

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

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I frequently receive questions from people who think they have caught us in an error. Occasionally, they do, though it is usually nothing more than a technical inaccuracy. However, most of the time they have based their attempt to correct our articles on the common doctrines of this world's Christianity. They are not entirely at fault because, in their sincerity, they are probably judging our articles by what they have been taught in their churches.

One must follow a number of principles to have the right perspective on biblical teaching. The Bible was not written like any other book. Its multiple authors wrote in three different languages over a period of around 1,500 years. God did not reveal the entirety of His purpose at any one time, but gradually over that entire period.

In reality, the Bible has only one Author—God. The apostle Paul states in II Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." In a different context, the apostle Peter confirms this truth in II Peter 1:20-21, "... knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

A major effect of God's manner of inspiration is that information on any given doctrine may appear in any number of the Bible's sixty-six books. Yet, despite the apparently jumbled order of the books as they appear in our modern versions, a common thread of an awesome, incredible purpose still runs through all of them, connecting Genesis with Revelation. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is one Book.

The Bible's books appear jumbled because the Hebrew Old Testament, while having the same content as the King James Version and most of the modern English translations, has many of the books in a very different order. In addition, those who study into these things believe the New Testament is also much easier to understand if its books are arranged differently. In His wisdom, God has not generally provided us with this most important educational tool arranged in the order these experts suggest. Most of us, then, have to work with what we have.

In my experience, one of the most common causes of people's accusations against us, besides their having been wrongly taught in the first place, is that they have not considered all of God's revelation on the subject in question.

Old Testament Largely Rejected

During his farewell address to the Ephesian church elders, the apostle Paul asserted, "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Conversely, in many cases much is omitted from people's analysis of what the Bible teaches. Jesus parries one of Satan's attacks during their confrontation with, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). In his temptations of Jesus, Satan twisted certain scriptures and omitted principles from others that would have exposed the lies he used to challenge Jesus.

A tragic, modern-day example is that much of this world's Christianity neglects or even rejects two-thirds of God's inspired Word, the Old Testament. Many people have relegated it to a mere needless appendage. To others, it contains some heroic stories, but important doctrinal positions that connect to New Testament instruction? Never!

Some churches have consigned it for use in children's Sunday school lessons, but it is rarely truly studied by adults in those same churches. All too frequently, churches and religious organizations hand out as a gift a small volume containing only the New Testament and the Psalms. Most are unconcerned that they have received less than half of the full Book.

Many are deceived in thinking that Christianity's doctrines lie solely in the New Testament, yet when Jesus replied to Satan during His temptation, instructing us to live by every word of God, He was speaking of the *Old Testament*, the only portion of the Bible He knew! It was God's Word then, and it still is today. In short, Christianity is not exclusively a New Testament religion but one based on the entire Bible, the whole counsel of God.

The New Testament contains two telling comments, both by Paul, that clearly show that Christ's disciples used the Old Testament in conjunction with the New. Paul writes in Romans 15:4, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the [Old Testament] Scriptures might have hope." He adds in I Corinthians 10:11, "Now all these things [written in the Old Testament] happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

The foundations for God's revealed way of life are established in the Old Testament, and one cannot live by the superstructure, the New Testament, alone. King David even writes in Psalm 11:3, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Without the foundation, one will get only a partial picture of a given doctrine.

Isaiah 28:10-13 expresses a principle about the way the Bible is written:

"For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, "This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest." And, "This is the refreshing"; yet they would not hear. But the word of the Lord was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little," that they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught.

In II Timothy 2:15, Paul charges us, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." All the counsel of God on any specific doctrine is probably scattered throughout as many as 66 books! Paul's exhortation to Timothy to dissect rightly the Scriptures—again the Old Testament—requires diligent research, honesty, and careful analysis.

Herbert Armstrong often compared the Bible to a picture puzzle. Each doctrine must be searched out precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little—much like finding specific pieces of a puzzle scattered on a table. Each piece fits only in the place specifically designed to accept it. As each piece is correctly fitted into its corresponding slot, the picture gradually emerges as it was designed to appear.

Lawkeeping and Works?

Of the critical letters we receive, the bulk of them concern several specific doctrines, but the one that receives the most in numbers and vehemence is—by far—our teaching that the laws of God, which we could expand to include "works," are required to be kept by the Christian if God is to complete His purpose for them. The tone of the missives against this true concept ranges from mild skepticism to angry rebuke that charges us with being arrogant false prophets.

Usually, the letters' contexts contain references to a number of verses that, to the letter writers, prove that the law is done away or that Christians are no longer under it; that grace through faith alone is sufficient; that Christ completed His work at the cross and nothing can be added to it; that He kept the law only because He was a Jew; or that God formerly saved people through their lawkeeping but now He does it by grace. The letters can be quite impassioned, but their arguments contain only a small portion of the picture of how God's law fits into His purpose in saving people. Because they see only a narrow portion of the whole, it renders their arguments incorrect. They do not seem to grasp that lawkeeping and works fit into a far larger framework than that of the brief paragraph containing their "proof text."

It is important to note that many of these critics lack a proper concept of law in its relationship to the Bible, and this leads them into too narrow an application. "Law" can be used by the Bible to indicate a specific precept or as a body of law—for example, the first five books of the Old Testament are known as "the Law." It can also refer to everything God has said, for He says nothing that is not absolutely righteous. His every utterance, therefore, places us under obligation to obey.

Let us begin looking at this "no law/no works" argument from the perspective of what the Bible says about its own words. Jesus states during a discussion with those who challenged a concept He was expounding, "If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" (John 10:35-36).

How clear! It was so clear that those who were challenging Him could not answer Him. "The Scripture cannot be broken" means God's Word is indestructible, no matter how fallible men may regard it. In this case, Jesus means that the Old Testament is inspired, infallible, and authoritative. The New Testament is every bit as authoritative and reliable as the Old, as the same God inspired it for the same overall purpose!

Jesus declares in Matthew 5:17-19:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Not only does Jesus, our Savior, emphatically proclaim that He was not doing away with portions of God's Word (again, the Old Testament), but He also specifically charges us to keep the commandments and teach them. Yet, men ignore this and say that keeping the commandments is no longer necessary. Are we going to believe Jesus or those who contradict what He says?

Jesus calls God's Word "truth" in John 17:17. David writes in Psalm 100:5, "For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations." Psalm 117:2 adds, "For His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of the Lord endures for ever. Praise the Lord!"

Just in case one thinks that nothing similar to this exists in the New Testament—as that is where people believe God's law was changed and done away—notice the apostle Peter's quotation of Isaiah 40:6-8 and comment on it, "'All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:24-25). Does he not imply that the gospel was preached to them—New Testament Christians—from the Old Testament? Indeed he does!

How can something that comes from the mind of the righteous God who never lies—declaring in Proverbs 30:5, "Every word of God is pure," and adding in Psalm 12:6, "The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times"—be effectively contradicted by fallible, short-lived, and foolish men, whose entire lifetime is but the blink of an eye compared to His?

In whom does wisdom lie? Surely Jesus knew what He was saying when the rich young ruler asked what he should do to have eternal life: "Keep the commandments!" The man then asked, "Which?" Jesus answered by naming five of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 19:17-19). The Bible does not contradict itself. Someone is seriously misinforming people on this subject.

God charges us to consider this seriously in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, where He commands us to make a choice—and not only to make this choice, but to choose life. Where can we find real life when comparing God's Word to that of men? Since He says to choose life, the wrong choice is automatically choosing death. This is not rocket science. The answer is obvious: If one wants to live, he will choose to believe and keep what Jesus says.

Yes, But What About Sacrifices?

A factor many fail to consider when they conclude that the law is done away is that God can temporarily set aside the physical responsibility of doing certain acts commanded under the Old Covenant, while at the same time still require His spiritual children to understand and apply them spiritually. Obvious examples are the offerings of Leviticus 1-7 that God commanded to be burned on the Temple altar. Each of those offerings in some way pictures Christ in His sacrificial work in our behalf. Most of us immediately think of them in relation to sin, with Christ being the payment for sins. Yet, interestingly, three of them do not involve a payment for sin at all. Only the sin and trespass offerings involve a payment for sin.

Three of the requirements God laid down for making those offerings cannot be met today. There must be a Temple or Tabernacle, an altar, and Aaronic priests available to perform the offerings. Since AD 70, these three conditions could not be met. The priesthood continued for a while following Jerusalem's fall, but the Temple and altar were rendered unusable by Roman armies. The Temple sacrifices stopped.

However, to a Christian, sacrificing continues—but in a far different and more meaningful way in terms of salvation. The book of Hebrews makes it plain that, despite sacrifices being offered at the Temple for almost forty years after Jesus' resurrection, they had lost some of their meaning and use. We can still learn from them, but God does not require that they be physically performed.

Paul writes in Hebrews 10:4, "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins." Do we grasp a serious ramification of this statement? It was *never* possible for animal blood to remove sins! If it was not possible in Paul's day, it was not possible in Old Testament times either. *No one*, including the Old Testament heroes, was ever forgiven through an animal sacrifice, nor was anyone saved by works of the law. Forgiveness and salvation by grace were not new to the New Testament.

The offerings were continuously repeated and detailed portrayals of what sin does—it kills—and what Christ's sacrifice would accomplish—reconciliation with God. Hebrews 10:3 says they served as reminders of sin. They were and remain as teaching vehicles since their spiritual purposes are shown elsewhere in God's Word. Hebrews 10:5-10 adds:

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—to do Your will, O God.'" Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

How can a person truly live by every word of God if he casts these things aside as useless to daily life? How do they apply to us today? They apply in the spirit, which is their true intent. Jesus Christ is the object of each of the offerings, that is, they portray His activities as a man. However, as mentioned above, three of them, the burnt, grain (or meal), and peace offerings, do not deal with sin. Only the trespass and sin offerings depict Christ's death for our sins.

Very briefly, the whole burnt offering pictures Jesus Christ's total devotion to God. His life was completely consumed as an offering to God every minute He lived. It pictures His fulfilling the first of the two great commandments of the law (Matthew 22:37): Jesus loved God with all His heart, soul, and mind.

Along with the burnt offering, the meal offering represents Christ's dedicated service, but this time to man, fulfilling the second of the two great commandments (verse 39): He loved His neighbor as Himself. Sharing His consuming love for God showed His consummate love for man.

The peace offering represents the fruit of all of Jesus' sacrificial labors on behalf of God and mankind, including those symbolized by the sin and trespass offerings. The peace offering shows God, the High Priest, and man fellowshiping together, sharing a common meal in peace and thanksgiving.

Before leaving Jesus' example, we need to consider whether we are ever tempted to think that Jesus dream-walked through life like an actor on a stage. Do we ever feel that He must have had it easy because He was also God, and so could easily overcome any temptation that crossed His path? While it is true that, even as a man, He never stopped being God, He was also a man and thus encumbered with human feelings, and that nature within Him opened the door to sore temptations. Hebrews 2:16-18 reflects this:

For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

Hebrews 4:15-16 adds

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

He Is Our Example in Sacrifice

It is important on several fronts to allow this reality's impact to affect us. Why? Because Jesus is our example, and we are to follow in His footsteps. Even though He was the Son of God, His Father did not lay out an easy course for Him. For instance, He rarely escaped almost continuous confrontations by angry people. By itself, this was a great burden. The pressure from this trial culminated in His crucifixion and all it entailed.

Jesus had to work at succeeding in His responsibilities. Each day was a sacrificial offering for Him on behalf of God and men. Thus, He is our example in this too. He gave of Himself, laying down His life for His friends, not only as an offering for sin, but also in daily service as a servant.

It will become clear that He did not engage in this labor so we could escape the responsibilities of our assignments. If we are to walk the same path behind our Example, does it not follow that we will face the same basic difficulties He did? God promises that our responsibilities will be in measure to our gifts (I Corinthians 10:13; Romans 12:6-8), but He did not do it all for us.

Do we not have work to do to follow Him? Once a person is converted, can anybody keep the commandments for him? Can a person be a proxy for another before God? Can anyone live any part of life for another? People can do things on another's behalf, but they cannot live life for anybody else.

The apostle Paul is given "credit" by no law/no works advocates for teaching that God's law is done away. However, II Peter 3:15-16 says about Paul's writings:

. . . and account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

Notice that Peter said *all* of Paul's epistles had things in them that people twisted! This happens because people frequently will not take the time to study deeply, and at the same time, they lack the humility to admit the truth.

Romans 12:1-2 lays the gauntlet before us concerning how the sacrifices apply to the Christian. Paul writes:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

In I Corinthians 11:1, Paul gives a command to the Corinthians that ought to be burned into our consciousness: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." This verse is unfortunately misplaced as the first verse of chapter 11, as it rightly belongs to the subject matter of chapter 10. Just three verses earlier (verse 31), Paul admonishes them, ". . . whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." This was how Jesus Christ lived life, doing it perfectly. The apostle strove to do the same. To imitate them, we must live life as a living sacrifice. We can imitate Christ, not in the sense of enduring the agony of His crucifixion, but by obediently walking in His footsteps (I Peter 2:21) and by showing love and thankfulness to Him by keeping His precepts.

Christians who love God fully with heart, soul, and mind, and who love their neighbors as themselves, will do everything to please Him. So how can a person sacrifice himself before the God he says he loves without doing the works entailed in those sacrifices? Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 5:1-2: "Therefore be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma." Love is extremely rewarding yet also costly since one who loves will sacrifice. Indeed, sacrifice is love's very essence.

We can illuminate Paul's thought in Ephesians 5:1-2 by placing it in a larger context. Note Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Salvation indeed is a free gift; it cannot be earned by works. Yet, after saving us from our sins, God requires us to work! We are to perform work that He has laid out beforehand for us to accomplish. In fact, verse 10, standing by itself, asserts that to do these good works is the very reason we have received justification!

This verse, in the phrase, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus," also says that God, in turn, is working on us. Before being saved, we were not in Christ Jesus. God's creative processes brought us into Christ, and once there, He continues to shape and form us into His Son's image (II Corinthians 3:18).

Works, Sacrifice, and Love

We are being formed, shaped, and molded by our Creator and Savior to become Christ-like. What kinds of work are required of us for this to happen?

As he progresses toward his statement in Ephesians 5:1-2, Paul says in Ephesians 4:17-18:

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk [live your life] as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. . . .

Is it twisting these verses to say that Paul is commanding these converted and already-saved people to work to sacrifice their lives as Christ did? Doing what he commands takes the work of consciously praying, studying, investigating, and meditating on God's Word to remove a person's ignorance and blindness. It also takes the additional hard work of resisting Satan, human nature, and the world to implement what is learned into daily life.

Such labor will be very pleasing to God, but in no way does it earn us salvation! Moreover, this is clearly obeying God's command. Even though it is not one of the Ten Commandments, it nonetheless expresses God's will for His children after they have been saved from past sins.

Let us be specific about other commandments God requires us to keep. Paul writes in verse 22, ". . . that you put off [work in sacrifice to rid yourself of character flaws], concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts." He adds in verse 24, ". . . and that you put on [work to build virtue into your character] the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness."

The picture Paul uses is taken from removing old clothing and putting on new. Has anybody figured out how to do this without labor? As simple as this illustration is, he applies it to the far more difficult and serious change of conduct and attitude that occurs as we choose to yield to God, who empowers us to do these things by His Spirit.

Paul's epistle becomes even more specific. In verse 25, he charges us, ". . . putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another." Is he not saying that we must keep the ninth commandment? Verse 26 admonishes us, "'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath." Is this not saying that we must control ourselves and not break the sixth commandment through the spirit of murder (see Matthew 5:21-22)?

Verse 28 commands us to earn our income honestly without breaking the eighth commandment so that we might have the resources to help others who are honestly be in need. In Ephesians 5:3, following his command to imitate Christ, he urges us not to fornicate and not to be unclean, both sins with sexual connotations. In other words, he is telling us to keep the seventh commandment.

He then adds that we must cut off any covetousness—the tenth commandment, which is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5)—that clings to our character. In Ephesians 5:4, he lists sins of blasphemy that can involve breaking the third commandment. He concludes his catalog of sins to overcome by making it exceptionally clear that anybody who practices them will not be in God's Kingdom (verse 5)! After this, who can sincerely claim that no works are required? Yet, doing none of these labors required to produce growth will earn one salvation.

The appeal underlying all of what Paul writes here is that we walk in love. If we follow what he commands on the authority of Jesus Christ, we will be walking in love, just as Christ loved us. Our walking in love cannot be just any old act that men dignify with the title "love." Christ's own purposeful, self-sacrificial example must be the pattern for our thoughts, words, and conduct.

Notice that in Ephesians 5:2 Paul says Christ gave Himself for us. At the end, He surrendered Himself to His enemies. Thus, His surrender, His sacrifice, was genuine; John 10:11, 15, shows it was not forced on Him. God wants Christ's example to be part of what motivates us to follow in His footsteps regardless of what life may drag across our path.

Self-sacrifice was the driving motivation of His life. For us, this is exceedingly difficult to emulate because self-gratification has been our guiding beacon for so long. Most of the works required by God occur when we make the effort to learn to do good and put off the evil that encumbers us from our former lives in the world. Can anyone honestly say that we expend no mental or physical energy—work—when we sacrifice for the sake of glorifying God in our lives?

God's freeing the Israelites from Egypt was His gift. They barely had to lift a finger in that huge undertaking, but they *did* have to walk out. His dividing of the Red Sea was a gift, but they had to walk through it. The Promised Land was a gift, but God required the work of walking there, following the guidance of "the cloud of the Lord" (Exodus 40:38). Suppose they had decided, at any time along the way, not to make that effort anymore. They never would have made it, would they?

Walking is one of the most frequently used figures in the Bible, appearing almost three hundred times! It is the Bible's prime metaphor for tying together a person's manner of life and his progress toward a destination. Walking can be casual or intense, but it always requires the expense of energy. Christianity is most certainly not a passive wait for Christ to do everything for us, but a dynamic process in which work plays a large part.

We are seeing that a Christian is required to perform the instructions God has laid out for him to accomplish. These include following God's guidance contained in specific laws and in general instructions, but in every case, once we are justified through Christ's blood, we are required to do our part. We will see more on this next time.