

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

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Part One addressed the issue of Christian works from a general perspective, showing that it is completely illogical to conclude, as some do, that no works are required for one to enter God's Kingdom. The New Testament contains a multitude of commands for the converted person to walk in Jesus' steps and works! Part Two will examine further evidence that works are absolutely required.

The apostle James writes, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. . . . But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:17, 20). He is saying that, just as surely as a dead person does no works, so a faith, a religion, that does not include works is also dead. Thus, a person in whom living, saving faith exists will produce works.

One must also consider Ephesians 2:8, 10, which tell us that salvation is by grace through faith, and that the Father created us for good works, which He prearranged for us to perform. Therefore, how can a person with a dead faith, one that produces no works, be in God's Kingdom, since he would be failing to do the very thing for which God is creating him in Christ?

Furthermore, we are to be in God's image and to imitate Christ. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Our spiritual Father is a Creator, and a creator works. Most certainly, Jesus worked during His lifetime on earth, living a sinless life to provide us a means of justification. As our High Priest, He continues to work toward our salvation.

Sin's Corruption

The root of this issue is that people have a dismally vague knowledge of what sin is, as well as an equally weak appreciation for the dangerous filthiness of sin, which can prevent us from entering God's Kingdom. We live in an exceedingly sinful nation in which we are confronted by sin from every quarter, including from within. Sin is so blatantly exhibited that most people seem to treat it with casual indifference until some form of it—rape, murder, thievery, lying, gossip, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, drunkenness, etc.—personally hits them.

So many are unaware of what sin is that they ignorantly participate in it. Television and movie "entertainment" overflows with it. In fact, sin is woven so tightly into the fabric of movies and TV shows that one could wonder if any other subject material exists! In America, over one million unborn children are aborted each year, and people euphemistically call this a "privacy right," hiding from the reality that they are murderers! What else can one honestly call the taking of life from an unborn human being created in God's image?

Through Jeremiah, God accuses Judah of having a "whore's forehead," indicating a people so perverted and hardened in their sins they could no longer be shamed (Jeremiah 3:3). If we as a people have not reached that stage of degeneracy, we soon will because God cries through Ezekiel, "Make a chain, for the land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence" (Ezekiel 7:23). Is there any other nation in the Western world that so openly exhibits as many violent crimes as the United States of America?

When one realizes sin's stranglehold on the United States, it becomes clear that a majority of its people are either ignorant of their responsibilities to God and fellow man, or no longer care what God thinks. A recent Barna poll reveals that an astounding 76 million American citizens never darken a church doorway to receive spiritual and moral instruction. How can they possibly appreciate what sin is and does?

Of far greater concern, though, are those who may read this article. God's ministers are responsible to make their teaching of God and His way as sharp and clear as they can so that those they teach can understand, not just the basics, but as broadly and deeply as possible so that it can be lived.

Wrong ideas about holiness usually lie in wrong ideas about human corruption. The responsibility of the Christian to seek the holiness of God provides the very reason God requires works. I Peter 1:15-16 charges us, "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"

The obverse of this common ignorance of sin is that, without a firm understanding of human corruption, we have little appreciation of the radiant glory of God's holiness toward which we are to strive! Sin lies exposed as the root cause of humanity's corrupt condition, but many, even in the church, do not appreciate the depth of persistent corruption in themselves.

Let There Be Light!

When God began the material creation in preparation for man, He did so by providing light. Light reveals and makes a person aware. The same process begins the spiritual creation, as Paul explains in II Corinthians 4:6: "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Peter confirms Paul's comment in II Peter 1:19: "And so we have the prophetic word more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." While Paul confines light to the beginning of our conversion, Peter extends our need for the light all the way to the end of God's creative process.

Vague, dim, and indistinct understandings of sin will never serve a Christian well. He must always apply his mind to growing in understanding to throw off spiritual vagueness and simultaneously glorify our Father and Elder Brother. If one does not grasp the depth of his carnal heart's disease, it will constantly deceive him into thinking he has little to overcome, thus dragging him into pride. The human heart is so sick God tells us in Jeremiah 17:9 that it is incurable!

Scripture uses terms for sin that are easily understood, but unless one meditates on them, they may not provide a clear picture of sin's many means of exerting its influence. The Bible's terms generally mean something like "missing the mark," "turning aside," or "slipping off the path." They can sound quite innocuous unless one recognizes the devastation sin has caused and ponders it seriously.

John Charles Ryle states in his book, *Holiness*:

Sin, in short, is that vast moral disease which affects the whole human race, of every rank and class and name and nation and people and tongue . . . "[A] sin," to speak more

particularly, consists of saying, thinking or imagining anything that is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God. "Sin," in short as the Scripture saith, "is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). (pp. 1-2)

As the previous article stated, law must be considered in two forms: first, as a specific command, and second, as the whole body of God's revealed will, as everything He says is absolutely true and righteous. God's revelation is not merely a collection of suggestions to mankind. How can one "live by every word of God" if he is not using all of it to nurture his spiritual and moral life?

The Bible shows that sin exists in circumstances in which no overt, visible demonstration reveals it is being committed. Jesus makes it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that one can sin through lust by coveting another, and that one is guilty of murder through hatred. In neither case is the actual act committed, yet the person is guilty of sin before God.

Everybody is aware of sins of commission. In addition, sins of omission—leaving undone things we ought to do—are also a reality. Jesus teaches in Matthew 25:41-42, 45-46, concerning His second coming:

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: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink. . . . Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

These are quite strong words to warn us about leaving good works undone.

In addition, some think that one may commit a sin in ignorance and be considered innocent. The reality is that the person is guilty even in his ignorance. Here, the saying, "Ignorance is no excuse," comes into play. Leviticus 4 and part of Leviticus 5 deal with sins of ignorance. Notice Leviticus 5: 17, "If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord, though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity."

The New Testament, in Luke 12:48, has its own word on this aspect of sin: "But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much shall be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more."

It would be good for those of us who are serious about pleasing God to spend more time in the book of Leviticus, which theologians have labeled as the Book of Holiness. One thing is sure: If we use our own imperfect knowledge of sin as the guide for evaluating our holiness, we will in all probability fall far short of measuring rightly.

Carnal to the Core

The Bible says our heart generates its evil products, and this process masks human nature, producing the sins we commit. The heart is the part of our innermost being that collects knowledge, processes it, and motivates its use. Today, we would refer to it as our mind. In Matthew 15:17-19, Jesus shows it to be the source of sin:

Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies.

Jesus also says in John 3:6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." *Flesh* is the Bible's term to indicate a person being encumbered with all the attributes of human nature, including its natural enmity against God.

Jesus admits in Matthew 7:11 that, though evil, man is able to do good things too. God has given mankind intelligence and vision that enable him to accomplish wonderful works in architecture, music, biology, sculpture, dance, painting, writing, etc. However, that same mind or heart also possesses an enmity against God that will not subject itself to His law (Romans 8:7). The same verse says this enmity is so strong that it *cannot* be subject to God and His law!

Because of this, the human heart will produce deceit, evil temper, self-centeredness, malice, self-will, self-indulgence, obstinacy, greed, envy, jealousy, narcissism, evil gossip, blasphemy, and many other corruptions. Sin pervades every part of our moral constitution and every faculty of our mind. Even our understanding, affections, reasoning powers, and will are affected. The conscience can become so blinded that it cannot be a sure guide. In Isaiah 1:6, the prophet laments that those of Judah in his day had in them no moral soundness from the tops of their heads to the soles of their feet.

This infection is worldwide. Regardless of whether one resides in the technologically advanced West or the "Black Hole" of Calcutta, India, the rain forests of central Africa or Brazil or on a lovely South Sea island paradise, all are driven against God and His law by varying degrees of carnality. No one, from the highest to the lowest, escapes God's judgment against the sin in his life. Whether king or subject, rich or poor, well-educated genius or illiterate buffoon, all stand before God, condemned to death by their own conduct and attitudes: "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Human nature is so deeply planted and persistently strong that, even though one may be justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, having received the Spirit of God and become sanctified, sin still remains, influencing by whatever sneaky means to retain control of the convert's life. The apostle Paul admonishes converted people, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Galatians 5:16-17). Carnality is buried so deeply within us that even a Christian with a new heart must battle mightily against its persistent pressure.

Paul had been converted for about twenty years when he wrote Romans 7:15-18, 23, declaring:

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. . . . But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Sin is much like the leprosy in the walls of a house, as described in Leviticus 14:33-45: We cannot get rid of it until the house—this earthly body—is dissolved. The sin within is no longer controlling the converted person's life, but it is not entirely gone, and this corrupt and filthy influence exerts its will in every situation to try to bring the righteous one down to its level in the gutter.

A Truly Tragic Imperfection

Perhaps its most serious flaw is its deceit. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." This verse is among the best known of all verses in the Bible. Though we know the words, could we perhaps not grasp some of the depth of what Jeremiah is trying to convey, particularly its practical, everyday application?

It is interesting that the Hebrew word translated "deceitful" (*Strong's* #6121) comes from exactly the same root as the name "Jacob" (which gives a bit of insight into the mindset of that famous Bible character in his pre-conversion days—God has the habit of naming things what they are). This word is used only three times in the Old Testament. It indicates "a swelling," "a humping up," and thus a knoll or small hill.

When used in relation to traits of human personality, it describes an inflated, prideful vanity, a characteristic that is distastefully useless, corrupting, and intensely self-serving. According to *Strong's*, it also indicates something fraudulent or crooked. In other words, it suggests an intentional perversion of truth intended to induce another to surrender or give up something of value. What Jacob twice did to Esau gives a good idea of its practical meaning.

Today, we might say our heart is always attempting to "con" us into something that is not good for us in any way. Its inducements may indeed appear attractive on the surface, but further examination would reveal that its appeals are fraudulent and risky. In fact, its appeals are not only downright dangerous, it is incurably set in this way.

In Jeremiah 17:9, the Hebrew word is translated "deceitful," but in the other two usages, it is translated "corrupted" and "polluted." This word should give us a clear indication of what God thinks of this mind that is generating our slippery, self-serving conduct and attitudes. In His judgment, it is foul in every sense, to be considered as belonging in a moral sewer or septic tank.

The King James translators chose to use "deceitful," and since it is a good synonym, just about every modern translation has followed its lead. *Deceit* is a cognate of *deceive*, which means "to mislead," "to cheat," "to give a false appearance or impression," "to lead astray," "to impose a false idea," and finally, "to obscure the truth." "Deceitful" thus indicates the heart to be brim-full of these horrible activities.

The term "desperately" (*Strong's* #605) also needs definition. It indicates something so weak, feeble, and frail as to be at the point of death. Thus, most modern translations, including the KJV margin, have opted for "incurable." Elsewhere, God calls it "a heart of stone," as if rigor mortis has already set in despite it still being alive. In other words, nothing can be done about it, as it is set in a pattern of influence that cannot be changed for the better. God promises, then, that He will give those He calls a new heart, a heart of flesh, one that will yield to Him and His way of life.

It is good to understand all these descriptors, but they only give us what amounts to book-learning on this vital topic. It is what its problems are in everyday, practical situations that makes God so dead set against it that He declares it "incurable." It cannot be fixed to His satisfaction and is therefore unacceptable for His Family Kingdom.

We can understand why from this brief illustration: What are the two great commandments of the law? First: We are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37-38). In other words, we are to love Him above all other things. We are to respond to God's wonderful, generous love toward us with a love that employs all of our faculties to match His love toward us.

Jesus says in Luke 14:26, "If any one comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." Do we grasp the practical application of this? He means that we are to make whatever sacrifice is necessary, even to giving up our lives, to submit in obedience to any, even the least, of God's commands. If at any time we put ourselves on equal footing to Him, we have actually elevated ourselves over Him and have committed idolatry.

The second great commandment is to love others as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). Though not quite as stringent as the first, it still is a very high standard. Jesus says that on these two commandments everything else in our response to God hangs (verse 40). Love and law are inextricably bound together in our relationship with God.

Yet, herein lies the problem. Keeping them is impossible for man as he now is, encumbered with this deceitful heart. Our heart will not permit us to do this because it is so self-centered it absolutely cannot consistently obey either of these commandments. Thus, no character of any value to God's Kingdom can be created in one with a heart as deceitful and out of control as an unconverted person. It is incurably self-centered, self-absorbed, and narcissistic in its concerns about life's activities.

This deceit has many avenues of expression, but none is more effective than to convince us we are far better than we actually are—but far better as compared to what or whom? Our hearts have an incredible ability to hide us from the reality of what we are spiritually and morally. It does this so effectively that it can harden us to the extent that we can be blinded to any and every failing in our character! It lures us into sin, hiding its seriousness from us and making us believe it to be a rather minor affair. It convinces us that "nobody got hurt" or "everybody's doing it."

In Hebrews 3:12-13, Paul issues a warning just as applicable today as it was in the first century: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Sin promises more than it can deliver. It assures us of pleasures it never imparts. Sometimes it does deliver some pleasure, but it conceals the boomerang effect that will surely come. It also obscures its addictive power, invariably leading us beyond our original limits. When we first sin a specific sin, we are under delusion, and it will lead us step by step until we are enslaved to it.

It can put on plausible appearances, even the mantle of virtue, convincing us we are doing ourselves and others a favor. Sin deludes us with hope of happiness, but what does the gambler feel when he

loses his bankroll, or the drunkard after he is burdened with a death caused by his drunk driving, or the fornicator who discovers he has AIDS, or the adulterer who must live with the fact that he has destroyed a marriage and family?

Human nature will generate any number of excuses—self-justifications, really—to avoid any sacrifice, no matter how small, or to admit any guilt that might damage its self-assessment of its value. It sometimes manages to produce narcissism so strong that all activity must have it as the center of the universe, and it will work hard to make sure it controls virtually everything. Pride and self-gratification are its driving impulses.

Surrounded by the Casual Acceptance of Evil

By insisting on "tolerance" over the last several decades, human nature has deceitfully managed to produce an open-minded acceptance of what was once commonly known to be sinful behavior. It has succeeded by maintaining that no absolutes exist regarding conduct, thus one morality is just as good as another. The nation has been bulldozed into accepting this deceitful concept by cooperative media, good-looking celebrities, savvy politicians, and liberal judges.

Thus, a polite, secular paganism has overtaken our nation, and many have become convinced that the gods and ways of the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Taoists, occultists, or whatever religionists are all the same. In one way, they are correct. They all do have the same god, but it is not the God of the true Christian religion and the Bible, One who adamantly insists on purity, chastity, and integrity of life in harmony with His commands.

We live in a time in the church's history when the news mirrors conditions Christ and others said would exist just prior to His return. Paul writes in II Timothy 3:13, "But evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." This does not mean that, as we approach Christ's return, human nature itself will get any worse than it already is, but that the expressions of its evil will intensify and increase. As the heart's evil acts multiply, greater inducements and opportunities are provided for everyone to be involved in its sinful ways.

In Matthew 24:37, Jesus states that, just before He returns, conditions will become as they were in the days of Noah. Moses reports under God's inspiration in Genesis 6:5, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." A plethora of evidence indicates that we are approaching such a time in our lives.

The apostle Paul adds in II Timothy 3:1-5:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemous, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

Perilous suggests "difficult," "threatening," and "dangerous." The term "last days" does not specifically mean the times we are living in at this moment, as Paul believed he was living in the last days. He expected Christ's return to be imminent, certainly during his lifetime, as many verses relate. Thus, he meant his instruction to Timothy to apply immediately. If this were not so, why would he tell Timothy in verse 5 to withdraw from the people he just described?

When combined with Paul's thought in verse 13, the Greek grammar gives the sense of conditions or expressions of human nature that ebb and flow like waves of the sea rather than a constant state of affairs. However, when combined with the idea of things growing "worse and worse" and Jesus' comments about the days of Noah, we can understand the situation will be especially intense in our time.

In addition, Paul did not intend us to suppose that everyone would express all of these traits all the time. Rather, all of them would indeed exist in each person since he is describing the elements of every human's deceitful heart, but the intensity of their expression would vary from person to person.

The peril to church members is not to being injured or killed but to being drawn into expressing the same sinful attitudes and conduct that everybody else is! Paul's warning is not to mix with people dominated by these characteristics. This helps us to understand that the potential to commit these sins is right in the church! Why? It exists in the church because we have all come out of the world where these things are nurtured, and none of us have overcome all these characteristics yet. In other words, despite conversion, we are still capable of expressing these sins. We must be on guard!

The first characteristic Paul lists is "men will be lovers of themselves," the wellspring of all eighteen subsequent traits. The wellspring remains in us, as Paul graphically explains in Romans 7. About this verse, William Barclay says in the *Daily Bible Study Commentary*:

Love of self is the basic sin, from which all others flow. The moment a man makes his own will the centre of life, divine and human relationships are destroyed, obedience to God and charity to men both become impossible. The essence of Christianity is not the enthronement but the obliteration of self.

New "religions" calling themselves "Christian" and having self-love as their very essence are popping up everywhere. These churches are quite popular, and their congregations tend to be large. In them, tolerance is a key concept, and the facts about the vileness of sin and man's vital need of repentance are smoothed over. Additionally, they will not teach several true Christian doctrines, ones essential to salvation, because of their belief that they are "divisive."

Truly, those doctrines do divide! They divide Christians away from the world yet unite them with God. These new religious groups are ignoring essential doctrines for the sake of so-called unity. Which is more important: unity with God or men? Men are easily deceived by their deceitful heart and blinded to their real state, believing all is well because everybody in the congregation is so "friendly," because the "gospel" music is entertaining, because the slide program is informative, and because the church is growing so large. With all these "good" proofs, they reason, surely God must be blessing their "church"!

They are deceived. None of these things is necessary to salvation and a good relationship with God. They are not proofs of God's blessing. Christ gives no indication His church would grow large. In fact He calls it a "little flock" (Luke 12:32). These churches may appear successful on the surface, but the fact remains that they are not teaching essential doctrines. They might as well be a weekly social center that also teaches some religious principles. Strong, detailed preaching about sin, repentance, and glorifying God through the works He demands must be part of Christian instruction, or the members will not grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18).

The preachers promoting this agenda are cheating people through their smooth words, convincing them that sin is not nearly as bad as the Bible makes it out to be. Sadly, church members do not sufficiently realize the extreme subtlety of our heart's disease. It does not come at us loudly proclaiming to be our deadly enemy, saying, "I want to ruin you in the Lake of Fire!" Sin comes like Judas, with a kiss, and like Joab, with his hand extended in friendship and his tongue uttering flattering words.

To Eve, the forbidden fruit seemed desirable, but she was cast from the Garden, away from the presence of God. Sin came to David in the form of a beautiful next-door neighbor, and because of his lust, first produced adultery and then the murder of a loyal man. It seemed good to Saul and his men to spare the best of the animals and King Agag's life, but consider what he lost!

Sin is sneakily attractive and very appealing to human nature, drawing our hearts toward it like a magnet. But can we appreciate that in God's loving eyes it is vile and deadly? He is forming a Family Kingdom of children who seek to please Him with all their being. Sin cost His Son His life, and the Father will not budge one inch in upholding the sinless purity of His Family Kingdom. Though He is very merciful, His standards are firm.

The purity of God's holiness is so high that we cannot really come to grips with it. The blinding radiance of His glory is an external manifestation of the purity of His character. It is so radiant that to look on the face of God would kill a man. Some, like Isaiah, who was given a brief glimpse of God in some measure of His glory, cried out that he was undone (Isaiah 6:5)! The sight must have drained him of all energy in the fear that at any moment he would be struck dead. This same God puts no trust in His servants, charges His angels with folly, and before His eyes even the heavens are not pure (Job 4:18; 15:15)! Where do vile and corrupt men, who have a nature at war against Him, stand in His sight?

We have rubbed shoulders with sin all of our lives. We have watched it occur on a massive scale, and have committed it ourselves many times, while never once having witnessed a perfectly pure life as an example of how we ought to live. It was not until God called us and began to remove the veil from our eyes that a motivating consciousness of sin began to form in our minds. It is a solemn thought to know and believe that this ultimately pure Being can read our every thought—and He is our Judge! David declares that He desires truth in our inward parts (Psalm 51:6).

Surrounded as we are by sin, and thus in some measure accustomed to it, are we honest enough to search out sin in our lives by comparing ourselves to the holiness of our Lord and Savior? Can we admit that we have not upheld our baptismal vow to be loyal to Him who has saved us? Are we willing to commit ourselves energetically and faithfully to fighting and overcoming whatever remnant of human nature that remains in us?