

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

James 1:16-18, NIV.

¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Every Good and Perfect Gift: *What is Faith?*

There is a perennial, divisive debate in Christianity, one that has been raging since the earliest days of the Faith: are we truly saved simply by having faith, or do we need to perform good acts in life to be saved? We've looked at this before. Today I would like to consider this from a somewhat different perspective and see if we can come to a deeper understanding of what is behind this apparent conflict. Consider the following from the third chapter of Paul's influential letter to the church in Rome, a document that has fundamentally molded Gospel interpretation and Christian theology:

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Paul tells us in blunt language that we are foolish to boast about our good works, the acts of kindness and generosity and forgiveness that we offer our fellow humans. He is clear that the requirements of Jewish law to offer alms to the

poor, to give to the Temple, and to fight for social justice do not determine whether someone is saved. The question so many have asked over the last couple of millennia is how a God who is truly righteous, who wants the best for all humans could hold us to such a seemingly low standard of behavior?

Consider an abbreviated version of a story from the 7th chapter of the Luke:

³⁶ A Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner. ³⁷ A woman who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. ⁴⁰ Jesus said to the Pharisee, "Two people owed money to a moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither had the money to pay him, so he forgave the debts of both. Which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ The Pharisee replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said. "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet."

⁴⁸ Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you."

Notice that Jesus himself makes a clear statement that this woman has been saved by her faith. She was a great sinner. But she does show great regret. She is clearly seeking forgiveness. And she is acting with love and kindness. It's not like she's a mean spirited, arrogant, cruel person who happens to have faith. I'll get back to this story. There is something subtle and important in it.

Now let's look at the Book of James. It is famous for its teachings on how to live a life that demonstrates our faith. It is believed that this is the oldest of the

New Testament books; it could have been written as early as the year 40 A.D., but certainly before the year 50. Given that Jesus was crucified around the year 33, this is impressive. It is believed it was written by James, the brother of Jesus. Some think that James, an illiterate fisherman, could only have written the core of it and that someone else extended it with very fluent Greek. More significantly, consider the context in which it was written. The faith had not yet spread far among Gentiles; most believers were Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah promised by the Hebrew scriptures. And James was indeed a leader in the Jerusalem, Jewish-based Church. A popular theory among scholars is that James wrote this letter to counteract a growing movement, one that wouldn't even have been evident from New Testament Scripture yet. Early evangelists like Paul were out there preaching that you could be saved by faith alone. The idea was very attractive and was catching on. The theory suggests that James, a devout Jew who very much believed in following Jewish law and living by a strong moral code, was horrified. He wrote James to argue the following, which we find in the second chapter of James, a circular sermon meant for general readership:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

This is also very clear. Faith without matching deeds is dead. This implies that such faith is false. We are not sure what James means by “demons”, but these are apparently agents of Satan – and even they realize that there is indeed one true God. But they have no faith. James makes this point about good acts repeatedly.

A while back I met a patient who a few years before had had to have a foot amputated. He was back in the hospital with the possibility of losing part or all of his other foot. He was despondent over this, certainly. He lived alone and had very little support. It would be a challenge for him to go from living with one prosthetic to possibly having to use a wheelchair, at least for a while. It would certainly make it hard for him to keep working. But he told me, he had a home, and at least for the time, a job he enjoyed, and he had savings. He had traveled overseas, and other than the circulation problem that had led to his amputation, he had had very good health. He told me that when he lost his foot, he told himself that the foot had never been his. It had belonged to God: it had been a gift from God. He couldn't be bitter because the foot was no longer his. More importantly, he said, he was not losing his faith – and his faith was far, far more valuable than a foot.

Here is something from the first chapter of James. These words are famous:

¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

This says that God is the Father of lights, and so evil does not come from him. He is constant in giving us only what is good. In fact, if you have anything in life that is good, and in fact, if you have been given something perfect, it comes directly from God. The verse about the “first fruits” refers to God giving us a spiritual rebirth, a new life, an eternal life - as the result of being saved.

Let's get back to the woman who offered an “*alabaster jar of perfume*” to Jesus and used it on his feet. Historians tell us that this jar of perfume would have been worth an entire year's wages of a lower-class person, and it's clear from the story that this woman was not wealthy or important. There was an extreme separation of wealth among the Jewish population. If she wasn't rich, she was probably poor. There are stories in the other three Gospels which seem to indicate that this ointment was nard, a perfume taken from a rare plant. Most likely, she was giving Jesus a substantial portion of her net worth. So, what gift did she value, the nard, a good gift that God gave her, or her faith, the perfect gift that God gave her? She was like the man I met who had lost his foot. She understood where the things she owned came from. Her values were godly, and

so she knew what was truly important. Notice how the woman behaves, with kindness and love. She is a person of faith, but she also lives her faith.

The man who had lost his foot, let's call him Dave. When I went back to see him a few days later, he had been told that he needed to have the front part of his other foot amputated, but not the entire foot. This was tough news. He was younger than me, an active professional, thinking about finding someone to marry. He was depressed but not broken. I prayed with him, asking God for a return to mobility, a continued happy, full life. Then he took over the prayer and simply thanked God for all the gifts he had given. He asked God to forgive him for being upset at having a small gift taken back. I never saw Dave again.

Here is something from the 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians, another letter we know that Paul wrote:

⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, ¹¹and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Paul talks about the various gifts that God might give us. Some of us are wise. Some are highly educated. There are those who can heal others. Some can

prophesize. Others speak languages. Of course, the ones with the greatest gift are those with faith. All these gifts come from God, through the Holy Spirit.

Let's get back to the question of whether we find salvation through faith or through our acts. James wrote that *"faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"*. In the letter to the believers in Ephesus, which is attributed to Paul, but was certainly written by some unknown follower of Paul, we read this:

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Again, we are told that we are saved through faith, and that this is a gift from God, not something we have earned through our own efforts. But it also says that God created us to, through Christ, do good works. In fact, this was the plan before we ever existed, that we would be created to act like true people of faith.

Notice, though, that we were made to live a certain way, to live as genuine people of faith, even before we were created and had an ability to even have faith. That's how important our actions on this planet are to God.

Let's consider the different perspective that I said that I wanted to look at. What does it mean to have faith, to "believe"? We all have doubts about the depth of our faith. We don't have a solid, concrete definition that tells us with certainty that yes, we have rock solid faith, the kind that without any question

gets you saved. We do accept the fact that all good and certainly all perfect gifts do come from God, the Father of lights. Nothing is really ours. We cannot claim to rightfully own the things we have when there are so many good people in this world who have nothing. Maybe faith is simply the act of believing that the most perfect gifts we could ever have are spiritual. If we can separate ourselves enough from the world around us that we believe that walking in the Kingdom of God is an infinitely greater gift than being worth a hundred billion dollars, perhaps that means we do indeed have faith.

Let's look at one last passage from the Bible. It's from the Gospel of John, just after Jesus tells Nicodemus in Chapter 3 that you must be born a second time to enter the Kingdom of God. These are the words of John:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

This says that God sent Jesus to Earth not to root out those whom he could condemn, but to enlighten as many as he could, so that he could save us. It says

that we must believe in order to be saved, and it says that this is sufficient. This passage tells us that people who do evil, whose acts are not righteous, have chosen to love darkness instead of the light brought by Christ. It concludes by proclaiming that those who do indeed embrace the light act openly in the sight of God, unafraid and unashamed of what God might see us do.

There are a few things that are implied when we talk about Christian faith. Yes, it means that we believe in God without proof. But once you believe, if your belief is real, you can't help but put your trust in God. It means that we have a relationship with God, and we work to make that relationship stronger as we grow older. Part of that trust and that relationship means that we are motivated to do what God wants us to do. What does that imply? We live with empathy for others. We are kind. We are forgiving. We take the unearned grace that God gives us and we pass it on to others.

If anyone ever asks you about this salvation by faith thing, something that non-Christians often call ignorant or even arrogant, I suggest you offer them this. There is a notion in mathematics called a "biconditional" statement. This is the same as an "if and only if" statement. Here is one: a quadrilateral (that is a four-sided polygon) is a square if and only if it has four congruent sides and angles. This means that a square is a quadrilateral that has four sides of the same size and

four angles of the same size, and it also means that if a quadrilateral has four sides and angles of the same size, it is a square. Here is another biconditional statement: You have faith if and only if you believe that the most valuable gift is the spiritual gift of walking in the Kingdom of God. This means that if you believe in God, you believe that the most valuable gift is walking in the Kingdom, and that if you believe that the most valuable gift is walking in the Kingdom, then you believe in God. That's the nature of faith.

I do not know what became of Dave. I certainly think that he is a person of genuine faith. I believe that he believes that the most important things he will ever possess are spiritual gifts. To me, that is faith. And Dave has withstood the true test: he has had to hand over very important gifts, extremely valuable ones, that just didn't happen to consist of walking in the Kingdom. He has proven that he can let go of worldly things, even parts of his body. Perhaps that is what makes many of us continue to have doubts about our faith. We've never been tested the way that Dave was, or if we were tested, we're not so sure we passed the test. Although Dave is sad that he is disabled, he has found joy in knowing that when God confronted him with having to lose one foot and half of the other, his response was that he had faith, and that this is more valuable than even his feet.

Finally, are you saved by faith or by your actions on Earth? My point is that this is not the right question to ask. Yes, having faith makes us want to live the way Jesus taught us to live, and that does imply some level of great acts. And it might even be true that there is an incredibly beautiful way to live with love and grace, one that is so magnificent, that if we are able to achieve this, it implies that we have embraced God and we are saved. So perhaps in some sense, for some very holy people, great faith and great acts imply each other. But the real point is that faith is a gift that we would be foolish to reject. How could we possibly turn down the opportunity to walk in the Kingdom of God? These are the two things that imply each other. Why do we walk with love in the Kingdom? Because we have accepted the most perfect gift we could ever have – and that is faith. And we have faith and we act with compassion and kindness and forgiveness because that is the only way to walk in the Kingdom of God. We live like the woman with the alabaster jar and we live like Dave, two people who walk in the Kingdom, two people who know that accepting the gift of walking in the Kingdom and accepting the gift of faith are the same thing. Everything else is secondary.

Accept that perfect gift. Walk in the Kingdom.