

Why Salvation Is Not by Works

Works and faith are two mutually exclusive principles. You must take one or the other; you cannot mix them.

This raises the interesting question, “Why did not God decide to offer salvation on the principle of good works?” The following considerations will explain why.

1. First, no one would be saved. All men are dead in trespasses and in sins, and therefore cannot produce good works for God. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). Good works cannot begin until after a man has been saved.
2. Secondly, if man could earn his way to heaven, he would make God his debtor. God would owe him salvation in return for the life he had lived. This is clearly impossible. God owes nothing to anyone (Rom 11:35). There is nothing which man can do to put God in his debt.
3. If man could be saved by his own works or his character, he could boast before God. But this, too, is unthinkable (Rom 3:27). In heaven, God will have all the glory. He will not give His glory to a creature. It would spoil heaven to have boastful men there.
4. Again, if man could save himself, he would obviously be his own savior. In that case, he could worship himself. But this is clearly forbidden by the first commandment—“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3). If man could even assist in his own salvation, then he could take the place of a co-savior, sharing the glory of saviorhood with the Lord Jesus. We have already shown that this is impossible.
5. The idea of salvation by works is further ruled out by the fact that God has decreed, “Without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb 9:22). Good works involve no blood-shedding. Therefore, there is no salvation in them.
6. Those who think they will win heaven by good works forget that God demands absolute perfection. Keeping one commandment is not enough. Even keeping nine out of the ten commandments will not do. God must have perfect obedience (Jas 2:10).
7. Even if a man could live a perfect life from this day forward, he would not be saved. God requires that which is past (Ecc 3:15), and the sins of his life up to this moment would still have to be atoned for.
8. To suggest that man can save himself by his own works is to deny the *necessity* of the work of Christ. If salvation could be through human actions or character, then the Savior did not need to die (Gal 2:21). But the Scripture teaches that there is no other way of salvation, “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11).
9. The notion that man can save himself, or assist in his own salvation, denies the *sufficiency* of the work of Christ (Col 3:11b). “There are multitudes of baptized men and women who profess to honor Christ, but in reality do Him great dishonor. They give Christ a certain place in their system of religion, but not the place which God intended Him to fill. Christ alone is not ‘all in all’

to their souls. No! It is either Christ and the Church—or Christ and the sacraments—or Christ and his ordained ministers—or Christ and their own repentance—or Christ and their own goodness—or Christ and their own prayers—or Christ and their own sincerity and charity, on which they rest their souls”—Ryle.

10. In connection with salvation, as with everything else, God must always have the place of supremacy, the place of the more blessed One. For instance, the Lord Jesus taught, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). That being so, God will always have the place of the more blessed One. He will do the giving, and man will do the receiving.

11. Again it should be mentioned that since Christ finished the work of salvation, it is impossible for man to add to it. You simply cannot add to a finished work. Christ did not come into the world to help save sinners, but to save them (1 Tim 1:15).

The idea that men are saved by keeping the law is very widely held, but it has no Scriptural foundation. God did not give the law as a means of salvation. He never intended that men should use it as a stepladder to heaven. Rather, the law was given in order to reveal sin. Its purpose was to show men the depth of their depravity so that they would then turn to the Lord and cry out for mercy. “The law entered, that the offence might abound” (Rom 5:20). “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). The law was given to stop men’s mouths, to convict them as sinners, and to bring them as penitents to the feet of the Lord (Rom 3:19). “Grace cannot begin with us until the law has reduced us to speechless silence” —C. I. Scofield.

And yet while we strive to emphasize that salvation is not by good works, we must make it equally clear that salvation is *unto* good works (Eph 2:10). Good works are not the root of salvation but the fruit of salvation (Ti 2:14). It is faith that brings salvation to the soul; then salvation in the soul produces good works.

It is this side of the truth which the apostle James emphasizes (Jas 2:14-26). He demands to see good works as the proof that a man has been justified by faith. Faith itself is invisible, but good works are the visible manifestation of true faith. A man may say he has faith, but if his life is not characterized by good works, then his faith is not genuine. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. It is only a say-so faith if it does not result in good works.

One final point! The good works of believers will be rewarded in a coming day (1 Cor 3:14). Although they do not contribute anything to a person’s salvation, they will contribute a great deal to his enjoyment of heaven.

Such is the grace of God! He saves men freely through faith in His Son, and without works. He gives them the power to produce good works for Him and rewards them when they do so.