every form of obedience that church leaders demand and requires us to obey as if these decisions are equal to Scripture. Mindless obedience to church leaders is not the basis for assurance. What a church or church leader requires could even be unscriptural or sinful.

What Is Faith and How Does it Relate to Works?

What does scripture mean when it talks about faith? What is the difference between faith and unbelief? How does faith relate to obedience? What kind of faith makes the resurrection and reclaiming power of Christ available? Scripture addresses these issues many times.

Although faith is essential to pleasing God, a lack of perfect faith is not equivalent to unbelief. This is demonstrated by examples in Scripture where people of faith demonstrate doubt and unbelief. Abraham doubted God's promise of a child in his old age (Gen. 17:7). Moses doubted that God could provide flesh for 600,000 men, plus women and children (Num. 11:21). Jesus said the disciples could not cast out a demon because of their unbelief (Matt. 17:19-20). And strikingly, Zacharias was unable to speak until John the Baptist was born, because he did not believe the angel's prediction (Luke 1:20).

We are warned in the letter of James though, that not all so-called faith is saving faith. Counterfeit faith is distinguished from saving faith by the character of its response. When counterfeit faith hears the Word, its response is like a man who looks at his face in the mirror but does nothing to change or improve his appearance (James 1:23, 24). On the other hand, saving faith trusts and listens to the gospel story to discern the mind of Christ for every decision. Only then can the one who hears the gospel become a doer of the Word and a follower of the Christ revealed in the gospel (1:19-22). The person who is blessed is the one who "looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it," in obedience (1:25). By contrast, dead faith lacks the works of Christ and is therefore "alone" or incomplete (2:17). James can even say that faith is "made perfect" (made complete) by works (2:22), and thus we are not justified by faith alone (2:24). Faith that does not mirror Christ's actual life and works is unprofitable and cannot save (2:14). A dead faith that does not work is in reality unbelief.

Assurance of no condemnation at the last judgment comes from assurance that a person is "in Christ," belongs to the Abba Father, and walks "after the Spirit." (See Romans 8 and my discussion of that passage in *From Condemned Slave to Belonging Child*.) This kind of assurance is rooted in faith in Jesus Christ, not faith in a scientific equation or procedure. That is to say our faith is in him as a person we are in a relationship with and as the Lord whom we obey. It is not simply in teachings or doctrines about him, or in an abstract concept of justification by imputation.

We who emphasize obedience face the dangerous pitfall of a "pharisaical religion" which is

based on works apart from faith in Jesus. For example, from childhood I have known that 1 John teaches me to love people who mistreat me. That Bible fact did not, however, deliver me from the habit of responding wrongly to people who hurt me, especially if I thought they were undermining the will of God. Since the Bible commands me to forgive, I would tell myself that I must obey the Bible and forgive. I could find many verses that told me I should forgive, and I was able even to develop an excellent sermon that expounded on the command to forgive. I did not, however, see the connection between my forgiveness of my offenders and Christ's forgiveness of His enemies. I was unable to trust my heavenly Father to take care of me in my pain the way Christ trusted His heavenly Father to take care of Him in His pain. There was no Christian compassion in my forgiveness, no heartfelt sorrow for the evil attitudes that motivated my brother to hurt me. My point is that we too easily practice a form of obedience that is not rooted in faith at all; instead, it is rooted either in our reasoning about the Scripture or in our lack of faith that God is alive and at work even in painful situations.

Faith focuses on the power of God to give life to the dead. Faith means looking away from the resources in man to the resources in God and acknowledging that all our natural ability to bring forth the fruit of righteousness accomplishes nothing. Faith accepts the gospel record of Christ's life and teaching and affirms the death and resurrection of Christ. Faith depends on God and abandons all of self to Christ to do his will regardless of consequences. Faith is marked by humble recognition of human helplessness, of our abject poverty, and of our tendency to sin. Faith means daily resignation, submission to, and affirmation of God's will. Faith also means repentance. In the end faith yields victorious work performed in the power of the Spirit.

Assurance of No Condemnation: Do we lose salvation every time we sin?

An intensely personal concern arises. If sin persists despite our faith, or if we recognize sinful patterns or needs, does this mean we are not "in faith" or that we have a "dead faith"? I want to show that believers are in a position of righteousness where God is busy saving them and where Christ is cleansing them and maintaining their salvation. To do this I will first examine how believers are free of condemnation, and then look closely at the teaching in 1 John about the reality of sin in the life of the believer.

Assurance of no condemnation at the last judgment comes from assurance that one is "in Christ," is walking "after the Spirit," and belongs to the Abba Father. We are in union with Christ, who is alive, and we have the death and resurrection of Christ reproduced in us; we die

to sin and rise again with Christ. We have the living Spirit of God living in us. As we submit to the controlling power of the Spirit instead of to the controlling power of the flesh, we experience victory. Within our “union with Christ, in the Spirit faith-walk” life we belong to Abba Father and no one, not even the devil, can rob us of our final reward. The resurrected Christ is alive, and he intercedes for his followers. (Heb. 7:25).

Since the Spirit makes us children of the heavenly Father, we have freedom from the bondage of fear. Believers have a totally different relationship with and view of God. We are adopted into God’s family by the Spirit, and this makes us all His children. The heavenly Father cares for His children. We need not fear Him.

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (1 John 1:7-10)

It is easy to misread these verses and to think that God’s love and forgiveness depends on us walking in the light perfectly and confessing *all* our sins. Rather, these verses teach that Christ is cleansing and maintaining the salvation of those who are in fellowship with Him. The Father loves those who trust in Him. The primary truth taught in 1 John 1 is that truth taught in Hebrews 7:25, “Wherefore [Jesus] is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

1 John 1 mentions three errors or false beliefs: 1) that we can have fellowship with God and habitually sin (v. 6); 2) that we have no compulsion or inclination to sin (v. 8); 3) that we live a perfect life and do not sin (v. 10). The passage teaches that a believer can neither habitually live in sin and claim to be saved nor claim that he lives a sinless life. In other words, although the Bible says that believers have the resources to live victoriously, the Bible gives us no examples of anyone, except Christ, who lived a sinless life. The basis of assurance then, is not a sinless life, for no one lives a sinless life.

I John 1:7 teaches, on the one hand, that assurance rests on walking in the light by the present work of Christ in us, and on the other hand, that we need the blood of Christ to cleanse us from sin even as we walk in the light (v. 7). The verse implies that even those who walk in the light do not walk in the light perfectly, and that is why they need cleansing.

The distinct impression one gets from these verses is that those who know Christ intend to follow Christ in life. They desire to know the mind of Christ and they intend to live the way He lived, in self-sacrificing poverty and “emptiness of self,” with a focus away from dependence on the material world. They intend to observe the way Christ lived and what He taught, and they ask themselves how Christ’s example and teaching applies to their life and to the temptation or decision they face today. Since they want to know the mind of Christ and intend to live the Christ-life, they ask themselves whether their conduct is rooted in the gospel message and in dependence on God (this is faith).

I believe that some believers lack assurance of salvation because they think of salvation in a perfectionist manner. They believe that God expects them to have perfect faith, perfect spiritual desires, perfect obedience, or even perfect confessions. Their goal is to perfect their part of the salvation process so that God will not punish them for their faults and sins. They feel they must not only walk in the light as best they can, but also, they think they must walk in the light perfectly. This is crippling. I am not suggesting that a believer should sin that grace may abound. I am suggesting that God wants us to live wisely but freely, not so cautiously that we can hardly participate in the work of God’s Kingdom.

In summary, assurance of salvation is rooted in Christ. Christ maintains the salvation of those who continually trust, confess, and follow. According to I John 1, Christ continually forgives and cleanses from all unrighteousness the person who continues to confess known sins and to walk in the light God gives him (vv.7, 9). The same Christ who works in us so we can do good works, pleads our cause before the Father when we sin (I John. 2:1).

**All scriptures referenced and quoted are taken from the KJV Bible.*