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How Am I Saved?

The topic of faith and good works creates tension in most denominations. Some, like the Catholic Church, believe that redemption is through good works, whereas others, like the Lutheran Church, believe the opposite – the only way to heaven is through faith alone (*sola fide*). This contradiction is not unjustifiable, though. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). However, Paul also wrote in his letter to the Romans that “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified” (2:13). Just by skimming the surface of each verse, it seems the two contradict each other, but that is not the case. Taking a deeper look into both sides of the paradox sheds light on why the big issues arise, how people have tried to differentiate the two, and most importantly, the true relationship between faith and good works.

One of the biggest questions with this paradox is what is meant by the term “justify”. It is frequently used by many people, but unfortunately, the contexts don’t always parallel, which causes issues similar to the one at hand. In Genesis 15, Moses records God’s covenant with Abraham in which Abraham is promised offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. James then recounts this in the New Testament and draws the conclusion “that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). James’s conclusion contradicts Paul’s teachings in Romans, which cites the same verse yet says “[t]o the one who does not work but believes in the

one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (4:5). Though the two teachings seem contradictory, they are simply pulling from different uses of “justify” (Maxwell 375).

To clarify, Paul used “justify” to refer to Abraham being credited as righteous, which was when he believed God. James, however, believed that Abraham was justified when he fulfilled Genesis 15:6 and “offered his son Isaac on the altar” (James 2:21). In this sense, James sees the justification as a result of believing enough to do, and Abraham is thus shown as righteous (Maxwell 376). This opens the gate for the next big conflict in this paradox: do good works save?

The Christian can be described from two different perspectives – the inner person and the outer person. The inner person is connected to Christ through his faith and is thus justified solely by it. The outer person, though, is in the world and is forced to occupy itself by doing and serving others (Kleinhans 395). This is not to be confused with doing to be saved because Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works.”

Kleinhans further explains this by citing Luther’s “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” and saying, “We...cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; rather we deal with men and with ourselves on the basis of works” (395). We use good works as a means of pleasing God with an active faith (Gusdal 156). This is what Paul was getting at in Romans when he said doers of the law will be justified rather than those who simply hear it. They are putting their faith into practice and the judgement that results from it is correspondent with the good works, not

contingent upon them. God judges based on good works, but he does not save and justify because of them (Ortlund 332).

Ortlund goes on to argue that many people falsely assume Paul refers to a hypothetical justification in Romans 2:13 (334); however, The Lutheran Study Bible says different. The LSB explains that only someone who could keep the Law perfectly can be justified, which is impossible because of sin (1912). Ortlund makes the same point, but he instead argues against it because Paul did not explicitly say “fully obey” (334). Ultimately, it is safe to say that the hypothetical justification explanation is reliable because no one can uphold the Law perfectly, meaning no one would essentially meet God’s standards of being saved.

The basic relationship between faith and good works is still cloudy at this point; however, it can be explained simply as this: “Good works come from faith, but we can with equal conviction say they have prior origin in Christ’s giving himself for us” (Scaer 239). Even simpler yet, Scaer says that Christ is in the hearts of the believers so they can do the works of God (239). We have been destined to do good works through Christ, meaning we are unable of taking credit for them because we cannot see whether or not we have reached God’s standard of perfection (238).

Even though we are incapable of reaching God’s standard to be saved, we still do good works. It’s not a case of trying to get as close to the bar as possible because that doesn’t matter. If the standard isn’t met there is no hope. Luckily for us, though, we have hope despite our failures. We know from Ephesians 2:8 that we have a saving faith because of God’s grace, which we don’t deserve. We also know that a workless faith is a dead faith (Scaer 236), and we can’t be justified through a dead faith. However, our works do not lead to our salvation. Instead, they

come about as a result of it (LSB 2019). Because we have been saved, we again use good works as a way of pleasing God (Gusdal 156).

One way of using good works to please God is through vocation. Although vocation used to generally refer to a religious calling, such as a pastor, Luther broadened it to include “the life and work of all Christians in response to God’s call” (Kleinhans 396). Therefore, anything that is honorable before God is a vocation. If it is not honorable, then it is not considered a vocation, nonetheless a good work pleasing to God.

To better understand vocation, take a look at the two kingdoms, specifically the secular realm. This secular realm ties to God working through the Law in an effort to bring order to the world. It is no less apart of God’s world, but it is more equipped for serving one another (Kleinhans 396). Additionally, one can have multiple vocations. As long as it remains pleasing to God, a vocation can be anything from a parent to a musician. Luther sees these multiple vocations as a way of confessing because it closely resembles the idea of the Law as a mirror. It shows someone what he or she has done wrong and provides an opportunity to get back up where need be (Kleinhans 399).

Thus far, the basics have been covered: faith saves; good works do not, although they can be an expression of justification; and sinners are incapable of being saved without God’s grace. One thing is missing though – our faith is not our own. Luther’s explanation of the 3rd Article of the Apostle’s Creed states the following: I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith. Simply put, no one can believe on his or her own; it is because of the Holy Spirit that someone can know Christ. Gusdal acknowledges this and goes on to say, “[F]aith itself is a gift of God, a work of the Holy

Spirit” (157). Without the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of believers, they would not be able to claim knowing Christ or having a saving faith.

Taking a deeper look into both sides of the faith versus good works paradox shed light on what the big issues are, why they arise, the many attempts of distinguishing the two, and most importantly, the what the true Lutheran relationship between faith and good works is. Despite the numerous biblical “contradictions”, there is still a distinction between justification as being credited righteous and justification as a fulfillment of a covenant. Both are true, but tensions arise when each one’s context goes unnoticed, thus creating the paradox common in many denominations.

Works Cited

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