

LESSON ESSENTIALS

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 8: SAVED BY GRACE NOT BY WORKS

The word grace means 'unmerited favour'. This is unearned or undeserved kindness towards a person. When it comes to God's grace in our lives, we did not earn it. We do not deserve it. God simply gives it to us.

"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy"

(Titus 3:5)

Anything we try to add to His completed work on the cross is proving a dependence on works, not grace. It is the grace of God alone that saves us. We must not add anything to that.

In a previous lesson, we examined the doctrine that states that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone. If we believe that salvation is through Christ alone, then we will not look to anyone else to be our saviour. There is no other god, no other person, no other system of belief that will grant us the salvation that we need. If we believe that, then there should be no question that we are saved by grace not by works. And yet, many Christians say with their mouths that they are saved by grace, but they live like they are saved by works.

What do we mean when we suggest that we could be 'saved by works'? There is a false belief that creeps in to the heart and mind of even the most whole-hearted believer that says that we can impress God with our right living and earn His grace. We feel so indebted to God for sending Christ to die on our behalf that we try to 'pay Him back' through our good works. Or maybe we feel like we are saved by grace originally, but in order to stay in God's favour we need to do good works so that He feels like we were worth saving and worth keeping in His family.

All of these thoughts are incompatible with the essential doctrine that salvation through Christ alone. Anything we try to add to His completed work on the cross is proving a dependence on works, not grace. It is the grace of God alone that saves us. We must not add anything to that.

Now, someone should ask, 'Where does that leave good works? What is the role of works in the life of a believer?'

The Word of God clearly states that when a person comes to saving faith through Christ, they are called to a new standard of living that honours Him and not ourselves and that our old selves are dead allowing us to act and live as new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15-17). Jesus Himself says that if we love Him we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). It is clear that we must do good works and that these good works please God (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

How then do we hold the tension of living a life that pleases God without relying on those good works for our salvation?

By thinking about human relationships, we might be able to keep the proper perspective on good works. Imagine a parent asking their child to help with some household chores. The parent is entirely right to ask the child to help. The child can respond with negativity and either not obey, or obey but with a rotten attitude. Neither of these options will make the parent very happy. On the other hand, the child could long to see a smile on the parent's face, and so serves willingly, happily, and thoroughly. The

parent is very pleased with the good work that the child did. Did the obedience, or lack of obedience, change the biological relationship the parent has with the child? Certainly not! Their relationship is fixed: they will be parent and child forever. That status was in place before the child could do anything, good or bad. They are by default in that relationship forever.

However, while the type of relationship will not change, the pleasure in the relationship might. The disobedient child may find the parent to be aloof or frustrated. There may be an awkward tension between the two because of unmet expectations or guilt. The obedient child, on the other hand, will sense the joy that the parent has in seeing the child willingly obey. There will be an increased joy and pleasure in both parent and child. Trust, intimacy, love, enjoyment: all will be increased by the good works in obedience of the child.

And so, in our relationship with God the Father, He has chosen to adopt us. Our position in His family is fixed because of the saving work of Christ on our behalf. We cannot initiate or destroy that relationship. However, we can enhance the joy, trust, intimacy, and love in that relationship by doing what our Father instructs us to do. This is not a means of earning favour or earning salvation: this is a means of saying ‘thank you.’

When we see what it cost God the Father to save us, and when we consider the suffering of Christ on our behalf, we are moved with gratitude and our heart response should be to say, “Yes, Lord. Whatever you say, I will do!”

Romans 11 ends by asking us who has ever, or who could ever, repay God? It is impossible to repay God, or to earn what He has freely given to us. However, Romans 12 then begins with the instruction that we ought to live our lives fully for God, in order to please Him with our sacrificial worship. These are not conflicting statements. We can never pay back the grace that the Lord has richly and freely poured out on His people. But we can, with gratitude, live a life of good works as obedience to Him. Without His grace we would not be saved. Without His grace we would not be able to do the good works He is calling us to. Let us be people who entirely trust in the saving grace of God as our only means of salvation. And let us also be people who entirely live out the saving grace of God in good works of obedience as our means of thanks to Him.

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IN REVIEW

- If we believe that salvation is through Christ alone, we must also believe that we are saved by grace alone.
- Believing that we are saved by grace does not absolve us from doing good works.
- While our good works do not earn or keep our place in God's family, they do show our gratitude to the Lord for His grace in our lives.

HAVE YOUR SAY

- Search your heart: is there any way that you are trying to earn, or keep, your salvation through your good works? Pray and ask the Lord to reveal it to you. And then pray and ask the Lord to free you from those wrong beliefs.

- What kind of relationship do you have right now with your heavenly Father? Are you seeking to please Him or are you avoiding Him because you know you have displeased Him? Rest in the knowledge that the saving grace of Jesus keeps you in relationship with your Father. Draw near to Him and choose to obey and to enhance your Father's joy!

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