

Faith and Works

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I hesitate to write this essay.

I am treading on a touchy subject: the relationship between faith and works. Nearly all students of the Bible have staked out a firm position on it, with red flags clearly marking the boundaries, "DO NOT CROSS THIS LINE."

Indeed, this subject fueled some of the hottest fires of Reformation thought, and since the Reformation the vast majority of conservative Protestants have jealously guarded the *sola fide* ('faith alone') of the Reformers.

The Apostle Paul would seem to agree with them:

"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." (Romans 3:28, NASB)

Paul's position appears quite clear. God justifies us, imputing righteousness to us, not on the basis of any obedience to his Law on our part, but as an unmerited gift in response to our faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul stated elsewhere to Titus: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy" (Titus 3:5).

Indeed, Paul felt so strongly that this was a core truth of the Christian faith that he was willing to pronounce eternal judgment on anyone who might teach otherwise:

"8 But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, *let him be accursed*. 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, *let him be accursed*." (Galatians 1:8-9)

Given the gravity of Paul's words here, and the equally tenacious defense of the *sola fide* principle issuing from the Reformation, you can understand my hesitancy in setting pen to paper concerning my conviction that the significance of works has been generally *undervalued* by the post-Reformation church. As it seems to me, many Protestants have erroneously taken the *sola fide* principle to mean that there must be a dissociation between justification and works, so that one's works are allowed to have no direct relevance to one's justification.

The words of James give us reason to pause in this regard:

"You see that a man is *justified by works*, and not by faith alone." (James 2:24)

On the face of it, James' statement seems to contradict Paul's statement above in Romans 3:28. Protestant theologians have generally resolved this paradox by making the "works" mentioned by James to be in some sense entirely subsidiary to faith, or a derivative of faith. This has led to such well-known maxims as, "We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone," or the formula, "faith = salvation + works" (as over against the suspect formula "faith + works = salvation").

The problem with these solutions, as I see it, is that they do not take seriously enough James' wording, "a man *is justified by works*. . . ." James did not say merely that a man is justified by faith, and that this leads to (non-justifying) works. Instead, James said that the works themselves (which, of course, accompany faith) are in some sense justifying or efficacious.

This hermeneutical problem is compounded by the fact that it was not just James who talked this way. Paul himself on various occasions made statements that hint at more than a symbolic or derivative role for acts of obedience. Take just two examples:

"16 Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of *obedience resulting in righteousness*? . . . 19b For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now *present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification*. 20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. 22 But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, *and the outcome, eternal life*." (Romans 6:16, 19b-22)

"7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who *sows to the Spirit* shall from the Spirit *reap eternal life*. 9 And *let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap* if we do not grow weary. 10 So then, while we have opportunity, let us *do good* to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." (Galatians 6:7-10)

In the first of the passages above, notice that "eternal life" is said to be an outcome of "sanctification" (vs. 22), which in turn is a result of having presented one's "members as slaves to righteousness" (vs. 19) and of "obedience" (vs. 16). Paul seems to have associated the outcome of eternal life directly with the believer's willingness to submit himself as a slave to obedience and righteousness. This bears resemblance to James' assertion that we are justified by works as well as by faith. In the second passage, Paul taught that eternal life is reaped by the one who "sows to the Spirit" (vs. 8). But notice how the concept of sowing to the Spirit is paraphrased in the next verse: "*doing good.*" Considered within the context of verse 8, then, verse 9 indicates that those who persevere in doing good will as a consequence reap eternal life. (Consider also Romans 8:13 in this light.) Again, Paul's statement here bears strong resemblance to James' statement seen earlier.

The Apostle Peter also spoke in similar terms.

"5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. 10 Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; *for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble*; 11 *for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.*" (2 Peter 1:5-11)

In this passage Peter conditioned his readers' "entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" on their willingness to "practice" the qualities mentioned in verses 5-7 (note the causal import of the phrase "in this way" in vs. 11). The practice of such qualities overlaps in many cases with what we would normally consider forms of good works or works of righteousness. This is again reminiscent of what we saw in James' epistle.

Consider a second example by Peter. Many Protestants are adamant in their insistence that water baptism is a merely symbolic or representational act, without any saving efficacy. And yet, in his first epistle, Peter states plainly:

". . . *baptism now saves you*--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21)

How is it that baptism, a physical act, can have saving significance? More generally, if salvation is by faith, as Paul argued, then how can such "works" and acts of obedience contribute anything to our salvation, as the various passages considered above--especially James 2:24--suggest?

I believe there is an answer to these questions that both avoids the works-based attempts to attain salvation warned against by Paul (e.g., Romans 3, Galatians 2) and also takes seriously James' assertion that our justification is not only by faith but "by works" as well. In order to understand this answer, we need to broadly distinguish three different possible conjunctions of faith and works presented in Scripture.

1. *Works without faith*
2. *Faith without works*
3. *Faith with works*

I will argue that the Bible characterizes only the third of these relations as compatible with justification. More precisely, I will argue that works complement faith and are to be considered justifying acts (only) *insofar as they are visible, tangible expressions of one's inner faith in Christ* rather than expressions of perceived self-merit. The latter type of works (i.e., expressions of perceived self-merit), not the former type, were those which Paul warned against as leading to an ineffectual works-based salvation.

Let us explore the above proposal by considering the three different conjunctions of faith and works presented in Scripture.

Works without faith

In this first case, a person seeks to obtain salvation apart from faith by means of deeds or "works" that are *an expression of perceived self-merit*. The works involved in this case are repeatedly referred to in Scripture specifically as "works of the Law" (Greek *ergon nomou*; Romans 3:20, 28; Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; cf. also Galatians 2:21), and the person who generates them does so in the hope that he will receive the reward *that is his due* in view of his obedience to God's Law.

This way of thinking, common though it may be, fails to take into account the fact that only a *perfect* record of obedience would be sufficient to merit eternal life (Galatians 3:10, James 2:10). However, no one perfectly keeps the Law (Romans 3:23; Galatians 3:11-12); therefore, no one can merit eternal life in this way.

The central point to keep in mind about this kind of works (i.e., works without faith) is that such works are expressions of perceived self-merit. As such, a person hopes by them to *earn* or *deserve* his salvation, and, consequently, perceives himself as being able to *boast* about it (in contrast to receiving salvation as an unearned gift of God's grace). This fact receives emphasis in the following two passages discussing works-based salvation. Notice that in each passage, Paul stresses that if works-based salvation were possible (though it is not), a person would be able to boast of having merited his salvation:

"2 For if Abraham was justified by works, *he has something to boast about*; but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, *but as what is due*. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." (Romans 4:2-5)

"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*." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

It is impossible, then, to be saved on the basis of works that are an expression of perceived self-merit, works that might otherwise supply a rationale for boasting.

Faith without works

Likewise, it is equally impossible to be saved on the basis of faith alone, without any works to express that faith. The foremost passage of Scripture speaking of deficient faith without works is found in the second chapter of James' epistle:

"14 What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 *Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself*. . . . 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also *faith without works is dead*." (James 2:14-17, 26)

Here is "dead" faith, faith expressed in empty words without actions. James makes it clear that such barren faith can save no one. It is of use neither to the one who possesses such faith (because it cannot save him) nor to the one in need of physical assistance from the former (because the latter's physical needs remain unmet).

Similar "dead" faith is seen in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel, where it is reported that Jesus

"31b . . . said to those Jews *who had believed Him*, 'If you abide in My word [NASB; cf. NIV "hold to my teaching"], *then you are truly disciples of Mine*; 32 and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (John 8:31b-32).

The deficiency of these Jews' faith in Jesus is seen in their subsequent response to Jesus in verses 33-59: Once Jesus suggested that they must actively hold to his teaching in order to be truly free, they turned against him, to the point that they soon were picking up stones to kill him (vs. 59). Though these Jews had just moments before "believed" in Jesus as the Messiah (8:30), their belief contained no sense of allegiance to Christ or willingness to submit to his lordship. Though they had believed, their underlying values had not really changed; they did not look on Jesus or his kingdom as a treasure that a man "from joy over it" might sell all he has to possess (Matthew 13:44).

This is the main point in regard to faith without works: Such faith is "dead" precisely because it involves no fundamental change in one's values, no gestalt shift by which one comes to prize Christ above all else. Because for such a one Christ is not a treasure, there is no compelling inward motivation for him to submit his will to Christ, hence no radical change of life. Obedience in this case will be artificial and forced at best.

Faith with works

Finally we come to faith *with* works. For the one who has yielded his loyalty to Christ, who prizes Christ above all else (i.e., who has experienced a living, saving faith), his works of obedience are an *expression of his faith*. Such works stand in marked contrast to the works without faith discussed earlier, which are an expression of perceived self-merit. Works that express faith in Christ were discussed at some length by James:

"18 But someone may well say, 'You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and *I will show you my faith by my works.*' 19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father *justified by works*, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that *faith was working with his works*, and as a result of the works, *faith was perfected*; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God. 24 *You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.* 25 And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also *justified by works*, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" (James 2:18-25)

Notice how James said that works both "show" faith (vs. 18) and "perfect" faith (vs. 22) in such a way that faith can be said to be "working with" works (vs. 22). The works being described by James are not merely derivative or secondary to faith, but are fully complementary to faith--they are *part of* faith, the *visible expressions* of faith. As such, these works are themselves *acts of faith*, and in that capacity they have saving, justifying significance. Hence, James can rightly say that "a man is *justified by works*, and not by [latent] faith alone" (vs. 24).

James presented two examples to support his point: Abraham and Rahab. In regard to Abraham, James argued that Abraham's faith was in some sense not mature or complete--hence the promise of his justification (Genesis 15:6; cf. Romans 4:3, 18-22; Galatians 3:6; Hebrews 11:8-10) was not entirely fulfilled--until Abraham actually *expressed* his faith through his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the one and only promised son (cf. Hebrews 11:17-19). If Abraham had not acted on his faith in this way, if he had denied the fundamental values he had previously affirmed of God and had refused to sacrifice Isaac, then his justification would have been incomplete or aborted. There can be no justification apart from a faith that expresses itself in visible works of obedience. [NOTE 1]

Similarly, Rahab the harlot did more than merely state her faith in God's power ("I know that the Lord has given you the land . . . for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath;" Joshua 2:9, 11; cf. Hebrews 11:31). She expressed that faith through her actions when she hid the spies in her home and abetted their escape (Joshua 2:4-6, 15). Judging from Rahab's words, many others in Jericho beside herself possessed a similar faith in (or dread of) the Israelites' God ("the terror of you has fallen on *us* . . . For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you . . . And when we heard it, *our* hearts melted . . .;" Joshua 2:9-11). However, only Rahab actually expressed that faith through her actions in aiding the spies, thus only she was saved.

When James spoke of the "works" by which a man is justified, then, he was *not* speaking of the "works of the Law" that Paul discussed as forming a basis on which one might boast before God (Romans 4:2-5; Ephesians 2:8-9). The works of the Law referred to by Paul are expressions of perceived self-merit. In contrast, the justifying works referred to by James are expressions of faith. Such justifying works naturally flow from and complement faith because they express the new values on which faith is based. Saving faith involves a dramatic shift in a person's fundamental values--what the person considers most important in life, what life is all about. The Christian is one who has decided that life is all about *Christ*, that he is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Savior of the world, the One worthy of our unending loyalty and service (see my essay, "[Obsessed with Christ](#)"). Conversion thus occurs when a person chooses to prize Christ above all else, to attribute the highest worth to Christ and Christ's will. It would be impossible for this shift in values not to lead to a shift in behavior, given that one's intentional behavioral choices reflect (to varying degrees) what one truly values. If I truly prize Christ as my treasure, if I love him and value the coming of his kingdom in my life and in others' lives, then my pattern of deliberate, intentional choices will reflect this fact. Good works are the necessary manifestation of our true values, and our true values are the essence of faith.

What we learn from James, then, is that for the believer in Christ each act of obedience has saving significance *insofar as it is an expression of one's faith*. We do not, then, in this sense, need to fear acknowledging an intimate association between faith and works as the two relate to justification. The believer's works (in the sense employed in James' epistle) constitute *faith being lived out*, faith being manifested in visible form. Hence, these works can be said to justify the believer (as James says they do) precisely because they are the tangible vehicles of faith. We thus truly "work out our salvation" (Philippians 2:12b) through these acts of obedience (vs. 12a) by the enabling of God (vs. 13).

Note, as a corollary, that in this view salvation is not merely an event. Instead, salvation is a progressive state deriving from a faith that is constantly being reaffirmed, reinforced, and visibly reenacted in the life of the believer (for more discussion, see my essay "[When An Immunization Becomes Fatal: Must Faith Persevere?](#)"). It is not only that we "were saved" at some past point in time. Rather, we are "being saved" (present participle, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 2:15; cf. also present tense in 1 Corinthians 15:2) and are on a continuing basis "receiving the goal of [our] faith, the salvation of [our] souls" (1 Peter 1:9; NIV). This happens each day as we persevere in faith and manifest this faith through loving actions (cf. Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but *faith working through love*" [NASB; cf. NIV "faith expressing itself through love"]). [[NOTE 2](#)]

The above view of justifying works allows for a straightforward reading of those passages that speak of works or acts of obedience as having saving significance for the believer. [[NOTE 3](#)] When Paul teaches, for example, that we "sow to the Spirit" by "doing good" and as a result "reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:8-9), he is speaking of the believer's good works as they are *acts of faith*. We "sow to the Spirit" not in an effort to merit our salvation, but because we have at the most fundamental level yielded our loyalty and devotion to Christ, having willingly "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24; cf. Romans 8:13) and having chosen to "walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16, 25). This is the path of faith expressed in good works.

This same understanding of works applies to Peter's statement that "baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21). Notice that Peter is careful to say that he is not speaking merely of the outward physical act of baptism in and of itself ("not the removal of dirt from the flesh"); instead, he is referring to what that outward act expresses, the inner "appeal to God for a good conscience." The "appeal to God" is the inner cry of faith, and the outward physical washing of baptism is a physical expression of that inner appeal. As such, the rite of baptism can be more than just symbolic or representational. Baptism can be an actual saving act, a visible instantiation and expression of saving faith in Christ. [[NOTE 4](#)]

The same perspective can be extended as well to one's participation in Communion (i.e., the Lord's Supper). Communion is intended to be a physical expression of the truth that we are saved through our spiritual union with Christ. Partaking of the physical representations of the Lord's body and blood can thus be an act by which one reaffirms and expresses faith in this truth. As such, participation in Communion, like every other act of faith, can become a vehicle by which one is justified before God.

If all this talk of being justified by "acts" and "works" is making you feel theologically uncomfortable, I can only point you back to the words of the Bible itself that a man is "justified by works" (James 2:24). As I argued above, James' words do not refer to the "works of the Law" that Paul warned against as expressions of perceived self-merit; instead, James was speaking of works as they are expressions of faith in Christ. [NOTE 5]

You might object, "But what about the verse you quoted earlier, Titus 3:5: 'He saved us, *not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness*, but according to His mercy?'" On the face of it, Paul's words here might appear to exclude not only the "works of the Law" that he addressed elsewhere, but also the sort of works-as-expressions-of-faith I have been discussing above. However, notice that in Titus 3:5 Paul drew a clear contrast between "deeds which we have done in righteousness," on the one hand, and God's "mercy," on the other. Mercy refers to God's favor toward the undeserving. The fact that Paul *contrasted* such mercy with "deeds . . . done in righteousness" suggests that the kind of "deeds" he had in mind in Titus 3:5 are precisely those deeds on account of which a person might feel he *deserves* to receive salvation. But then, such deeds are equivalent to the "works of the Law" that Paul discussed in other passages (Romans 3:20, 28; Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). That is, the "deeds . . . done in righteousness" referred to in Titus 3:5 as well as the "works of the Law" mentioned by Paul elsewhere both refer to works/deeds that are expressions of perceived self-merit on the basis of which one might boast of having earned God's favor. Consequently, Titus 3:5 does not serve as evidence against the proposal that we are justified by only those works that tangibly express one's inner faith in Christ.

So then, have I affirmed or denied the Reformation's *sola fide* principle in the discussion above? I think the answer to that question depends on one's perspective of what *sola fide* means. I don't pretend to be a historian, so I cannot say with certainty whether any of the great reformers themselves would have been willing to embrace my position above. I suspect that at least some would not. [NOTE 6] In regard to the modern theological situation among conservative evangelicals, I am quite sure that some or perhaps many would conclude that I have strayed into heterodoxy by speaking of works in *any* sense as comprising a basis for our justification--even works considered as vehicles of faith. To this I can only say that I hope I am keeping good company, most notably James the Elder, as well as (it seems to me) the Apostles Paul and Peter. I trust, however, that there will be others among my contemporaries who will recognize that it is impossible to deal honestly with the various Scripture texts involved without acknowledging that our works play an indispensable role in not only validating but completing and establishing our faith, and that, consequently, we are justified not on the basis of faith alone, but on the basis of the works that express that faith.

Note 1:

One might object, "What about the thief on the cross?" In Luke 23:39-43 we are told about one of the criminals who, just hours before his death, placed his faith in the crucified Jesus who hung beside him. Jesus assured him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (vs. 43). One might object that this criminal had no chance to express his faith through visible works, yet he was clearly saved by Jesus. (I wish to thank Ken Nissen for bringing this potential objection to my attention, and for numerous other helpful comments on the first draft of this essay.) To this objection I would respond that (a) the criminal's willingness to publicly identify himself with Christ in his final hours was itself a work expressing the reality of his inner repentance and faith, and (b) even if due to extenuating circumstances the criminal had not been able to outwardly express his faith (e.g., if he had been at that point unable to speak due to his rapidly deteriorating physical condition), his sincere inner faith would have been sufficient for his justification, for the simple reason that *if* he had been given the opportunity to express his faith outwardly, he would have done so. The point is not that outward expressions of faith *per se* are necessary for justification in a rigid, technical sense; instead, such expressions of faith are necessary in the sense that saving faith *if given the opportunity* (as is normally the case) then naturally issues into works, on the basis of which God can rightly justify us. This is so because, as discussed in the main text, faith in Christ represents a dramatic shift in one's underlying values, and these new values are naturally reflected in one's conscious behavioral choices.

Note 2:

One might object that the Bible also speaks of Christians who were "saved" (aorist tense; cf. 2 Timothy 1:9) and "have been saved" (perfect tense; cf. Ephesians 2:5, 8; Luke 7:50). (I again thank Ken Nissen for pointing out that some readers might raise this objection.) However, there is no contradiction here. It is true *both* that we *were saved* (past tense) when we first believed in Christ, that we therefore *have been saved* (perfect tense) as an ongoing consequence, and yet that we are *still being saved* (present tense) as we continue in the faith. Indeed, the Bible sometimes speaks of our salvation as being a *future* event as well (e.g., Romans 5:9-10; 8:23). The fact that any one of these perspectives on salvation is true does not negate the truth of the others. This general point is illustrated, for example, by Colossians 1:22-23, where a *past* act of reconciliation yields a *future* effect contingent upon our *present* continuance in faith: "He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach--if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard."

Note 3:

One passage that I have not mentioned here but that might possibly be explained in terms of works expressing faith is Romans 2:6-10 (God "will render to every man according to his deeds . . ." NASB; cf. Psalm 62:12, Proverbs 24:12; see also Matthew 12:37 for a similar notion). That is, Paul's meaning in this passage may include the idea that God's judgment can be based on works even for believers because the faith by which believers are saved will necessarily be expressed in their works, hence their works provide a sufficient basis for their judgment and justification. It is not clear to me, however, that Paul had this idea in mind in this passage. Instead, it seems to me that Paul here in Romans 2:6-10 intended to describe judgment and justification as these concepts are characterized strictly *under the Law* (i.e., in relation to "works of the Law"), and that believers like unbelievers fail to pass judgment in this regard (cf. Romans 3:19-20, with the preceding context in mind). The salvation of believers, then, follows not from the principles expressed in Romans 2:6-10, but instead through the *alternative* principles ("apart from the Law," 3:21) of substitutionary sacrifice and imputed righteousness described in Romans 3:21-30. According to the latter principles, we are justified on the basis of faith, which, as we have seen in this essay, necessarily includes works as they tangibly express that faith (but not as constituting "works of the Law").

Note 4:

I say "*can* be," because clearly not everyone who receives baptism does so with the intention of expressing a genuine faith in Christ.

Note 5:

For more thoughts on why this is not works-based legalism, see my essay "[Can You Do Anything to Gain God's Acceptance?](#)"

Note 6:

Recall, for example, Luther's famous characterization of James' letter as an "epistle of straw." It may be that Luther understood the meaning of James' words more clearly than many modern commentators do. Yet, rather than accept James' teaching that works can have justifying significance and integrate this teaching with the broader context of Scripture, Luther chose to reject the canonicity of James' epistle outright.