

SALVATION: FAITH vs. WORKS

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Eph 2:8-9 NASU

It is almost universally accepted among so-called “evangelicals” that we are saved by the grace of God; that our salvation is secured by the atoning work of Jesus at Calvary as opposed to our meritorious works. There is nothing we could do to cause God to love us more. That Jesus died while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8) is evidence enough to support that statement.

Confusion exists, however, regarding what constitutes faith. Almost everyone in the denominational community (those who have adopted doctrines and names distinguishing themselves from the church as described in the New Testament) has incorrectly placed upon this phrase the meaning of mere ascent, with the added assumption that it means “as soon as one has faith.” In other words, salvation occurs the moment an individual acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God. This is not supported by Scripture. Yet this is the prevalent teaching.

It is our present purpose to address the question of what constitutes faith, specifically the faith that saves. That faith is an active response to a promise or command is readily seen by the examples listed in Hebrews 11.

- By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain. (v. 4)
- Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark (v. 7)
- By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. (v.8)
- By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac (v. 17)
- By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. (v. 21)
- By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents (v. 23)
- By faith the [Israelites] passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through on dry land (v. 29)

The language of the Apostle Paul at the beginning and the end of his letter to the Romans also emphasizes this truth that faith and obedience are inseparable. In Romans 1:5 and Romans 16:26 Paul refers to “the obedience of faith.” The inspired apostle clearly connects the two, indicating that faith is nonexistent apart from the active response to a command and/or promise.

It is in the application of this truth that many have adopted a salvation message that is not only unbiblical, but more than that, anti-biblical – a salvation by human works. Oddly enough, the purveyors of this message are those who claim to champion the concept of salvation by grace.

The prevailing practice that identifies these purveyors of salvation by human works is what has become known as “the sinner’s prayer.” When a person desires salvation, he is instructed to repeat a prayer that, in itself articulates some very fine sentiments. This prayer almost always includes a statement confessing guilt and one’s inability to be saved without Christ. This prayer characteristically includes expressions of repentance, which is also necessary to be saved. The problem is not so much with the language and sentiment in the prayer as it is with the assertion that salvation is the result when one sincerely prays this prayer.

Is this the faith the Bible says results in salvation? The answer to this question is the same as to the following questions. Can such a prayer be found within the pages of the Bible? Can any Biblical example be given in which a person, having recited or repeated such a prayer, was saved? Can a single promise connected with this prayer be found in the Bible? Did any apostle or the Lord Himself ever tell anyone to pray this prayer? Do any of the conversion accounts (e.g., Acts 2, 8, 9, 10, 16, 22) follow this pattern? The answer to all these questions is clearly “No.”

Having established this, we must now ask ourselves another question. In whom is the sinner placing faith when he practices this approach? It is obviously not faith in God. God never commanded it. Nor has He promised salvation to anyone who repeats or recites such a prayer. If this is not salvation by faith in God, then it is a message of salvation by faith in man. As such, it is of necessity by human works. Men, having no Biblical authority or example, have concocted their own method of salvation rather than accepting what God said in His Word. The very ones who denounce a salvation by works are themselves espousing and practicing the same by telling people they are saved when they, in this humanly-devised prayer, “invite Jesus into their heart” (more unbiblical language).

Again, it is odd that this practice is common among those who reject the Biblical teaching that baptism is for the remission of sins, saying that such a practice constitutes salvation by works. I have even heard some among these denominations assert that those who teach that baptism is for the remission of sins, and therefore necessary for salvation, comprise a cult. Yet the Bible plainly says this is a primary purpose of baptism (e.g., Acts 2:38). Furthermore, Colossians 2:12 states that baptism is the expression of faith in the working of God, who promises to raise us from spiritual death, the resurrection of Jesus serving as the foundation for such faith. There is no better way to express faith in God for salvation – no clearer acknowledgment of our need of grace – than by baptism into Christ for the remission of sins.

Consider the fact that every one of the conversion accounts in the New Testament includes baptism into Christ. Notice, too, that there is a divine promise attached to this expression of faith. It is variously worded as “for the forgiveness of sins,” “so that your sins may be washed away,” and “for remission of sins” (Acts 2:38; 22:16). It is also accompanied by the promise that the one who so demonstrates faith through this obedience will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift.

Baptism, then, is not a human work at all. It is the place where and the occasion when the sinner, cognizant of his sick and guilty condition before God, confesses his total dependence upon the work of Jesus at Calvary and calls upon God to shower upon him all the grace gifts he needs to be saved. Baptism, then, is the sinner's obedience to the command of the Lord, and his expression of faith in the promise of the Great Physician, Who promised to heal and forgive. Baptism is where God does His work of regenerating the heart (Titus 3:5), washing away our sins (Acts 22:16), and making us alive together with Christ, having raised us from death in the likeness of Jesus' resurrection (Colossians 2:12; Romans 6:4). It is the occasion or place where He promises to give us all His wonderful grace gifts, including the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:15-16) and the Holy Spirit Himself (Acts 2:38; 19:1-5, where Paul intimates or infers a direct correlation between the two).

The conclusion to which we are drawn upon reading the Scriptures is that salvation by grace through faith is consistent with, and in fact impossible apart from baptism into Christ for the remission of sins. It is an active response to the promise of God that He will, on that occasion, give to us His grace gifts. It is where the sinner identifies with and participates in the death of Jesus (Romans 6:5), which is a necessary aspect of grace – the payment of our debt by the One Who alone did not deserve it. It is He who made the promise, “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:15-16). It was Jesus Himself who commanded us to make disciples among all the nations by baptizing them in the name of (or by the authority of) the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that He commanded (Matthew 28:19-20).

The faith that saves is the faith that obeys. What the Lord taught us to teach and to practice is that sinners must repent of their sins and be immersed into Christ in the likeness of His death. The promise is that sins and the resultant guilt will be removed, covered by His precious blood. Nothing less constitutes faith in Christ.

Have you demonstrated faith in Jesus? Or have you expressed faith in men by submitting to their substituted avenues of salvation? The consequences of each are as significant as they are distinct. We urge you to express faith in Jesus by repenting of your sins and being immersed into Christ. This is salvation by grace through faith.