

The Works of Faith

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” James 2:26

The Bible says that faith must produce works. Very few Christians understand the relationship between faith and works or which works are acceptable to God and which are not acceptable. What does the Bible mean by “faith” and “works?” Faith is “what we believe” and works are “what we do.” The Bible says we are saved solely by faith in Jesus Christ because there are no works which could ever earn us righteousness. “For by grace you have been saved through faith... not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9; see also Titus 3:5).” But once we are saved, the Bible says we must then express our faith by our works; otherwise our faith is not valid. “Faith apart from works is inactive and ineffective and worthless (James 2:20).” Therefore, salvation is not a result of our good works, but good works should result from our salvation if our faith in Jesus Christ is real.

At this point, it is important to note the difference between what the Bible calls “dead works” and “good works.” In the early church, new Christians received discipleship training on the need to repent from dead works in order to serve the living God (Hebrews 6:1; 9:14). From a Biblical perspective, “dead works” include anything we do to establish a religious or moral identity outside of faith in Christ. Many works of service done by Christians today fall under this category. Dead works have three distinguishing features that separate them from what the Bible calls “good works.” The source, the power and the outcome of dead works are different than the source, the power and the outcome of good works. Dead works are initiated by our natural mind, are empowered by our natural ability, produce what we can achieve and get man’s approval. Good works are initiated by the mind of God, are empowered by the Spirit of God, produce what only God can achieve and always result in God’s approval. The Son of God is the

perfect example of someone who always did good works. Jesus Christ never did any works independently of God’s will. “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing... I can do nothing on My own initiative... because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me (John 5:19 & 30). By His good works, Jesus showed us that the work of God is God Himself at work. Jesus said, “The Father abiding in Me does His works (John 14:10).” Even though Jesus was the Son of Man, He never did any works that sprang from the strength of his human soul. Jesus showed us the only works acceptable to God are those initiated and empowered by the Spirit of God. “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God (Romans 8:14).” All good works must spring from true faith in Jesus Christ. When some people asked Jesus what they must do to do the works of God, He replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent (John 6:29).”

If God Himself is not doing the work, it is not the work of God. If we can do a work without relying on God’s wisdom and power, then such a work is likely to be natural and void of the Spirit. Since dead works are not authorized by God, they are disobedient works. For this reason, it is crucial for Christians to hear and obey the Holy Spirit in order to do good works and not dead works. We simply cannot do good works if we cannot hear God’s voice. Jesus emphasized this truth when He said, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches... My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me.” If we cannot hear the Holy Spirit, we will naturally do dead works that spring from our soul but mistakenly think they are good works. They may even appear to be “Christian” works but they are still dead works if the Spirit of God did not initiate them. Many Christians are doing dead works because so few are able to discern the difference between the spirit and the soul (Hebrews 4:12). If we are used to living by the strength of our soul and being led by our soul (our natural personality and ability), we will be

deceived into doing dead works. In fact, others may even encourage us to do them. The Bible says we must stop doing our own works to enter into God’s rest and His works (Hebrews 4:10). The only way we can stop doing dead “Christian” works and enter into God’s works is if we believe the truth of the cross. If we believe that we have been crucified with Christ and our sinful nature is dead and gone (Romans 6:6), then we can hear and obey Jesus Christ who will initiate and do His good works through us (Galatians 2:20). “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 3:10).”

At the end of this age, every Christian will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). On that day, Christ will assess our works and allot our rewards and responsibilities for the age to come (Matthew 25:21; Luke 19:17). The works we have done on earth will not only be judged for their quantity but also for their quality (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Every good work we have done in obedience to the Holy Spirit will be treated as gold, silver and precious stones. But every dead work we have done will be treated as wood, hay and straw and be burned up. On that day, Christ will judge the hidden motives of everyone’s heart (Romans 2:19). If your dead works were done out of spiritual ignorance, your works will be rejected but you will still be saved. But if your dead works were done lawlessly for selfish ambition and personal profit, you will be rejected. The angels of God will cast you out of Christ’s presence and you will face God’s judgment and eternal punishment with the rest of the hypocrites and unbelievers (Matthew 7:21-23; 13:41-42; 25:26-30). Knowing then the kindness and severity of God, we should do the works of true faith to make sure we are doing the true works of God.

*“So then, my beloved... work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”
Philippians 2:12-13*