

Is The Christian Required To Do Works? (Part Five)

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In the previous four installments in this series, we have covered the subject of works in the following order:

1. The Bible's general approach to works.
2. Mankind's failure to appreciate the seriousness and costliness of sin and thus the need for works.
3. The inability of works to justify a person before God. No one, despite his sincerity or his many painful sacrifices, can be saved based on his own works (Ephesians 2:8-9).
4. The necessity of works for sanctification unto holiness, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

In this article, works will be shown in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Is there any doubt in our minds that we are within striking range of the return of Jesus Christ? Not that He is going to return the day after tomorrow, but that He will come back to this earth within our lifetimes. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached for almost two thousand years, and prophecies made by Him and others regarding His return are being fulfilled. The crisis at the close is almost upon us. Mankind's only hope is revealed in the gospel, yet we find great ignorance regarding what His good news is.

The complete secularization of the Western, "Christian" world is almost accomplished, and doctrinal confusion abounds. It seems as though the vast number of professing Christians believe that all one must do is believe in the name of Jesus Christ to be saved. Believing in Jesus Christ is most certainly required, but Jesus Himself says in Mark 1:15 that one must believe in the gospel in order to be saved.

That is quite a bit different than merely believing in Jesus. While it is definitely true that Jesus died for our sins, the true gospel provides a great deal more instruction regarding Christianity and its purpose than solely Jesus' part in our salvation. It reveals that a Christian must play an active part in the spiritual creation that God is working in and through men.

Saved Immediately and Forever?

One of the more effective deceptions Satan has palmed off on mankind is that all God is attempting to do is to "save" people. Most Christians somehow fail to think of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, as actively involved in doing something more with those who are converted.

Consider this process, which most people believe: At some time in his life, the "saved" one had perceived the need to be forgiven of his sins. He then asked God to forgive him, and from that point on, because of Christ's blood, he was "saved." Is this true? Though this illustration has been simplified a great deal, it is nevertheless close to the prevalent belief.

We will add a biblical fact to that scenario. Almost all Bible commentators hold that the Israelite's experience of walking through the wilderness following Israel's release from bondage to Egypt is a type of a Christian's walk following his conversion. Walking is typical of laboring or working to reach an objective.

Did the Israelites arrive in the Promised Land—a type of the Kingdom of God—immediately upon release from their bondage? No! They had ahead of them a forty-year journey filled with trials. As they journeyed, God worked with them and supplied their needs, preparing them for their inheritance. Release from Egypt only began another aspect of God's work with them. To reach their objective, a great deal of labor lay ahead of them.

We all need to come to grips with the reality that our Creator is a God who works. He is not merely observing mankind, or worse still, having gone way off somewhere in the vastness of the universe, letting things run more or less on their own. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." More plainly, the Father began working in the indefinite past and has continued working right up till now. God is not sitting around passively saving people.

In Psalm 74:12, notice the psalmist Asaph's revelation of what God is doing: "For God is my King from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth." The salvation of human beings requires God to work, yet some seem to think that all He does is as simple as turning a "forgiveness switch," and the person is saved. However, in various places both the Father and the Son are called "Saviors." It ought to be apparent that saving a person from circumstances he needs deliverance from requires a savior to work. If a deliverer or savior does not make a strenuous effort, the one in need of rescue will not be saved.

Jesus testified that the Father was working at that very moment. The Bible provides abundant records of Jesus, our Savior, working on behalf of mankind: teaching, counseling, praying, healing, setting the example for His disciples, and obeying His Father flawlessly in order to be the sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Further, He says in John 14:10, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works." Jesus thus shows the Father to be His partner in His ministry.

In addition, when Jesus rose from the grave and ascended to heaven, He was made Head of the Church, as well as its High Priest. As such, He is responsible to the Father for working with the members of His Body, interceding on our behalf. He thus bears great responsibility for the salvation of its individual members and the success of the church as a whole. These vital tasks require His careful attention, especially as events near the crisis at the close of the age.

The conclusion is obvious: The work of God abounds with works for all concerned in seeking the objective He has set before us in His purpose. That objective is the Kingdom of God.

What Did Jesus Preach?

Jesus came to this earth as a Messenger from God the Father: "'Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). Two messengers are mentioned in this verse. The first is John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the second Messenger, "the Messenger of the covenant," Jesus Christ.

It is helpful to understand that, as Messenger, He did not speak His own words. John 8:38-42 combined with John 12:49-50 confirms this. Thus, the message He brought is *not* primarily about Himself but about the good news of the Kingdom of God that the *Father* ordained to be announced on earth. This does not discount Jesus in any way because He is clearly the most important person ever to inhabit this earth. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that the gospel Jesus preached is not just about Himself.

The inspired Word of God makes it quite clear that the good news Jesus brought is about the Kingdom of God. Mark 1:14-15 is typical: "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'" Luke 8:1 shows that proclaiming this good news was His customary activity, "Now it came to pass, afterward, that Jesus went through every city and village, preaching and bringing glad tidings of the kingdom of God." He says plainly in Luke 4:43 that this was His appointed task: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also: because for this purpose I have been sent."

Even in those last days before He ascended to heaven and the church was born, He used His time with the disciples to teach the same message. ". . . to [the apostles] He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Jesus was not alone in preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God. He charged His disciples with this responsibility, and they followed through as commanded. "Then He called His twelve disciples together and . . . He sent them to preach the kingdom of God . . ." (Luke 9:1-2). Later, others like the evangelist Philip joined in this effort: "But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized" (Acts 8:12).

Just in case one might think the apostle Paul preached a different gospel, he himself states in his farewell to the Ephesian elders, "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more" (Acts 20:25). As Paul reached the end of his life, Acts 28:30-31 states of him, "Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him."

One final reference, Galatians 1:8-9, is pertinent to this important issue:

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

The Father's message, purposely given to Jesus to deliver to mankind, had already been corrupted just a few decades after Christ's death, and the Galatians had been deceived into believing the corrupted one! Similarly, the gospel Jesus Christ brought has been corrupted in modern times. Rather than focusing on the coming Kingdom of God, the message being palmed off in our day primarily focuses on the Messenger.

Without a doubt, within the context of the message, Jesus is important as God in the flesh, our sinless Savior, and our resurrected High Priest. However, the message He preached focuses on other important issues besides Himself. If this were not so, why did God not title the message with something focusing directly on Jesus? God intends the title "gospel of the Kingdom of God" to fix our attention on the issue He wants to be the focus of our lives after we are called and converted, since it is the only hope for the resolution of mankind's numerous and presently unsolvable problems. The Kingdom of God is of such importance that, once we grasp the essence of its instruction, we can honestly say, without exaggeration, that it is the theme of the entire Bible.

Resurrection into the Kingdom of God is held out as the goal of those making the New Covenant with God. A covenant contains requirements that are to be met by both parties entering into it. Will those of us who have done so escape the responsibility to make efforts to live up to the New Covenant's terms comparable to those required of Israelites under the Old Covenant? Many—those who say that no works are required of Christians—believe so.

But what is a kingdom? A kingdom is simply a nation whose ruler is a king. The United States does not have a king, thus the term "kingdom" is never used in reference to it. However, Britain is ruled by a monarch (presently a queen), and the nation is frequently referred to as the "British kingdom."

A kingdom has four basic elements: 1) a king who is its supreme ruler; 2) a territory with a specific location and boundaries; 3) subjects or citizens within that territorial jurisdiction; and 4) laws and a form of government through which the will of the ruler is carried out. In our day, the gospel has been distorted by diminishing the importance of some of these elements. However, if we ignore any of them, we will have distorted the message, resulting in a distorted faith that will not bring salvation to those attempting to use it.

Who Will Be King?

David, one of ancient Israel's greatest kings, was well aware that the physical kingdom of Israel was only a type of the Kingdom God would establish long after he was dead. He clearly understood that there were two God beings and that one of them—the One who became the Son—will become the King over the earth and all of its inhabitants. Notice how Psalm 2:6-8, which David authored, begins to reveal this: "'Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion.' 'I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.'"

Many more verses support this thought:

» "The Lord is King forever and ever; the nations have perished out of His land." (Psalm 10:16)

» "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations." (Psalm 22:27-28)

» "The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood. And the Lord sits as King forever." (Psalm 29:10)

» "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom." (Psalm 45:6)

» "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures throughout all generations." (Psalm 145:13)

Isaiah 9:6-7, the wonderful prophecy regarding Christ, reads:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

As early as Genesis 17:6, God began promising that royal offspring would come from Abraham: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you." This does not specifically designate the King of kings, but when combined with other promises, we can rightfully include this verse among those that prophesy of Him. In Genesis 49:10, God prophesies through Jacob that the scepter (kingship) shall not depart from Judah's line. Jesus' ancestry (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) goes directly back to David then back to Judah and thus to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, to whom the promises were given (Galatians 3:26-29).

At the time of Jesus' first coming, the Jews were looking for a Messiah to rescue them from their downtrodden state. Though they were well aware of the Old Testament prophecies, they had made an incorrect interpretation: They were looking for a powerful, conquering king. When He came, He was indeed powerful, but He was powerful spiritually. The Jews' misinterpretation blinded them to the reality of where His power lay and how their downtrodden condition would be relieved.

The majority of the Jewish leadership overlooked such prophecies as Zechariah 9:9: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey." They completely overlooked the detailed prophecy of Psalm 22, which foretells of His crucifixion at the hands of cruel persecutors. They bypassed Isaiah 52-53, which reveals that He would die a horrible, disfiguring death while shedding His blood for the sins of His people. He indeed was the much-awaited Messiah/King, but for the establishment of His Kingdom, the wait would be much longer.

When He was crucified, the inscription over His head read that He was "King of the Jews." Yet, when asked just a few hours earlier by Pilate if He was a King (John 18:33), Jesus had replied, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (verse 36).

It *will* be established. We are much closer to that time than they were then. At His coming, Revelation 19:16 proclaims, "And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

Where Will the Kingdom Be Established?

Perhaps no other doctrine more clearly exposes the effectiveness and thoroughness of Satan's deception of the whole world (Revelation 12:9). Jesus plainly states in John 3:13, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of man who is in heaven." Yet, most of the Christian world believes that immediately upon death a person's soul wafts off to heaven to be with others of the dearly departed.

This verse does not stand alone; many scriptures confirm Jesus' testimony. Peter says regarding the highly respected, man-after-God's-own-heart David, ". . . he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. . . . For David did not ascend into the heavens . . ." (Acts 2:29, 34).

Other scriptures remind us that, when a person dies, he is without consciousness:

For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going. (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10)

Psalms 146:3-4 adds, "Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans [thoughts, *KJV*] perish."

Jesus identifies Himself in Revelation 1:18 as, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen." He says something similar as He begins His message to the church at Smyrna: "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life" (Revelation 2:8). Who are we to believe, a God who never lies or the tales of false prophets? Was Jesus telling the truth when He said He was dead—that He was not off in heaven during those three days conversing with the Father, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses? If we believe the Bible, the answer is beyond question.

The gospel Jesus Christ brought reveals the Kingdom of God as the Christian hope. The Bible teaches that a person must remain in his grave, unaware of events in the conscious world, until a resurrection occurs, when his life is renewed (just as Jesus' was), his body is changed to spirit, and he enters God's Kingdom.

In I Corinthians 15:50-54, the apostle Paul teaches that the resurrection does not occur until Christ returns. Then, those who "died in Christ" will be resurrected from their graves with spiritual bodies, and the living saints will also be changed, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. . . . [T]he dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (verse 52).

Galatians 3:29 speaks about our reward: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise," confirming that those who are true Christians—"in Christ"—will receive the same inheritance Abraham was promised. Romans 4:13 establishes beyond doubt what Abraham will inherit when he is resurrected: "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith."

Furthermore, regarding those who will be resurrected with Abraham, Revelation 5:10 adds, "[You] have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth." Later, Revelation 11:15

says, "Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'"

Many centuries of pagan tradition have convinced people that heaven is their "home" and their reward when they die. Nevertheless, the biblical record is unassailable: God's Kingdom will be established on the earth He created for mankind, and it will be an everlasting Kingdom with Christ as its King.

In awe of what he saw, John declares in Revelation 21:1-4:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

The Bible contains much more on this facet of the gospel. Yet, with just this small sampling of verses, there should be no doubt remaining that the gospel teaches that the inheritance of Christians is this earth.

Who Are the Kingdom's Subjects and Citizens?

Another area of essential knowledge contained in the gospel shows considerable misunderstanding among professed Christians. When the wise men from the East appeared in Jerusalem after Christ's birth, they stated that they sought the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2). He most assuredly was that, as He said when on trial before Pilate. However, seeing that the promise to Abraham is the entire earth, which Jesus will inherit as King, how can His rule be limited only to Jews? It is not.

Recall that in the preceding section regarding the Kingdom's location, several scriptures stated that His rule will encompass all the families of the earth—that all nations, whether Israelitish or Gentile—shall come and worship before Him (see Psalm 2:8; 22:27-28; Revelation 15:4; etc.). However, the gospel instructs us that, though all nations and their populations will be subject to Him, not all of those people will be members of the Kingdom of God. All of the citizens of the Kingdom of God, under the leadership of Jesus Christ as King of kings, will cooperate in ruling all nations.

Who are the "kings" in Christ's title as "King of kings"? It refers to those who inherit God's Kingdom by means of the first resurrection, which occurs at Christ's return. In I Corinthians 15:50, the apostle Paul reveals that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Following the resurrection that occurs at Christ's second coming, those entering the Kingdom will be changed from flesh and blood to spirit.

In John 3:3, Jesus reveals an easily understood truth if one will simply believe what He says. He tells Nicodemus that, in order for a person to see or know the Kingdom of God, he has to be "born again."

It is at this point that the prevalent misconception arises. People have been mistaught that, once they experience spiritual regeneration (Titus 3:5) upon accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and receiving the Holy Spirit, they are completely, eternally saved. This is most certainly *not* true.

Paul explains what happens at that point: "He [the Father] has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14). Notice that a newly converted Christian does not "inherit" the Kingdom at this point but is "conveyed"—it can also be translated at "transferred" or "translated"—into it. At the time of our justification, when our sins are forgiven and we are redeemed from this world, we are spiritually transferred "from the power of darkness," the rule of Satan, to that of Christ. Thus, as Paul writes, from that time "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20), and that we become "members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19).

A Christian, then, becomes part of the Kingdom of God by virtue of being "in Christ" (Romans 8:1; I Corinthians 1:30; II Corinthians 5:17; etc.), but he does not *inherit* it until the second coming of Christ, when, by the resurrection from the dead, he will be changed to spirit composition. In the meantime, he is subject to the Ruler and the laws of the Kingdom as one of its citizens. Between a person's justification and resurrection is the period of sanctification, when God expects much growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, overcoming, and testing to be accomplished before he can inherit God's Kingdom. In addition, there is the unfortunate possibility of falling away (Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-31).

Jesus explains in Matthew 25:31-34, 41:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." . . . Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Ultimately, the Kingdom of God, ruled by Jesus Christ, will be inherited by those whom God will glorify upon their resurrection at Christ's return. These resurrected saints will rule along with Christ over the earth's remaining peoples, who will become the Kingdom's physical subjects (Daniel 7:27; II Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:26-28; 5:9-10; 20:4-6; 22:5).

What are the Laws of the Kingdom?

It is helpful to realize that at its establishment on earth the Kingdom of God will be ruling over unconverted people who have just passed through the most horrific period of tribulation in the history of mankind. These people will need guidance from absolutely trustworthy standards.

No nation, not even the Kingdom of God, can govern human beings without laws. There must be standards of conduct for citizens to follow, or chaos and anarchy will result as each person does what seems right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). But "God is not the author of confusion but of peace" (I Corinthians 14:33). His Kingdom will be peaceful and orderly because people will be led to submit themselves voluntarily to His rule of law—His commandments.

Unfortunately, many believe that the commandments are done away, having been replaced by love. This can easily lead a person to believe the opposite of what is true regarding the commandments. People have a strong tendency to think of them in terms of restrictive bondage, whereas love is perceived as liberating. The apostle John says, however, that the commandments of God are love and not grievous (I John 5:3).

What does Jesus teach? In Matthew 22:36, He was asked, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" His reply is instructive:

Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

Notice that both of the two Great Commandments encompass love. The first four of the Ten Commandments show man how to love God, and the second group of six shows man how to love fellow man. The commandments remove love from being merely an emotion and reveal how to apply love practically. As one commentator stated, "Love is what you do."

It was Jesus, as God of the Old Testament, who gave to ancient Israel God's laws in their codified form from Mount Sinai. When He became a man, what did He teach in reference to these very commandments?

» "If you love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

» "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." (John 14:21)

» "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me." (John 14:23-24)

The apostle James calls the Ten Commandments "the royal law," meaning it came from a King and is worthy of His Kingdom:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. (James 2:8-12)

God has never done away with His Ten Commandments, and they never shall be done away. They will be lived by all those given eternal life forever. They will also be the basic law of those

possessing mortal life when Jesus returns. From God's commandments, all laws governing every aspect of a moral life will be drawn and applied in their spirit. Their standards will be the rule of law against which people's lives will be guided and judged.

This article has provided a foundation for the next and final installment in this series. All of the reasons works are required of the Christian are contained within the gospel. All the works in the world will not provide everlasting life; it is indeed a gift from God. Yet, God nonetheless requires works, as will easily be seen in the concluding article.