

Faith and Works.

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Outlines of Truth.

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Faith and Works.

It has been commonly supposed that between faith and works a deadly feud exists; so much so

that they are utterly irreconcilable. This is far from being true. Most mistaken ideas have, however, a grain of truth embedded in them somewhere, and this one is no exception to the rule. It is perfectly true that the popular doctrine of salvation by human merit, in the shape of works of some kind or other, is totally opposed to and inconsistent with the Bible truth of justification by faith. Yet the Scriptures speak of good works? but they are of another order altogether and are as much in harmony with faith, and as intimately connected with it as the fruit and leaves of a tree with the sap which flows through trunk and branches.

If we open our Bibles at Colossians 1: 21, we find the expression "*wicked works*." These there is no need to define. They are the hideous outcome of the fallen and depraved nature of the children of Adam. The bad fruit of a bad tree.

In Hebrews 9: 14, we get the words "*dead works*." These are works done with the object of obtaining life and blessing, such as the diligent performance of religious duties and observances. They are man's "righteousnesses," which are only as "filthy rags" in God's sight (Isaiah 64: 6) - the product of the bad tree when cultivated to the utmost. Bad fruit after all, for no amount of skill can produce grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles.

In Titus 2: 7, 9 we have "*good works*" spoken of, and strongly enforced upon Christians. They are the fruit of that new life and nature of which the Christian partakes, which has its vitality in faith, and of which the Spirit of God is the power. They are the good fruit which grows upon the good tree.

In Romans 3, Romans 4, and Romans 5, justification before God is seen to be solely on the principle of faith. One verse will be sufficient proof.

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified *by faith without the deeds of the law*" (Rom. 3: 28).

In the second chapter of James we have it laid down with equal clearness that justification - as a public thing in this world before men - is not only or mainly by faith but by works. One verse again will suffice to prove it.

"Ye see, then, how that by *works* a man is justified, *and not by faith only*" (James 2: 24).

Study carefully the context of these two passages, and you will see a most striking proof of the harmony that exists between faith and works. Both Paul in Romans and James in his Epistle cite Abraham as the great Old Testament example which supports their contention. In the life of that remarkable man called out of God to become "the father of all them that *believe*" (Rom. 4: 11), we see *faith* as a living reality between his soul and God; when gazing into the starlit heavens he "believed God" - accepting as certain that which was humanly impossible - "and it was counted unto him for righteousness." We also see a great *work* of faith when years afterwards, in simple obedience, he went

forth to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, in whom the promises reposed. He believed in God as a God who raises the dead. This public act proved it beyond dispute before men. It was the outward evidence of the inward faith.

The former we find in Genesis 15, and to this Paul appeals in Romans 4. The latter is recorded in Genesis 22, and to it James refers.

Like the fable which tells of two men, one inside a hollow ball, the other outside - one declaring it to be concave, the other insisting upon its being convex - Paul gives us the inside view, and cries "by faith." James viewing things externally, says "by works" - only, unlike the fable, in so saying, they do not disagree over it.

But now for some questions.

What is Faith?

Elaborate definitions might be given, but they would probably be less satisfactory than the answer made by a little child to this very question. She simply replied, "Believing what God says, *because God says it.*"

Faith is like a window. It receives the light. The sunlight is there. It shines *upon* the wall outside, but *in* at the window; nothing is added to it, but its rays illumine the otherwise darkened room. To "believe God" like Abraham lets Divine light come streaming into the soul.

But faith is more than this. It means not only to have light, but to *wholly repose on the One whom the light reveals to us.*

The late Dr. Paton of the New Hebrides used to tell that when translating the Scriptures into the tongue of the islanders he failed for some time to find an appropriate word for "trusting" or "believing."

One day, however, he called an intelligent Christian native, and seating himself on a chair he said, "What am I doing?"

"Master, you are resting," said the woman.

The doctor had heard that word before; it was not what he wanted, but a bright idea struck him.

He lifted both feet off the ground, and placing them under him so that they rested on the rail between the front legs of the chair, he said, "Now what am I doing?"

"Oh, master!" said the woman, "you are resting wholly, you are trusting," using a word quite new to the doctor's ears. That was the word he wanted!

Faith is reposing wholly upon Christ - *with both feet off the ground.*

What are we to understand by that verse which says that a believer's faith is counted for righteousness? (Rom. 4: 5)

We must not read those words with a *commercial* idea in our minds, as though they meant that we come to God bringing so much faith for which we receive in exchange so much righteousness, just as a shopkeeper across his counter exchanges goods for cash.

Nor must we entertain a *chemical* idea, as though they meant that we bring our faith that it may be transmuted into righteousness, after the fashion of the fabled philosopher's stone that turns everything it touches into gold!

No! Abraham is the great example of what is meant (verse 3). He - and we - are accounted or held by God as righteous in view of faith. That is its simple meaning. Faith brings in all the justifying merits of the blood of Christ; these are the great basis of that righteousness; and further, it may safely be said that the first right (or righteous) thing in anybody's life, and the beginning of a course which is right, is when he turns to God as a sinner, and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are verses which seem to connect works with salvation. Philippians 2: 12, for instance. How should we understand them?

Always strictly in relation to their context. Even if we had no context to refer to, we might be sure that "work out your own salvation" is not intended to clash with the truth of Ephesians 2: 8, 9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith . . . not of works lest any man should boast."

Turning, however, to the context we find that the Apostle's subject in Philippians 1 and 2 is the practical walk of the believer. Adversaries were abounding (Phil. 1: 28). Difficulties were thickening in the bosom of the Church (Phil. 2: 2-4). Paul himself, the watchful pastor, was removed far from them (Phil. 2: 12). In effect, he says, "Christ Jesus is your great Example. With fear and trembling, because

conscious of your weakness with the flesh within, work out your own salvation from the various forms of evil which threaten you." And lest they should think of their own abilities for one moment he adds, "*for it is God which worketh in you.*" By His Spirit He works *in* and we work out.

Might not the preaching of "only believe" without demanding good works lead to disastrous results?

Yes. To preach "only believe" in an indiscriminate way may lead to mischief. We shall not improve upon apostolic methods, so let us see what Paul did.

To men generally he testified, "*Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Acts 20: 21).

When speaking to the anxious jailer of Philippi, in whose soul a work of repentance was already proceeding, he said *only*, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16: 31). There "only believe" was quite in place, and to have "demanded good works" would have been worse than vain. It is recorded, however, that within one short hour of conversion the jailer performed his first good work, the fruit and proof of his faith (*see* verse 33). He did it not in order to be saved, but as the result of the change that grace had wrought within.

Paul further tells us that he preached that men should "repent, and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26: 20). This is most needful. If a man professes repentance we may safely demand that the change shall become manifest in his daily life ere we fully accept his professions. But this has nothing to do with preaching good works as an auxiliary to our justification.

Not only have we "dead works" *in* Hebrews, but "dead faith" in James 2: 17. What is this latter?

It is human faith, mere head belief, and not the living faith that finds its spring in God. Demons share this faith, as the succeeding verses show. It appears superficially to be much like real faith, but on closer inspection it is seen to be spurious. It "hath not works." It is a fruitless tree, with nothing but leaves.

Scripture furnishes us with examples of this dead faith. Read John 2: 23-25 and compare therewith John 6: 66-71. In that scene, living faith is exemplified by Simon Peter; dead faith by the many disciples who left Jesus, whilst Judas Iscariot gives us a man with much profession and no faith at all!

**Many professing Christians have little or nothing to show in the way of good works.
What does it mean?**

Who can really tell but God alone? Good works are not so much like the works inside the watch as the hands upon its face, which indicate the result of the activity within. Faith is the mainspring of the activity. It may be that such people are *only* professors, like a toy watch with hands only painted on its face, and no insides at all! Or it may be that something has gone wrong with the works within; they are true Christians, but sunk into a low and carnal condition like the man of whom Peter speaks, who is "blind and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins" (2 Peter 1: 9).

At any rate, the principle holds good that "the tree is known by his fruit" (Matt. 12: 33). Remembering also that "the Christian is the world's Bible," we can well understand the stress laid on the importance of good works in Scripture (*see* Ephesians 2: 10; 1 Peter 2: 9-12; and the whole of Titus 2).

How will the believer's works on earth affect his place in heaven?

Not at all. A place in heaven is his solely on the ground of the work of Christ. The Father "hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col. 1: 12). With that our works have nothing to do. All is of grace. There is only one title to a place in heaven, and that *every* true Christian has.

Our works will, however, greatly affect our place in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, as shown in the well-known parables of the "talents" (Matt. 25) and the "pounds" (Luke 19). The same thing is clearly taught in 2 Peter 1: 5-11, where, after urging the Christians to whom he wrote to abound in every spiritual grace and work, he says, "For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you *abundantly* into" - heaven? No. "The everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

The *character* of our entrance into that does depend upon our works.