

Can Effort and Good Works Save Us?

Some Jehovah Witnesses knocked on our door recently. They asked if we were interested in the Kingdom of God, and gave us a copy of their magazine.

Every Saturday they go out into neighborhoods and knock on doors. Some may be motivated by genuine compassion. But most do it because they are required to - their effort will earn them a place in Paradise.

They're not alone. Almost all religions link salvation to human actions, good works and effort. Make the right kind of offering, perform rituals correctly, memorize the right words - behave - and you get the eternal payoff, please the gods, achieve nirvana, break out of the wheel of karma, whatever.

It's simple cause and effect, the way the world works. Effort expended, results seen.

Christianity is different.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

The works *follow* faith, since we were saved "unto" or "for the purpose of" good works.

It's a crucial difference.

- **John 6:28** - "Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus replied, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent.'"

Or rather "that ye may keep on believing" in one whom he has sent.

This might also be Jesus' commentary on **Exodus 32:15-16**, in which the tables of the law were referred to as "the work of God."

"All the delight of the Holy One, blessed is He, is with the Torah" (Midrash Tanchum). The rabbis considered this meant that all of God's works were wrapped up in the Torah itself.

And it is Jesus who fulfilled and embodies that Torah Law in our hearts (**Matthew 5:17-20**).

The Jews asked about "works" (*erga* plural); but Jesus replied that there are not many works but one simple "work."

Even spiritual works will be judged by God according to their source.

Matthew 7:21-23 - "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

Jesus is quoting a line from **Psalm 6:8**, where the Hebrew word for "iniquity" is *'āven*, from a root that means "to pant" (hence, to exert oneself, usually in vain).

Self exertion is all humans know how to do, without the power of the Spirit.

Similarly we are exhorted to "labor to enter into the rest" (**Hebrews 4:11**). Like a Zen *koan*, it's meant to short circuit our normal thinking.

1 Thessalonians 1:3 - "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father"

Of course, faith will result in good deeds.

James 2:18 - "But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds."

"Faith alone is sufficient because this alone does God require from us, that we believe."
- *John Calvin, 16th century Reformation leader*

Good works point back to their source in faith.

Even the Torah-observing Jews saw that all good works reduce back to one "work" - faith.

The Law commanded Israel to obey God's laws:

Leviticus 18:5 - "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD."

Commenting on this, Rabbi Simlai said: "Six hundred and thirteen commandments were given to Moses, 365 negative commandments, answering to the number of days in the year, and 248 positive commandments, answering to the number of a man's members.

"Then David came and reduced them to eleven [eleven commands are found in **Psalm 15** - "LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? ..."].

"Then came Isaiah, and reduced them to six [as one may count in **Isaiah 33:15** - "He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; He shall dwell on high..."].

"Then came Micah, and reduced them to three [as seen in the great saying of **Micah 6:8** "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God"].

"Then Isaiah came again and reduced them to two, as it is said, **Isaiah 56:1** - "Thus saith the LORD, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed."

"Then came Amos, and reduced them to one, as it is said, **Amos 5:4** - 'For thus saith the LORD unto the house of Israel, Seek ye me, and ye shall live:.'" Or one may say, then came **Habakkuk 2:4** and reduced them to one, as it is said, 'The righteous shall live by his faith.'

- *Tractate Makkot.23b-24a*

The New Testament writers expanded on Habakkuk's assertion:

Galatians 3:11 - "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, 'The just shall live by faith.'"

"His faith" is "*emunah*" with the meaning of "strength." This means we are relying on the strength and faithfulness of God, not on our own trustworthiness. It's also where we get the expression "Amen!"

The whole passage reads:

Habakkuk 2:3-4 - "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith."

Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher, identified the whole passage with the coming Messiah. His twelfth article of the Jewish faith: "I believe with a complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, though His [coming may be delayed], nevertheless, I will wait for Him every day. For the vision is yet for an appointed time. It hastens to the end and will not fail. If it should be slow in coming, wait for it. For it will surely come – it will not be delayed . . . but the righteous will live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:3-4).

"Without faith it is impossible to please God" (**Hebrews 11:6**).

But what does this faith, this one true "work," consist of?

Matthew 16:24 - "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Walking through life in faith means we walk in repentance and humility, surrendering or abandoning our selves, dying to self daily.

In fact, each day unwraps a new manifestation of what that means, and where it takes

us.

Even when we lack strength to follow through on this "Way" - when we feel we can't believe or do any good works - we can rest on his promises:

1 Thessalonians 5:24 - "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it."

Philippians 1:6 - "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:"

That is the gospel of grace.