



CWRm

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PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

“But What About Works?”

Q There are dozens of scriptures in the Bible about works, so many that a book could be written about them. Works don't save a person but they are something that are expected of a Christian. You have written a half-dozen books or more on grace. Would you please help us get our heads around all these many scriptures about works?

R Here are a few thoughts for your consideration: First, I agree—many biblical passages exhort us to “works.”

The term “works” begs for a definition. In context, “works” sometimes refers to behaviors that people undertake, willingly and by choice. Further, the Bible may also use the term “works” to describe virtuous and beneficial deeds, rather than the opposite.

The entire old covenant is about “works.” This is not to exclude the threads you find between the lines through the Old Testament about Jesus, about grace, etc. But the emphasis in the Old Testament is on national and individual relationship with God—about what God's people must and must not do. It's a performance heavy covenant, full of stipulations concerning behavior.

There's no doubt that the New Testament directs us to behave in many positive, appropriate ways, and disavows other behaviors. We have the responsibility to make good choices and adopt beneficial behaviors.

But a question remains about the efficacy of these works. What do good works accomplish in the eternal dimension? Do our works earn anything—do we deserve payment for our good works?

You say, “Works don't save a person but they are expected.”

Let's focus on the word “expected” for a moment. Yes, God “expects” works in the way

that James says, “show me your faith by your works.” That is, those who've been given the grace of God and put their faith in Jesus will illustrate the reality of their faith by their lives. But “works” follows faith—“works” are produced by God in us. We are his “workmanship” or “handiwork” (see Ephesians 2:10).

So again, salvation is not BY works, but FOR works. God saves and rescues and re-births us, so that Christ in us, the hope of glory, works in our lives, producing in and through us the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Only God can create a tree. And the only reason a tree brings forth fruit is that God created the tree and vibrant systems within the tree that enable fruit-bearing. No stick of wood can plant itself in the ground, and by rigorous effort, expect fruit to be borne on its branches. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches...Without me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

God does not force anyone to allow him to indwell them and enliven them—but if we embrace his grace, then as his children, we will produce the good fruit of the Holy Spirit. How? By yielding to God so that his works may be produced in us.

Some suggest that laws and behavior create morality. I insist that true morality is a product of God—the fruit of Christ's Spirit alive in us.

Morality does not induce God's favor or motivate God to take action. True morality is because of God. God does not serve laws. God's laws came from God and are given by God.

God's law boils down to love. Such love is the product of God, rather than humanly-produced morality, as if we could prove that we are good enough for God to love us back. Rather, we willingly love God and our neighbor as God's grace empowers us to do so. □