

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership
Study Guide

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 8: SAVED BY GRACE NOT BY WORKS

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Christian Doctrine. This series of lessons examines doctrines which are foundational to our faith, with an emphasis on how incorrect doctrine can negatively impact true faith. Doctrine is the set of beliefs that determine how we practise our faith. It is critical that Christians understand correct doctrine about the nature of God and salvation, especially if they are engaged in teaching and discipling. This module examines scriptures related to a number of core doctrines of the Christian Church, and also some of the areas of confusion and error associated with each doctrine.

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 8: SAVED BY GRACE NOT BY WORKS

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

This lesson discusses grace as the means to our salvation, not works. Errors about this doctrine are also examined.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

How do you respond when two passages of God's Word seem to contradict each other? Do you ignore them entirely? Do you choose to believe the one that fits best with your present understanding? Do you seek help from books or experts? Do you pray to God about it? When two passages seem to be contradictory, there may be many reasons. This lesson explores the relationship of faith and works, two things that are frequently contrasted in the Bible. But even while there is a contrast in these two terms, there is no conflict. God has clearly shown us the way of truth so that we can walk in it.

GETTING STARTED

1. Do you think of yourself as a 'good person'? Why or why not? If you think you are good, are you comparing yourself to others around you, or to Jesus? Would it make a difference if you compared yourself to Him?

2. What is your understanding of God's love for you? On what does that love depend? Can you do anything to make God love you more or cause Him to love you less? Explain.



STUDY

❖ **THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE THROUGH FAITH:** Apart from God's grace, we can never be good enough for God. However, God in His great love for us gives us the free gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Grace is a gift from God that we don't deserve, and it comes in many forms. The word 'grace', as it relates to our salvation, refers to the unmerited and unearned gift of forgiveness given by God to those who by faith believe in Jesus as Saviour. By grace we are made right with God, and are no longer slaves to our sin.

- Other religions and worldviews say we must work to be good people because God will love us if we are good. In other words, if we do good we will receive good. Religions are systems that attempt to change us into good people.
- Christianity says that we are not good people, but God loves us anyway. God by His grace can change us so that out of love for Him we can do good works. No set of rules could ever produce that result.
- How would you explain the previous statements to someone in your own words?

- This is one of the major questions of all Christian theology: Are we saved by grace or by what we do (our works)? Does God require just our faith in Jesus Christ, or do we have to do certain things to earn or activate this gift? This question comes from passages that by themselves seem somewhat contradictory. But if we believe that the whole Bible is true and without error, we also believe that the apparent contradictions can be reconciled. We will look at the following verses in greater depth later in this lesson. But read them now and summarize what they say about salvation:

Romans 3:20-28	
Romans 4:2-3	
Galatians 2:16	
James 2:21-26	



- Christianity has historically taught that the Bible reveals that our salvation is a gift from God, not something we are able to earn. The doctrine of grace can be stated this way: **We are saved by grace through faith, not because of or by our good works. Our good works, done by faith through God's enablement, are evidence of our salvation. Grace is God's love in action, giving us a gift we do not deserve.**

❖ **JUSTIFICATION:** This free gift of salvation from God is called 'justification'. That is, we are no longer guilty in God's sight, and we are freed from the penalty of our sin.

- **Why we need to be justified:** When we stand before God, we cannot say we have lived a perfect life. We are sinners, we have all sinned. We needed someone to remove our guilt, and that is something we cannot do for ourselves. Simply being perfect from this point on (if it were even possible) could not remove our past offences. We are guilty of all the sins we have committed, not doing the good things we should have done, and doing good things but for our own glory rather than God's. We deserve God's wrath (death).
- Read Galatians 2:14-21. Is obeying God's laws enough to achieve salvation?

- **The Gift of God:** The Bible explains that though I am a sinner, I will not experience God's wrath because it was poured on Jesus, and the guilt for my sins was transferred from me to Him. God made me righteous in His sight through Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:23-24, Romans 5:9). This justification is given by God. But what does He require of me in return?

❖ **EXAMINING GRACE THROUGH FAITH:** This justification, that we so desperately need in order to escape the penalty for our sins, is received by faith. The word faith as it applies to our salvation doesn't mean having a general positive attitude, or hoping that God will do something about our problem eventually. No, it is an unwavering trust in what God said, and the work He accomplished through Christ's death on the cross.

- **Abraham is made righteous by faith:** When God began a covenant relationship with Abraham, He made amazing promises. These promises included land that Abraham had never seen, a child and descendants he thought impossible, and blessings that Abraham could never have dreamed of. God came to Abraham with these promises, and Abraham responded by believing God. Because of his belief, God gave Abraham the status of righteousness, or being justified (Genesis 15:6). There was nothing that Abraham had yet done to earn this gift, except his response, "Yes, God! I believe You!"
- **The Jailer Saved by Faith:** Another example of the role of faith in salvation is shown in the book of Acts. Paul and Silas were in jail, but an earthquake shook the building with



such force that they were freed. Read Acts 16:25-31. What was the jailer’s response when he saw that none of his prisoners had escaped, realizing the power of God was at work?

The jailer was not required to perform any action or ritual, but simply to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. His questions to Paul and Silas demonstrated His belief in God’s power.

➤ **Is faith itself a ‘work’?** Faith is trusting and believing in God. Grace is defined as a gift that is entirely unearned (Ephesians 2:8-9). If it were earned, it would be a wage rather than a gift. These verses from Ephesians tell us it is by faith that we receive salvation. If the gift was given to us because of what we have done, it would not be a gift (Romans 11:6). So is faith a work on our part, or is it a work of God? Jesus called the act of believing the work of God (John 6:28-29). So even our faith is enabled by God. Faith for salvation is not *doing* something, but rather *believing* in what Jesus has already done.

- Faith is an action that merits a reward, such as receiving a gift that is offered. If we are given a gift from someone, the act of opening the gift box to see what is inside does not cause us to *earn* the gift. But it is necessary for us to receive and keep it.

❖ **EXAMINING GOOD WORKS:** We have seen that it is through faith that we are justified. Our obedience to God and doing good works should grow out of our new relationship with Him. Let us consider what it means to do good work. Read the following verses and write down what you learn about obeying God and doing good works.

John 14:15	
2 Timothy 3:16-17	
Ephesians 2:10	
Titus 1:16	
James 2:14-26	



Our good works are evidence of our obedience to God, and they are one reason for which we were saved. They are evidence of our faith and the sanctification we are undergoing. When we grow more like Christ, our lives will show it by the way we love others. God equips us for these good works, and they contribute to the growth of His Kingdom.

❖ **FAITH OR WORKS?** Faith and works are contrasted regularly throughout the New Testament. We can apply logic to what we are studying to help clarify this issue. We have already established that salvation is not by works. However, does the Bible indicate that we are saved by our faith alone, or by faith plus works? As we examine James 2:14-26, we see that there is no contradiction, only clarification. Faith is the root of our salvation, while works are the fruit (or the outworking) of it. First, let's look at Abraham's faith.

- **Abraham's faith led to works:** God made a covenant with Abraham. This covenant was initiated by God, and Abraham was just to be the recipient of these promises and good things. Because Abraham believed the promises, he was declared righteous (justified) before God. Later, God gave some clarification to their contract and required Abraham to remember the covenant through the sign of circumcision. This would be considered a 'work' or evidence of faith.
- Read Romans 4 carefully, then answer the following questions:

Was Abraham justified before or after he was circumcised?

Did God justify Abraham before or after he demonstrated his faith through works?

What was the result of Abraham's faith? What did he do because he believed?

- **James says faith without works is dead:** James was writing to a church where Christians claimed to have received the forgiveness of God, but they were not living any differently. They were lazy and insincere in their beliefs. James took this opportunity to correct them. He asked them to show him their faith without deeds. It can't be done! Then he contrasts an active faith to a dead faith. A dead faith does not



produce good work, similar to the demons that acknowledge God but refuse to serve Him. James examines the example of Abraham's active faith which was proven by his obedience ([James 2:14-26](#)).

- **We are His workmanship:** This is the relationship of faith and works: God justifies us by His grace when we have faith, and this faith produces good works as evidence of its authenticity. God saves us so that we can serve Him. Ephesians 2 calls us God's workmanship. We are the result of the work of God, and we will continue to be agents through which God works. God works in us, and through us ([Ephesians 2:1-10](#)).

❖ **ERRORS IN DOCTRINE OF GRACE THROUGH FAITH:** When we misunderstand the relationship of faith, works, and the grace of God, we really have a misunderstanding of the very nature of salvation. Sound doctrine is necessary for healthy spiritual life. We must be careful to understand the Bible clearly and not fall into any of these errors:

- **Error #1 – Adding anything to grace:** It can be difficult to believe that God will give us salvation without us having to be good enough to earn it. That isn't the way the world thinks or works! Some people will suggest that a specific system of deeds is necessary for justification, or that we only keep our salvation if we adhere to a list of rules. These works may include perfect church attendance, always tithing a specific amount, acts of charity, or recitation of specific prayers. While what we do matters to God, it does not save us. Salvation is a gift we could never earn! Without the gift of salvation, even our righteous deeds are of no worth to God ([Isaiah 64:6](#)).
- **Error #2 – All you have to do is believe:** Another common error is that we only need to pray to ask for salvation, and then we can continue to live as we always have. Because we know our good deeds will not earn our justification, we choose to not do anything at all. As a result our faith is weak and we demonstrate no evidence of a changed life. However, if our faith is real, we will desire to do what God wants and our lives will show it. The book of James addresses this misunderstanding. Faith that is not active is dead, but when our faith is real, we will do much more than just believe ([James 2:26](#)).
- **Error #3 – Comparing ourselves to others:** It is tempting to look at others around us and compare our lives to theirs. It is a falsehood, however, to think that we are 'good enough' if we are better than those around us. Salvation isn't a race in which we win if we run farther or faster than others! Each of us has a different set of obstacles to overcome in our lives, and some struggle with one sin longer than other people do. We should pray for one another, and be friendly, kind and gracious to one another as God has given us His grace ([Galatians 6:4-5](#), [2 Corinthians 10:12](#)).
- **Error #4 – Earning God's blessings:** It is a lie that we can earn God's blessings in our lives. While God promises to bless the obedient and the faithful, we cannot do specific tasks of charity or mercy in hopes of 'earning' something from God. Have you ever thought that you ought to read your Bible more so God will listen to your prayer? Or that you must stop a bad habit in order for God to bless you financially? While those disciplines are good, we must not do them in order to change God's mind and force



Him to do something we desire. We cannot do anything to earn God's blessings (Galatians 3:2-3).

- ❖ **CONCLUSION:** God's grace, in its many forms, is a gift to us and is an outpouring of God's love in action. Nothing we can do will make God love us more, and He will not love us less when we fail Him. Out of our faith and love for God, good fruit will be produced if we have a living faith. The working out of our faith through deeds causes our faith to grow even greater. God's grace makes no sense to the world. It is difficult to grasp that such a great gift can be ours at no cost! It is important that we get this doctrine right.

SUMMARY

- ❖ We are saved by grace through faith, not because of or by our good works. Our good works, done by faith through God's enablement, are evidence of our salvation. Grace is God's love in action, giving us a gift we do not deserve.
- ❖ The gift of salvation from God is called justification, which means we are no longer guilty in God's sight – freed from the penalty of our sin.
- ❖ Abraham was an example of someone who was declared righteous because of his faith, not because of his obedience. Rather, his faith was proven by his obedience to the commands of God.
- ❖ While good works are not the means of our salvation, they are an important part of the Christian life. They are evidence of our obedience to God, and something God desires and plans for us to do.
- ❖ Believing that we must do something to earn or deserve our salvation is a doctrinal error.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you had a difficult time reconciling faith and works? Have you been confused about what God desires from you, and the role that faith and works play? What other questions do you have?

2. How does this lesson help you understand grace that is undeserved? What was new to you in this lesson?