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# ARE WE SAVED BY WORKS

(UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRACE & WORKS)

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One doctrine that separates the churches of Christ from nearly all of the religious world is our insistence on baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We believe the Bible clearly teaches that only those who have been immersed in water for the purpose of having their sins washed away will enjoy the benefits of the blood of Christ (**Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:16**).

Since the Bible contains many passages that support this fundamental doctrine, one surely marvels at the attempts made today to deny this Scriptural truth. However, such attempts have been characteristic of the religious world for centuries – especially among those who claim to be Bible believing Christians.

What is probably the most popular argument against teaching the essentiality of baptism for salvation is to claim that since salvation is by God's grace (**Ephesians 2:8-9**), and grace is a "free gift" (**Romans 3:24**), then neither baptism nor any other human work will save. Here is the argument:

- 1) Works cannot save (**Ephesians 2:8**)
- 2) Baptism is a work (admitted by all)
- 3) Therefore, baptism cannot save.

The problem is that the argument has failed to distinguish the different kinds of works discussed in the Bible. It lumps all works together and assumes that is what Paul is discussing in **Ephesians 2:8-9**. But notice how this same kind of argument can be used in favor of baptism for the forgiveness of sins:

- 1) Works DO save (**James 2:14-26**)
- 2) Baptism is a work
- 3) Therefore, baptism DOES save.

On one hand, the Bible teaches that works cannot save (**Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5**). On the other hand, the Bible teaches that works do save (**James 2:14-26**). This apparent contradiction can easily be resolved by noting that the Bible teaches two kinds of works. On one hand, **works of merit** cannot save. That is, there is no amount of good deeds you or I could do whereby we could say to God, "Lord, You owe me salvation because of what I have done." But on the other hand, **works of obedience** does save us. That is, our conformity to the will of God has a direct relationship to what God will do for us by His grace.

As you can see, the "grace only" advocates confuse the word "free" in **Romans 3:24** with the word "**unconditional**." They read the verse this way, "...and are unconditionally justified by His grace..." But the verse doesn't say that. Paul says we are freely justified by God's grace and that carries a far different meaning.

For example, Jesus freely healed a blind man by anointing his eyes with clay mixed with spit. But the healing was conditioned upon the obedience of the man who was told to “go wash in the pool of Siloam” (**John 9:7**). Sadly, many people today would refuse to obey the Lord’s command for fear that they would be attempting to earn their sight. Naaman was freely healed of his leprosy, but the healing was conditioned upon his washing “in the Jordan seven times” (**2 Kings 5:10**). Many today would refuse to wash in the Jordan because the human activity might offend the free gift of God.

Undoubtedly, one cannot earn God’s grace. Paul said, “now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation” (**Romans 4:4**). If we could earn our salvation with God by being good, by our works, then the gift wouldn’t be a free act, it would be a wage, an obligation to reward. There is nothing you or I could have done or can do that would obligate God to send his Son, to make salvation possible for us. But at the same time, the Giver of these things, God Himself, has set conditions that are to be met in order to receive His grace. These conditions are necessary in order to be saved. Incidentally these conditions involve “works.” These are not the same works that Paul discusses in **Romans 4:4, Ephesians 2:8-9**, but the works that James discusses in **James 2:14-26**. James says explicitly, “you see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”

Ironically, even the “grace only” advocates, by implication, teach that works are necessary to be saved. They boldly teach that salvation is an unconditional gift from God and that you do not have to do anything. Then they immediately exhort you to believe in Christ to receive His salvation. Little do they realize they have just stipulated a condition. Moreover, this condition is also described in the Bible as a work (**John 6:28-29**). If you were to ask someone with this belief system whether a person needs to repent in order to be saved, most likely you would get an answer of “yes.” But doesn’t it take effort and work to repent?

The bottom line for the “grace only” advocate is this: You can’t have it both ways. Either salvation is totally a gift from God in which men are entirely passive, OR salvation is conditioned on man’s obedience to the will of God as set forth in His word. If men are entirely passive in the salvation process then all men are going to be saved because “the grace of God has appeared to all men” (**Titus 2:11**). But Jesus said that not all men would be saved (**Matt 7:13-14**). Since conditions are required we had better understand the conditions correctly or be lost! One hopes that the adherents to the false teaching of “grace only” will see the contradiction of their doctrine and obey the truth. In addition, salvation by “grace alone” or “faith alone” is unreasonable and unscriptural as salvation by “repentance alone” or “hearing alone” or “baptism alone.” We are not saved by any one thing alone, to the exclusion of other things required in the Bible.

The Bible teaches that baptism is essential to one’s salvation. Baptism puts one into Christ (**Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:26-27**). Baptism washes away sin (**Acts 22:16**). In this way, baptism saves (**Mark 16:16; 1 Pet 3:21**). We must never approach baptism, or any other work of obedience, as a way to put God in our debt, or to earn our salvation in any way. We should approach all obedience as divinely established conditions whereby we have the privilege of accepting the free gift of God’s grace. Even after we have conformed to God’s plan of salvation we still ought to say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty” (**Luke 17:10**).