

13.

The Gospel: Saved By Faithfulness to Christ Alone

What I have been contending for leads to some very important questions. If it is true that our contemporary views of God's covenant are off base, how did we arrive at such a tragic misunderstanding of the Bible? Is it really possible that so many could be wrong for so long, about something so important as God's will in saving mankind? Isn't this crucial truth of the Gospel so simple that a child can understand it? However, the most important question arises about all those passages that reject salvation by works; what do we do with those? These are important questions.

The first question concerning *how* we could misunderstand God's covenant so badly is a question that is too large for the scope of this book. That is like asking how it could be that a German nation could stand behind a ruler that was so patently evil as Adolf Hitler. That question will never be totally answered because so many social, cultural, religious and economic factors were involved. But in the case of Germany under Adolf Hitler, the facts remain. They *did* support his rule, as wrong as it was. And in the case of the Reformation doctrine of faith alone, that facts remain, the Reformers, and others *have misread crucial portions of Scripture*.

On the second question, we must recognize that the dark side of history is the story of men willfully misunderstanding God's covenant with mankind. The Reformation was a period of great progress in our understanding when "back to the Scriptures" became a core value, and a massive religious framework built on superstition and ignorance was thrown off. But we must remember that superstition and blatant false teaching had been accepted for several hundred years prior to Martin Luther and would continue to be accepted by many even after the Reformation.

Is the Gospel a simple message that a child can understand? Yes, it is. But what we have here are competing simple messages. It is simple to believe the concept that the sun circles around the earth, but it is also simple to believe that the earth revolves around the sun. A child can understand either concept equally well, even though only one concept is the truth. It is possible to misread a simple truth, especially when you factor in the sinful human drive to suppress what is plain for all to see! Martin Luther recognized this in his day when he wrote,

Let the Diatribe¹⁷ now come and tell us how it is possible for one ordinary person to see what all these public figures, the chief men of all these ages, did not see! Even a schoolboy would conclude that this passage proves them to have been blind pretty often!¹⁸

The last but most important question: What about those passages that reject works for salvation? Those passages have become bedrock texts for the Reformers in their insistence on justification by faith alone. But what we will clearly see, is that Paul was rejecting two specific viewpoints on good works when he rejected works for justification. It is crucial to see precisely what Paul was against in these passages, so we are able to discern the legitimate role works have for Paul in regard to justification.

The first passages the Reformers interpreted, as establishing their faith alone teaching, was Paul's vigorous insistence in many places that we are justified by faith and not by "works of the law" (Rom. 3:20, 28; 9:32; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10, 12). The situation Paul and the apostles were facing is well-chronicled in Acts chapter 15. A council was held in order to decide what to do with the crisis of false teachers who were leading people astray. What were they teaching? Were they teaching a false gospel, that you must obey Jesus in order to be saved? No, they were teaching something else. They were not pointing to Christ at all, but away from Him. Acts 15:1 states, "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are *circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses*, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with them."

This false teaching is described again in Acts 15:5, "Then some

¹⁷ Erasmus' writings against the doctrine of predestination.

¹⁸ Luther, Bondage of the Will. Revel, 1994, 173.

of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be *circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses*.’ The apostles and the elders met to consider this question.” From this passage, we can gain an understanding of the false teaching that Paul so vigorously opposes in his letters. The false teachers wanted everyone to return to the Old Covenant, even after Jesus Himself had instituted the New Covenant. They were going against what Jesus had commanded. To retain the Old Covenant practices as mandatory for justification is to take the focus off Jesus, His commands and His promises.

To do this constitutes a denial of Christ, since He came to fulfill the Old Covenant and to establish the New Covenant (Mt. 5:17). Not only that, the Old Covenant was about Jesus Christ, and He is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant’s office of High Priest (Heb. 7:23-26). He is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant’s spotless lamb (Rev. 5:12). He is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant’s temple of the living God (Jn. 2:20, 21). The Old Covenant contained mere shadows and symbols of the real thing, Jesus Christ (Col. 2:17). To turn back to the Old Covenant is tantamount to a denial of the reality, Jesus, the Messiah of the prophets, and fulfillment of the Old Covenant.

To put it another way, since the Old Covenant is about Jesus, to turn away from Jesus and to go back to the Old is, in reality, to deny and break the very purpose of the Old Covenant, which leads us to faith in Jesus (Gal. 3:24)!¹⁹ This is nothing less than a disastrous teaching that seeks to undermine the New Covenant with God and send people back under the curses of the Old Covenant.

One of my seminary professors presented this useful illustration of this sinful impulse to return to the Old Covenant. A young man goes away for a long period of time and his wife writes letters and send pictures to him. He sets the pictures of her up by his bedside table and remembers her with great fondness as he looks at her pictures. He, through the pictures, remembers her voice and wonderful times they have shared together. Finally, at long last, they are reunited. But as the days go by after being reunited, he ignores her and instead looks dreamily at the picture of her. He turns away from the real person as he continues his attachment to her picture. This would not only be very

19 This reference to the law being a “custodian-male nursemaid- tutor” in Galatians 3:24 is not necessarily a negative one in the sense of being antithetical to faith. The following context speaks of the Old Covenant being for “children” who are under the supervision of a “custodian” which is the law, but when Christ comes we reach maturity and are no longer in need of the “tutor” services of the law.

strange behavior; it would be a great offense to her! She would be jealous and angry about this misuse of her picture, and his lack of attention and devotion. Even though the picture was only meant to be used temporarily as a way to remind him of the real person, his attachment to the picture alone reveals a misplaced affection to some imaginary person, not the real person.

In the same way, a return to the Old Covenant is a turning away from the true and living Lord revealed in Christ, and a turning to what was only meant to be a temporary representation. The “circumcision group” was attempting to do nothing less than this. Just like the wife in the story would want to rip up the picture in jealous anger, so Paul expresses God’s jealousy with his God-inspired words, “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves” (Gal. 5:12)!

This is why Paul consistently and aggressively opposes these teachers who wish to return to the Old Covenant. But, this is the point that the Reformers missed; when Paul taught against “works of the law” for justification, he is resisting the false teaching that sends us back under the Old Covenant. We see this truth in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. What did the false teachers insist on as a necessity for the church in Galatia? They were insisting on circumcision. This is why Paul would call them “the circumcision group” (Gal. 2:12). Notice what “works” Paul was vigorously rejecting;

We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by works *of the law*, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works *of the law*, because by works *of the law* no one will be justified (Gal. 2:15, 16).

At this point the Reformers fell into the ditch on the opposite side of the road. When they read this text, they understood Paul to mean rejecting good works in total, even the works that Jesus commands us to do. But this is not the works that Paul was rejecting. As we saw in Acts 15, the problem was a return to the “works of the law” or obeying Moses to be saved. We see that Paul could not mean works in total in his letter to the Galatians because he closes his letter by exhorting the church to obey Jesus *for eternal life*.

First he states, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). Then he exhorts them to “not

become weary in *doing good*, for at the proper time you will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9). What is the harvest that is to be reaped in doing good? The prior verse tells us. “The one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit *will reap eternal life*” (Gal. 6:8). So the reaping of the harvest is equated with reaping eternal life, and it follows that we reap eternal life *by doing good*. What we see from the prior context, is that *doing good* in “carrying each other’s burdens” is “fulfilling the law of Christ.” It is clear Paul is rejecting “works of the law” given by Moses. It is equally clear what he is not rejecting the idea that we must do the works that Jesus commands us to do for eternal life. This is the important difference that the Reformers missed.

Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia was a favorite for Luther. It is instructive for us to look at how Luther dealt with these closing verses which exhort the church to good works for eternal life. He recognizes the plain sense of Paul’s teaching when he asks the question,

Here rises a question, whether we deserve eternal life by our good works? For so Paul *seems*²⁰ to vouch in this place... Very necessary it is, after the example of Paul, to exhort the faithful to good works, that is, to exercise their faith by good works; for if they follow not faith, it is a manifest token that their faith is no true faith.²¹

Luther’s reasoning is the same as what we saw with Calvin. Luther reasons that Paul *seems* to speak *as if* eternal life were dependent upon good works. Luther reasons that Paul wrote in this way because good works are crucial in order to verify true faith. In other words, good works are not a pre-requisite for eternal life as Paul *seems* to say, but they are simply a necessary consequence of having saving faith. In this section of Luther’s commentary he refrains from going into great detail on how he interprets Paul’s statements in this way, because he considers his comments on Paul’s rejection of “works of the law” in Galatians chapter 5 to be sufficient to prove his case. He maintains that Paul meant all works whatsoever. So here we see Luther’s confusion of categories. He considers it impossible that Paul requires good works for eternal life in chapter 6 when he has already rejected “works of the law” in chapter 5. Apparently, Luther never considered the possibility that Paul was rejecting Old Covenant works in chapter 5, while

20 Italics is mine to highlight Luther's logic.

21 Luther, *Galatians Commentary*, Kregel, 1979, 370.

affirming the necessity of New Covenant works in chapter 6.

The interpretation that Paul was rejecting a return to Old Covenant “works of the law” in his letters makes good sense of many of Paul’s statements in which he maintains the necessity for good works, as follows:

“Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Co. 7:19).

“For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule” (Gal. 6:15,16).

There is a second sense in which Paul rejects works for salvation. He rejects the idea that God is a debtor to anyone, whether he is a Jew or a Gentile. No one is called into a relationship with God by a debt that God owes, but only by mercy. Paul was cutting the ground out from any possibility of our boasting about our salvation. In several places he does this by pointing out that the Lord called us out of sinful and disobedient lives. The Lord did not look down the corridors of time and see certain righteous people doing good works and decide to call them into a relationship with Him. This would give us a real cause for boasting. Our salvation would then be based on our working, *independent of God’s gracious call*. This false understanding would make God’s call dependent upon our pre-existent goodness. Rather, what we see is the Lord calling Abram *out of* idolatry, Matthew *from* his corrupt tax collector’s booth, and Paul *out of* his murderous and idolatrous devotion to the Law of Moses. It is clear that this was Paul’s intent from the following passages;

God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time (2 Ti. 1:9).

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so

that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe and receive eternal life (1 Ti. 1:15,16).

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts... But God... made us alive with Christ... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:3,4,8).

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures... But when the kindness and love of our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy (Tit. 3:3,4,5).

Notice that, in all four of these important passages, Paul is referring to God's mercy in calling us to Himself, *out of* a place of sin and idolatry. His call into His covenant is not based on our doing good, because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). When the Lord calls a man He calls him from a pool of sinners. But here we must be careful in our interpretation, so we stay out of the ditch the Reformers fell into. While it is true that Paul, Matthew and Abraham were "foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures" *before* being graciously called into fellowship with the living God; it is *not* to say they were able to stay this way. Part and parcel with being called into a relationship with the Lord is the call to obey all that He says. The Lord calls us *out of* disobedience and *into* obedience; *out of* foolishness and *into* wisdom; *out of* slavery to sinful passions and pleasures, and *into* slavery to God; *out of* living for this world and the vain pursuits of this world, and *into* living for God, which will never be a vain pursuit; and He calls us *out of* faithlessness and *into* faithfulness.

For Calvin, Luther and the Reformation theology which followed, God's call *and* covenant is totally unconditional. He calls us to be His treasured possession by faith alone. For the Reformers, once we really understand the freeness of the Gospel's unconditional nature, we will be so grateful for this free gift that we will want to obey Him as

a necessary consequence.²² They are careful to assert that being God's treasured possession is not in any way dependent upon our obedience or good works, but good works will be the appendix or the necessary consequence of *really* being justified by faith alone. This is like saying that you give a child the whole house, everything in it is his, there is nothing he has to do in order to get it, it is given without *any* conditions. If the child *really* understands the freeness of the gift and that he doesn't deserve any of it, he will just want to cut the grass and do the dishes and clean out the kitty litter. Gratitude for the absolute free gift will propel obedience and good works. The good works done in gratitude will show that the child *really* understands how unconditional the gift of the whole house really is. Of course, real life does not work that way, and neither does the Lord's gracious covenant.

It is true that God's call comes to us freely and unconditionally. Abram, Matthew and Paul did not deserve to be called by God. But what they didn't deserve was the gracious call *out of allegiance* to sin and the world and the devil, and *into a covenantal allegiance* to the living God. It is the whole covenant that has been graciously offered and the whole covenant consists in promises for the future, commands for the present, and the historical accounts of God's faithfulness in the past. All is theirs and it has been given by mercy.

This truth is seen in Jesus' call of His disciples. He did not call them to Himself because of their good works. He also doesn't say to them, "I want you to understand that I have graciously called you into an unconditional covenant in which you are justified by faith alone. There is nothing you can *do* to have me not love you, *because* my love to you is by faith alone." Do you see the difference? This is the assertion of the Reformers and now evangelical theology in their wake. This is not the assertion of Jesus.

In John 14 and 15, Jesus makes abundantly clear that he has graciously called the twelve into a covenant which is conditional by definition, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (Jn. 14:21). "Remain in my love, *if* you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love" (Jn. 15:9b,10). We remain in Jesus' love by loving our brothers.

22 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Fortress, 1989, 609, "This, as has been said above, is a necessary consequence on account of faith in Christ. So the heart learns to scoff at death and sin and say to the Apostle, 'O death, where is thy victory?'"

So Paul's point is that Jesus does not call us on the basis of good works, but He does call us out of the world and sin *for* good works as they have been covenantally mandated. *This is the crucial point: these good works that Jesus has called us to, are the good works that keep us in His love.* They must not be seen as just a necessary consequence, merely an appendix, or reduced to encouragements for holy living. It remains true that we live "on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3). We are Jesus' treasured possession as He has showed us his love, and at the same time we will be His treasured possession as we obey His commands to love our brothers, bless and not curse, show mercy, and even love our enemies.

Here Calvin stumbles. He cannot bring himself to say what Jesus says in John 15. When Jesus commands us to "remain in His love" in John 15:9, Calvin understands Jesus to mean that He is not demanding anything from us. To "remain in Jesus' love" is, for Calvin, an exhortation to continue to believe in Jesus' unconditional love, through faith alone.

"Some expound this that Christ demands from His disciples love in return. Others are better, who take it actively as Christ's love. He wants us continually to enjoy the love with which he once embraced us and continually warns us to beware not to deprive ourselves of it."²³

Jesus, in fact, is demanding love from the disciples in the form of obedience, and it is couldn't be clearer from Jesus' own words that remaining in Christ's love does *not* mean continue to continue in faith alone; it *is* a call to obedience of faith. Jesus is calling us to faith by His command to obey. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it,

The actual call of Jesus and the response of single-minded obedience have an irrevocable significance. By means of them Jesus calls people into an actual situation where faith is possible...because he knows that it is only through actual obedience that a man can be liberated to believe."²⁴

We can illustrate it this way. If a person takes rock climbing lessons, one of the things the climber learns is to repel from the top. To repel, he

23 Calvin, *Commentary on John*, Baker, 1974, 97.

24 Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 91-92.

has to lean back, while being suspended by a rope, and walk backwards down the cliff's face. The hardest part is getting started, actually taking that first step out over the edge. The teacher will tell the student to step out over and start repelling. The command has been given. It is not until the climber obeys the command to step, that faith in the rope, and the instructor exists. The command provides the occasion for faith! It is what the climber must *do* that makes faith necessary.

Jesus' command to us is a call for faith; to *believe* that Jesus *will love* us as we love Him, and love our brothers. Jesus is calling us to faith, to *believe* that He will forgive us as we forgive our brothers from the heart. Jesus is indeed calling us to faith, to *believe* that He will show us mercy as we show mercy to others. He is *not* calling us to faith alone. He is *not* calling us to believe that He forgives us, and is merciful to us, and loves us without regard for our behavior. That type of faith amounts to a faith other than what Jesus holds out for us, and another faith is belief in another message, and another message is in reality another gospel. Dr. C. van der Waal writes, "It is impossible to preach a gospel from which the covenant has been removed. It is impossible to speak of the kingship of God, without bringing the covenant into it. The Great King is the God of the covenant. His Royal Word is covenantal."²⁵

Jesus gives us a whole host of things to believe, called promises. Then He gives us a whole host of commands. To believe in Jesus, is to believe all that He promised, and it is by believing in all that He promised, we are required to obey all He commanded. Never do we get even a hint that these are merely encouragements or appendixes to what really matters. It all really matters, every word that has proceeded from the mouth of our Savior. The good news is the invitation into this New Covenant that calls us *out of* darkness and *into* His wonderful light!

For many, this assertion will lead to an objection. They will resist the thought that to believe in Jesus is to believe all that He said and taught, because the Scriptures talk so powerfully about being justified by the blood of Jesus. If we are justified by the blood of Jesus, aren't we adding to the gospel if we say we must believe in something more than the death of Jesus for our sins? Indeed, it is precious true that we are justified by the blood of Jesus. This is biblically beyond dispute.

The real question is; "*How* are we justified by the blood of

25 van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, 175.

Jesus?” The expert in the law, referred to in Luke 10, recited accurately the biblical fact that he was to love his neighbor. This begged a question. *Who* is his neighbor? That was the all-important question, because the answer to that question would determine whether or not he had loved his neighbor. It is one thing to recite the biblical fact that we are justified by the blood of Jesus. It is quite another to understand *how* we are justified by the blood of Jesus. Just like the answer to the lawyer’s question of Luke 10, the answer to that question will determine if we actually are one of those justified by His blood!

