

Lesson 13: “Working” out salvation

Memory Verse: [C]ontinue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12, 13)

So far in our examination of God's plan to save humanity, we have not addressed the issue of “faith and works.” We have learned that the problem we need to be saved from is sin. Sin results on the destructive actions we call sins, and it should be clear that just stopping the destructive actions doesn't get rid of the sin that will kill us if we don't get rid of it.

So why did God introduce a written law (the ten commandments) and why does the Bible have so much to say about faith and works? There will be a place to give more thorough answers, but let's just get an overview now. The promise of Genesis 3:15 (if you choose to interpret it as a promise) is that a descendant of the woman would one day defeat Satan, the agent behind the serpent. We know that in order to do that God would come to earth as a human and live a sinless life, something no human could do.

But certain conditions had to exist in order for that to happen. God couldn't send his son to be born of and raised by a woman like Jezebel. Jesus faced many obstacles to surviving without sinning, but few of them came from his mother. God needed a nation where people at least pretended to serve him and where the worst effects of sin would be held at bay. He chose Abraham to be the father of this nation.

Even this plan ran into trouble as humans kept getting in the way of what God had planned. Eventually, God sent Jacob and his family to Egypt to escape a great famine, one probably sent by Satan in an attempt to stop God's plan. The people were in Egypt for a long time, and they became slaves to the Egyptians. They learned all the false religious practices of Egypt.

When God set them free he had to create a nation out of people who had no idea what it meant to be a nation. At their very immature level of moral development he had to give them a way to prevent the most destructive practices of the world around them. So he gave them a written law. The ten commandments are based on God's actual moral law, his character of love, but they are a very limited expression of it. That's why most of them begin with “You shall not....”

Even in the Old Testament, however, God started telling his people that just keeping the laws he'd given them wasn't enough. In the book of Jeremiah he promised to make a “new covenant” with the people; one unlike the covenant the people made when God gave them the ten commandments.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:33)

The promise from Ezekiel 36 also demonstrates that a character change was needed. Israel, through the ages, did a very poor job of keeping the ten commandments, especially the first and second ones. God eventually let the nation of the Chaldeans (Babylon) defeat Israel and take them captive. When they came back to Israel from that experience they no longer had problems keeping the first and second commandments.

In that situation, then, God found a young woman who was willing to give birth to Jesus. And thus

Jesus came into the world. He didn't focus on the rules, however. He said what was important was that you reflect the character of God and demonstrate his love. He showed by his teaching and by his life that there was a much better way to live.

After he left, his followers began to teach others what they had learned. They saw what Jesus taught as a completely new approach to righteousness. The following table summarizes some of these passages:

Author	Old Way	New Way	Reference	Notes
Paul	Flesh	Spirit	Romans 8:1-11	Walk after the Spirit, not the flesh
Paul	Letter	Spirit	2 Corinthians 3:3-18	Spirit is more glorious than letter
Paul?	Levi (Aaron)	Melchizedek	Hebrews 7:11-28	Jesus like Melchizedek, not Aaron

Paul frequently warns against attempting to save ourselves by keeping rules, especially the rules relating to the way Israel worshiped God. Some people have seen him in conflict with James who wrote:

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”
Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. (James 2:18, 19)

But if you read the book of James through you'll see that the “deeds” he talks about here are deeds of love and mercy, not rote rule keeping. And Paul would have agreed with James completely.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

The reason so many people have trouble with “faith and works” is that they confuse “the works of the law” with “good works.” People have demonstrated many times that it is possible to keep a list of rules and still treat their fellow humans with disrespect and cruelty.

God wants us to do good works; but he wants us to do them for the right reason. Doing good works in order to be saved is a form of selfishness. We're trying to avoid death. But that very selfishness is the problem that needs to be removed. That's why nobody has or will come up with a list of rules good enough to save humans.

So how do we fight sin? We fight it by trusting God to make the changes in our characters that will prepare us for eternal life in a universe without sin, sadness, death, or destruction.

Possible thought papers:

1. Have you tried to make yourself better by keeping a list of rules. How did that work out?
2. What does James mean by, “I will show you my faith by what I do.” How does faith affect the choices you make on a daily basis?
3. Satan believes in God. Why doesn't that save him? What does that say about the faith that “saves” us?