

# **The Role of Works in Salvation**

by Casey Head

One of the most misunderstood and controversial subjects in religion today is the issue of whether or not works save us. Many passages are perverted and twisted, while others are ignored. The purpose of this article will be to define the three types of works that exist in the New Testament. This is a foundational point in our overall understanding of this subject.

There are different types of works in the New Testament. Many of these works are looked down upon and spoken against, but not all are. In Titus 3:5, we find what are called “works of righteousness.” These are works that WE have done, and the implication is that these works have supposedly “earned” the sacrifice of Jesus. Paul says, “NOT by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.” Obviously, these works are spoken against. Also, in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” A contrast is made here between one system of salvation (grace through faith) and another. The point is simply that we are not saved by works of which we can boast, but please understand the difference between “boasting works” and obeying the commands of God. We cannot live the Christian life and then look back and say, “look at what I did, I’ve earned a place in heaven.” These kinds of works are condemned. The works that God has set forth for us to obey do not fall into this class of works.

And then you find another type of works. Paul says in Romans 3:28-29, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. Is He the God of the Jews only?” Again, a contrast is being made here between faith and the deeds of the law. What law is Paul discussing in this context? Is it any and all law? No. Specifically, he is dealing with the law of Moses, as evidenced in verse 29 when he points out that salvation belongs not only to the Jews but to the Gentiles as well. That is the whole point of the book of Romans- to establish the universality of the gospel and law of Christ, and to show that the old law is no longer binding. Many people look at the book of Romans as condemning all forms of law and works of obedience, but that is a perversion of the text. Notice in Romans 3:27, “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.” Likewise, in Galatians, another book devoted to rebuking the followers of works of the old law, Paul mentions the “law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2) while at the same time showing the ineffectiveness of the works of Moses’ law (Galatians 5:1-4).

Finally, you have a third type of works, and these works are promoted and commanded. These works do play a key role in our salvation. We cannot boast about them, nor are they derived from the Old Testament law. These are the commands of God given in the New Testament. In James 2:17, we are told, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone,” and in verse 24, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” While the other types of works were condemned, these are said to justify us. Is there a contradiction between James 2 and verses such as Galatians 2:16? Not at all. One passage is dealing with works of the law of Moses, and another is dealing with faith-driven obedience to New Testament law. These “justifying works” may seem to be foolish to us (1 Corinthians 1:27), and so we certainly cannot boast because of our submission to them. Faith would fall into this category of works (John 6:28-29; 1 Thessalonians 1:3), as would repentance (Acts 17:30) and baptism (Acts 10:48). By having faith, repenting, and being baptized, though, are we somehow earning our salvation? No. We are simply doing that which we were commanded to do (Luke 17:10).

Many religious people take these verses out of context and they conclude that we are saved by grace alone. They want to deny any form of obedience in the plan of salvation, but then they have to deal with verses like Hebrews 5:9 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9. Understand that obedience to God’s commands do not nullify grace. Remember that context is so very important in determining the type of works discussed in any passage. Let our faith move us to obedience!