

Faith and Works XXV

The Contemporary and Biblical Contexts

Col. 2:8

First Love

Love is shown to be love when it is not deserved.

If after all the washings, prayers, reciting of Holy scriptures, we have tried to earn acceptance before God, it is then only our deeds that earn our reward, for to not do them perfectly would mean our rejection.

And while extreme ritualistic practices may be obvious examples of earning salvation through works, it is often the little foxes that spoil the vineyard; it is the small amount of yeast that leavens the whole lump of dough.

As an example of this point, martyrs are not killing themselves in the name of God because they have the faith to die; they are killing themselves to prove to God that they have faith. They are killing themselves to validate their faith, and even raise the value of their faith and works.

All too often our natural way of thinking results in our seeking ways to improve and perfect ourselves, to establish ourselves, control our standing before God and His obligation to us by what we do, even when the rigorous demands of God's law are softened into easier to follow teachings, mere shadows of the Law given Moses.

The original law given to Moses by God did not offer a prescription for man to justify himself by his works before God, they only brought about a knowledge of man's fallen sinful nature, and the need for the shedding of blood at the temple altar, for, as the scripture plainly says, without the shedding of blood, shall no sin be justified.

There was always the need for the ministrations of the Levitical priesthood and the daily sacrifices at the temple until the perfect Lamb of God would be offered in payment for the promise God had made to Abraham, that through his seed, all the nations would be blessed.

And yet, it is in the nature of fallen mankind, that they still begin on the premise that it is what God sees us doing that earns His favor. The hidden conceit here is that ultimately it is in our own power to perfect ourselves and earn a right standing before God by our works. This is not a trust in a loving God, this is a business transaction seeking to fulfill a contract dealing with the very issues of life.

But the Bible teaches that God is not looking for works to prove us worthy of His love, He seeks those who will trust in Him to make us worthy, with the result of the fruit of love and forgiveness to those around us that is the response to the recognition and acceptance of His grace.

Mark 12:28-34 Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.

How far was the distance that the scribe, while recognizing God's truth, yet still had to travel? The distance is often only as far as our head is from our heart. We often strive to show God that we love Him, but have we first let Him show His love to us?

If we approach loving God as a work we must do before God will accept us, we put ourselves in an impossible category, of those whom the Bible says, have all sinned, and fallen short of the Glory of God, who are by nature, children of wrath. The Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the unrighteous. If even the high priest of Israel could not enter the temple without the shedding of blood, no work of our own will ever do more than to testify against us that we are starting a journey toward God from a wilderness where He is not, and by God's own testimony, it is a journey we cannot finish in our own works, for without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins.

Seeing our relationship with God resting on the bases of our own works focuses our attention on how well we are doing God's work, and inevitably leads us to compare our works with those around us, to be in competition with and even rejoicing through gossip and condemnation over the failure of those we think are beneath our imagined standard of self righteousness. Such is the fruit of the mind set on the flesh.

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

John 8:3-11 Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him (Jesus) a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very

act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

The message of the Gospel is indeed unique in the World's religions. For while all seek to teach the way to God, the Gospel proclaims the way God Himself has made. All religions but one teach that a man must make himself worthy of God. Only one makes man worthy by God.

Rom. 3:21-31 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not

also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

What is important according to the scriptures, is faith working through love, a love that is a response, evidence, the works even that James is saying must be present in a true believer in the gospel, fruit of a heart that is thankful and responding to God's love that He showed in the giving of His only begotten Son. If we make actions of love our focus, we will never clean the inside of the cup, and our actions will not be fruit but works done simply to buy favor from a false non Biblical god who will not accept anything but full payment.

Rom. 3:19-20 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Only those with a superficial understanding of love would imagine that it is simply a prescribed set of actions done as proof of our own self righteousness, for true Grace, when walked in, results in the surrendering of all that we have, not trying to perfect it for our own self-preservation and status before man and God.

Matthew 5:43-48 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more

than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

What is this perfect love of God?

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

2 Cor. 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Jeremiah 33:8 I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned and by which they have transgressed against Me.

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Isa. 53:5-6 But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

1 John 4:7-11 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved

God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Christian behavior, if pursued as merely outward conditioning of actions, and not a change of heart on receiving the love of God in believing on Christ as our new foundation, leaving our old, will always leave the focus on the self and the effort to build on the old foundation.

But focusing on Jesus, the author perfecter and finisher of our faith is the power of the Gospel to change us from being self centered, to Christ centered, with the result of the fruit of the spirit, true love and forgiveness towards those around us even as we have received God's forgiveness in Christ. Our focus should be on our true treasure, for there will our heart be also. We must continue to keep our hearts good soil for the Gospel, lest the worries and cares of this life bring us back to rebuilding on the old foundation and resurrecting the first husband (Rom. 7:1-4).

Matt. 18:21-35 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw

him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

James 2:13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

There is only one way into restored fellowship with God, to go through the door God has made, Christ Jesus.

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

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

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.

Rom. 10:2-13 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall

live by them." But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

Amen