

## **Is The Christian Required To Do Works? (Part Three)**

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Previously, we saw that sin is an overwhelming reality throughout the entire world. Regardless of location, race, ethnicity, or gender, nobody escapes committing sin because all are encumbered with a nature at war with God and thus not subject to His law (Romans 8:7). In fact, mankind commits so much sin that it seems that he is barely able to keep it contained. Satan's deception is so thorough that most people on earth commit it without being aware that they are doing it!

The churches of this world have abandoned the law of God and are badly divided by sectarianism. Buried under an avalanche of false doctrines, they give no indication through the witness of their church members that it can rise to offer any effective defense against sin's pervasive influence. The churches have lost their power.

The world is filled with violence resulting from sin. We observe violence in warfare, violence in the streets, violence against the unborn in the sterile surgical rooms of abortion clinics, and with euthanasia becoming more commonplace, violence against the elderly, the terminally ill, and others deemed not worthy of life.

The public is frequently assaulted by "spin" from the government and commercial marketers that is often nothing more than polite lies, deviations from truth that are fully intended to mislead its hearers away from the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

To squeeze every dime out of their harvests, corporate farmers rob our food of many of its nutrients through poor growing methods, and mass production further compounds that damage by spitting out processed junk foods—and we wonder why so many are sick so early in life! Lately, pharmaceutical companies have been accused of greatly exaggerating statistical occurrences of certain illnesses and /or deficiencies in order to sell their drugs and so increase their profits.

We could examine each of the Ten Commandments in this manner, but these few examples give an overview of the undeniable fact that morality—of which God's laws are the standard—is almost completely swamped by a veritable ocean of sin, with our own among the rest of mankind's.

That God has not blown up the entire planet is certainly a testament to His confident vision that He can bring something beautiful and good out of what He has made, despite man's tireless and unrelenting efforts to destroy it. Above all, it speaks superabundantly of His grace. Is there anything in God's great creation we in our enmity against Him have not attempted to befoul, corrupt, and destroy completely through sin?

This situation cannot get any better unless sinning stops or is stopped. History reveals that life in general can be made marginally better in a given culture for brief periods, which happens occasionally after a devastating war. Early on during a period of peace, when people are too disgusted and exhausted to make war any more, they turn their attention to the far more positive labors of reconstruction. Thus, the quality of life rises because not as many people are sinning so egregiously.

Even so, no government or religion has enough spiritual, moral, or physical power to stop sin in its tracks. Overcoming sin is a very personal problem. It is not just the other person who sins: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). In this context, the glory of God is that He, by way of contrast to us, is holy. He does not sin—ever!

Each person must take it upon himself to stop sinning. Nobody can live life for another; the strong godly character of any person cannot be transferred to another. Because of human nature's deceitful self-centered pull, imitating another's evil example is relatively easy. All one has to do is to go along with the flow of the crowd. But following true moral instruction and imitating the good works of another so that one does not sin are exceedingly more difficult. Each person must face the truth about his own flawed character, allow himself to be convicted of his need to stop it in its tracks, and then put righteousness into action.

One human cannot stop sin in another, for as we saw in Part Two, a person can sin within himself in his lustful thoughts, and no one else even knows it has happened. Overcoming sin is an individual burden each must strive to achieve before God.

Many, having some knowledge of sin, sincerely want to do this. However, the Bible reveals there is a major "catch." It can be accomplished only in a close, successful relationship with God because the enabling power to overcome sin must be given by God within that relationship.

### **God's Calling and Overcoming Sin**

Once one becomes more thoroughly aware of the exceeding sinfulness of sin within himself—so aware and concerned about what God thinks of him that he wants to do something about its very real existence in his life—it elicits the question, "What must one do?" Notice the word "do." Does this not indicate activity of some kind? In other words, are we willing to expend some measure of energy—work—to begin stopping sin in our lives?

The person who experiences a deeply felt guilt regarding his sinful nature and broken relationship with God comes to understand from his study of God's Word—a work in itself—that it frequently appeals to the disciple to keep the commandments of God—another work. Yet, the world so often objects that works are not required for salvation, that one could become confused.

Obviously, something or somebody is wrong somewhere along the line. God's Word contains no contradictions, and in many places, it definitely commands the doing of works. At least eight times the Bible says we will be judged or rewarded according to our works. Since the Bible does call for works, could people be confused as to precisely *when* they are to be done?

There is a very good reason why so much sin exists. God certainly has the power and the will to stop it, but the time has not yet come in our sovereign God's purpose and plan to do this. Revelation 12:9 informs us, "the great dragon . . . , called the Devil and Satan, . . . deceives the whole world."

### **God Is Not Idle**

Because people lack faith and do not see God at work, they carelessly assume that He has gone off somewhere or that He does not care what man does. This is far from the truth. He is working out a

clear plan, one that is easily seen if one will only believe. Sadly, we are living in a part of the plan in which He has essentially left man to his own devices under Satan, the god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4).

Despite doing so, God is not inactive by any means. Humanly, we are impatient; we want things accomplished in a hurry (James 1:4-6). Did not God work out all the events concerning Israel and have them recorded in the Old Testament for our learning (Romans 15:4)? Does not God's Book show He formed the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into a nation and gave them kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah to further His plan? Did not God raise up prophets like Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel to deliver messages to inform us? Did not God send Jesus Christ to preach the gospel, live a sinless life, die for our forgiveness, and raise Him to glory as our High Priest and soon-coming King?

God took 4,000 years to arrange all the details and assemble all the parts necessary to form the church and to get its part in His plan launched on the Pentecost following Christ's resurrection. It is obvious to anyone familiar with the Bible that God's perception of time is different from man's. During all that time covered by the Old Testament, He was working toward the same objective that He is engaged in during this present age. Nothing deters Him.

God is closely involved in what is happening on earth. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Psalm 74:12, written over two millennia ago, states, "For God is my King from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth." Jesus adds in His prayer in John 17:4, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." Clearly, God retains control of what is happening in all His creation, but presently, His will restricts how involved He is in people's lives compared to what His involvement will be following Christ's return. That event will mark the beginning of the next major step in mankind's conversion.

This becomes obvious if one is willing to believe the Bible's clear statements that God is being selective about whom He offers salvation to at this time in His plan. Overall, God is "not willing that any[one] should perish but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). However, Paul clarifies this in I Corinthians 15:22-23: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming." This is not the only day of salvation.

The apostle Paul answers many questions on this subject throughout Romans 9—11. Notice Romans 9:13, 15-16, 18-23:

As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." . . . For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. . . . Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make

His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory. . . .

While this passage contains the barest of information on this subject, it clearly reveals that God is offering salvation to some and not to others. Jacob and Esau are clear historical examples of this fact. They were twins, but God, even before they were born and had done absolutely no works, made a choice between them. Jacob was selected, and Esau was not.

The same principle is true regarding Christian access to God and the salvation it makes possible. For millennia, God seemingly ignored the Gentiles, but after Christ's resurrection, this changed dramatically with Cornelius' calling and conversion (Acts 10:17-48). God is following a well-designed plan of selecting some and not others, and He is still observing that pattern to this day. He is not offering salvation to everyone just yet.

### **Only Those Called**

The notion held by the overwhelming majority is that a person is free to come to God at any time. Yet, answer this simple question: Is just anyone free to go before the king of a country at any time he wants to? Is any American free to knock on the President's door and gain entry into his office? It is almost impossible to see a corporate president, let alone the President of a nation!

People's notions of the sovereign dignity and holiness of the Creator of all things has been warped by a distorted, humanistic perception of Him, so that they barely consider respect for Him and His mighty office. Conversely, just a brief vision of Him caused the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel and the apostle John to swoon as if dead. Looking on Him in the undimmed brilliance of His radiance would kill a man.

A person cannot decide on his own to "come to Christ" and be accepted. This does not mean God will not hear and on occasion respond to the sincere prayer of even the unconverted, but that is far different than voluntarily "coming to Christ" for the purpose of being converted. Scripture clearly shows that one must be summoned by God Himself (John 6:44). Until a person meets the qualifications God demands for anyone invited into His presence, he has no access to the enabling power to overcome sin.

Notice this startling announcement Jesus made to the Jews of His day: "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is but the Father, and who the Father is but the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:22). We all have many misconceptions about both the Father and Son, but is this verse true? Yes! It says that all our conceptions about the Father and Son are wrong unless the true Son has been revealed to us, and He in turn then reveals the Father!

It is no wonder there are so many religious groups calling themselves Christian! Except for one, all the conceptions of Jesus and His way contain falsehoods patterned after *Satan's* revelation of Him to them! He has indeed deceived the whole world. John 6:44 clearly states in Jesus' own words, "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day*" (emphasis ours throughout). The apostle Paul confirms in Philippians 1:29, "For to you it has been *granted* on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." Access to the Father and Son *following* His invitation is a privilege granted. It is an aspect of God's grace.

Consider: Did Noah simply volunteer to build the ark? Did Moses seek out God to lead Israel out of Egypt? How about David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.—did they apply to become God's prophets? Did not Jesus appoint the Twelve, telling them to follow Him? Regarding this principle, no one is a clearer example than Paul—he was an out-and-out enemy! One can even say that the Father runs His whole operation through Jesus Christ, whom He *appointed* to this task. The Father chooses whom He will.

Why should we think that God's clearly established pattern in the Old Testament should be any different for us in the New Testament? One cannot just barge into His operations. Such hubris mankind has! This certainly reflects how scanty mankind's knowledge of and reverence for God are. Instead of deferring to Him at every turn, people treat Him as if He were common. Surely, the apostle Paul is correct in quoting David in Romans 3:18, "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

God calls each person individually into the church/kingdom/family/government He is producing to carry out His operations. He has planned for the next step in His purpose.

### **Justification and Sanctification**

At this point, we need to discuss the terms *justification* and *sanctification*. We will concentrate on justification first, mentioning sanctification only by way of contrast. Justification is absolutely essential to overcoming sin within the self. Why? Because without justification one has no access to God.

How, then, can one be justified? In Psalm 143:2, David makes a heartfelt appeal to God: "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous." In one sense, our sins have cast us all into the same untenable quandary. How can we have a relationship with a holy God when our conduct is so inferior that we are unacceptable for a relationship, despite greatly desiring it?

If it is possible to have such a relationship, will changing our sinful conduct through great sacrifice and effort, disciplining ourselves to obey every commandment of God about which we know, make us acceptable? People have crawled on bloody hands and knees from a mountain's foot to its peak to impress God with their sacrificial devotion in hopes of being forgiven. Will such painful sacrifices impress Him enough to earn entrance into His presence? Some will fast for long periods, while others will spend all their adult lives behind the stone walls of a monastery, poring over sacred works or praying continuously after taking a vow of utter silence. Do such things make a sufficient impact on God to open the doors to His throne room?

None of these truly impressive acts or any of a similar nature removes either the ugly, death-incurring blot that stains our hearts and characters or the blemishes on our record of sinfulness. God has a better way, the *only* way justification can be granted.

*Justification* is a metaphor taken from the law court. It and its cognate terms can indicate "alignment with a standard," "acquittal," "clearing of guilt," "innocent," "equitable," and "righteous." Interestingly, the verbal root of all these applications means "to point out." The words formed from this root point to a norm or standard to which persons and things must conform to be "right."

This ties directly into our modern English word *right*, derived from the Anglo-Saxon *richt*, which means "straight" or "upright." The *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* notes that within the Hebrew,

Greek, Latin, and English terms for justification, "the common idea is the norm by which persons and things are to be tested. Thus, in Hebrew, a wall is 'righteous' when it conforms to the plumb line, a man when he does God's will" because he is living according to that standard (vol. 10, p. 483).

How, then, can a man, burdened by a corrupt human nature that has motivated sinful deeds all his life, be just before God? Job and his three friends argue this very point through many chapters in the book of Job. Job's friends attempt to find the reasons for Job's sorry state of affairs. They consider Job to be guilty of a—or perhaps many—egregious sin. Their arguments generally consist of either accusing Job or extolling God's holiness, and Job then defends himself. In Job 9:2, he responds to Eliphaz' charge by questioning, "But how can a man be righteous before God?" He then goes on to extol God's greatness in many different ways, strongly implying, "What can a man do that could possibly please God since He is absolutely righteous in character, He has everything, and all that He does in governing His creation is righteous? No man can possibly measure up."

Bildad seconds this in Job 25:4: "How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?" The general theme of their arguments is that, since God is so holy and righteous and His judgment is so penetrating, He leaves no wiggle-room for man to claim innocence in any situation. Bildad essentially says that the best thing a person can do is to keep his mouth shut and not complain about his lot because things could be worse!

King David adds another factor certainly worth considering due to his open honesty and his refusal to dodge the issue of where he stood before God in the matter of his sins: "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge" (Psalm 51:4). He openly admits that he deserves whatever God dishes out. In other words, he has no excuse, no justification of his own that will clear him of guilt.

Jesus has an encounter with a lawyer, a man accustomed to splitting hairs over matters pertaining to the application of God's law. The issue is keeping the two great commandments of the law. When Jesus tells him to do these and he would live, the man responds by asking a question, prompting Jesus to give the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke 10:29 reveals what motivated his question: "But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" This lawyer is apparently guilty of sins of omission. He wants to appear righteous, that is, in alignment with what is good. He wants to seem better than he actually is because Jesus' answer has hit a sore spot or at least an area in which the man felt vulnerable.

The truth is that there is *nothing* a man can do to justify himself if what he does involves the expending of energy in accomplishing a work, even the works of obeying the commandments.

There are two major reasons for these works' unacceptability. First, no offering that any man other than Christ could bring to God is without blemish. Man's every offering, no matter how severely he may beat his body to discipline himself, is already tarnished by immorality, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). A man's just act or acts cannot make up for previous infractions.

All of the instructions on the requirements for making a burnt, grain, peace, sin, or trespass offering on the altar before the Tabernacle or Temple declare that the animal must be without blemish. God repeats this instruction in excess of fifty times! Why? All of these animals point to the sinless Christ, who is the only acceptable sacrifice for our justification and forgiveness. Thus, all men are disqualified on this count.

The second reason these works are unacceptable also deals with the value of the sacrifice for our justification. No human being can pay the price for the sins of the whole world. God requires a life of sufficient value or worth to nullify that immense quantity of sins and their destructive power. The only acceptable sacrifice able to meet this is the life of the very instrument of creation. The Creator alone is of greater value than what He has created. Thus, all men are also disqualified on this point, too.

### **The Apostle Paul's Example**

The apostle Paul was a man of unusual zeal for righteousness long before God ever called him. In Acts 22:3, he testifies before a group of hostile Jews, "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in the city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today."

In Galatians 1:13-14, he provides evidence of his unusual zeal to the Galatian congregation:

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

He expands on this in Philippians 3:4-6:

. . . though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Despite this background of lifelong zeal, when God called him, he began to perceive that sin was very much alive in him. He started to notice elements of its depth to which he had been blind. He gives an example in Romans 7:7-12:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

This is the man, one of exceptional zeal and spiritual insight, who strove for righteousness but who nonetheless occasionally fell into sin through the onslaught of his nature, to whom God chose to reveal His truth regarding justification by faith in Christ's blood. Paul came to realize that, regardless of how hard he tried not to sin, he nonetheless did sin, marring the offering of his life to God. Without faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice, there would be no justification and thus no access to God. Not even Paul could measure up to this standard.

## Freely Given Gifts

The cry of all of God's prophets, including Jesus, is that before one can have access to God, the one who is invited must repent. Jesus cries out in Luke 13:3 and 5, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." In Acts 2:38, the apostle Peter also, concluding his long message on the Day of Pentecost, instructs, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

John the Baptist, whose ministry immediately preceded Christ's, urged those hearing him to repent:

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" . . . But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them. "Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance." (Matthew 3:1-2, 7-8)

Access to God ultimately depends on one being called of God and justified by the blood of Jesus Christ because they have expressed their faith in His blood, repented of their sins, and brought forth fruit as evidence of their faith and repentance. Are not works by those called involved in this process? Absolutely! Faith, repentance, and producing fruit are spiritual works.

Do these works count toward justification? In John 6:27-29, Jesus clearly calls faith a work:

"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him." Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

Faith—believing—is a work. But how does this square with Ephesians 2:4-5, 8?

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. . . .

The *New Testament Commentary* illustrates this apparent contradiction:

The roots of a tall oak perform a well-nigh unbelievable amount of work in drawing water and minerals from the soil to serve as nourishment for the tree. Nevertheless, these roots do not themselves produce these necessities but *receive them as a gift. Similarly, the work of faith is the work of receiving the gift of God.* (John, p. 232; emphasis theirs)

The faith to believe in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the faith that leads to repentance and producing fruit as evidence, is a gift from God resulting from His calling and His revealing of Himself and His Son. All that follows a person's choice to use that faith is the result of the gift given initially. Without faith being given first, an individual would not repent or produce any fruit; he would simply continue living in his deceived state.



Thus, God's granting of justification is a freely given gift. It is freely given on His part, that is, He gives it without constraint to one He has called, not because the called one has earned it. However, it will cost the receiver of the gift considerably, for if he chooses to continue to seek access to God, he must give up his life to the One who bought Him. Paul states this plainly in a somewhat different context:

And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? (Romans 2:3-4)

Thus, being able to repent is also a gift of God, but we must choose to do it.

If these things are gifts of God, how then can justification be earned as the fruit of one's labors? One does not earn a gift. A gift is something given because of the liberality and kindness of the giver.

### **Distinctions Between Justification and Sanctification**

It is important to our spiritual understanding to grasp the similarities and differences between justification and sanctification, of which there are several. It is perhaps paramount to recognize that both proceed originally from God's freely given grace. It is by His gift alone that believers are justified or sanctified at all.

The result is that believers are both justified and sanctified. Both processes begin at the same time, when the sinner expresses his faith in Christ and repents. The sinner may not feel them occur, but this is nonetheless a fact of everyone's salvation.

A justified person is always also sanctified, and a sanctified person is also justified. Therefore, both are part of God's great work of salvation. Christ, therefore, is the fountain of life from which forgiveness (justification) and holiness (sanctification) flow. Both are necessary to salvation. No one will enter the Kingdom of God without being justified, nor will one enter the Kingdom of God without being sanctified—holy, fit for living in it.

A major difference between the two is that the righteousness imputed for justification is Christ's, not ours except by imputation. God grants it to us or accounts it to us for Christ's sake in a manner analogous to a legal procedure. Conversely, sanctification is actually the process of making a person inwardly righteous through experiencing life within a relationship with God.

The imputed righteousness of justification is as perfect as it ever will be; it never increases nor diminishes because that righteousness is Christ's. The righteousness of sanctification, however, is mingled with our many infirmities and imperfections.

In justification, our works have no part at all, but in sanctification, our works are of vast importance, requiring much sacrifice, striving, labor, prayer, and fighting to meet and conquer sin. Justification opens the door into God's presence and the Kingdom of God; sanctification makes us fit to dwell there. We will consider this more fully next time.