

Works is works – right? One woman in my previous church believed the definition of Christianity was simply doing good works – helping others, especially the poor. But is that really the essence of Christianity? Let's look at what the Bible says.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

One of the most common, yet erroneous, beliefs among people – including some who are in church – is that we are good persons based on doing good deeds; or that one can earn God's favor and enter a wonderful life after death based on one's own merits. And some of us, even when we know that our deepest need is God, try mistaken ways of getting close to God:

* “My mother was a Christian so....” God has no grandchildren.

* “It doesn't matter what you believe, just be sincere.” You can be sincerely mistaken; not all paths really lead to God.

* “I'll give up all my bad habits.” The only humans who have no bad habits are in the cemetery.

* “I'll be religious and go to church.” Sitting in a chicken house for years does not make you a chicken; just like sitting in church for years does not make you a Christian.

• “I'll do lots of good works and earn it.” God does not grade on a curve. Jesus Christ is God's standard; and who can measure up to that?

Salvation is the gift of God. That's what grace means: a gift we do not deserve or cannot earn. Grace is the source, while faith is the condition of salvation. And what is that faith of which the Bible speaks? Is it simply belief in God? Many non-Christians believe in God; most of them even believe in a good God. The devil goes even further: he believes that Jesus is the Son of God [see Luke 4:34]. The apostles, while Jesus was among them on earth, had faith enough in him to leave all and follow him. Still this is not the faith spoken of here.

The Christian must have a faith greater than all these. The condition of our salvation must first believe in the goodness of God, and that Jesus is the Son of God; but further, it must be a faith that is more than a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head. It must also be a disposition of the heart. And right here it differs even “from the faith which the apostles themselves had while our Lord was on earth, that it acknowledges the necessity and merit of his death, and the power of his resurrection.”¹

This kind of faith acknowledges that Christ's death is the only sufficient means of redeeming humans from death eternal, and his resurrection is the restoration of us all to life eternal. He was delivered up for our sins and rose again for our justification. Christian faith is not only an assent to the whole gospel, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection. Even more, faith is a dependence upon him as our atonement and our life, as *given for us*, and *living in us*; not just in general, but for *you* and for *me*, and for all others. Faith is a sure confidence that through Christ *your sins* and *my sins* are forgiven, and that *you* and *I* are reconciled to God.

So what about doing good works? Many people are motivated to do good works so as to look good to their neighbors. They are concerned about what others think of them. Some are motivated by altruism. Let's look at what the Bible says.

“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). We are his workmanship through our salvation in Christ. We are re-tooled, so to speak, in order to fulfill the good works *God* has intended for us to do. Therefore, we are not justified before God by any good works we choose to do. True good works are what we are able to do *after* God has made us new. Before that point we might do some good things – beneficial to others – but they may not be the things God is concerned about or has planned for us to do. It was his purpose, to which he prepared us, by blessing us with the knowledge of his will, and his Holy Spirit producing such a change in us, that we should glorify God by our godly living and perseverance in fulfilling *his* good purposes.

¹John Wesley, “Salvation by Faith,” *John Wesley's Sermons, An Anthology*, Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed. (Nashville, Abingdon, 1991), 42.

God has done it that way so that we will depend on His power, not our own; because God knows that human power always falls short and that the good we try to do is always tainted by the sin we bring into it. God has done it that way so that we all learn how important each one of us really is to God's purposes, and so that each of us has an opportunity to grow in spirit as we become God's instruments for good in this world.

So here we are! By God's great grace, in Jesus Christ, we are his workmanship, equipped to do his perfect will. That's something worth celebrating!