

GRACE IN FOCUS

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The Faith & Works Issue

**Justification by Works for Baptists • Saving Your Soul by
Doing Good • God's Grace and Our Works • and More!**

Articles

- 3/ JUSTIFICATION BY WORKS
FOR BAPTISTS (JAMES 2:14-26)
by Shawn Lazar
- 6/ WHEN THE CHURCH
BECAME THE KINGDOM
by Ronald E. Diprose
- 8/ SAVED FROM WHAT? (JAMES 2:14)
by Keith Pesce
- 11/ A TRIBUTE TO DR. EARL RADMACHER
by Hersh Lange and Shawn Lazar
- 12/ DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER!
by Brad Daskocil
- 17/ SAVING YOUR SOUL BY
DOING GOOD (JAMES 1:21)
by Bob Wilkin
- 19/ WOE TO THAT MAN (MATT 18:7; 26:24)
by Bill Fiess
- 20/ GOD'S GRACE AND OUR WORKS
(2 CORINTHIANS 8-9)
by Ken Yates
- 22/ JESUS PROPS UP UNFRUITFUL BELIEVERS
(JOHN 15:2-3)
by John H. Niemelä
- 25/ Q&A
by Staff
- 29/ A REVIEW OF "REPENTANCE
FOUND?" BY DAVID A CROTEAU
by Bob Wilkin

From the Editor

We received lots of very encouraging feedback on our move from 16 to 32 pages in the last issue. Many of you commented how much you appreciated the solid Biblical content. We also received many questions from new readers about the proper relationship between faith and works, especially as it appears in the epistle of James.

Hence, we are pleased to present you with the "Faith and Works Issue." There are three articles, by Shawn Lazar, Keith Pesce, and me, dealing with the issue of "salvation" in the epistle of James. We aim to clear up some of the confusion.

Ken Yates gives us an outstanding article on 2 Corinthians 8-9. He shows how giving is not automatic for believers. From that he suggests that all good works that believers do require effort on the part of believers and are not automatic.

John 15:1-6 has long troubled many Christians since it sounds like born again people can be cut off from Christ. John Niemelä shows that the Greek of John 15:2 actually says that the Father "props up" branches that are not fruitful now.

Sometimes rewards teaching bothers people. If it bothers you, Brad Daskocil says, "Don't Shoot the Messenger!"

We also have several other articles, such as one by Ronald Diprose on Amillennialism and how it arose from the teachings of Augustine and Replacement Theology. Two thumbs up. There is a short tribute to Earl Radmacher, a long-time champion of the grace of God. Bill Fiess makes an interesting observation about Judas. And the question and answer section has lots of helpful comments.

If this is your first issue of our magazine, welcome. Please email us with any comments or questions or suggestions at ges@faithalone.org.

Enjoy.



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Justification by Works for Baptists

(James 2:14-26)

by Shawn Lazar

Why I Love Problem Verses

If you've ever preached that justification is by faith apart from works, someone has most likely asked you to explain James 2:14-26. What did James mean when he said that "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:17, 20, 26) and that "a man is justified by works" (Jas 2:24; cf. Jas 2:21, 25)? How do you reconcile James and Paul?

Martin Luther was so vexed by this passage that he not only called the letter of James "an epistle of straw" (LW 35, 362), he also proposed it must have been written by "some Jew" who "probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any" and urged his students to "throw the epistle of James out of this school [i.e., Wittenberg], for it doesn't amount to much" (LW 54, 424)!

Unlike Luther, I do not consider James 2:14-26 to be a problem passage. I consider it a pivotal passage, one that shows how Free Grace hermeneutics unties the knots created by other traditions. In fact, many Baptists have moved away from the muddy middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism and have embraced Free Grace theology precisely because their minds were changed one problem passage at a time, often beginning with James 2:14-26.¹

James Is Not Talking about Eternal Salvation

The first step in getting a proper grasp of James's argument in 2:14-26 is to understand what he meant by "salvation." (See the article by Keith Pesce in this issue for a more detailed discussion of salvation in James.)

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (Jas 2:14).

What kind of salvation was James talking about? Most Christians assume he was talking about eternal salvation. But most Christians also tend to over-spiritualize the Bible. If the Bible reads "life," we think "heaven." If it reads "death," we think



"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" (Jas 2:14)

"hell." And when James says "save," most people assume he must be talking about *salvation from hell*. But what if James had a more down-to-earth kind of salvation in mind?

If you were to do a word study on the Biblical uses of "save" and "salvation" you might be surprised to find that 100% of the OT uses and about 70% of the NT uses are not about eternal salvation, but about deliverance from life-threatening dangers such as war (Num 10:9), enemies (Ps 3:7), persecution (Ps 59:2), destruction (Judg 6:31), poverty (Ps 72:13), affliction (1 Chr 20:9), drowning (Matt 8:25; 14:30; Acts 27:31), and disease (Matt 9:21; Jas 5:15). The New Testament occasionally uses *save* and *salvation* to refer to deliverance from eternal condemnation, but those are the exceptions, not the rule. Salvation most often means deliverance from life-threatening dangers. That holds true for James.

Rather than read James as an evangelistic tract explaining how to avoid eternal condemnation, we should read it as a piece of Jewish wisdom literature, in the tradition of Proverbs, which warns against the life-threatening consequences of sin:

The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened (Prov 10:27).

As righteousness leads to life, so he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death (Prov 11:19; cf. 12:28; 13:14).

James has the very same concerns as Proverbs. He wanted his readers to have wisdom (Jas 1:5). He warned them about sin's deadly consequences (Jas 1:14-15) and urged them to lay aside wickedness and welcome God's word with meekness. Why? Because it could save their lives from death (Jas 1:21). What kind of death? The same one Solomon spoke about in Prov 19:16: "He

who keeps the commandments keeps his life. But he who is careless of his ways will die” (Prov 19:16). Solomon was referring to physical death. So was James, whether it was from divine chastisement (Jas 1:21; 2:14), God’s timing (Jas 4:12), sickness (Jas 5:15), or sinful living (Jas 5:20). When we over-spiritualize this passage, we miss James’s deeply Hebraic concern with life and death.

Faith Can Die

Second, we need to rethink what James meant when he said that “faith without works is dead” just as “the body without the spirit is dead” (Jas 2:26).

The interpretation most often found in the commentaries suggests James meant to say that faith without works is *inauthentic* or *fake*, i.e., we know that we have a fake faith if we have no works.

But if that’s what James meant to say, he chose a bad metaphor. Has anyone ever looked at a dead body and concluded it must be fake? On the contrary, when we see a dead body, don’t we think about how it was once alive and we wonder how it died? That’s what James is doing here. He’s explaining how a living faith can die.

Without works, our faith is unprofitable or useless (Jas 1:26; 2:16). If you believe that we ought to love our neighbors and give to the poor, but you don’t actually act on those beliefs, then your faith is of no use to anyone. We are given the Word in order to be doers of it (Jas 1:22).

But not only is your faith useless if you don’t put it into practice, it will never mature. Against the objection that there is no connection between our faith and our behavior (Jas 2:18-19), James says that faith and works are like body and spirit. In the same way the spirit gives life to the body, good works give life to our faith. If we are increasingly drawn away by our desires and give in to our temptations (Jas 1:12-15), and if we pursue filthiness and wickedness instead of holiness (Jas 1:21), the result is that our faith will get weaker and weaker and may eventually die. And then we won’t have faith to save us from an early grave. If we don’t resist our evil desires, those desires will give birth to sin, and sin can lead to our death (Jas 1:15). But if we do good works, our faith will be living and profitable and it could save our lives. Actually, it could



Good works vindicate our faith before other people

save other people’s lives too, such as distressed orphans and widows (Jas 1:27), the poor (Jas 2:15), the sick (Jas 5:15), and people on the path to an untimely death (Jas 5:19-20).

“Good works do not come automatically. We have to be diligent. We have to make an effort. We have to deliberately put our faith into practice. The more good we do, the more mature our faith will be.”

The story of Rahab emphasizes James’s point that faithfulness can save us from an untimely death. Rahab was saved from Jericho’s destruction because she put her faith into action (cf. Heb 11:31). This is precisely the same hope that James has for all his readers. He hopes that their faith will likewise save them from an untimely death.

Some people think all true believers will automatically produce works. If so, they don’t get out much. Anyone involved

in church ministry knows that Christians do not always live up to their faith. Sometimes believers backslide, backstab, gossip, bring shame to Christ, and even fall away from the faith altogether. James stressed to his readers the importance of good works precisely because good works do not come automatically. We have to be diligent. We have to make an effort. We have to deliberately put our faith into practice. The more good we do, the more mature our faith will be. Faith is like a muscle. When you exercise it, it gets stronger. And the stronger it gets, the more good works we’ll be able to do. Faith without works is *dead*; faith with works is *lively*.

The Bible Teaches Two Justifications

Third, we need to know that *justification by works* is not the same thing as *justification by faith apart from works*.

Most people assume there is only one kind of justification and that James and Paul were talking about two aspects of the same thing. On this view, what James taught is supposed to complement, clarify, or even contradict what Paul taught, and vice versa. Neither James nor Paul taught the whole truth about justification; the whole truth is supposed to lie somewhere in-between their two accounts.

But what if there was no conflict between James and Paul because they

were actually writing about *two different kinds of justification*? There are three reasons to think they were.

First, Paul and James use different terminology. Paul wrote about “justification by faith” (Gal 2:16, Rom 3:28), while James wrote about “justification by works” (Jas 2:21, 24). Why would anyone think they were talking about the same thing? If there were two cans in your grandmother’s pantry, one labelled “Peaches” and the other labelled “Plums,” would you assume each can contained a mixture of peaches and plums? Of course not. So why do it here? A plain reading of their differing terminology suggests that Paul and James were talking about two different kinds of justification. We shouldn’t assume otherwise without good evidence.

Second, Paul confirms that there are two kinds of justification. In Romans 4:2, Paul said, “For if Abraham was *justified by works*, he has something to boast about, *but not before God*” (emphasis added). Paul had been writing about *justification before God* (Rom 3:21–4:1ff.). Paul explained at length how justification before God is by faith apart from works. But then in Rom 4:2, Paul implies there is a second kind of justification, one that is by works, and which is *not* before God. Who is it before? Evidently, it’s before men. That’s the kind of justification James is talking about in 2:14–26, one that is by works and before other people. When Abraham offered up Isaac, his faith was vindicated (i.e., justified) before men, and he became known far and wide as “the friend of God” (Jas 2:23). Likewise, Rahab was vindicated before all Israel when she hid the spies and sent them away safely. Her actions proved to Israel that she believed in their God. She was justified by her works before men.

Third, James himself contrasts Abraham’s two justifications. He refers to two different events in Abraham’s life. Each event was connected with a different kind of justification. Early in his life, Abraham had been justified by faith because he believed in God’s promise (Jas 2:23). But later on, Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac upon the altar (Jas 2:21). These are two different events, with two different justifications. And what is the relationship between them? James says that Abraham’s act of offering Isaac “perfected” his faith (Jas 2:22). Abraham

believed that God’s promise would be fulfilled through his son. So when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, the one through whom God’s promise was supposed to be fulfilled, Abraham’s faith was sorely tested. But he went to sacrifice Isaac anyway. Abraham trusted God to fulfill the promise, and believed that He could do the impossible, even raise Isaac from the dead (Heb 11:19). Abraham put his faith into action and became known as the friend of God because of it. Hence, James confirms what Paul implied: justification by faith isn’t the only one there is. There’s also a justification by works (Jas 2:24).

For these reasons, I think it is clear that James and Paul were writing about two different kinds of justification. Justification by faith before God is not the same as justification by works before men.

Conclusion

There is no contradiction between James and Paul. If you want to know about how to be *eternally saved*, then read Paul’s explanation of how we are justified before God, by faith in Jesus, apart from our works (Rom 3:28). But if you want to be *temporally saved*, then read James’s explanation of how to grow in your faith, avoid the deadly consequences of sin, and demonstrate your faith to the world (Jas 2:14–26). Our lives, our health, and our spiritual maturity depend on not only hearing James’s instruction, but doing it (Jas 1:22). ■

Shawn Lazar is the Director of Publications for the Grace Evangelical Society.

1. For a more detailed look at these verses, please see Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing*, eds. Arthur L. Farstad and Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2009); Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*, 2nd Ed (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co, 1993), 187–94; and Robert N. Wilkin, “Another View of Faith and Works in James 2,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2002), 3–21.

WHAT IS GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY?

THE GOSPEL PROMISE was under assault in Paul’s time and still is today. How many “Christians” have followed the ancient Galatians in believing they can be saved by a mixture of faith and works?

Grace Evangelical Society (GES) was founded in 1986 to promote the soul-winning truth that God offers man the free gift of everlasting life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from works done before or after the new birth (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:26).

Another of our aims is to promote Christian growth by emphasizing the Biblical truths about eternal security, assurance, and eternal rewards.

We do this by publishing *Grace in Focus Magazine*, expository books, booklets, and tracts, and the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. We also hold an annual conference each Spring at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth, TX, and regularly speak at local churches and Bible conferences.

For more information about our ministry please visit

FAITHALONE.ORG



When the Church Became the Kingdom

More Bad Effects of Replacement Theology

by Ronald E. Diprose

Indirectly Replacement Theology Obscured the Biblical Doctrine of Salvation

We have seen that one of the effects of Replacement Theology was the transformation of the church into a priestly hierarchy. This in turn obscured the Biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. On a personal level, this is the most serious consequence of Replacement Theology, as the new priestly cast claimed to mediate God's grace through priestly administrations, later called "sacraments." This new concept of Christian ministry does not have roots in the New Testament but rather in the instructions given to Levitical priests in the book of Leviticus.

Among those who have received the "sacrament" of baptism in their infancy, how many take the trouble to know what the Apostles teach concerning how salvation can be experienced personally? Do they know that to experience salvation it is necessary to believe personally in the risen Christ and in the sufficiency of His atoning sacrifice (John 3:14-16; Acts 4:12; Rom 3:23-26; 4:25; 10:9)? Do they know that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ the Son (John 14:6; 2 Tim 2:3-6)? Do they know that Jesus' priestly role will never be delegated to anyone else (Heb 7:22-25)? Do they know that it is the Holy Spirit who dispenses grace and implants new life in those who believe (John 1:11-13; 3:3-8; Titus 3:4-7)?



Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican, Rome, Italy

Unfortunately the false priesthood and the priestly functions which developed within Christianity, on the foundation of Replacement Theology, continue to create, in innumerable people, the illusion of being right with God. In reality, only Jesus "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb 7:25).

Replacement Theology Led the Church to Substitute a Human Kingdom for God's Kingdom

According to the divine revelation that God entrusted to Israel, there will be a time when a descendant of David will establish a universal kingdom of peace and righteousness centered in Jerusalem (Gen 49:10; Isaiah 2 & 11; Ezekiel 34; Zechariah 12-14; etc.). Jesus and the Apostles confirmed this prospect, linking it with the Second Coming of Christ (Luke 19:11-27; Acts 1:6-8; 3:19-21; 1 Cor 15:23-28). From the Book of Revelation we learn that when Christ comes in glory, at the end of a period of great tribulation, He will judge the Beast and the false prophet and will then reign for one thousand years, while Satan will be bound. At the end of Jesus' earthly reign, Satan will instigate a further rebellion against God, inducing the nations to attack "the city that God loves," Jerusalem, but this rebellion will be immediately repressed. Then, after the Great White Throne Judgment, time will give way to eternity when God makes "everything new" (Rev 19:11-21:5).

That is a very brief summary of what the prophets, Jesus, and the Apostles teach us about the future reign of Christ. In the early days of the Church this prospect was considered an integral part of orthodox belief. So much so that Justin Martyr, around 140 A.D. could write,

But I and others, who are right-minded (*orthogōmones*) Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.¹

This doctrine held the field from the time of Papias (ca. 120 A.D.) until the last period of the life and ministry of Augustine.² It is instructive to read Augustine's own account of what made him change his mind on this point. It was not careful Biblical exegesis.³

By mentioning Augustine, we have skipped over Origen's attempt to overthrow the Church's teaching concerning an earthly Messianic kingdom. Origen is famous for his allegorical interpretation of the Bible, following the way the Greeks interpreted passages from their classical writings which they could no longer accept at face value. R. Hanson has this to say about Origen's denial of eternal punishment, a denial based on the allegorical interpretation of the relevant Biblical passages: "Origen was obviously moving with the tide of contemporary sentiment."⁴ Regarding the Millennial kingdom, Hanson observes:

The contrast between Justin, who regards a literal interpretation of the millennial kingdom as part of Christian orthodoxy, and Origen, who regards in precisely the same light an allegorical interpretation of the same subject, is striking.⁵

The presupposition of Origen's denial that there will be a literal Messianic kingdom was a very radical version of Replacement Theology, according to which true, spiritual Israel had always been the Church.

Especially after Origen, the traditional interpretation of Rev 20:1-6 was on shaky grounds because this was the only remaining Biblical passage concerning a Messianic kingdom that continued to be taken literally by most interpreters. Replacement Theology had effectively removed the foundations of this doctrine in the Scriptures used by Christ and the Apostles. So, by the time of Augustine, the only thing necessary in order to apply all kingdom teaching to the Church was an alternative interpretation of Rev 20:1-6.

The alternative interpretation on Rev 20:1-6 supplied by Augustine has some important exegetical flaws. Among other things, it ignores references in Revelation to Satan deceiving the nations.⁶ Augustine attributes his change of mind concerning the meaning of the passage to dissatisfaction concerning how others had interpreted it. But in reality it was more the result of current events, in particular the sack of Rome in 410 and the accusation that the Church was largely to blame for this calamity. Augustine answered this accusation by suggesting that the kingdoms of men were in the process of being replaced by the kingdom of God. Revelation 20 was used in support of this thesis. For Augustine, Christ's kingdom is to be identified in the Church, especially the hierarchy and the martyrs.⁷ By the way, the presumed role of the martyrs, as reigning with Christ, favored the practice of praying to the "saints."

How Augustine's Kingdom Teaching Was Applied

The transformation of the Church into an institution governed by a hierarchical priesthood had prepared the way for a very dangerous application of Augustine's teaching concerning the kingdom of God. The prestige gained by Leo I, bishop of Rome, at the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) and consolidation of the political power of the Roman Catholic Church by Gregory the Great (590-604) paved the way for the Western Church to become the Triumphant Church of Medieval times. This long chapter of Church history is remembered mainly in relation to the exercise of temporal power.

The consequences of the Augustinian understanding of the Messianic kingdom, known as "Amillennialism," are well-known. Far from incarnating the values of the kingdom of God, successive popes exercised purely human power, not hesitating to fabricate the false "Donation of Constantine" which gave the Catholic Church its own territory. The acme of abuse of the claim to act in the name of Christ may be seen in the reigns of Urban II (1088-1109), who authorized the first of the Crusades (1096-1103), which condoned the massacre of both Jews and Muslims. Two centuries later, Boniface VIII (1294-1303) issued the Papal Bull "Unam Sanctam" according

to which secular governments possess a little sword, while the pope uses his God-given big sword to wield authority over all purely human governments.

Conclusion

The abuses of power mentioned above were the logical consequences of the course taken by the Roman Catholic Church, based on the (false) claim to be the true Israel. According to Peter Beyerhaus, failure to observe the distinctions between the different stages in which the redemptive economy of God is unfolded has the effect of "changing the Kingdom of Heaven as promised and given to God's sons and daughters into a Kingdom on Earth which is to be constructed solely by the autonomous efforts of man himself."⁸ The claim of the Triumphant Church to be the kingdom promised to Israel was one of the long-standing effects of Replacement Theology. However, because God was not behind this operation, instead of the universal blessing of which the prophets speak, the Medieval Church produced much injustice and suffering—not to mention the damage done to Christian witness to the Jews. ■

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1. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXXX.
2. A future Millennium was taught, by Papias, Justin Martyr, the Epistle of Barnabas, Tertullian, Commodianus, Eusebius, Methodius, Lactantius and others (see my *Israel and the Church*, 148-159).
3. Augustine, *The City of God*, XX,7.
4. R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*, (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 341.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 345.
6. Augustine, *The City of God*, XX.
7. *Ibid.*, XX, 9.
8. Peter P. J. Beyerhaus, *God's Kingdom and the Utopian Error* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 1992), ix.

Saved From What?

(James 2:14)

by Keith Pesce

Introduction

As most students of the Bible know, James 2:14-26 is a very controversial passage. Much of the difficulty revolves around the meaning of the word *save* in Jas 2:14 and the way many people equate *salvation* with *salvation from hell*. I believe that is a serious misinterpretation that compromises the free gift of eternal life, and I will try to prove to you that James had another kind of salvation in mind.

The Definition of *Sōzō*

The Greek verb *sōzō* and the noun *sōteriā* most often translate into English as *save* and *salvation*. What do these words mean?

According to BDAG *sōzō* means “(1) to preserve or rescue from natural danger or afflictions, *save, keep from harm, preserve, rescue*” and “(2) to save or preserve from transcendent danger or destruction, *save/preserve from eternal death*” (p. 982, italics original). The first meaning is deliverance from problems in this life. The second meaning is deliverance from the problem of eternal condemnation.

In other words, *sōzō* is not a technical term which always means *salvation from hell*, even though that is how it is often read. On the contrary, *sōzō* has the same range of meanings in Greek as *salvation* does in English. It can refer to either

temporal or eternal deliverance. So which way is the word used in James?

How *Sōzō* Is Used in James

Since *sōzō* has a range of meanings in Greek literature, we need to know how it is used in the book of James, where it is used five times (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:15, 20).

The first occurrence is in Jas 1:21-22. Here James admonishes believers to *both* receive the implanted word of God *and* be doers of the word which is able to save one’s life. It seems unlikely that he has eternal life in view, because James already assured his readers that they were regenerated “by the word of truth” (v 18). They didn’t need to be eternally saved. But they did need to grow and mature in the faith. James was concerned that filthiness and wickedness would lead these believers to an early death, so he urged them to lay aside their sins and meekly receive the Word which was already implanted in them (cf. 1 Pet 1:23-25). That seed has

enormous potential. It could save their life, *if* they heard it and obeyed. If they disobeyed, and pursued wickedness instead of laying it aside, their sins could end in death (v 14-15). In sum, it seems that James had temporal death and salvation in view.¹

Another use of the word appears in Jas 4:12, “There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?” In v 11, James warned his readers not to speak evil of fellow Christians. They shouldn’t judge others. James is making the same point that Jesus did in Matt 7:1, Luke 6:41, and elsewhere. Speaking evil of others is the opposite of the humility all Christians should exhibit (Jas 4:10). God is our Judge, and we should leave judgment to Him. It is up to Him to decide whether to save people from the deadly consequences of their sins, or to let them suffer (James 1:15; 5:20). To force the word *save* in this verse to mean *deliver from eternal condemnation* is unwarranted. James is once again





thinking of the deadly consequences of sin in this life.

The next use of *save* is found in James 5:15, which reads, “And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” It’s hard to miss the temporal nature of this reference. The context involves someone suffering from a serious, potentially fatal, illness. What are we to do when that happens? James indicates that the prayer of faith will deliver the sick person from illness and premature physical death. The NASB (“the prayer offered in faith *will restore* the one who is sick”) and NIV (“the prayer offered in faith *will make* the sick person *well*”) translations reflect this understanding. This is temporal salvation.

In his final use of *sōzō*, James says in 5:19-20: “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error

of his way will save a soul [or life] from death and cover a multitude of sins.” This warning could have been taken straight from Proverbs. I’m sure you remember the verse that says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov 14:12). Solomon was addressing faithful Jews, warning them about the consequences of sinning. So is James. Believing in Jesus for eternal life (“*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders...*”) does not make you immune from straying. Even mature believers can “wander from the truth.” Convince the wanderer to change his ways and to return to the truth and you’ll be saving his life.

Since four out of the five uses of *save* in James do not refer to salvation from hell, but rather refer to deliverance from death or some other temporal judgment, it seems likely that James’s use of the same word in 2:14 would follow suit. Does it?

The Critical Question

The verse reads,

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

Since the meaning of a word is derived from its usage in the immediate context, we must ask the question, “Save from what?” If the answer to that question is eternal condemnation, as is commonly held, then we could represent that interpretation with the following syllogism:

- P1: Faith without works cannot save.
- P2: To *save* means to deliver from eternal condemnation.
- C: Faith without works cannot deliver from eternal condemnation.

If James has eternal condemnation in mind, then it is impossible to escape the conclusion that, contrary to what the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul taught, works are indeed a co-condition of salvation along with faith in Christ.

Is James Only Complaining About a Certain Kind of Faith?

Protestants eager to reconcile James and Paul sometimes propose the following solution: In order to escape the conclusion that eternal salvation depends upon works, many English translations insert the words *such* or *that* immediately before *faith*. Here are a few examples, with emphasis added:

ESV: What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can *that faith* save him?

NIV: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can *such faith* save them?

NASB: What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can *that faith* save him?

NET: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can *this kind of faith* save him?

Some interpreters justify the insertion of these qualifiers by appealing to the presence of the Greek definite article with the word *faith* in 2:14. However, the definite article can also be found with *faith* in vv 17, 18, 20, 22, and 26, but qualifiers *such* or *that* are never proposed as natural translations of those verses. Why not? The translators have inserted their theological biases.

Why does adding these qualifiers matter? Adding the qualifiers *this kind of*, *that*, or *such* to faith in 2:14 implies that there are *different kinds of faith*, some that result in eternal life and others which are spurious and result in eternal condemnation. John MacArthur expresses that understanding of faith in Jas 2:14-16:

Not all faith is redemptive. James 2:14-16 says faith without works is dead and cannot save. James describes spurious faith as pure hypocrisy (v. 16), mere cognitive assent (v. 19), devoid of any verifying works (vv. 17-18)—no different from the demons' belief (v. 19). Obviously there is more to saving faith than merely conceding a set of facts. Faith without works is useless (v. 20) (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 186).

Preachers, teachers, and theologians often define *true saving faith* to include all kinds of works, such as the commitment of one's life, submission of one's whole life to the Lordship of Christ, turning from sins, and a life subsequent to faith filled with good works and the fruit of the Spirit that "prove" that a person has been justified by grace. Sadly, this view totally undermines the Biblical teaching of assurance of eternal life as found in John 5:24 and 1 John 5:9-13.

“None of James’s five references to *temporal salvation* contradicts Paul, because Paul had *eternal salvation* in view, while James, deeply rooted in wisdom tradition, had a more temporal salvation in mind.”

If “true saving faith” includes the elements of commitment, surrender, and turning from sins, then it is impossible to know if I have committed, surrendered, or turned from sins enough to prove I am a *true* believer. Of course, the Bible often admonishes us to do these things, but only *after* we have believed in Christ for eternal life and received it (e.g., Rom 12:1-2). Hence, thinking that James is speaking about a spurious kind of faith seriously confuses the nature of faith and creates an epidemic of uncertainty and a lack of assurance about one's eternal destiny. One can never be certain that he has saving faith.

James 2:14 Refers to Temporal Salvation²

These problems dissolve once we see that James is not talking about eternal salvation, but temporal salvation. There is only one kind of faith, but not every faith has

the same object, and not every faith is equally fruitful, complete, or mature.

Some believers welcome the Word of God implanted within them with the result that their lives are preserved (Jas 1:21).


Believers who fail to apply what they believe will experience temporal judgment and will be on the path to an early grave (Jas 2:14-17).

God is the one who is able to preserve or destroy believers (Jas 4:12). Some believers are facing serious illnesses and are in need of healing from God (Jas 1:15).

Other believers sadly wander from the truth down a path that leads to death (Jas 1:14-15; 5:19-20).

None of James's five references to *temporal salvation* contradicts Paul, because Paul had *eternal salvation* in view, while James, deeply rooted in wisdom tradition, had a more temporal salvation in mind.

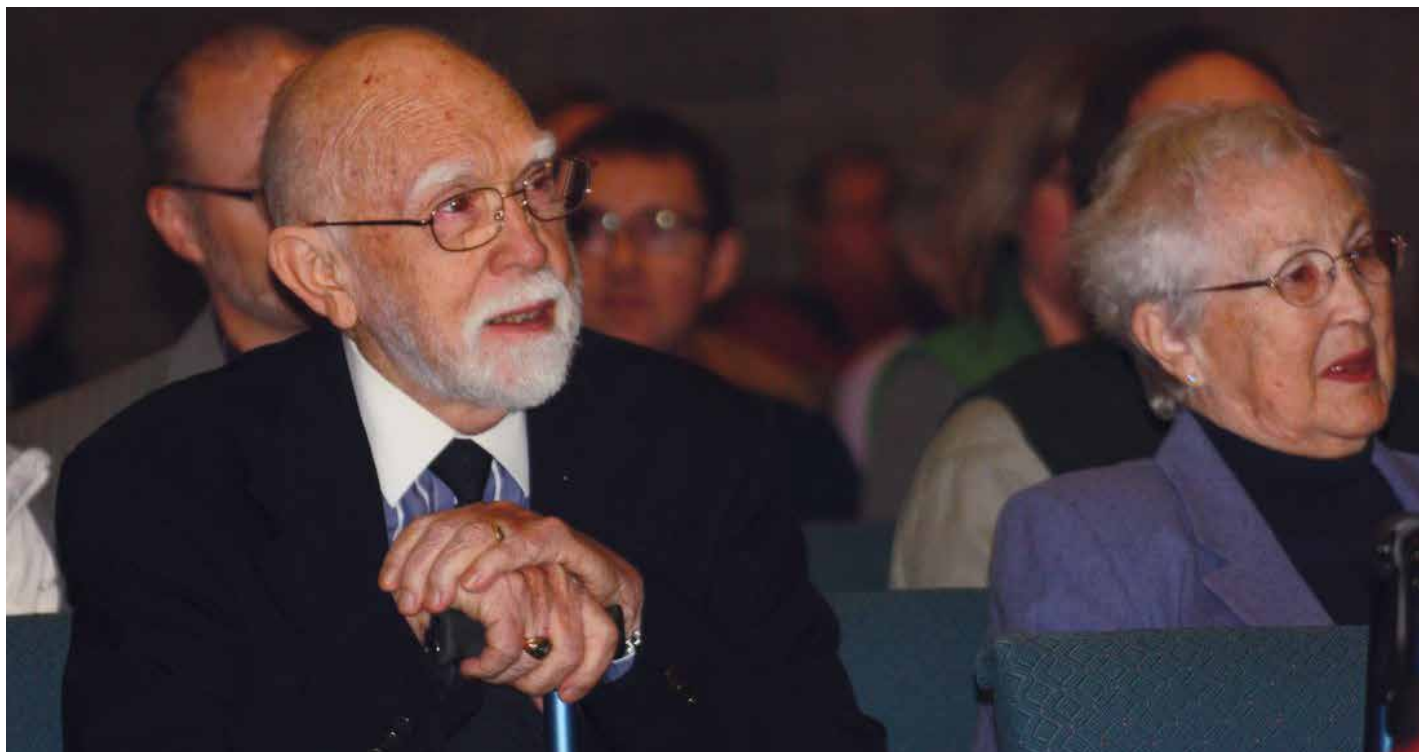
Conclusion

To conclude, when James states that faith without works cannot save, he is not referring to being saved from eternal condemnation. Rather, he is referring to deliverance from temporal judgment. In a world where people are constantly asking what difference Christianity makes in one's life here and now, James would answer, it could very well mean the difference between life and death. 

Keith Pesce is a graduate of Florida Bible College and is currently completing a Master's degree in Christian Apologetics at Southern Evangelical Seminary. He and his wife, Cindy, live in Port St. Lucie, FL and attend and serve as teachers at Coastal Life Church and in their home Bible study.

1. See the article on Jas 1:21 by Bob Wilkin in this issue for more details.

2. For a discussion of justification by works in Jas 2:14-26, see the article by Shawn Lazar in this issue.



A Tribute to Dr. Earl Radmacher

by Hersh Lange and Shawn Lazar

The Autumn 2013 issue of *The Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* was a special *festschrift* published in honor of Dr. Earl D. Radmacher.

Many of our readers know Dr. Radmacher from his long tenure at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary where, for thirty-four years, he taught systematic theology, and served as an administrator, Dean, President, and as Chancellor.

Dr. Radmacher was born in Portland, OR. He first attended Bob Jones University (B.A., M.R.E.) and went on to complete doctoral studies at Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M., Th.D.), before arriving at Western.

On Sunday December 15, 2013, Dr. Radmacher's service for Christ was publicly honored and recognized at Central Bible Church, where he and his wife Ruth

attend, and where their son Tim is the chairman of the Elder board. The presentation was done at the end of the Christmas message, when Tim introduced Dr. Steve Lewis, of Rocky Mountain Bible College and Seminary. Steve spoke about Dr. Radmacher being a great communicator, life-long learner, and about his two life verses: 2 Tim 2:15 ("Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed,


"In my wildest dreams
fifty years ago, I could
never have imagined the
exciting plans that God,
in His sovereign grace,
had for me."

rightly dividing the word of truth") and 2 Cor 3:18 ("But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord").

Dr. Radmacher came forward to a standing ovation and a warm reception

afterward. His reaction and comments expressed an overwhelming gratitude for the recognition and honor afforded him. Dr. Radmacher was very humble and emotional, interacting with many people after the presentation. The Body of Christ there was lovingly receptive and gave both Drs. Lewis and Radmacher a standing ovation.

Through his seminary ministry, he was able to mentor many students who now pastor hundreds of churches across the country. But he has influenced even more people, promoting the message of free grace, through his many books, articles, and conference messages. Dr. Radmacher has often said, "In my wildest dreams fifty years ago, I could never have imagined the exciting plans that God, in His sovereign grace, had for me."

Many *Grace in Focus* readers could identify with the sentiment expressed during the presentation's closing prayer: "He touched my life too." 

Hersh Lange is on the Chairman of the Board at Rocky Mountain Bible College and Seminary in Englewood, CO. Shawn Lazar is the Director of Publications for the Grace Evangelical Society.

Don't Shoot the Messenger!

by Brad Duskocil

Our Works Will Be Evaluated

One of the distinctions of Free Grace theology is the teaching about the believer's judgment for rewards. All Christians will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Jesus will evaluate every Christian's service record, "whether good or bad" and we will receive payment for services rendered in this life (2 Cor 5:9-10; Rom 14:10-12).

Why Rewards Make People Uncomfortable

Not every Christian knows or likes this doctrine. For some, the idea of being judged by the Lord based on our service record causes distress because of the uncertainty of the outcome at this judgment. Others may chaff at the idea of judgment altogether. They may not think it fair for the Lord to reward those who faithfully served Him. Still others may have concern because in looking at their own lives they do not think they measure up to God's standards or have done enough for the Lord. They fear the Lord will find their service record worthless or inadequate and as a result they feel shame now (cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15).

And sometimes the messengers (like those at GES) who teach about the Judgment Seat of Christ and eternal rewards are blamed when Christians become distressed over this topic. But they shouldn't be.

Let me illustrate this. I am a Certified Public Accountant and a tax practitioner. In the past several months I have had to tell my clients the unpleasant news that many of them will be paying significantly higher income taxes. Needless to say, this has been a trying experience. When you inform someone that their income taxes have increased significantly—including combined federal and state tax rates of 58%—you can probably imagine what some of the reactions might be. However, as I write this, none of my clients have shot the messenger! While many have expressed disgust, and others anger, most have been thankful for having been informed ahead of time and they seek advice about ways to minimize their tax bite.


Likewise, Christians confronted with the Judgment Seat of Christ and the teachings about rewards, should exhibit a similar attitude. We should be thankful for the advance warning.



Be Prepared

There are many passages in the Bible that teach about rewards. Some are uplifting and encouraging. Others serve as warnings that describe loss and shame. It is these later passages that cause some Christians distress. No one wants to "shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (1 John 2:28, NASB). No one wants to "suffer loss" (2 John 8). No one wants to be rebuked by the Lord (e.g., Matt 25:26-28). Certainly these passages, plus many others, attest to the advance warning given to Christians on this subject.

Why does this matter? Perhaps those Christians who are distressed by this teaching, and who want to shoot the messenger because of it, should feel grateful instead. Without warning and instruction from the Scriptures about the Judgment Seat of Christ or its consequences, we could not become properly prepared for that day. Would a Christian really prefer to remain ignorant about these things? I think not. It would be like finding out on April 15 that your income taxes have significantly increased, and you owe a large sum of money to the government. Just as advanced warning helps us deal with the consequences of taxes, likewise advanced warning from the Scriptures helps us prepare for the Judgment Seat of Christ. We can look to see if we are serving the Lord in a manner that is pleasing to Him, which is by faith: "But without faith it is impossible to please Him..." (Heb 11:6).

And please remember, don't shoot the messenger! Rather, be grateful for the advance warning. I know I am. 

Brad Duskocil is the Chairman of the Board at GES and a CPA in Southern California.

Paul's Epistle to the Romans

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2:40-3:30	Room 150	Plenary Session 2	Dr. David Allen (Prof of Preaching, SWBTS), TBA
4:10-5:00	Room 150	Plenary Session 3	Bob Wilkin, "Free from Indwelling Sin (Rom 8:1-11)"

Tuesday April 22, 2014

9:00-9:50	Room 150	Plenary Session 4	John Niemelä, "The Golden Chain of the Joint Heirs of Christ in Romans 8"
10:30-11:20	Room 150	Plenary Session 5	Jeremy Edmondson, "Fully Preaching the Gospel (Rom 15:14-21)"
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3:00-3:55	Various	Workshops 2	López, Elkins, Hornok, Threlkeld
4:10-5:00	Room 150		Update on GES and Q & A
5:30-7:30	The Lane	Banquet	Only available for those who purchased tickets

Wednesday, April 23, 2014

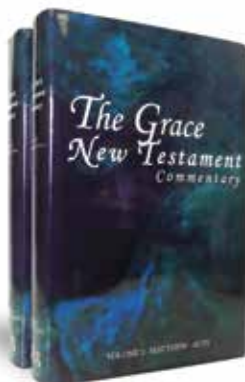
9:00-9:50	Room 150	Plenary Session 6	Ken Yates, "Suffering in the Epistle to the Romans"
10:30-11:20	Room 150	Plenary Session 7	Shawn Lazar, "Homosexuality and the Wrath of God (Rom 1:18-32)"
1:50-2:45	Various	Workshops 3	Yates, Lewis, Bryant, Brown
3:00-3:55	Various	Workshops 4	Edmondson, Sterling, Niemelä, Janssen
4:10-5:00	Room 150	Plenary Session 8	Bob Bryant, "Romans 7-8"

Thursday, April 24, 2014

9:00-9:50	Room 150	Plenary Session 9	René López, "Does Romans 9 Teach Calvinistic Election?"
10:30-11:20	Room 150	Plenary Session 10	Bob Wilkin, "The Law of Liberty (Rom 14:1-12)"

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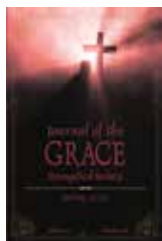
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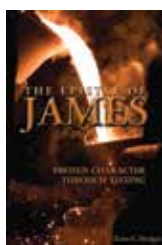
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Bob Wilkin's *Confident in Christ* and *The Road to Reward* are out of print. New editions are coming in May 2014.



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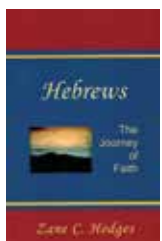
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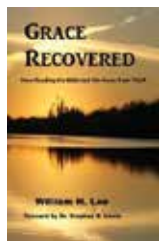


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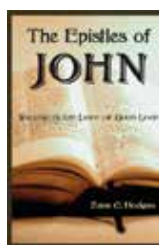


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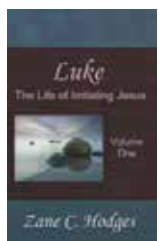


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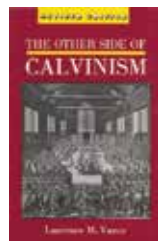


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Saving Your Soul by Doing Good

(James 1:21)

by Bob Wilkin

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21).

This verse certainly is confusing for the person who understands it as dealing with how a person obtains eternal salvation from hell. Note there are two conditions. The first is turning from one's sins. This is moral reform. The second is receiving the word, which the following verses clearly show results in doing good deeds. Nowhere does this verse or the verses which follow state that we need to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to obtain this "soul salvation."

If this verse and passage is talking about how one obtains eternal life, then it teaches works salvation, pure and simple. Apparently, belief in Jesus isn't even necessary.

That alone should lead us to conclude that this passage is not talking about eternal salvation at all. Instead, my thesis is that it is talking about the temporal salvation of believers who are already eternally



secure. The following exposition will defend that thesis.

Believers Being Addressed

Verse 21 is a logical continuation (note the first word, *therefore*) of vv 19-20 which are addressed to believers: "So then, *my beloved brethren*, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (emphasis added). Verses 19-20 in turn look back to vv 16-18 where James indicates that both he and his readers are recipients of the *free gift* of eternal salvation and hence have been *born again*:

Do not be deceived, *my beloved brethren*. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will *He brought us forth by the word of truth*, that we might be a kind of *firstfruits of His creatures* (emphasis added).

There is no doubt, therefore, that in v 21 James is addressing believers. And

we know from many other verses that once believers receive eternal life, they are eternally secure and can never perish (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 10:28). So James cannot possibly be addressing the question of eternal salvation.

Discipleship in View

So what kind of salvation does James have in mind? The evidence points to salvation in the sense of *temporal well-being*.

The two conditions he gives for being saved—turning from sins and receiving God's Word (with the result that one does good deeds)—are repeatedly given in Scripture as conditions of discipleship. See, for example, Acts 20:27-38; Rom 12:9-15:3; 1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Cor 5:9-10; Eph 4:17-31; 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:21-26; Titus 3:1-8; Heb 13:1-9; James 5:7-12; 1 Pet 1:13-16; 2:1-2. All of these passages are clearly addressed to Christians and call upon them to avoid sinning and to apply God's Word in order to grow as Christians, to please God, to avoid temporal judgment, and to lay up treasure in heaven. The picture is one of spiritual

health in the present and at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

As mentioned above, avoiding sin and doing good are *not* conditions of eternal salvation (cf. Rom 4:5-8; Eph 2:9; Titus 3:5). Instead, the one and only condition of eternal salvation is believing in Jesus Christ for everlasting life (cf. John 3:16; 4:10ff; 5:24; 6:47; Rom 4:1-5; 5:1; Gal 3:6-14; Eph 2:8).

Receiving the Implanted Word

God's Word is in believers because they have been begotten of God ("He brought us forth by the *word* of truth" v 18). Thus "the implanted word" (or "the innate word") is *completely natural* to the believer. Of course, this cannot be true of unregenerate people.

The word *receive* (*dechomai*) here carries the idea of *welcoming*. As a matter of fact, the word is often used in the NT to refer to hospitality. It often means "[to] welcome someone into one's house... [to] receive as a guest, welcome" (BDAG, p 221B; it cites Matt 10:14, 40; Luke 9:5, 11; 10:8, 10; 16:4; John 4:45; Col 4:10; Heb 11:31 as having this meaning). Because God's Word is natural to believers, they should *welcome it* (i.e., approve and accept the teaching, BDAG, p. 221C) as they would a friend into their home.

The implication is that believers can be *unwelcoming* to the word of truth. And don't we often see that? Believers can become lazy, can become sporadic in assembling with the other believers at church (Heb 10:23-25), and can stop putting God's Word into practice. The result? A lack of spiritual growth and maturity combined with temporal difficulties designed to wake us up and get us back on the path of godliness.

Saving Your Souls

The temporal nature of this salvation is also seen in the use of the word *soul* (*psychē*), which has a number of meanings. We tend to think of the soul in terms of the immaterial and immortal inner self (BDAG, p. 1099B). But the most common Hebraic usage, and the meaning which fits this context, is for *soul* to mean one's *physical life* (BDAG, p. 1098D-1099A, the first nuance listed).

This passage is in harmony with many other passages in Scripture which speak

of saving one's physical life from the deadly consequences of sin. For example, consider the following verses from Proverbs and Ezekiel:

As righteousness leads to life,
So he who pursues evil pursues it to
his own death (Prov 11:19).

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of
life, to turn one away from the snares
of death (Prov 14:27).

The soul that sins shall die (Ezek 18:4,
20).

James is warning believers that failure to obey God will result in loss of one's physical life. He made this same point

"Being eternally
secure does not
exempt believers from
the death-dealing
consequences of sin."


earlier in chapter one when he wrote, "sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death" (1:15).

Of course, while the immediate death of believers due to sin is reported on occasion in Scripture (e.g., Nadab and Abihu, Lev 10:1-2; Ananias and Saphira, Acts 5:1-11), this is not the norm. Rather,

as one of my professors in seminary liked to illustrate it, sin is death-dealing. Every card it deals says "death" on it. To play in the card game of sin is to invite one's own death. The more one sins, the closer his or her death approaches (and the more miserable his or her present experience becomes). Being eternally secure does not exempt believers from the death-dealing consequences of sin.

Conclusion

The freeness of everlasting life is not an invitation to carnality and disobedience. While everlasting life is absolutely free, temporal well-being is not.

There are many things which should motivate us to obey God. Surely gratitude and love are preeminent motivations (2 Cor 5:14; 1 John 4:19). The prospect of the Judgment Seat of Christ and eternal rewards are also vital motivations (Matt 6:19-21; 1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Cor 5:10; Jas 5:7-12). However, one motivation sometimes overlooked, which is also Biblical and powerful, is temporal well-being. The obedient Christian will experience temporal well-being (Matt 6:33; Gal 5:22-23) while the disobedient Christian will not. 

*Bob Wilkin is the Executive Director of
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ThM (Dallas Seminary),
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Woe to That Man

(Matt 18:7;
26:24)

by Bill Fiess

While doing a Logos search I discovered that the expression *woe to that man* (*ouai tō anthrōpō ekeinō*) occurs only four times in the New Testament, twice in Matthew (18:7; 26:24) and once each in Mark (14:21) and Luke (22:22). I wondered whether the Lord might have a specific man in mind in all these places, since in three of the four it is clear who that cursed man is.

Matthew 26:24 reads,

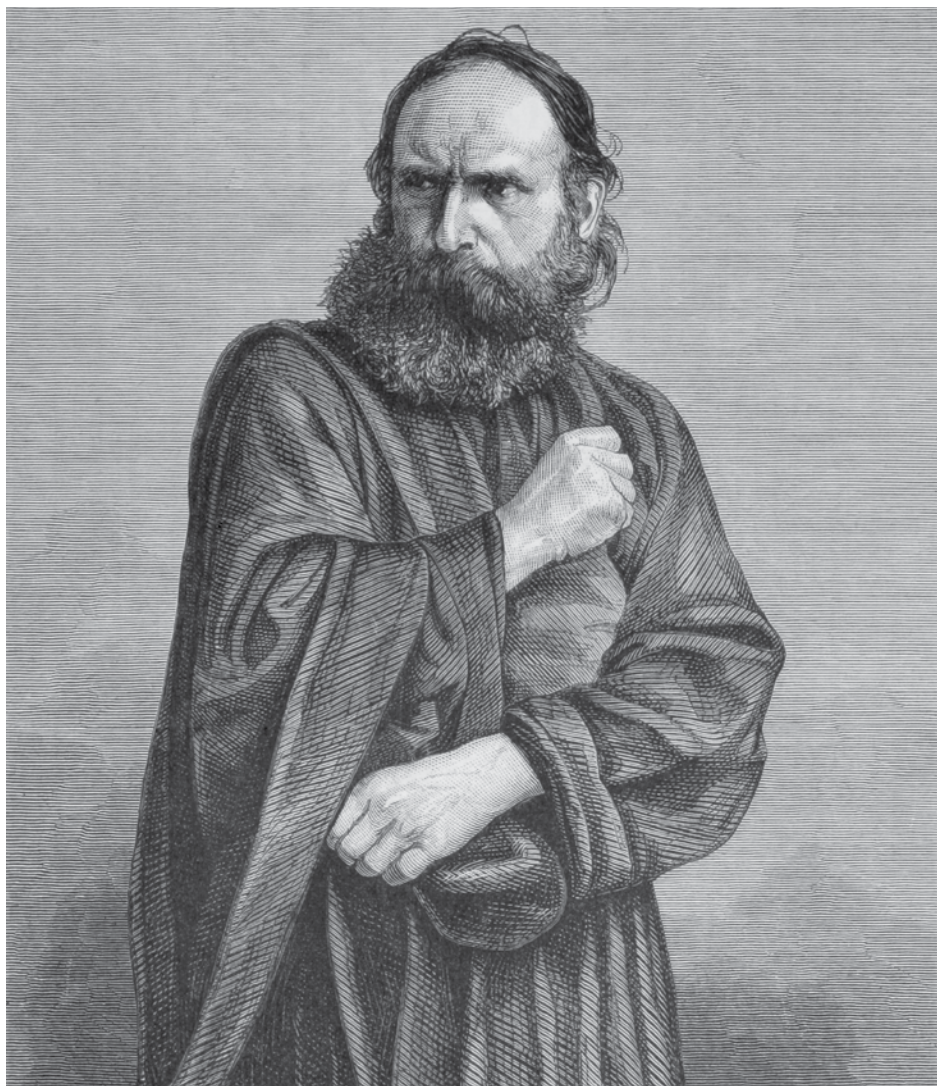
The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.

The Lord is speaking of Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. Mark 14:21 and Luke 22:22 are parallel and also refer to Judas using the expression *woe to that man*.

However, the context for Matt 18:7 is different. Verses 6-7 read,

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

I wonder if “one of these little ones” in Matt 18:6 might include the eleven



Judas performed by George Lechner in the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1870.


disciples.¹ It seems that in Matt 10:42 “these little ones” refers to disciples of Christ (though not necessarily the apostles).

In Matt 26:31 (still within the context of Matt 26:24) we read,

Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

The word *stumble* is the same word used in Matt 18:6, *skandalizō* (translated as *cause to sin* there). When Judas betrayed Jesus he also caused the eleven to stumble during the Lord’s trials and crucifixion.

Jesus used the words *skandalizō* and *skandalon* six times in Matt 18:6-9. It is translated there as *causing another to sin* or *causing an offense*. I believe that in

Matt 18:6-9 the Lord was giving a warning to Judas, which sadly went unheeded (cf. John 13:10-11; 17:12). 

Bill Fiess is a mathematics professor.

1. Editor’s note: Clearly the passage begins with Jesus sitting “a little child” in the midst of the crowd (Matt 18:2). That is literally a child, a little one. However, it is possible that in vv 6-9 “these little ones,” while still including those who are literally small children who believe in Him (v 6 “who believe in Me”), might, as Fiess suggests, include the disciples, since all believers are to be as little children (v 4).

God's Grace and Our Works

(2 Corinthians 8-9)

by Ken Yates

Grace and Works

Free Grace theology emphasizes that eternal salvation rests upon the grace of God. We receive eternal life as a free gift through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from our works, the moment we believe in Him for that life.

Unfortunately, throughout Church history people have taught that works are a condition of eternal salvation. Some teach that a person must perform works in order to *receive* the gift of eternal life. Others insist that works are necessary in order to *keep it*. Either option denies God's marvelous grace.

But that raises a challenge. If we are to correctly proclaim God's grace, we need to clarify how grace and works are related in the believer's life. Some would say that anyone saved by grace will automatically be characterized by a lifestyle of good works, and that if a radically transformed life is not evident, that proves they were never saved to begin with.



Is that true? Do all believers automatically experience radical transformation that shows itself in a lifetime overflowing with an abundance of good works?

Giving and Grace

2 Corinthians 8-9 contains the longest discussion in Scripture of one particular example of Christian good works, namely, the issue of Christian giving. Specifically, Paul asked the believers in Corinth to give financially in order to help the poor believers in Judea.

If the first century Church was anything like the Church today, the subject of giving must have been a touchy one. There is a natural inclination to hold on to one's money. What made this particular situation even more sensitive was that Paul had enemies at Corinth who might accuse him of false motives in asking for money (cf. 2 Cor 12:11-13; 13:3). Moreover, Paul was asking a mostly Gentile church to give to a Jewish church. This would involve both cultural and racial considerations.

It is interesting how Paul dealt with such a potentially difficult situation. What was the basis of his appeal? The answer is simple: the grace of God.

Even though these two chapters are about Christian works, they strongly

emphasize grace. The word for "grace" (*charis*) occurs ten times (8:1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 16, 19; 9:8, 14, 15). Paul began his discussion with God's grace (8:1), saying that God gave grace to other churches, specifically those in Macedonia, by giving them the opportunity to give to the needy believers in Judea.

And Paul's discussion also ends with the theme of God's grace. When the Corinthians give, God's grace will be evident as working in them as well (9:14). Paul then says that he gives thanks (*charis*) to God for this gift (9:15). While the "gift" (*dōrea*) here could possibly refer to eternal salvation, the context suggests that it refers to the gift of having the opportunity to minister to the needs of other believers.

God's grace, then, forms an *inclusio*—like the bread of a sandwich—around this discussion about Christian giving. It is God's grace that *allows* us to do good works by serving others, and His grace that gives us the *privilege* of doing so.

Being Aware of God's Grace to Us

In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were aware of the grace of Jesus Christ. Although He was

rich, He became poor that they might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). This is a beautiful picture of what Jesus did for us. When we were in need, He left His divine throne and humbled Himself to become a man. He died the death of a criminal, taking upon Himself the sins of the world. He did all this that through faith we might receive eternal life.

In other words, He met our need and served us when we were “poor.” Paul is making the point that when Christians serve the needy, they are being like Christ. Christ’s life provides us with the example of grace in action. It should motivate us to minister to others, just as He ministered to us.

Even though Paul was specifically talking about the work of giving financially to others, his point applies to any good work we do. When a believer ministers to others through his or her spiritual gift, God gives us the grace to do it. The privilege of serving others is itself an example of God’s grace.

Good Works Are Not Automatic

The NT teaches that all Christian service is a giving of oneself to others. One need only think about the teaching of the Lord in Mark 10:43-45. Like Paul’s discussion in 2 Corinthians 8-9, the Lord told the disciples that when they serve others they are being like Him. Greatness in Christian service is serving others.

But it is also clear from Paul’s discussion that such works do not come *automatically* for the believer. In this passage Paul uses the example of the Macedonians (8:1-5) to urge the Corinthians to do the same. We learn here that believers can, by their actions, provide an example for others to follow.

But it was also possible for the Corinthians *not* to follow the example of the Macedonians. Paul told them that they had the option to give, and that it was not a command (8:8). He also acknowledged that the Corinthians may fail to do well in this gracious work. Their giving might be stingy and a source of embarrassment (9:3-5).

The same is true for any Christian good work. Good works are possible, not automatic. The believer has the power to refuse to act upon the grace of God. We

can refuse the privilege of serving others and being like Christ.

Sowing and Reaping

But whether believers accept or reject the opportunity to serve others, they reap the consequences of their actions. There is a spiritual law of sowing and reaping. Paul told the Corinthians that giving is a case in point. They would reap based upon what they sowed (9:6, 10). However, the potential harvest was not static. God could multiply the impact of their giving. Paul prayed (as they should as well) that God would do that: “Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for

**“If we are to correctly
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food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness” (9:10). In the context, the things they would reap included thanksgiving and glory to God (9:8-13). The harvest, then, includes reaping things pertaining to this life.

However, the NT is also clear that Christian service will also result in a reaping in the next life, at the Judgment Seat of Christ. On that day, believers will be rewarded for how they have served the Lord and others. One of the major contributions of Free Grace theology is distinguishing between eternal salvation and eternal rewards. The former is free. The latter requires work. And both are only possible by the grace of God.

Application

2 Corinthians 8–9 teaches us a great deal about good works. By using the example of giving, Paul shows us that the privilege of obedience to Christ and serving others are examples of God’s grace in our lives. We can be motivated to do good works by observing others or even being an example for others to emulate. In our


obedience and service we are following Christ’s example. When we respond to God’s grace by serving, we are displaying the grace that He demonstrated to us in providing for our eternal salvation. Such obedience also results in a harvest of rewards both here and in eternity.

This passage also teaches us that both our induction into the Christian life and our service are a result of God’s grace. However, we must always keep the two distinct. The believer has received eternal life by grace through faith. He or she can never lose that life. Eternal salvation is just that—eternal.

However, we can spurn the grace that God continually gives us to serve Him and others. Or we can gladly respond to His grace and use our time, talent, and treasure to minister to others in His name. But make no mistake, there are consequences. What we sow we reap. God is gracious in giving us *the opportunities* to serve Him and others. But will we act in a Christ-like manner and grasp those opportunities? Doing so is not automatic. We must be intentional in our actions.

Conclusion

One of my favorite hymns is *He Giveth More Grace* by Annie Johnson Flint. It speaks of God’s great limitless love, power, and grace. Even though the hymn specifically addresses how God gives His children grace when they experience affliction, the words of the chorus also apply to the grace God gives us to serve Him. It summarizes what Paul teaches about Christian works in 2 Corinthians 8-9:

His love has no limit;
His grace has no measure.
His pow’r has no boundary known
unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth
again! 

Ken Yates, Lt. Col., retired, was a chaplain in the Army for 20 years and is completing a Ph.D. in New Testament at Dallas Seminary. He is GES’s East Coast speaker.

Jesus Props Up Unfruitful Believers

(John 15:2-3)

by John H. Niemelä

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit *He props up*; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, *that it may bear more fruit*. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15:2-3, author’s own translation, emphasis added).

Perseverance theology distorts John 15 by suggesting that unfruitful believers are actually unbelievers (or believers who have lost everlasting life). So the Father “cuts them off” (a common translation) and sends them to the lake of fire. Incredibly, much of Evangelical Christendom would say *Amen* to that view of John 15!

Fortunately, many Free Grace people know that v 2a can be translated as “He props up” instead of “He cuts off.” Therefore the verse should be rendered: *Every branch in Me which does not produce fruit He props up*. But why would anyone prop up an unfruitful branch?

Propping Up Branches in Ancient Viticulture

A document by Pliny the Elder from the first century speaks of vineyardists propping unfruitful branches onto stones to hold them above ground, so they would bear grapes the next year. Depending upon locale, modern vineyardists apply the same techniques, using wires, trellises, or even rocks to lift up pre-productive branches from the ground, so they can produce seed-bearing grapes. As Gary Derickson explains:

When the stems were trained along the ground the grape clusters were propped up to keep them from contacting the soil and being ruined. Trellising of vines seems to have been introduced by the Romans as one of their advancements in viticulture and was used extensively in Palestine. It allowed air to flow through the branches to dry the dew more quickly. Pliny described five approaches to training grapevines “with



the branches spreading about on the ground, or with the vine standing up of its own accord, or else with a stay but without a cross-bar, or propped with a single cross-bar, or trellised with four bars in a rectangle.” Thus when Jesus related His analogy, the disciples would probably have been familiar with both trailing and trellising practices.¹

Hence, Jesus was describing a common practice used to help grapevines to become more fruitful.

But there is something else in the passage that requires our attention.

Jesus Was Speaking to His Disciples

Despite handling 15:2a correctly, many Free Grace people are (as one of my seminary professors asserted) *two-handed Christians*. That is, they accept a truth on the one hand, but immediately compromise it on the other hand. Getting v 2a right, but v 3 wrong, is like taking two steps forward, and one step back. Let us take a closer look.



Who was Jesus addressing? Understanding the referent of *you* in v 3 is crucial. *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.* We tend to universalize verses like this one. No one raises an eyebrow when preachers say: “What Jesus told the disciples is that all Christians are clean because of Christ’s word they heard and believed.” But is that the interpretive point of v 3? Or is it an application *from* the interpretation? It is crucial to know the difference.

The simple truth is, Jesus was speaking to His disciples. The *eleven* were clean because of what He *had spoken to them*. Even though there might be an application to our lives, we were not there the night before His crucifixion. The eleven were. He was speaking to them.

So we should interpret the verse in light of that fact. Jesus said, “*You [the*

eleven] are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you [the eleven].” By implication, the eleven are not the only ones cleansed by Christ’s word. However, interpretively speaking, Christ declared His immediate hearers to be clean, not a wider group.

How does this affect our understanding of John 15:2a? It means the disciples were Jesus’ interpretive focal-point. He was talking about them. When He said, “*Every branch in Me which does not produce fruit He props up,*” the Lord was talking about *the eleven disciples*.

A Specific Kind of Fruit

Rightly defining the fruit Jesus was talking about is also important. Later in this same context (15:16) Jesus says, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and

appointed you that you should go out and produce much fruit and that your fruit should endure.”

What fruit did He have in mind?

He chose the eleven Apostles so they would spread the message of life after He ascended to the Father. Jesus elsewhere (e.g., in the Parable of the Soils) equates *seed* with God’s Word. Unlike modern seedless grapes, all grapes of Jesus’ day were seed-bearing. May I be so bold as to assert that unless the eleven were sharing God’s Word with others they bore no seed-bearing fruit?

Dare we also assert that during the fifty-three days between the night before the cross and Pentecost the eleven were fruitless? Acts 1:8 predicts, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit [at Pentecost] has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me...” For fifty-three days, they were fruitless, producing no seed-bearing fruit.

A Message They Needed to Hear

Of course, the Father supports all believers during their unproductive times so that they might produce seed-bearing fruit (i.e., so that they might share the Word with others). So, what is the point?

One day, I was explaining a Free Grace view of John 15 to a certain man, and he objected to it. He noted that the passage starts by Jesus calling Himself the True Vine and the Father the Vinedresser. The thrust of his question was: “Why (in describing those who would believe the Apostles’ message) would Jesus give prominence to unproductive believers by mentioning them first?” When asked that way, it does seem puzzling.

However, it is not at all surprising that Jesus would assure the eleven of the Father sustaining them through the next fifty-three days before Pentecost, even though they were producing no seed-bearing fruit. That message of mercy was appropriate, if only because of their fear. It was fear that caused Peter to deny Jesus, and fear that led them to hide behind locked doors after the cross. None of them were prepared for Jesus’ death. None expected the resurrection. None said, *Three days from now, He will rise again.* Other than John (John 20:8), all seem to have misinterpreted the empty tomb as the work of grave



robbers. Yet, Jesus promised them in John 15:2a, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He [the Father] props up.” They would need His support. That was an important promise to the eleven and this same truth extends to us.


An Application for Everyone

What is the practical benefit of getting this right? Most think of this passage as if it were addressed broadly, rather than

to the eleven. From such a vantage point Reformed people see it as proving the doctrine of perseverance, i.e., that all true believers will never fall away from the faith. As a result, they scoff at the idea that John 15:2a could speak of propping up, rather than cutting off.

However, I have found that some Reformed people are open to the idea that the eleven were the focal-point of Jesus’ message. They know that Peter’s denials did not lead to the Father cutting him off,

but instead to propping him up (e.g., John 21:15-19). They recognize that the eleven were unproductive during the fifty-three days before Pentecost. I have seen Reformed people back away from insisting on this passage being a proof-text for perseverance.

We should all thank God that He propped up the eleven during a time when they did not produce seed-bearing fruit, so they might bear fruit. It is incredible how widely they spread His word in the years following Pentecost. Of course, even though Christians in general are not the focal-point of John 15:2a, we can thank Him for showing us the same mercy as well. 

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1. Gary W. Derickson, “Viticulture and John 15:1-6,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2005): 23-43.

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Q&A

by Staff

Does the Parable of the Talents Refer to Church-Age or Tribulation Believers?

Q My questions have to do with the Parable of the Talents found in Matt 25:14-30. In verses 21 and 23 we read, “Well done, good and faithful servant...” These are words we would all love to hear at the Judgment Seat of Christ. But is it good exegesis to apply these verses to believers today or is that just wishful thinking on our part? In essence who are the servants who will be given the opportunity to hear these words? Is it limited to the Tribulation saints or is there broader application? Let me explain my concerns.

In the context of Mathew 24 and 25, Jesus is answering two of the disciple’s questions: When will the temple be destroyed; and what are the signs of Christ’s second coming and the end of the age? The second question occupies most of the text and focuses on the Tribulation period. The parables immediately before and after the Parable of the Talents take place at the end of the Tribulation, or during the transition period between the Tribulation and the start of the Millennium. The preceding parable, the Parable of the Ten Virgins, focuses on the nation of Israel being ready for the imminent arrival of the Bridegroom and the wedding feast. The succeeding parable, the Sheep and Goats Judgment, concentrates on how people, believers and non-believers, treat the Jews who were undergoing extreme hardship and persecution during the Tribulation. We are neither Israel nor “sheep and goats.” Thus, these later two parables do not directly apply to the Church since we will be raptured and in the presence of the Lord.

In context then, I assume the Parable of the Talents takes place during the Tribulation, maybe near the end of it. The primary application and audience seems to be fairly narrow. It seems limited to a

specific time, place, and number of people meaning only a few faithful Tribulation servants will have an opportunity to hear the much desired words, “Well done...”

I realize there are secondary applications of these parables, but I wonder if we are guilty of taking these verses out of context, giving them too broad a meaning, and misapplying them most of the time. Please help me with my understanding and application of this important parable.

—MM, email

A Excellent questions. You touch on a number of key questions related to hermeneutics, how we interpret the Bible.

It may sound like dodging your question, but my first suggestion is to look at Luke 19:11-17 (the Parable of the Minas) before looking at Matt 25:14-30. The reason is because both parables are discussing the same event and because Luke 19 is easier to understand. The analogy of faith is a principle of hermeneutics which says that we are to understand

the difficult texts of Scripture (like Matt 25:14-30) in light of the simpler texts of Scripture (like Luke 19:11-27).

Both of the parables discuss three servants of Jesus whom He will judge when He returns. In both, two of the three servants are rewarded (though there is a difference in the amount of reward the second servant receives in each parable) and one is not rewarded. The third servant in each is rebuked for his failure to invest the money the Lord gave him.

In the Parable of the Minas there is another group present which is not discussed in the Parable of the Talents: the citizens of the Lord who hated Him and did not want Him to rule over them as their King (Luke 19:14, 27). First the Lord judges His servants (Luke 19:16-26), then He says, “But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay *them* before me” (Luke 19:27).

Slaying is done to the enemies, not the servants. The judgment of the third servant ends in verse 26. He is not slain. He has his opportunity to rule taken from



QUESTIONS?

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him and given to the first servant. But he still is a servant and he gets into the kingdom.

Slaying refers to the second death of Rev 20:14, which is being cast into the lake of fire. The enemies suffer that fate. The third servant does not.

Zane Hodges has pointed out that there is clearly a sequence in the two judgments of Luke 19:11-27. The judgment of the believers (19:16-26) is over before the judgment of the unbelievers, the enemies, begins (Luke 19:27). Zane said that like Zech 9:9-10 there is a 1,000 year gap between Luke 19:26 and Luke 19:27. The servants are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ (the Bema) before the Millennium and the enemies at the Great White Throne after the Millennium (Rev 20:11-15).

Since the third servant in the Parable of the Talents is parallel to the third servant in the Parable of the Minas, we know the he represents an unfaithful Church-Age believer who is rebuked at the Judgment Seat of Christ and who will not reign in the life to come.

Now let's consider Matthew 24:45-25:31 in more detail. There are three parables there followed by the judgment of the sheep and the goats. Two judgments are presented back to back in Matt 25:14-30 and 31-46.

Zane Hodges suggests that the four sections alternate in terms of which age is in view. Two refer to the judgment of Church-Age believers (Matt 24:45-51 and Matt 25:14-30). Two refer to the judgment

“The servants are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ (the Bema) before the Millennium and the enemies at the Great White Throne after the Millennium (Rev 20:11-15).”

of believers, or believers and unbelievers, from the Tribulation (Matt 25:1-13 and 31-46).

Note that in the first three sections the people believe Jesus is coming again (which unbelievers rarely do). Moreover, all three are either called His *servants* (Matt 24:45, 46, 48, 49, 50; 25:14, 19, 21, 23, 26, 30), or they are called *virgins* who

had been invited to dance at His wedding celebration (Matt 25:1, 7, 11). Even the “wicked and lazy servant” and “the unprofitable servant” (Matt 25:26, 30) are called servants.

I know you agree, but it bears mention. It would be odd, even misleading, to call unregenerate people *servants of Christ* and *virgins*. And there is no teaching anywhere in Scripture that suggests that unbelievers are given stewardships by God.

While the idea of *accountability* certainly is evident in Matt 25:1-12 and 31-46 for believers in the Tribulation, it should be noted that nothing is said or even implied about *stewardship* in either passage. However, stewardship is *the point* of both Matt 24:45-51 and Matt 25:14-30. In the first the servant is in charge of a house. In the third the servants are given money and were expected to invest it and bring a good return on investment, clearly a stewardship. But that is very much a Church-Age idea. Paul said, “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:1-2). I believe those words to Church-Age believers are essentially what those two parables are about.

(I’m not saying that Tribulation saints aren’t also stewards. What I’m saying

is that there is nothing remotely about stewardship in either Matt 25:1-12 or 25:31-46.)

In all three the point is that believers need to be watchful in light of Christ's soon return and the Bema (Matt 24:45-48; 25:13, 29-30). However, in only one of the three parables do the people in question know *when* the Lord is returning. Only in the Parable of the Ten Virgins do they hear the midnight cry (the abomination at the middle of the Tribulation). They know based on Scripture that the time of Jacob's Trouble is 7 years long and hence the Lord will return exactly 3.5 years after the midnight cry.

Of course, the application the Lord gives in Matt 25:13 to watchfulness (compare Matt 24:42-24, immediately before the first parable, suggesting it too deals with Church-Age believers) is directed to His listeners who would soon be in the Church-Age, and to Church-Age believers who would read Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 25:13 is not part of the parable per se. We in the Church Age are to be *watchful* for He is coming like a thief in the night, with no indication of the timing (Matt 24:43).

I should add that there are lots of similarities between (1) Matt 24:45-51 and (3) Matt 25:14-30 which are not found in (2) Matt 25:1-13 and (4) Matt 25:31-46:

1&3: called *servants* 11 times

2&4: not called *servants* even once, but called *virgins* and *sheep*

1&3: given a stewardship

2&4: no mention of stewardship

1&3: nothing related to the Tribulation

2&4: midnight cry and return of Christ with Him sitting on His throne

Those textual clues strongly suggest that the arrangement goes back and forth from Church Age to Tribulation to Church Age to Tribulation.

In summary, the Parable of the Talents, like the Parable of the Minas, looks at the Judgment Seat of Christ when Church-Age believers will be judged. That will occur sometime between the Rapture and the start of the Millennium.

You did not ask about the weeping and gnashing of teeth or the expression "the outer darkness." I believe you are familiar with what we have published on those questions since you indicate you see the people in the Parable of the Talents as

believers. For more information, consult our website (www.faithalone.org) for articles.

I know that's a long answer, but your questions cannot be answered quickly without skipping important details.

—Bob

Are Adulterers Excluded from Christ's Kingdom?

Q Regarding the advice you gave concerning the brother who was living with his girlfriend [see Jan/Feb 2014 issue], what kind of thinking process results in your inexcusable advice to explain to the brother that there are no threats of hell for him anymore as he is now saved. For a person who continues to practice sexual immorality, there is every reason to counsel the opposite: that according to Scripture, no adulterers will enter heaven. The indication is that he

**"Everyone who believes
in Jesus for eternal life
will *enter* the kingdom;
but only those
Christians who are
faithful will *inherit* it."**

has not yet repented. Stated so strongly in both Galatians and Revelation that adulterers will not enter heaven, how can you oppose such Scriptures?

—DP, Email

A I sympathize with your objection, but can't agree with it. Although I admire that you're trying to appeal to Scripture, I'm afraid you are actually misquoting and misunderstanding the passages you are referring to.

First, repentance is not a condition for eternal salvation. John tells us many times that if we believe in Jesus, we have eternal life (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35; 11:26). But we never find a single occurrence of the word *repentance* in the whole Gospel of John. And in the two books that tell us how to be justified before God, Galatians never mentions repentance at

all, and there is only one use of *repentance* in Romans (Rom 2:5), and even then it is not stated as a condition for justification. John and Paul both make *faith* the one and only condition for having eternal life. Repentance is important for growing in the Christian life, and for temporal salvation, but not for eternal salvation.

Second, I should point out that we believe in the doctrine of eternal security (John 3:16; 10:28-30). So, once someone believes in Jesus for everlasting life, it is a present possession, and he can never perish eternally. Even someone living in adultery cannot lose everlasting life. Once he has it, he has it forever.

Third, you seem to have a different understanding of the nature of salvation than we do. You wrote: "according to Scripture, no adulterers will enter heaven." That's not true. What Paul actually says is,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not *inherit the kingdom of God*?

Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will *inherit the kingdom of God* (1 Cor 6:9-10, emphasis added).

Notice that while you talk about *entering heaven* (and thereby imply this is an eternal life/eternal death issue), Paul actually writes about *inheriting the kingdom*. Heaven is not in view here. This is the Millennial kingdom that Christ will set up on earth, with the capital being Jerusalem. So that's the first thing to recognize.

Also, you should note that Paul isn't talking about the conditions for *entering* the kingdom. He is speaking about the conditions for *inheriting* the kingdom. If you aren't a Dispensationalist, then you probably won't know the difference between "entering" and "inheriting" the kingdom. And you may not know about the more basic difference between "eternal life" and "eternal rewards." If not, I would encourage you to do word studies on both. Simply put, everyone who believes in Jesus for eternal life will *enter* the kingdom, but only those Christians who are faithful will *inherit* it. Some Christians are more faithful than others, and will be rewarded with greater responsibility in the kingdom (Luke 19:17 versus

Luke 19:19). Some will rule over ten cities (Luke 19:17), some over five (Luke 19:19), and some over none at all (Luke 19:20-26). Just read the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27).

So, coming back to the original question about the believer living in adultery: believers cannot lose everlasting life. All believers will enter the Millennial kingdom. But believers who live in rebellion against God will not receive an inheritance in the kingdom.

—Shawn

Must We Strive for Everlasting Life?

Can anyone please comment on Luke 13:22-30? I've looked at a lot of commentaries, and most seem to talk about how *agonizomai* (strive) is used, and claim that it is not easy to get to heaven and we must strive with God. Example:

Those that would enter in at the strait gate must strive to enter. It is a hard matter to get to heaven, and a point that will not be gained without a great deal of care and pains, of difficulty and diligence. We must strive with God in prayer, wrestle as Jacob, strive against sin and Satan. We must strive in every duty of religion; strive with our own hearts, *agonizesthe*—"Be in an agony; strive as those that run for a prize; excite and exert ourselves to the utmost."

Why does Jesus seem to contradict Himself between passages like this and John 3:16? I'm not claiming He is...I just don't understand.

I see so much evidence for salvation by belief alone in some verses, and then verses like this seem to indicate we must work hard. I don't want to take anything away from the message of salvation by Jesus alone, but what else is this passage suggesting?

I asked someone who preaches on grace alone, and he just said it was to unbelievers...but the person asking the question addressed Jesus as Lord...

I'm just confused. I want to get this right, and I hope someone can help clarify for me. Thank you.

—BH, Facebook

Excellent question. You're right that the idea that the Lord is teaching that we must work hard, understood to mean *working hard doing good works that please God*, in order to

"Striving to find the saving message is something many have had to do over the years, especially those of us who were steeped in legalism."

gain everlasting life, is clearly false. Not only does John 3:16 contradict that, so do John 6:28-29, Acts 16:31, Rom 4:4-5, Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:5, and so many other texts.

The Lord was, however, teaching that striving may well be necessary in order to be saved (v 23), that is, in order to enter the narrow gate, which is the gate to everlasting life (vv 23-28). The issue is not *striving to do good works*, the issue is *striving to find the way by which to enter*. Since there are two ways, one narrow and one broad, and since most people are on the broad way, it stands to reason that it may take effort to find the truth. Most evangelistic messages are false and will not save.

Compare Luke 13:27 with Matt 7:23. The issue in Matt 7:21-23 is doing the will of the Father, which in terms of salvation is believing in His Son (see John 6:28-29, 39-40).

In both cases the persons involved call Jesus "Lord." That in no way proves or even suggests that these are believers. If this is the Great White Throne Judgment, surely people being judged would speak respectfully to the Judge. After all, they want to get into His kingdom. So they call Him *Lord*. But if they did not believe in Him for everlasting life (1 Tim 1:16) in this life (John 11:26), they are not in the Book of Life and will miss the kingdom (Rev 20:15).

Of course, Jesus was speaking to Jews steeped in Rabbinic legalism. For them to come to faith might well involve a search. Compare John 5:39-40; 7:17; Acts 17:11. If a person is willing to come to Christ in faith, then the Lord will open his eyes to the message of life.

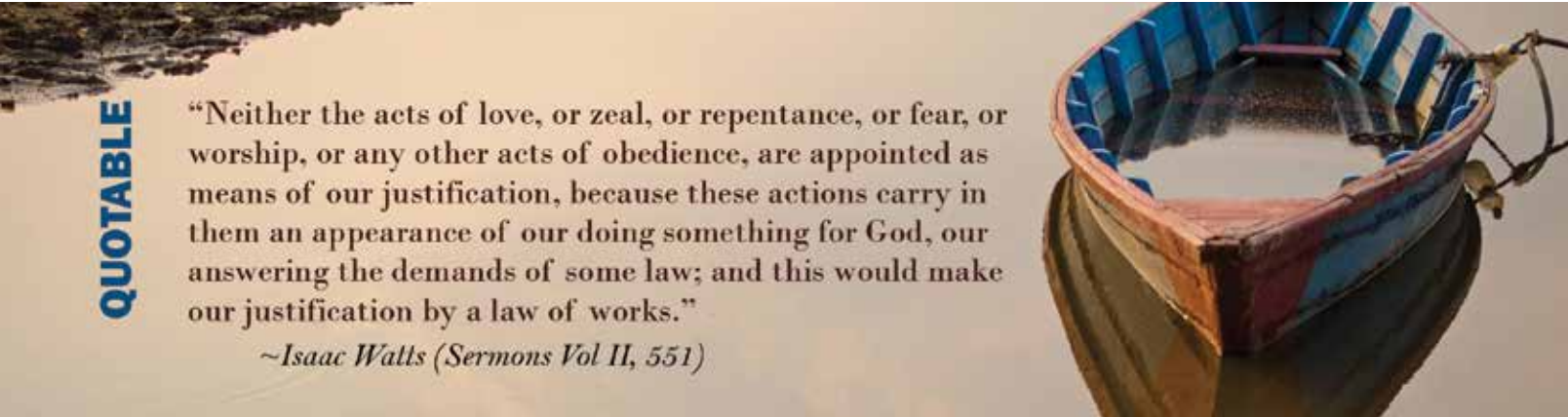
Today in the U.S., the situation is very similar. If you talk to 100 pastors, surely 90 will tell you that in order to be born again you must turn from your sins, commit your life to Christ, obey Him, and persevere till death in obedience and faith. Anything short of that means that you either lost everlasting life or proved you never really had it in the first place. Striving to find the saving message is something many have had to do over the years, especially those of us who were steeped in legalism.

Eternal life is a free gift which is received simply by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, discovering that it really is that simple may require striving on the part of unbelievers.

I hope that helps.

—Bob

Email your questions and comments to bethany@faithalone.org.



QUOTABLE

"Neither the acts of love, or zeal, or repentance, or fear, or worship, or any other acts of obedience, are appointed as means of our justification, because these actions carry in them an appearance of our doing something for God, our answering the demands of some law; and this would make our justification by a law of works."

~Isaac Watts (*Sermons Vol II, 551*)

A Review of “Repentance Found? The Concept of Repentance in the Fourth Gospel” by David A. Croteau

by Bob Wilkin

I wrote my dissertation on the question of repentance and salvation in the NT. Croteau quotes me a number of times in this article (though he seems unaware that I changed my understanding of repentance in 1998, 16 years ago).

Though this is a 27-page article, the author’s contentions are quite simple and easy to follow. This article, which appeared in *Master’s Seminary Journal* in the Spring of 2013 (pp. 97-123), argues as follows:

1. Repentance in the NT is turning from sins, not a change of mind about Christ.
2. Though the words *repent* (*metanoeō*) and *repentance* (*metanoia*) are admittedly not found in John’s Gospel, the concept of repentance is a significant theme there.
3. In the Fourth Gospel we learn that one must turn from his sins *in order to be born again*.
4. In terms of application to modern evangelism, John’s Gospel teaches us, for example, that an alcoholic must



stop getting drunk before he can be born again.

Let’s examine these four points.

Repentance in the NT Is Turning from Sins

Croteau is unaware that Zane Hodges, myself, and many other Free Grace writers agree with him that repentance in the NT is turning from sins. He cites decades-old journal articles by me as arguing that repentance is a change of mind (p. 97).

There is no reason to debate this point since I completely agree that Matt 12:41 and its OT counterpart in Jonah 3:10 shows that repentance is turning from sins. Indeed, I agree that the words *metanoia* and *metanoeō* always refer to turning from sins in the NT.

The Concept of Repentance Is in the Fourth Gospel

Croteau says, “While repentance cannot be said to be an overwhelming theme of the Fourth Gospel, it should not be considered absent” (p. 121).

Let me say that if it can be shown anywhere in John’s Gospel where someone is called to turn from his sins, then the concept of repentance is there even if the words *repent* and *repentance* are not. However, Croteau fails to show a single

example of this, because there are none. So he is forced to go to texts that speak of evil deeds or of turning and argue that repentance must be implicitly present even if neither the words *repent* or *repentance* or the phrase *turning from sins* is found.

Before I go through the seven places in John where Croteau says that a call to turn from sins is implicitly present, let me say that I find this to be a moot point in any case.

Let’s imagine that the expression *turn from your sinful ways* occurred 99 times in John’s Gospel, but that not one of the contexts was an evangelistic context. Then even if the concept is present, it would still not be a condition of everlasting life.

Now let’s consider his seven proofs.

Four of the seven places where Croteau thinks he sees repentance are in John Chapter 3.

One place in which Croteau finds the concept of repentance is in John 3:14-15, the uplifted serpent as type of Christ. Yet there is no mention of turning from sins in John’s reference to the bronze serpent being lifted up, nor in Num 21:4-9. This is weak, to say the least.

Croteau thinks that the *confession* of Num 21:7 “describes the repentance of the Israelites from their sin” (p. 111). Possibly they did repent. But Num 21:7 does not describe repentance. Confession is not repentance. How does he

know that they also repented? And even if they did, the condition for healing was neither confession nor repentance, but as Croteau acknowledges, simply looking at the uplifted serpent. Note this amazing admission: “just as the Israelites ‘looked’ at the serpent [and] were given life, so belief in Jesus gives life” (p. 111).

He also suggests that repentance is found in John 3:3-5 in being born again or born from above. Yet there is no mention of repentance or turning from sins there. The only condition there is believing in Jesus. Again, there is zero support for his contention here.

John the Baptist said the one who disobeys the Son shall not see life (John 3:36). Croteau sees there a call to repentance and obedience. Yet BAGD understands *apeitheō* in John 3:36 as “the supreme disobedience...meaning *disbelieve, be an unbeliever*” (p. 82D). This is a faith issue, not a works issue. That is why many versions translate *apeitheō* in John 3:36 as “he who *does not believe* the Son...”

But even if John 3:36 had said, “He *who obeys* the Son has everlasting life and he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him,” that would in no way introduce the theme of turning from sins. The issue would be obedience, not repentance. But John 3:36 does not say even that. John the Baptist said, “He *who believes* in the Son has everlasting life...” That is the same message as John 3:16. No repentance is present.

Croteau thinks the call to *step into the light* in John 3:19-21 a call to repentance. Zane Hodges wrote a journal article on this passage, showing that *coming to the light* in this context refers to openly confessing Jesus, something Nicodemus did not do, but something that John the Baptist (discussed in the verses which immediately follow, John 3:22-26) did quite well (see *BibSac*, Oct-Dec 1978: 314-22).

There is no call to turn from sins in these verses. Instead, there is a call to confess Christ.

It is true that in v 19 the Lord says, “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” But this is not a call to repentance. This is a statement

of fact. Men’s evil deeds often, but not always, keep them from faith in Christ.

Of course, since some come to faith in Christ and all are sinners, some clearly do overcome this hindrance and listen to and believe the message of life. Nicodemus is one such person. And in the very next chapter John tells of the woman at the well coming to faith in Christ. Yet her deeds were especially evil. And there is no indication that she repented before or after coming to faith.

A fifth place in John where Croteau finds the concept of repentance is John 15:1-5. The theme of abiding there

“If repentance
is a condition of
everlasting life, then
one must not simply
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from *all sins*.”

according to Croteau teaches turning from sins. But once again, there is no mention or even hint of turning from sins there. (Croteau actually lists this as his weakest argument, p. 121.)

Of his seven suggestions, only two of them might legitimately allude to repentance. Interestingly, Croteau himself ranks his seven texts in terms of strongest to weakest and the following two he lists as the two strongest arguments for the concept of repentance being present in John’s Gospel (p. 121).

In John 5:14 the Lord said, “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.’” Similarly, in John 8:11 the Lord said to the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” Interestingly, Croteau rejects John 8:11 as Scripture (p. 115, esp. note 112), and thus he is reduced to John 5:14. However, since John 7:53–8:11 is found in the vast majority of manuscripts and is clearly Scripture, I will discuss both.

In both cases the Lord told notorious sinners to “sin no more.” Is that

the same as saying, “don’t return to the sin that got you in this predicament in the first place?” I’d say yes, but I’d also say that is not the same as repentance. Even Croteau stops short of calling this a command to repent saying, “this is *essentially* an injunction to repent” (p. 115, italics added).

Repentance is turning from our sins, plural. When the prodigal son left the far country, he left behind all the sins he was involved in there. Say the woman caught in adultery did not commit adultery again, thus obeying the Lord’s command, but she did continue in unrepented lying and stealing. Then she would not have repented.

I find it something less than a call to repentance when the Lord commands a person to not repeat the sin that led to their sickness or their near stoning.

Croteau’s final example is John 12:40. There John alludes to Isa 6:10: “*He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.*” The word translated *turn* is *epistrephō*. It is a word that is used in the NT to refer to both turning *from one’s sins* (Jas 5:20; Acts 26:18 uses *hupostrephō*) or turning *to the Lord* (Luke 1:16; Acts 9:35; 11:21; 2 Cor 3:16). Turning to the Lord is a synonym for believing in Him. In this passage in John 12:40, as well as in Isa 6:10, the issue is turning *to the Lord*, not *turning from sins*.

Croteau’s seven examples of repentance in John’s Gospel do not stand up to scrutiny.

The Fourth Gospel Teaches That One Must Turn From His Sins to Be Born Again

I am being gracious here to call this a point in the article. Croteau actually never once explicitly says the Fourth Gospel teaches that one must turn from his sins to be born again. The closest he comes is on p. 115 where he says concerning John 5:14, “the context is salvific.” Yet he gives zero evidence of the fact that the man’s healing is also his new birth.

Croteau is simply trying to show that the concept of repentance is somewhere

in John's Gospel. However, since he says that one must repent to be saved (p. 97) and that "repentance is a part of saving faith and without it salvation cannot occur" (p. 97; see also p. 121 where in his conclusion he speaks of repentance "in evangelism and gospel presentations"), I will discuss this point, even though he never does.

Obviously if the concept of repentance is not even found in John's Gospel as I have argued in the preceding section, then the Fourth Gospel does not teach that one must turn from his sins to be born again.

However, even if John's Gospel taught the concept of repentance—which it does not, it would only teach repentance as a condition of everlasting life if the concept of repentance was found in *each and every evangelistic passage*.

Over and over again the sole condition in the Fourth Gospel is believing in Jesus. The word *believe* (*pisteuō*) occurs 99 times in John's Gospel. In addition, in many places *the concept* of believing is presented, as in coming to Jesus (John 6:35), eating the bread of life (John 6:35), drinking the water of life (John 4:14; 6:35), and receiving Him (John 1:12). But never do we find an evangelistic passage in John in which anything other than faith in Christ is the condition of everlasting life.

But let's say that we accepted all seven texts in John that Croteau says teach the concept of repentance. And let's go even further and grant that all seven of those texts are *evangelistic passages*. And let's go even further and say that in all seven the texts explicitly says that one must turn from his sins in order to have everlasting life. Now let's say that there were 50 total evangelistic passages in John. Even Croteau would be forced to admit that in 86% of the cases the only condition given is faith in Christ. Then he would be forced to conclude that there are two different ways to be born again in John's Gospel!

Think about it. If the Lord Jesus told some that *whoever believes in Him* has everlasting life, but He told others that *whoever turns from his sins* has everlasting life, then there would be different conditions for different people. In the conclusion of his review of Millard Erickson's article, "Lordship Salvation: The Current Controversy," Darrell Bock says precisely that: "There are many kinds of

[evangelistic] invitations in the Scriptures. Some of the offers of eternal life come with pure invitation and others are presented with demand. Jesus Himself seems to have given a variety of invitations, depending on the situation He addressed" (*BibSac*, July-September 1991, p. 361).

There are zero passages in John's Gospel (or the Bible) that say anything even close to "whoever turns from his sins has everlasting life." But, unless *each and every evangelistic passage* in John's Gospel taught that, Croteau would have to either say that the sole condition is faith in Christ, or else that there are different conditions for different people.

Evangelistic Application: All Sins Must Be Abandoned Before a Person Is Ready to Be Born Again

Croteau actually gives the example of an alcoholic and says he must "change his lifestyle," or at least "be willing to do so in order to obtain salvation" (p. 97). This is remarkable. Croteau is just using that one sin as an example. He means that a person must change *his entire lifestyle, turning from all his sins*, to obtain salvation. Or at least he must be willing to do so.

Say an evangelist is speaking one on one with a person he just met. He would need to find out what sins this person was involved in so as to make sure the person understood that he needed to turn from all those things to be born again.

According to Croteau, to be born again a person must cease immorality, stop getting drunk, stop getting high on other drugs, give up lying, stop stealing, cut out cursing, eliminate hitting, cease coveting, stop being jealous or envious, cease being prideful, and so on.

In his famous book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J. I. Packer wrote:

In our own presentation of Christ's gospel, therefore, we need to lay a similar stress on *the cost of following Christ*, and make sinners face it soberly before we urge them to respond to the message of free forgiveness. *In common honesty, we must not conceal the fact that free forgiveness in one sense will cost everything* (p. 73, emphasis added).

Note the same sentiment expressed by James Montgomery Boice in his famous book *Christ's Call to Discipleship*:

I say that the minimum amount a person must believe to be a Christian is *everything*, and that the minimum amount a person must give is *all*. I say, "You must give it all. You cannot hold back even a fraction of a percentage of yourself. *Every sin must be abandoned* [emphasis mine]. Every false thought must be repudiated. You must be the Lord's entirely" (p. 114).


If repentance is a condition of everlasting life, then one must not simply turn from *a sin*, or even *a few sins*, but from *all sins*. If repentance is a condition of everlasting life, then part of evangelism needs to be instructions on what is sin. Young people today do not know that sex outside of marriage is sin. Most people today do not consider lying to be sin. Or cheating on your income taxes. Or stealing little things like stamps and staplers and pens from work. Or calling in sick at work so you can go fishing. Or taking the Lord's name in vain.

How many sins are there? Let's say that there are only 200. You'd need to keep that list with you at all times when you evangelize so that you could tell the person *all* he needed to give up in order to be born again.

Conclusion

I respect the author's zeal for holiness. I share that concern. However, he pollutes the living water when he adds works into it. A person being evangelized by him could only be born again if he rejected the idea that it takes belief plus turning from sins to be born again.

Yes, we should call those who are enslaved to sin to repent, but not in order to gain everlasting life.

That the author can find the concept of repentance in a book that doesn't mention any of the words or expressions of repentance is a sad commentary on the need for people to read their theology into the Word rather than allowing the Word to form or change their theology. 

Bob Wilkin is the Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society.

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