

Discipleship Questions

What do people deserve for committing evil works?

Why is it impossible to save yourself by doing good works?

Why is it impossible for anyone to boast in law-keeping?

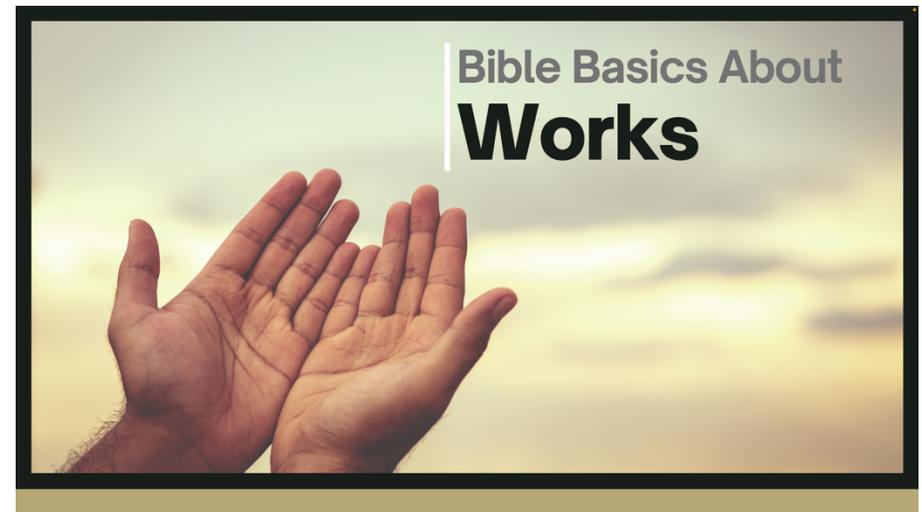
What is the connection between true faith and works?

What kind of works justifies a person?

What works are involved in initially receiving salvation?

What works are involved in pleasing God after you have been saved?

How is a person both not saved by works and saved by works?



There has been considerable debate over the subject of works regarding salvation. On one end of the spectrum are those who believe that salvation is all about what people do. On the other end of the spectrum are those who believe there are no works involved in salvation. And, there are many variations in between. However, the reality of Biblical teaching about works will only be discovered when all the passages are harmonized instead of made to compete against each other. Let's consider some basics the Bible teaches about works.

Ephesians 2:1-10

Whenever a person engages in evil works (sin), the result is spiritual death and deserving to experience God's wrath. This is what we all deserve (Romans 3:10-18, 23; 6:23). Thankfully, by God's love, grace, mercy, and kindness, He has provided a way to be saved from evil works through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ! Since our evil works have condemned us, there is no amount of good works that can then bring about our own salvation (by ourselves, as though we did not need a Savior). If we could do something so spectacular to save ourselves by ourselves, we would have reason to boast in saving ourselves. However, we were all desperately in need of a Savior and God's gift of salvation. Our response ought to be to receive this gift by faith (as defined by Scripture, more on this later; John 6:28-29). Then, those who experience His salvation must be involved in the good works God has prepared for people to do (Romans 6).

Romans 4:1-5

The apostle Paul had previously taught that all people had become guilty of sin (both Jews and Gentiles, Romans 1:18-3:18) and that God has offered Jesus to justify (being declared righteous, no longer guilty of sin) those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26). Therefore, no one could boast in themselves through their works of law-keeping (e.g. keeping the Law of Moses, since all had violated God's laws). Instead of justification coming from trusting in oneself as a law-keeper, justification comes through trusting in God's grace and mercy. This is demonstrated by Abraham, who was declared righteous before God before the act of circumcision being commanded (vv. 9-12; Genesis 15:6; 17:3-14). Abraham's justification was, therefore, not because he did something so great that undid his unrighteousness. Instead, he simply trusted God so much that he did whatever God instructed (consider Abraham's obedience of faith, Genesis 12:1-9; Hebrews 11:8-10; also see Romans 1:5; 16:26).

James 2:14-26

This passage does not conflict with the previous passages. Rather, it focuses on a different sort of works and helps to explain the nature of true faith. Namely, while the previous passages have focused on the impossibility of someone doing enough good works to earn their own salvation apart from Jesus, this passage focuses on the necessity of works of obedience that are essential to true Bible faith! So, although you cannot save yourself by yourself apart from Jesus, true faith involves trusting God enough to do whatever He requires you to do. For Abraham, this involved obedience in offering his son (Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17-19). For Rahab, this involved hiding the spies (Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31). In fact, this passage helps us understand that faith alone (only being mentally persuaded without obedient works) will not result in justification! If faith is alone without obedient works, it is a dead faith that does not save! Instead, God requires true faith, which involves obedient works for justification and salvation (e.g. Hebrews 11). These obedient works are such that after they have been done, you still recognize that you are an unworthy servant of God (unworthy of the gift of salvation), not one who has now done enough to deserve salvation (Luke 17:7-10)!

Matthew 7:21-23

Although belief in Jesus as "Lord" and "Messiah" (Christ, John 8:24; Romans 10:9-10) is essential for salvation, Jesus says salvation is not found through just professing belief and allegiance to Him. Instead, God requires obedience for salvation. In fact, Jesus says there will be

many people on Judgment Day who will have professed Him as Lord and done many good works in His name who will be eternally condemned to Hell because they were not obedient to God and were involved in law-breaking works (Hebrews 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Romans 6:16-18)!

Acts 2:36-41

While salvation is a gift from God that cannot be earned through good works, true faith in God involves obeying whatever conditions God puts on receiving the salvation (as conditions are often involved in receiving earthly gifts). This passage demonstrates the works involved in initially receiving God's salvation and forgiveness. As these Jews had come to accept the truth about Jesus as the Lord and Messiah (v. 36), they wanted to know what they must do to be saved. If there was nothing God required them to do to be saved and forgiven, we should expect to see that reflected in Peter's answer. However, God required repentance and baptism to experience the forgiveness of sins and salvation! They were even urged to save themselves! Though they did not earn their salvation, they did obey God to receive His salvation!

Philippians 2:12-16

Not only are obedient works necessary for initial salvation, but they are also required for pleasing God after being saved. Those who live by faith in Jesus must continue allowing God to work in their lives to produce good works of obedience. In fact, the language is that of working out your salvation with fear and trembling! So, you must seek to actively do the good things God has prepared for you to do as one of His saved people, recognizing you will stand before Him in Judgment one Day (Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:11-14; Matthew 25:31-46).

Conclusion

There is a critical balance to properly understanding the Bible's teaching about works. Works that are done to depend only on yourself to earn or deserve your salvation cannot save you. However, true saving faith requires trusting God enough to do whatever God requires, depending on God's mercy and grace to save you! The Scriptures then demonstrate that God requires certain works of faith for both your initial salvation and to continue in that salvation.

Discovering God's Word Bible Study Series

Written by Eric Krieg

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