

Work Without Faith Is Dead By Paul R. Blake

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas. 2:17,20,22,24,26). "Faith without works is dead" is a scriptural principle taught as a counter to the denominational error of salvation by faith only. Faith and works are inextricably linked in the inspired writings of James, of Paul in Romans, and of the Hebrew writer.

At the same time, it is essential to be aware of the other extreme: the doctrine of salvation by works only. Publicly, less preaching is done on "work without faith" than on "faith without works." Nevertheless, it is addressed in the word of God and is currently practiced by some who have erred in the faith.

The major tenets of the doctrine of salvation by works are: 1) the Bible is only a book of do's and don'ts (as opposed to being a book that transforms life, Rom. 12:2), 2) salvation is based on perfect works keeping alone (liturgical Christianity), and 3) judgment is based solely on works alone (in other words, God only sees what one does, not what is in his heart). Clearly, truth is seldom at the extremes of human viewpoints; it is precisely where God has placed it in His word.

In answer to the false tenets of salvation by works alone, the Bible is not just a list of marching orders. Paul writes: "...be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2ff). The word of God has the effect of altering the thinking and feeling of the believer. This "renewing of the mind" produces a transformed life, a life that becomes a living demonstration of the perfection and power of the inspired Writ. One who simply treats the Bible as a book of rules will struggle constantly with keeping the rules consistently. Yet, one who uses the scriptures to change his heart finds living according to the scriptures to be a blessed state (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 4:20-24).

Second, God has linked faith in the heart with works of the hand, and the two cannot be scripturally separated. The apostle Paul wrote that the heart believes in Christ, and the mouth acts on that faith by confessing His name (Rom. 10:10). It is just as unacceptable before God for one to confess the name of Jesus without believing, as it is for one to believe in the Savior and yet say nothing.

Third, God will not only judge the deeds of man, he will also examine the heart (Heb. 4:12-13). Jesus describes Himself to the church at Thyatira as "...He who searches the minds and hearts" (Rev. 2:23). Heaven is not promised to the man who believes he will satisfy God with "going through the motions" Christianity. "But without faith it is impossible to please Him..." (Heb. 11:6ff).

What do the scriptures say about the relationship between the heart that believes and the hand that works? Ezekiel told Israel to cast away their sins, to make a new heart and spirit for themselves, and to turn themselves and live (18:31-32). Jeremiah wrote: "And I will give them one heart, and one way that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them" (32:39). He told Israel that they were uncircumcised in the heart (4:4, 9:26). While they had given their flesh to the Lord, they

had failed to dedicate their hearts to Him. The flesh alone was not enough to satisfy the Lord. Even from old, God told His people that a good heart leads to a spiritually good life. For example, Ezekiel prophesied that God will give Israel a tender heart to help them to walk in His statutes (11:19-20).

One who practices salvation by works alone will protest: "I don't drink or dance or curse, and I go to all the church services." Well, the same things could be said about my tie clip, but that doesn't make it a faithful Christian. One must give his whole self to God, and that also includes giving his heart to the Lord.

Furthermore, an unfaithful heart cannot maintain good works indefinitely; and contrariwise, a devout heart does not purpose to disobey. Isaiah told Israel that the reason they failed to remain in fellowship with God was because their hearts were far from God and that they treated His word as if it were a tedious list of commands (Isa. 28:13, 29:13). According to Malachi, Israel's weariness with following God's instructions led them to deal with it casually and eventually corrupt it. Their heart wasn't in it (1:6-14). The New Testament abounds with texts that prove that one's heart must be full of faith and fervency toward God and His will. It also condemns one who does works of righteousness for reasons other than faith and love toward God (Mt. 6:1-7, 16, 23:5-12, 23-28; Lk. 11:34-42, 12:1-2, 16:13-15; Rom. 2:28-29; 1Cor. 13:1-3).

Why is it that one with a sinful heart cannot maintain good works in perpetuity? It is because the heart is the origin of deeds of both righteousness and iniquity. Sin originates in the heart (Mt. 15:18; Jas. 1:13-15). Lust + opportunity = temptation; and temptation + action = sin. As lust began in the heart, the process that led to sin also started in the heart. Likewise with righteous deeds, they too begin in the heart (Rom. 6:17, 10:9-10). Faith + opportunity = will to obey; will to obey + action = obedience. In this process, faith begins in the heart. Therefore, the resulting obedience traces its roots to the heart.

At this point, it is evident that failure to obey God is based on failure to begin with a believing heart (Deut. 5:29, 6:5-6; 1Chron. 28:9; Rom. 8:4-6). Solomon said: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he..." (23:7ff). Certainly, God does not want service from those who are only acting like His people. He wants them to come before Him with a clean heart before they make their offerings (Psa. 34:18, 51:10, 17-19; Isa. 1:12-20). "...Purify your hearts, ye double minded" (Jas. 4:8ff).

Indeed, one will not escape judgment who serves God with the hand only and not in conjunction with a believing heart. The Savior said: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Mt. 5:8). Early in His ministry He was establishing the principle that a heart full of faith leads to a life full of works of righteousness. Without doubt, the condition of the heart will be part of Judgment Day criterion (Jer. 11:20, 17:10; Prov. 21:2, 24:8-12).

Placing emphasis on faith from the heart does not reduce the importance of righteous works, nor is provoking others to greater faith a repudiation of works. One does not need to worry about balancing his salvation between faith and works. Salvation is based on faith that is made alive by works. Judgment is based on works motivated by a heart full of faith.

Still, some might object by demanding, "What of all the texts like 2Corinthians 5:10 that teach we are judged by our works?" Those texts do not teach salvation by

works ONLY, any more than texts like Romans 5:1 teach that we are justified by faith ONLY. The word "only" is not in either passage; it must be inserted by the reader.

Others will go to the opposite end of the spectrum and suggest that as long as one has a heart full of faith coupled with good intentions, he will get to heaven with weak, incomplete works. That view is similar to one who would observe the Lord's Supper without the fruit of the vine. It is incomplete; and therefore, it is wrong.

All of the good works in the world will not save a soul without a good, believing heart. Hand service without heart devotion is spiritually unprofitable. Work without faith is dead, being alone.