

Works Of Faith (Part Two)

by Staff

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Does God expect perfection? Indeed, He does, but not all at once. Step by step we are to become perfect in keeping God's law just as our heavenly Father is (Matthew 5:48). Our attitude, though, can be perfect today already. The way to accomplish this is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). We must give top priority to what Jesus came preaching: "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

There is no boasting for those who are perfecting their attitude by working to keep God's law by the faith of Christ. Will we stumble as we get serious about honoring God's law more perfectly? Of course! But we will never achieve perfection if we do not display the will and the effort to do it in our lives—and God leaves that part of our salvation entirely up to us.

Our first steps may be clumsy. We praise a child, especially one who does not appear to be overly talented, for the *effort* he puts forth. The gleam in his eyes as he experiences accomplishment means more to us than his actual achievement. Would not God, as a perfect parent, view His children likewise? Does not the effort we exert—and the growth we exhibit—in trying to be as He is mean more to Him than the rate at which we achieve perfection? Why should God not impute righteousness, based more on our heartfelt effort and attitude, than on our actual success in self-discipline? He knows that perfection will come if our attitude and motivation are right and remain right.

Thus, we are saved by God's grace through our faith. But it is a faith that *wants* to keep God's law. Paul writes: "For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:5-6). This faith is the same kind that Jesus had, a commandment-keeping faith! As the apostle John puts it so simply: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (I John 5:3).

What Law?

Those who do not want to submit to God quote verses that seem to say that faith has replaced the requirement of keeping God's law. They mention such verses as Romans 3:20, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight"; Romans 7:6, "But now we have been delivered from the law . . . so that we should serve in the newness of spirit and not in the oldness of the letter"; and Romans 10:4, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one who believes." On their face, these scriptures *seem* to support their argument.

However, they will not quote balancing verses in the same book! Paul also says, "[F]or not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13), and "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. . . . For we know that the law is spiritual" (Romans 7:12, 14). Invariably, they leave out Paul's emphatic statement in Romans 3:31: "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law."

They will note that "the law is not of faith" (Galatians 3:12), but they generally avoid Romans 3:27, where Paul says that boasting about righteousness is excluded "by the law of faith." How can a "law . . . not of faith" at the same time be a "law of faith"?

It seems to be quite a paradox! In their ignorance and disobedience, the deceived fail to ask the question Paul does in the first part of Romans 3:27: "By *what* law?" They fail to perceive that Paul was trying to save the true brethren from wolves in sheep's clothing, Judaizers who were contradicting the faith of Christ. Their purpose was to convert the brethren to their philosophy of salvation that centered on the rituals practiced under the Old Covenant law of Moses.

In reality, then, the paradox dissolves. Paul contrasts the spiritual, Ten Commandment "law of faith" with the temporary law of physical, ritualistic duties, the keeping of which required no faith. This is vital to understand: The apostle Paul describes two distinct sets of law. When reading his arguments, we must always discern "what law" from the context.

He writes of this ritual law in Hebrews 9:9: "It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot [and were never intended to] make him who performed the service perfect in regard to conscience." These temporary laws were "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation," which Christ inaugurated (verse 10). This law, only "a shadow of the good things to come, . . . can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect" (Hebrews 10:1).

The spiritual "law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul . . . and in keeping [it] there is great reward" (Psalm 19:7, 11), if we believe it and do it. Unlike the ritual law, our keeping God's law of faith produces the attitudes, behaviors and character that truly please Him. It is partially by our keeping of His law that we "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Perfection comes by submitting to God's wisdom and believing in His eternal, spiritual law, as Abraham did. Notice James' argument, so reviled by the anti-law Martin Luther: "Was not Abraham our father *justified by works* when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (James 2:21-22). The faith of Christ in us is perfected *by our works*. Abraham believed God enough to keep His commandments, and that lawkeeping faith in him was imputed to him for righteousness (James 2:23).

He continues with the example of Rahab: "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?" (James 2:24-25). Paul agrees with James when he writes, ". . . the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13). The doers of what law? The eternal, spiritual, Ten Commandment law!

God Delegates Responsibility

God is not unreasonable. He does not expect instantaneous perfection from us. He knows it is a laborious, tough process—given the stubbornness of the material He has to work with. For those who, because they believe God, work at keeping His law, boasting truly is excluded, because we stumble so very often. But though we stumble—even daily—if we discipline ourselves to walk in the

law-abiding steps of the faith of our father Abraham, God will reckon our faith to us for righteousness (Romans 4:23-25). In spite of sins that continue to come to our attention, He readily forgives us of them because our attitude is right.

God looks at our attitude of heart. If He sees in our heart a burning love that yearns for His loving way of life, He has evidence that we will stumble less and less—and eventually we will really *be* righteous. Seeing the result, He imputes that faith in our heart as righteousness. As long as that faith works to keep the Ten Commandments with wholehearted and understanding commitment, He continues to impute this righteousness to us. This faith—the same as Jesus had—gives God's law top priority, and it will eventually produce the same righteousness as He had.

David, a man after God's own heart and another good example for us, proclaims in Psalm 119: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (verse 11), and "I love Your commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold" (verse 127). If we accept God's way of life into our hearts like David, we have God's Spirit and will keep His law (Acts 5:32; Psalm 37:31).

God has taken upon Himself the greatest responsibility in our salvation, but He evidently believes in sharing responsibility. It is the personal responsibility of those whom God has called to ensure that God's plan, shown in the gospel, and God's way, codified in His law, abide in their heart. It is our free choice to do so, a choice that we must maintain ourselves. God has delegated to us this choice so that character development can occur.

He has also given His chosen ministers a weighty responsibility in this salvation process, primarily the preaching of His gospel and way of life, as well as providing other services to the brethren. Through "the foolishness of preaching" (I Corinthians 1:21, KJV) comes not only the conversion of those whom God calls, but also oftentimes a great deal of opposition and even persecution. This, on top of their own struggles to live righteously, must frequently make their God-given responsibility feel like a burden.

We honor God by honoring His way of life, His law. This will and must be the greatest effort we exert in this life. But we must never commit the error of mistaking our good works and our great effort to live according to God's law as payment for our salvation. The opportunity and privilege to live forever with God is priceless. He offers it freely to us; we cannot buy it because it is not for sale. Besides, nothing we could ever do or give would be enough to pay for it.

Yet God expects us to receive His gracious offer with joy, and normally, we have no trouble doing so. He also expects us to want to work as coworkers with Him, a more frequently avoided responsibility. The truth be told, this is a small thing compared to all that God does for us. By doing this little bit—by strenuously striving to be real *coworkers* with Christ in attitude and works of faith—we can make our great Benefactor happy and ensure our birth into His Family.