

The Difference Between Worked-Up-Faith And Faith-Works

The New Testament contains many statements which superficially appear to support a legalistic view of salvation. Some unorthodox teachers interpret these as a foundation for establishing a fleshly, works-based redemption. Evangelicals reject this with vigour, yet many Evangelicals, and especially those of reformed persuasion, go nearly as far in using these texts to support a legalistic view of the Christian life after conversion. Following the Lord Jesus becomes merely a list of do's and don'ts. Discipleship is reduced to law-keeping.

Now the apostles expressly teach that this is not the case. Christian discipleship is not legalistic, unlike Judaism, but is a walking in the Spirit, an abiding in Christ, a putting on of the new man. Observance of rules and regulations cannot impart faith or grace, cannot deal with the heart and offers no help with taking thoughts captive.

If the Christian life is not legalistic, then how do we explain the many texts which seem to imply that it is? We need to look carefully at this subject and come to some conclusions.

Important texts for consideration

Jesus states that only those who obey his commandments are his disciples.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (Jn 15:10)

If you love me, keep my commandments. (Jn 14:15)

He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. (Jn 14:21)

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. (Jn 14:23-24)

Paul states that

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. (1 Cor 7:19)

Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification. (1 Thess 4:1-3)

Peter says:

For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. (2 Pt 2:21)

John states:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. (1 Jn 2:3-6)

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. (1 Jn 3: 21-24)

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. (1 Jn 5:4)

Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie. (Rev 22:14-15)

From this we see the following:

- To abide in God's love we have to keep God's commandments.
- If we love God we will keep his commandments.
- What matters is keeping the commandments of God.
- We please God and have a sanctified walk by keeping the commandments.
- To turn away from the commandments results in disaster.
- A key proof of a genuine conversion is keeping God's commandments.
- The love of God is perfected in those who keep God's word.
- People who claim to be Christians but do not keep God's commandments are liars.
- Those who do God's commandments are blessed.
- Only commandment-keepers will enter the heavenly city.

Now all this sounds rather strange to upholders of divine, unmerited grace.

There are only three explanations for this; either:

1. True faith can be worked up by human effort.
2. After receiving new life in Christ by grace alone, the believer continues his process of sanctification by personal effort.
3. Those who are truly converted will produce Gospel obedience.

Is Gospel faith based on works?

The NT everywhere shows us that answer one is condemned:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. (Rm 3:28)

A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. (Gal 2:16)

Salvation only comes by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-10). God draws his people (Jn 6:44,65), gives them faith (Jn 6:29; Acts 18:27) and repentance (Acts 5:31, 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25-26) through his effectual call (1 Cor 12:3; Jn 1:13; 1 Pt 2:9) and regenerates them (Jn

3:3; Titus 3:5) granting them the righteousness of Christ (Rm 5:17). There is no way that human strength, righteousness or faith can enable a change of heart. Neither is there some vague universal common grace that partially imparts a nebulous faith to assist people to grasp saving faith (as Wesleyan Arminians teach).

Is the Christian life based upon human effort?

The second explanation denies that perseverance is sustained by God working through the Holy Spirit by grace.

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. ... the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rm 8:1-2, 4)

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Rm 8:13)

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. (Gal 5:16)

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. (Jude 1:24)

Living by faith, obeying the commandments, completing the Christian walk, can only be done according to the Spirit.

Will born again believers always grow steadily in grace?

Only answer three has the support of the Bible.

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. (1 John 5:4)

To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:1)

When God places his seed into a life, a sinner is transformed into a member of God's own family. He is united with Christ, shares in Christ's righteousness and is filled with Christ's Spirit. He will grow in grace, faith and holiness. Not only is this the logical outcome of being joined to Christ, but God states that he will bring the redeemed sinner through. He will be sanctified. He will be preserved.

This has two very significant implications for modern churches:

- a) Leaders must be very careful in their preaching to ensure that they do not promote legalism.
- b) True believers will definitely grow in grace and sanctification.

This requires further analysis.

(a) The dangers of legalism

Too many reformed pastors recognise the scriptures we saw earlier but fail to see the wood for the trees. They see that believers will obey God's commands, so they preach that the Christian life consists of obeying these rules. This is a fallacy.

The whole point of the Christian life is that God changes us by regeneration then two vital things happen: i) we become part of Christ's life; ii) we can now be filled with the Holy

Spirit who empowers us. Those who understand this and allow Christ to work through us and bear fruit automatically obey God's law. They do not do this objectively and wake up every morning thinking, 'I must not steal, I must not covet....' No, they wake up every morning as worshippers and devote the day to pleasing God. They seek to minister to Him and defer to the Spirit constantly, from the deepest thought processes to external acts. Their focus is Christ, not mere rules.

Paul does not say, 'Strive to obey the Law as best you can, and ask the Spirit for help when you struggle.' No, he says, 'Put on the new man' (Christ in us) and 'Walk in the Spirit'. The Christian life is a relationship not an army boot camp.

The key is one's focus. One either looks to the Lord or concentrates on rules. The Holy Spirit empowers those who look to Christ and enables them to live in ways they could not achieve by their own strength; thus God receives a true testimony to his glory. Those who look to rules alone either become proud that they achieve (or so they think) or become introspective and defeated because they think they have failed.

Notice the emphasis of Jesus, which was that it is those who love him who obey his commandments. Obedience arises from love, from relationship, from trust—not from determination to follow a code. Jesus (and John) states that abiding results in obedience. Abiding means to remain in one place, what place is that? It is remaining in Christ, dwelling in Him by His Spirit. Obedience thus flows from living and walking in Christ by His Spirit.

Legalism produces Pharisees, the Spirit produces Christ-like fruit.

(b) True believers will definitely grow in grace and sanctification

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. (1 Jn 2:10)

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. (1 Jn 5:4)

The call of the Gospel is not just a promise of deliverance from sin, it is also a call—even demand—for holiness. The church is a called out people who, having been united in the divine life of God by being placed in Christ, live to be a testimony to the God who saved them. This God is a holy God. Only holiness is singled out as an attribute which is mentioned in triplets, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts' (Isa 6:3). 'Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty' (Rev 4:8). Since men, even converted men will sin, growth in holiness cannot be left to their own devices and efforts. God has included in his salvation the means to ensure that his people will progress in sanctification. To this end he has filled true believers with the Holy Spirit who leads them in holiness:

For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit. (1 Thess 4:7-8)

This why the doctrine of preservation (perseverance) is included in the doctrines of sovereign grace. The God who chooses his people, calls and saves them and ensures they remain to the end. Were it not so there could never be any certainty that any fruit would remain. The God who elects is a God who preserves.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

The first letter to the Thessalonians was one of Paul's earliest and was written to a comparatively young church. Nevertheless Paul feels that one of the most important things he must share with them in a short epistle is that God himself will preserve and sanctify them.

So, even young Christians can be assured that those with true faith will be definitely be saved and will persevere to the end. But does this not encourage complacency, arrogance and even antinomianism?

Paul was aware of that this charge would be provoked by his Gospel and taught that genuine converts would not be dominated by sin but instead would yield to the Spirit who overcomes sin in them (Rm 6:1-18). Assurance of full salvation does not lead to antinomianism but sanctification. Genuine converts know that they are saved and desire to be more holy. The bigger problem is not that secure believers will sin, but that the modern church is filled with professing Christians who do not grow in grace. As a result all sorts of counselling programmes are established to prop up failing 'converts'.

Superficial professing Christians

All sober orthodox believers are aware of the growing apostasy and appalling state of the churches in the UK, this does not need to be developed here. The main reason for this is that the Gospel message for decades has been watered down by inroads of sentimental, emotional, unbiblical, irresponsible, Arminian ideas. There is no need for conviction of sin, repentance and agonising over personal culpability in this Gospel. There is no place for exalting the demands of a holy creator God upon a sinful created people. No room for establishing the claims of divine sovereignty upon man who can do nothing to appropriate salvation without grace being first given by a merciful God. No the message is all about co-operating with a God who loves everyone equally, about deciding for Christ as if anyone can do this at any time, about minimal responsibility in following the Lord or ignoring the depths of human sinfulness before a holy God.

But enough of this which is familiar (I hope). The current problem is that the churches are full of people who do not know God because they believed a false Gospel. How can we be sure of such a provocative statement? We know because we see the shocking poverty of holy living in hundreds of church-members nation-wide. Folk have become so used to loose-living that church leaders across the land also stoop to appalling standards of behaviour, if they have standards at all. Many leaders, especially in the Charismatic Movement, have been publicly exposed as liars, deceivers, abusers of authority, manipulators, grabbers of unseemly wealth and property, fraudulence, fornicators and adulterers, full of pride and a lust for power and prone to take the glory which is due to God.

Now before criticism is rained upon me, all the above statements can be demonstrated in book after book and film after film exposing the errors of modern Charismatic leadership. I personally have seen most of those traits with my own eyes. If there are many men seeking to live godly lives in these works, then they are the exceptions. The shocking lifestyles of modern Charismatic and Pentecostal leaders are well documented. How is all this possible? How is it that church members can feel comfortable with swearing profusely? Why do so many people in churches feel no qualms in defrauding the taxman? I even met one trainee minister who admitted that he used prostitutes to comfort his loneliness.

The reason for all this is that these people have been attracted into a social structure with a purpose. They found the church to be their social centre and they enjoy the benefits of fellowship—but they never truly met with God and never had their sins remitted. They do not know the power of God in their lives and consequently do not follow Christ. Their lives demonstrate that they follow the prince of the course of this world. This is no new phenomenon:

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:4)

And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in... (Gal 2:4)

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. (2 Pt 2:1-3)

They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. (Titus 1:16)

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. (1 Jn 2:18-19)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 Jn 4:1)

False members and false leaders have been around from the beginning, but the apostles warn us that, at the end, the problem will increase significantly. We find ourselves in this situation today.

True church leaders will carefully monitor their flock and seek to lovingly deal with those who walk disorderly. Exceptionally, gross sin will need to be dealt with by expulsion. Only those who truly demonstrate their faith by their godly lives should be accepted as genuine members. This is not to say that there is no tolerance of behavioural problems since love covers a multitude of sins. But pastors must deal with their flock as men who will have to give an account. Even the weakest believer will grow, no matter how slow. Folk attending church who never grow in grace need to have the Gospel shared with them properly, not be treated as those who can be trusted into the heart of the family. Members also have a duty to admonish pastors who err. Just because a man is a leader, he is not excused of a holy standard of life and must be called to account for sin.

Holy discipline is a core feature of genuine church life. If this is not maintained, there is not church in the Biblical sense.

Conclusion

It is vital today to assert that genuine believers will definitely grow in grace and holiness and it is not acceptable to make excuses for people year after year, or worse still to establish all sorts of counselling programmes to undergird people who don't really have any faith.

The past is replete with examples of lost cases whose lives were turned around by the Gospel power of God. I personally knew a young man who was so delinquent that he was widely known as a law-breaking troublemaker in his home town, a port on the South Coast. His rabble rousing at school led to him being unable to read or write even in his early 20's. One day he was confronted with the claims of Christ and was soundly converted. He immediately set about teaching himself to read and write in order to be able to read his Bible. That man took a self-employed profession that gave him time to preach the Gospel in the open air using a specially converted motor cycle. He devoted his life to preaching the Gospel and was the model of well-dressed, consecrated devotion to the Lord. Anyone can grow; that is the whole point of the Gospel. It is not our power but the Lord's which changes us.

We must insist that genuine converts to Christ will certainly grow in grace, even if they may be weak in knowledge or unconventional; we are not all clones of each other. We must insist that Christians will fulfil the commandments of God because a Christian is someone who has been given an internal powerhouse that enables him to obey God's law. Believers will be holy, as God is holy. Anything less is false.

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