

# The Faith | Works 'Conundrum'

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## Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

The simple truth that we find acceptance with God by grace through faith alone is the Bible's most beautiful theme. Grace began long ago when God set in motion the means for humanity to find their way back to Him, to find their way home. He promised Adam and Eve that [a redeemer](#) would come who would save humanity from the [consequences of their sin](#). That redeemer would be His very own Son, born for the specific purpose of reconciling the world back to God (John 3:17). The earth waited, enduring times of difficulty and futility, restless and expectant for the promised Prince of Peace to appear.

With the arrival of Emmanuel, 'God-With-Us', the reality of a whole and healed relationship with God for every person was realised. Brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death was finally overthrown in the person and ministry of God's Son, whose death on the cross struck the final blow to mortality.

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end." – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV*

## Salvation Isn't Earned

This work of salvation, in its entirety, was set in motion and completed by God. Humanity had no contribution in any of this. The Bible is very clear that salvation is given freely, as a gift, and is never attained by works.

*“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.”*

*– Romans 5:1-2, NIV*

Paul the Apostle was a champion for the need for a grace-led, faith-full life. He had been converted from a life steeped in religious tradition and law, a life in which a man could become ‘more righteous’ before God than his fellow man, simply by achieving greater adherence to law. Yet Paul learned that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and in fact was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God’s promises. Paul learned of the true gospel and He speaks of it often throughout his letters in the New Testament – that of being ‘saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, least any man should boast’ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul is very adamant that justification – that is, “right standing with God” – is by faith alone. What are we to make then of the words of Paul’s contemporary, James, who writes “As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and **not by faith alone.**” (James 2:24). It seems, at least initially, that these two men are in contradiction with each other.

## **Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone**

In reality, James and Paul are actually in complete harmony and a closer look at James’ letter not only gives us a better understanding of what *faith really is*, but also warns us of the sobering reality that *information doesn’t always equal transformation*.

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did **plus** additional ‘spiritual acts’ that are

undertaken, that we are made “right with God by **what we do**“. This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

James, when writing his letter and speaking of ‘what we do’ is concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is ‘Christian’ in name only. He is tackling another dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can ‘continue in sin that grace may abound’. That the new life is the same as the old life, the only difference being that a person has become ‘saved’. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) is necessary to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough and that we don’t need to ‘do better’ because God’s grace covers all our shortcomings anyway.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless its demonstrated by an active, loving response to God’s grace.* This is, as Paul agrees, “faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated in a Christian’s life by ‘what they do’.

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

*“Do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense.” – James 2:17-24 MSG*

He goes on to reiterate his meaning in the plainest of language, saying “Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.” (James 2:26, CSB).

## Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is Real

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action.

To illustrate his full meaning, James gives two examples from the life of [Abraham](#), whom he describes as ‘the friend of God’ (James 2:2). The first was when God promised Abraham a great line of descendants, even though at the time Abraham and his wife were both old and childless. Abraham didn’t doubt God for a second and James cites this faith (Genesis 15:6) as “reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” Abraham believed God was ‘good for His word’ and this is why, James says, he was justified.

Paul, when also commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say “Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified.” Neither does he say “Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified.” or that “Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore was justified. He says, “Abraham **believed** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness.” He and James are both referring to the same event in Abraham’s life and are both drawing the same conclusion – that Abraham was ‘made right with God by his faith.

However, James goes on to reference a second event in Abraham’s life, found in Genesis 22. Here, God is testing Abraham, looking for the kind of works that show Abraham’s faith to be not just words but real and living – demonstrable in action. This is not the same kind of justification which gave Abraham right standing with God, but rather a test of Abraham’s original profession of belief. Was it the living

kind of faith which produces a genuine response or a dead faith that has no effect on life at all?

James therefore has a different meaning in mind than Paul when Paul concludes that people aren't justified by works. James is answering another question entirely: **Does the ongoing and final reckoning of our righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of a true and living faith?** The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes!

If you were to ask James and Paul, "How does a person obtain right standing with God and receive '[the righteousness of God](#)'?", both men would answer "As a gift of grace. Trust God, believe His promise and that faith alone will be counted as righteousness."

However, if you asked them, "Does our final right standing with God depend on works of love?", Paul will answer "No, not if by 'works', you mean deeds done to show that we somehow deserve God's blessings" (his point in Romans 4) but James will answer "Yes, if by 'works', you mean evidence of a faith that is alive and active in a believer's life". Both are in agreement with each other, based on those definitions.

Works, in the way that James defines them, prove that our faith is real. When James says that we are not justified by faith alone, he means that the faith which justifies or makes us 'right with God' does not remain alone but bears the fruit of the new, spirit-led life. Any other kind of faith is counterfeit, in reality, dead, and completely useless.

## **What Does Living Faith Look Like?**

*"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." – 1 John 4:11*

Living faith is really another name for [discipleship](#); learning to replicate the pattern and example left by Jesus in both

word and action. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by discussing this very thing, making it clear that being called to 'freedom in Jesus' is not an excuse to do whatever we want, but rather 'freedom to serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:14). It's in the **believing** and **doing** that faith is made alive, vibrant and visible.

James agrees with Paul in this, again referencing the life of Abraham:

*"Wasn't our ancestor Abraham "made right with God by works" when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the Scripture sentence, "Abraham believed God and was set right with God," includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?" – James 2: 21-24, MSG*

Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we 'earn God's favour' but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

*"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find*

*ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.*

*Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” – Galatians 5:22-25, MSG*

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our ‘loving union with God’ doesn’t result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as 1 John 4:7-21 says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn’t real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

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**This article was first published on 11 June 2019**

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## **Toxic Faith**

**(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)**

It seems hard to believe that people who have answered Jesus’ call to a life of freedom could so easily lose the sense of joy and relief they first felt. It’s difficult to understand why Christians who have been made free and ‘alive in Christ’ would choose to return to a kind of spirituality that slowly

imprisons the mind and poisons the soul. How does a message that speaks clearly of God's love – a life of salvation in Jesus by His grace – become perverted and distorted, becoming instead a culture of performance-driven expectations, demanded by an unfair and intolerant God?

*“God didn't go to all the trouble of sending His Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.” | John 3:17, MSG*

Yet for many Christians, this is exactly where they find themselves. It may be early into their Christian journey or many years later, but somewhere along the way, their perception of Christianity becomes misshapen and their sense of peace, fulfillment, and relief dissipates.

Religious life becomes exhausting; they feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained and trapped. They may begin to judge themselves or others around them by what they do, what they wear, what they say. They become consumed by rules, preoccupied with fault and blame, and heavily focused on performance – their own or others'. Something that was meant to empower them and set them free has rendered them powerless – they are stuck, with no way forward and no way out.

The simple truth of being 'saved by grace through faith alone' has been turned on its head, becoming 'the gospel of acceptance with God through performance'. Their simple faith in Jesus as the only source of life and acceptance with God has become toxic. Or perhaps, sadly, they never had that simple faith to begin with.

## **Toxic Faith**

Toxic faith is a destructive and dangerous relationship with a religious system, not with God, that allows this system to control a person's life in the name of God. It is a system



where another gospel is preached – not one of freedom and liberty and acceptance through grace, but one, in reality, of enslavement to rituals and rules.

Seeking God's approval on the basis of your own religious behaviour is toxic faith. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching. A true and meaningful relationship with God can never be sustained on this basis.

This deconstruction of faith is not just a problem that modern Christians struggle with. The first-century church at Galatia also dealt with this issue and the damage caused by this 'false gospel' is catalogued throughout the letter written by Paul to the Galatians.

The tone of Paul's opening words is one of incredulity at the situation in which the Galatians find themselves.

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all." | Galatians 1:6, NIV*

The Greek word used here for 'desert' means 'to defect'; and it's a defection, not from a denomination or doctrine, but from 'Him who called you by grace'. It's a severing of the real and personal relationship a Christian has with God. And it's a distortion of the gospel Paul first preached to them, Christ's gospel, of forgiveness of sins by grace – by Jesus' performance – and not by their own. In fact, Paul says, it's really no gospel at all.

Paul takes the issue the Galatians are dealing with very seriously. When a spiritual life of grace and rest is replaced with a life of imposed works, it's a hugely serious issue.

But what was happening in Galatia for Paul to be so up-in-

arms? What induced him to tackle the situation with such passion, to the point of stating the following words, not once but twice?:

*“Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a **gospel other than the one we preached to you**, let them be **under God’s curse!** As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a **gospel other than what you accepted**, let them be **under God’s curse!**” | Galatians 1: 8-9, NIV*

## Law Versus Grace

Paul had been converted from a life steeped in [religious tradition](#) and law, a life that gave him privilege, prestige, and power. He had used that power to persecute the church of God, systematically destroying it, until one day He was confronted by the risen Jesus, and a message that was radically different to everything he thought he knew.

Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal saviour offering life and freedom through the saving work of Jesus. Paul discovered that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and, in fact, was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God’s promises.

Paul learned of the **true gospel** – that of being ‘saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, lest any man should boast’ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is the gospel that He originally preached to the Galatians and which they had gladly received. Yet, it is with dismay that he hears that religious leaders of the old school had come into the church, reintroducing old ways, law-keeping, and an abundance of religious rules and regulations. One of these religious rules was the rite of circumcision, which they

were insisting Christians should undertake. Circumcision, in that time, was the ultimate act of external religious performance, and was being promoted as added 'proof of spirituality'.

*'Yes', they would have said 'faith in Jesus is important and you absolutely must have it. But it's **not enough**. In order to find positive standing with God, you must also be circumcised'.*

In other words, there was a group in Galatia propounding the idea that right standing with God depends on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken. This is completely in opposition to the message of the cross, that salvation comes through Jesus' performance, not our own:

*"For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." | 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, ESV*

*"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." | 1 Peter 2:24, NIV*

This 'different gospel' was a serious perversion of God's gift of grace and a not-so-subtle manipulation of the relationship between the individual and God. No wonder Paul was furious.

*"Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily." | Galatians 2:21, MSG*

# The Collision Of Grace And Spiritual Performance

The word of God is living and active, and, like a powerful sword, it cuts right through [to the heart](#), judging the thoughts and purposes contained therein. It can be used as an instrument of grace, by reminding us of God's love and showing us how to bring order and purpose to our lives.

In the wrong hands, however, or wrongfully used, the word of God can be used in ungraceful ways, as a means of shaming others into performing someone else's agenda, in the name of God. In the hands of performance-based people, it can be used as a weapon in order to pressure people into acting differently or to get rid of them if they do not. It can be used to lay burdens on men 'too difficult to bear'.

*"Woe to you experts in religious law as well! You load people down with burdens difficult to bear, yet you yourselves refuse to touch the burdens with even one of your fingers!" | Jesus, Luke 11:46, NET Bible*

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between grace and spiritual performance. The conflicts the Pharisees initiated with Jesus were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with 'unclean' people (Mark 9:11), or attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality.

The Pharisees 'majored on minors' because precise details of religious life were their passion, but in doing so, they were actually inverting spiritual values. They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised.

Jesus called them out on their hypocrisy in the gospel of Matthew, where he says:

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” | Matthew 23:24, NIV*

Jesus, in contrast, set out the essential way that a person finds [right standing with God](#):

*“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” | John 14:6, BSB*

*“I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture.” | John 10:9, NIV*

*“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies.” | John 11:25, NIV*

*“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be [saved](#).” | Acts 4:12, ESV*

Jesus is the only way to find right standing with God. The name of Jesus is the only means by which humanity can be saved. Jesus’ performance, not our own, is what secures this extraordinary gift of grace.

Christians must not be drawn to extremes in a misguided zeal for religious purity but pay attention to the essentials that

Jesus so patiently explained. We must be on guard to avoid systems that employ the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system instead of conformity to Christ. Particularly, we must be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

*“God’s steward, an overseer (leader) must be above reproach – not self-absorbed, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for money. Instead, he must be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it was taught, so that by sound teaching he will be able to encourage others and refute those who contradict this message. For many are rebellious and full of empty talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced.” | Titus 17-10*

*“Leaders are given to the church to protect the flock from legalists, who push religious performance as the means of right standing or favour with God. In Paul’s letter to Titus, he says that the rebellious men **must be silenced**. Unfortunately, in many churches, not only are the leaders not protecting the flock against those who push religious performance, they are the pushers and in bondage to performance themselves.” | Johnson & VanVonderen*

Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. He chose instead to major on the significant agendas of the kingdom of God. Paul confirms Jesus’ way of living in his final words to the Galatians:

*“For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the*

*little patterns that they dictate. Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do – submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and He is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God – His chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!” | Galatians 6:14-16, MSG*

*“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” | John 8:32, NIV*

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**Toxic:** ‘Mid 17th century: from medieval Latin toxicus ‘poisoned’, from Latin toxicum ‘poison’, from Greek toxikon (pharmakon) ‘(poison for) arrows’, from toxon ‘bow’. (Oxford Dictionary). ‘Containing or being poisonous material especially when capable of causing death or serious debilitation’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). **Faith:** ‘Great trust or confidence in something or someone.’ (Cambridge Dictionary)