

Christianity's Best Kept Secret!

The Christian Church has existed for almost 2000 years and the number of people who call themselves Christians today exceeds one billion! To my amazement, one the most important teachings in the Bible, clearly stated by Jesus and taught by His Apostles, is unknown by many (even most) professing Christians. What I find so troubling is that if this truth (which I will discuss below) is overlooked the result is disastrous. It is literally an issue of life and death, heaven and hell.

The central theme of the Bible and most other religions is how a person finds favor with God and receives eternal life. The Bible tells us that God created us to have fellowship with Him and He has prepared a wonderful place for us to live with Him forever (John 14:2&3). What is so often misunderstood is what God requires of us to enter into eternal life. How can a person know for sure he or she is acceptable to God and will go to heaven?

Although there are thousands of religions in the world, I believe there are only two basic propositions put forth regarding how a person finds favor with God and receives eternal life. One proposition is beautifully simple and guaranteed by God Himself; the other proposition is fatally flawed and collapses under its own weight. Sadly, most of the people I have talked to about eternal life subscribe to the second proposition. As we look more closely at each proposition, I hope you will see that they are not only opposite and contradictory but mutually exclusive. Simply stated, we are talking about two approaches to finding God and getting to heaven; let's call them grace and works.

Grace means unmerited favor. Grace is getting something we do not deserve. My high school Latin teacher told me I was receiving a "D" in her class and that it was grace. I really deserved an "F" but she was gracious enough to give me a "D" so I could graduate. Works on the other hand, is the idea that I am capable of doing it myself. The person who depends on his works to get him to heaven feels that he has enough in and of himself to make it without any outside help. There is definitely a distinction that many people do not recognize. Apparently, they never understand grace so they end up depending on works by default. According to the Bible, the results are disastrous. Proverbs 14:12 says: "There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."

Let's examine more closely the viewpoint that a person can be saved by his works. The basic idea is that man by his own efforts and actions can make himself acceptable to God and therefore earn his way into heaven. Various systems of good behavior and human effort have been suggested including keeping the Ten Commandments, observing rituals like baptism and communion, praying long prayers, following the Golden Rule, giving to charity, church membership, etc. Even terrorist acts have been committed in the name of god for the purpose of earning a place in heaven. Most people who subscribe to the works system think they are pretty good people or at least above average. (I think this viewpoint of one's self gets a lot of support from media coverage of real monsters- e.g. murderous dictators, serial killers, and child-

abusers who make the rest of us look pretty good.) The works system appeals to human logic because in our life we usually experience rewards and satisfaction of our goals through hard work and discipline. If I succeed in business, it will likely be the result of preparation, long hours, and extra effort. If I become a famous athlete, people will recognize that I earned my reputation through sweat, commitment and pushing my body to its limits. Academic achievements are the result of long hours of study, concentration and self discipline. And so it goes in life. We are rewarded for good behavior, performance and for playing by the rules. When this same logic is applied to our relationship to God and eternal life, it doesn't work. According to the Bible, the ultimate authority on spiritual matters, the works system has several fatal flaws.

First, it ignores the problem of man's sin. We all sin hundreds of times in word, thought, and deed. We sin when we break God's law but we also sin when we fail to do what we should. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." It only took one sin for Adam to forfeit his place in paradise and bring spiritual ruin to all of us (Romans 5:12). "The wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23). Secondly, the works system ignores the Righteousness of God. God will not accept our good works either as compensation for sin or as entrance into heaven. "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags in God's sight" (Isaiah 64:6). God is simply too perfect to accept our flawed efforts or to tolerate even one sin in His presence (Psalm 4:5). Third, the works system ignores the death of Jesus Christ, the most important event in history. If I can be acceptable to God and enter His heaven by being good and doing my best, why did Jesus have to die? If God is going to simply weigh my good deeds against my sins, it seems that Christ went through that horrible ordeal on the cross for nothing. Perhaps the most important reason the works system does not work relates to the issue of God's glory. The universe, our earth, and the human race were created to glorify God, e.g. to show how great he really is. God's whole plan of saving people and taking them to heaven is designed to give God the glory (recognition, credit, appreciation) that only He deserves. If I get to heaven because of my personal goodness and my own efforts, who gets the glory? I do. It would be an amazing accomplishment, something I could boast about. Ephesians 2:9 says that salvation is "not of works lest any man should boast". The works system, even if it did work, glorifies man, not God.

The best kept secret in Christianity is that eternal life, going to heaven to be with God forever is absolutely free; it's a gift, not a reward. A reward is something earned through works, effort, or performance. We have already shown from the scriptures that our best efforts and behavior cannot earn us salvation because they are less than perfect in God's sight. Furthermore, there is the problem of our sin that a holy God can not and will not ignore. The Bible tells us repeatedly that eternal life is a free gift; it is not earned or deserved. This is completely opposite from the works system where man supposedly receives eternal life as reward for his behavior or personal merit. The gift of eternal life is offered freely by God because of His love for us. This is what the Bible calls grace. Grace gives us what we do not deserve (heaven) because God wants to spare us from what we actually deserve (hell). Admittedly, grace is not well received by people who have experienced rewards and success in this life as a result of hard work, diligent study or self discipline. In the Bible there is an oft misunderstood word called

repentance. Repentance is a complete change of mind. Many of you who have found success and reward in this life, must have a change of mind to appreciate God's grace.

You must shift from the works mentality (which might have worked well for you in this life) to the grace mentality which is absolutely essential if you are to receive God's free gift of eternal life.

The grace mentality recognizes our true condition before God which is spiritual bankruptcy. We have no assets because our good deeds are flawed when seen through the eyes of a perfect God. He sees our selfish motives which are often hidden to others and even ourselves. The great apostle Paul, author of nearly half the books of the New Testament, wrote of his experience when he realized the worthlessness of his own accomplishments; "if anyone ever had reason to hope that he could save himself, it would be I....but all these things that I once thought very worthwhile-now I've thrown them all away so that I can put my trust and hope in Christ alone....to be found in Him, not having my own righteousness; but the righteousness of God that comes through faith" (Philippians 3:7-9).

The other factor contributing to our spiritual bankruptcy is our sin debt. You may be a fairly good person by human standards. Suppose you only sin three times a day. You tell a lie, you steal some supplies at work, and you jealous of someone's financial success. That equals more than one thousand sins per year. If you are forty years old, you are in debt to God to the tune of 40,000 sins! That's what I mean by spiritual bankruptcy. That is why eternal life has to be a gift. Nobody deserves it. None of us possess the necessary asset of absolute perfection, and we are incapable of escaping from the consequences of our sins. If you understand what I am saying, you might conclude that no one will make it to heaven. If it depends on works and behavior that is absolutely correct. But that's where grace comes to our rescue.

God recognized our helpless, bankrupt condition before we were ever born. His limitless love caused Him to devise a solution. The most well known verse in the Bible says it like this, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Under grace, the death and resurrection of Jesus (seemingly unnecessary in the works system) becomes the focal point of our salvation. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He took our place by paying the penalty for our sins. Jesus was actually God and therefore completely sinless. Since He had no sins of His own, He took our sins on Himself. Every sin you have ever committed or will commit was laid on Jesus and judged. The justice of God is satisfied because the penalty was paid by Jesus. This cancels all of the liabilities (sins) that would otherwise be held against us. "...having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile toward us, and He has taken it away, nailing it to his cross" (Colossians 2:14).

The forgiveness of all of man's sin means all men are savable. Regardless of what you have done, God's free gift of eternal life is available if you will receive it. The only way you can receive eternal life is by faith. Faith is the only means of appropriation that is consistent with grace. You cannot receive eternal life by baptism, communion, church

membership, self-improvement, or keeping the Ten Commandments. These are things you do (works) and can boast about. Ephesians 2:8,9 says: “For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast”. Faith is depending on someone else, trusting in His ability to do something that we cannot do ourselves. It’s like allowing a surgeon to take my life into his hands and open my body to perform an operation. When you believe in Jesus Christ, you trust in His death as the complete payment for your sins. God gives you the righteousness you need to become His child and enter heaven. This righteousness makes you totally acceptable to God. Think of it as the great exchange; Christ took your sins and gives you His righteousness. “God made Him [Christ] who knew no sin, to become sin for us; so that we could be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Remember what I said about the glory of God? God created us and saves us to bring glory to Himself, to demonstrate just how loving, gracious, and merciful he is. Salvation by grace through faith gives God all the glory. He did the work; He gets the credit. Now do you see the difference between works and grace? According to the works system, man does the work and God is supposedly going to accept it and man gets the credit (glory). Martin Luther called this “the most damnable and pernicious heresy known to men.” Under grace, man faces the reality that he has nothing in himself to warrant spending eternity in a perfect place with a perfect God so he throws himself on the mercy of God and receives a pardon provided by the death of Christ. We could also describe the two systems as the religion of “DO” and the religion of “DONE”. In the religion of “DO”, I do the work and I depend on me and my less-than-perfect efforts. In the religion of “DONE”, I am saved by God’s grace, and I rest on the accomplishment of the perfect Son of God—remember His last words in John 19:30? “It is finished!”

There is no way one can combine these systems; they are mutually exclusive. “If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no more grace”(Romans 11:6). If you have to work for it, it’s not really a free gift. Under the works system, you are your own savior and you take your chances hoping that somehow you have done enough to earn salvation. Under grace, you accept God’s free gift and rely on a perfect person (Jesus Christ) who did a perfect work (His sacrificial death) to save you. The resurrection of Christ proves that His death was sufficient and acceptable to God.

A helpful test to determine whether you are relying on grace or works is to answer this question honestly: Suppose you were to die tonight. You stand before God and He asks; “Why should I let you into my heaven?” What would you say? If your answer contains references to who you are or how good you are or what you have done, or what church you attend, you are in the works category. God states plainly that He will reject our works. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us” (Titus 3:5). The correct answer to that question would be “Jesus died for me and I am trusting Him alone.”

Another test is the test of assurance. Do you know for certain that you will go to heaven when you die? Are you confident that you are acceptable to God and possess eternal life? If you are trusting in your works, it would be presumptuous and arrogant to feel that sure of yourself. If you are trusting Jesus Christ alone such confidence is warranted because you are depending on what He accomplished -His death and resurrection- the most documented event in history.

Don't take my word for it. Your faith should not rest on the words of any man. I would encourage you to take the time to examine the Bible passages that speak to these issues and draw your own conclusions. Here is a list of some verses that will help you get started. You can look them up online or in any Bible. Reading these verses for yourself might end up being one of the most important things you will ever do.

Why doing good works or keeping the law will not save us: See Romans 3:20&28,
Romans 4:5, Galatians 2:16, Titus 3:5

Salvation (forgiveness, God's favor, going to heaven when you die) is a free gift because of God's grace: See Romans 3:24, Ephesians 2:8, Revelation 22:17

The seriousness of man's sin: See Ezekiel 18:4, Romans 5:12, Romans 6:23

Our spiritual bankruptcy: See Psalm 52:2&3, Romans 5:5&8, Romans 8:8

Jesus died for us: See I Corinthians 15:3-4, Romans 5:8, I Peter 3:18

Belief in Jesus Christ is the sole condition for salvation: See John 1:12, John 3:18, John 6:47, Acts 16:31

Jesus Christ was God in human flesh: See Isaiah 9:6, John 1:1&14, John 10:30, John 20:28, Colossians 2:9

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