

## Can You *Do* Anything to Gain God's Acceptance?

1/2/2001

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[http://www.geocities.com/amywes\\_tw/devotionals.html](http://www.geocities.com/amywes_tw/devotionals.html)

The Bible flatly states that no one can be saved by his works. "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Romans 3:20). That is, no one can be good enough to merit God's acceptance. This truth, of course, goes very much against the world's way of thinking, in which "good" people go to heaven and "bad" people don't, the standards of "good" and "bad" being watered down to a manageable level such that most people will make it in. Against this sort of thinking the apostle Paul warns that anyone who would come to Christ in faith must first renounce all dependence on his own ability to merit God's salvation, even in part (Galatians 5:2-4).

I sometimes hear sincere Christians (including many preachers and Christian writers) go further, though, and define works salvation as doing *anything* to try to gain God's acceptance. They argue that it is dangerous for a person to think that even his faith in Christ is a condition for salvation, because (they say) making faith a condition for salvation is just another kind of works salvation (where "works" is taken roughly to mean "doing anything to gain God's favor").

This, however, is emphatically *not* what the Bible means by works salvation. It is clear from Scripture that God asks, commands, and requires us to do something in order to be saved; namely, we must choose to have faith in and allegiance to Christ (see my essay on "Allegiance"). The difference between works-based salvation and faith-based salvation does not center around whether a person *does* something or not. The difference, rather, lies more specifically with whether or not one hopes to *morally merit* God's acceptance by obedience to God's Law. Those who choose the way of faith renounce all confidence in self-merited goodness and trust solely in Christ to gain God's acceptance. Those who continue to cling to works, in contrast, depend at least in part on their supposed self-merited goodness to attempt to gain God's hearing.

That works salvation is, biblically speaking, associated directly with attempts to morally merit God's acceptance (and not with the broader notion of merely *doing* something to

gain His acceptance) is clear in all of the discussions of the danger of “works” in the New Testament. These discussions are always set in the context of God’s Law, as for example in Romans 3:20 above (“by the works of the Law”) and in Galatians 2:16:

“Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.”

At issue here is whether a person can obtain salvation by meeting the moral requirements of God’s Law. The New Testament writers consistently say *no*, for the simple reason that attaining salvation by one’s works would require that one *consistently, perfectly* keep God’s Law (Romans 2:7; Galatians 3:10-12; 5:3). The reality, however, is that “all have sinned” and fail to meet this perfect standard required by the Law (Romans 3:23). Those who fail to grasp this basic fact and continue to believe that God can (at least in part) accept them based on their own merits are guilty of what we refer to today as (attempting to attain) a “works” salvation.

In contrast, when I have faith in Christ for my salvation, this does not mean that I now morally merit my salvation. Though my act of faith is indeed an intentional act on my part (i.e., I have *done* something to gain God’s acceptance), this act in itself does nothing to improve my own personal moral merit before God. What my act of faith does, rather, is meet the condition by which God will then choose to begin *considering me in relation to Christ*. If God were still somehow to consider me in and of myself (i.e., apart from Christ), I would be just as morally repugnant to God and fall just as far short of meeting the moral demands of His Law *after* having faith as *before* having faith. Faith is not itself a “work” that accrues merit before God; faith is simply the response God requires before He will “justify the ungodly” (Romans 4:5). Faith, or what I have elsewhere called allegiance to the truth about Jesus (see “Allegiance”), is thus truly a *condition* for salvation, but it is emphatically not a “work” for salvation in the biblical sense.

Some people have argued that even if faith is not a “work,” the same cannot be said of repentance, which (they argue) clearly involves doing works of righteousness and therefore cannot be a condition for salvation. This, however, is to confuse “repentance” with the “fruit of repentance” (Matthew 3:8). Repentance itself is the act of submission to the lordship of Christ, and, like faith, is another aspect of the Christian’s underlying

*attitude of allegiance* to Christ, that wholehearted response of surrender to God that forms the basic condition for salvation. It is true that good works will naturally flow from this underlying attitude as God works in the heart and character of the one who has yielded allegiance to Him, but we must not confuse the underlying attitude of allegiance (which includes faith and repentance) with the fruit that follows from that attitude (i.e., good works and changed character). Thus, neither faith nor repentance are “works of the Law” as the phrase is intended in Galatians 2:16 and similar passages.

I have said all of this for two main reasons:

First, it is important to recognize the distinction between faith/repentance and works of the Law so that believers will not labor under a false sense of guilt. I have seen sincere believers struggle with gaining assurance of their salvation because they fear that their faith in Christ or underlying attitude of repentance is itself a “work” that has plunged them into the trap of works salvation. This concern is unnecessary and illustrates the kind of problems that can arise when churches erroneously teach that man must be entirely passive in the process of salvation.

Second, I have made the above observations in order to rebut a common objection raised against Arminians, namely, that Arminians promote a variety of works salvation when they say that humans must play an active part in salvation by exercising faith as a prior condition for salvation. Once we properly recognize, however, that works salvation in Scripture refers strictly to attempts to morally merit God’s acceptance through obedience to God’s Law, then this objection to Arminianism evaporates.

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