

Thought For The Week

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Merit Versus Grace

Understanding Salvation *in the Light of Faith and Works*

In the heart of the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans lies a profound paradox that continues to challenge believers today. Gentiles, who never pursued righteousness, attained it through faith. Israel, diligently chasing the law as the path to righteousness, failed to reach it. The reason, Paul explains, was not a lack of effort but a fundamental misunderstanding of how righteousness is obtained: "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone" (Romans 9:30-33, NIV).

This tension between merit (often expressed through human works or efforts to earn favor with God) and grace (God's unmerited favor) forms the core of the gospel message. It addresses questions many Christians wrestle with: What role do good deeds play in salvation? Are we saved by faith alone, or must our faith produce works? And how do we avoid the trap of self-righteousness while living obediently as followers of Christ?

The Paradox of Pursuit:

Gentiles and Israel - The scripture readings from Romans 9 and Romans 4 set the stage beautifully. In Romans 9:30-33, Paul highlights how the Gentiles—outsiders to the covenant—found righteousness simply by believing, while Israel, with all its zeal for the law, missed the mark. Their pursuit was sincere but flawed in its approach. They treated righteousness as something to be earned through meticulous observance of rules, rather than received as a gift through faith in the "stumbling stone"—Jesus Christ Himself.

Complementing this is Romans 4:16-17: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all" (NIV). Here, Paul emphasizes that the promise to Abraham (and to all who share his faith) is secured by grace through faith. This ensures it is available to everyone—Jew and Gentile alike—and not dependent on human performance. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, long before the law was given.

The lesson underscores an attitude problem. Israel sought righteousness with an ulterior motive: to merit it through their own efforts. This self-seeking approach turned obedience into a transactional balance sheet, where good deeds were meant to offset sins. But as the sermon vividly illustrates, this ledger system is doomed to fail.

The Futility of the Balance Sheet:

Why Works Cannot Merit Salvation - Imagine life as an accounting ledger. Every sin appears as a debit on one side. To balance it, one must perform enough "credits"—good deeds—to offset the deficit. The Israelites viewed the law this way: fall short, then do more to compensate. Yet the law cannot generate credit; it only reveals sin and declares guilt or innocence. It accuses but does not acquit through human effort.

The preacher uses a relatable example: Suppose a person sins seven times in a day—a conservative estimate for most. How many good deeds are needed to balance the books? Help seven elderly people cross the street? Visit the sick or give to the needy an equal number of times? Even if possible in theory, the next day brings new sins, and opportunities for offsetting good deeds are limited. Over a lifetime, the imbalance grows insurmountable. No one can consistently "earn" enough merit to cancel out their shortcomings.

This mirrors the archery imagery of sin. The Hebrew and Greek words for "sin" carry the idea of missing the target or falling short of the bullseye. The Christian target is a sinless life, but we all miss repeatedly. The law exposes the miss but offers no power to hit the mark perfectly. Trying to merit salvation through works is like attempting to pay an infinite debt with finite resources. It leads only to frustration and spiritual hardening, as Paul notes in Romans 11: a remnant is saved by grace, but many others are hardened because they sought it "as if it were by works" (Romans 11:1-10).

Grace, by contrast, is unmerited favor. God freely credits righteousness to those who believe, not because they deserve it, but because of His love and the finished work of Christ. As Romans 1:16-17 declares, the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, revealing a righteousness that is by faith from first to last: "The righteous will live by faith."

Faith Without Works Is Dead:

The Witness of James - Does this mean works have no place? Absolutely not. The sermon turns to James 2:14-26, which powerfully addresses the relationship between faith and deeds. James asks: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?" (NIV).

He gives practical examples. If a brother or sister lacks clothes and food, and you merely wish them well without helping, your faith is useless. Faith without accompanying action is dead, like a body without a spirit. James challenges the false dichotomy: "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds." Even demons believe in one God and shudder, but intellectual assent alone saves no one.

Abraham's offering of Isaac demonstrates the point: His faith and actions worked together, making his faith complete. Rahab the prostitute was likewise considered righteous for hiding the spies and sending them safely away. "You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone" (James 2:24, NIV). Yet James is not contradicting Paul. He combats a dead, inactive faith that claims belief but produces no fruit. True saving faith is alive—it naturally produces obedience and good works.

Created for Good Works:

Ephesians and the Purpose of Obedience - Ephesians 2:1-10 clarifies this beautifully. We were once dead in transgressions, following the ways of the world and deserving wrath. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5, NIV). Salvation is a gift, "not by works, so that no one can boast" (v. 9).

Yet the passage does not end there: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (v. 10). Good works are not the root of salvation but its fruit. They are not performed to earn merit or balance a ledger, but as expressions of love, obedience, and gratitude to God. They demonstrate that we are His children, walking in the light as He is in the light, where the blood of Jesus continually cleanses us (1 John 1:7).

The sermon connects this to everyday Christian living. A true Christian does good—visiting the sick, helping the needy, giving generously—because that is what children of God do. Galatians 6 urges us to do good to all, especially the household of faith. Circumcision in the Old Testament pointed to a circumcised heart, fully dedicated to God rather than chasing idols. Likewise, New Testament obedience flows from a heart transformed by grace, not from a desire to impress or earn points with God.

This is illustrated in family relationships (Ephesians 5): Wives submit to husbands "as to the Lord," reflecting the reverence and wholehearted devotion given to Christ. Such actions stem from love and trust, not coercion or calculation. Jesus taught in Matthew 6 not to worry about daily needs but to seek God's kingdom first, relying on the Father's provision. This trust produces freedom to serve others generously.

Walking in the Light:

Grace-Fueled Obedience - The distinction is crucial. Merit-based religion says, "Do enough good to earn heaven." Grace says, "God gives you heaven through Christ; now walk as His beloved child." We are not earning status; we are living it out. When we sin, we do not scramble to offset it with extra good deeds. Instead, we confess, repent, and continue walking in the light, trusting Christ's ongoing cleansing.

James reinforces this: Knowing to do good and failing to do it is sin. As God's children, we are motivated by love to act—helping those in need, as in James 2's example of clothing and feeding the poor. Abraham obeyed because he honored God as friend. Rahab acted because she aligned with God's people. Their works completed and demonstrated their faith.

Peter reminds us that God desires all to come to repentance, not perish (2 Peter 3:9). The invitation stands: Come to Jesus, heavy-laden, and find rest. Baptism for the remission of sins is not a meritorious work but an act of obedient faith, uniting us with Christ's death and resurrection, allowing us to walk in newness of life (Romans 6).

Conclusion:

Receiving the Gift - Merit seeks to climb to God through effort; grace has God descending to us in Christ. The law exposes our inability; the gospel reveals God's provision. Israel stumbled over the rock of offense—Jesus—because they sought a righteousness of their own. Gentiles, hearing the good news without preconceived notions of earning it, simply believed and received.

Today, the same choice confronts us. Will we trust in our balance sheet of good deeds, inevitably falling short? Or will we receive the free gift of righteousness by faith in Jesus, whose sacrifice satisfies the law's demands once and for all? Salvation is not earned by swimming oceans or climbing mountains. It is accepted through faith in the One who paid our debt.

True faith is never alone. It produces good works prepared by God—acts of love, mercy, and obedience that honor Him. As James concludes, faith without deeds is dead, but faith that works is alive and complete. We are saved by grace through faith, for good works.

If you have not yet responded to this grace, the invitation remains open: Believe in the Lord Jesus, be baptized for the remission of sins, and rise to walk in newness of life. God offers righteousness and eternal life to all who will come. Receive it not as wages earned, but as a gift from a loving Father.

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Merit Versus Grace:

Faith, Works, and God's Free Gift

In Romans 9:30-33, Paul presents a striking paradox: Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, obtained it through faith. Israel, zealously pursuing the law for righteousness, failed to attain it. Why? "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone" — Jesus Christ.

The core issue is attitude. Israel approached God with a merit-based mindset, treating obedience like a balance sheet: sins as debits to be offset by good deeds as credits. Yet the law only exposes sin; it cannot credit righteousness. Sin, like missing an archery target, leaves us short daily. No amount of helping the elderly, visiting the sick, or giving to the needy can fully balance a lifetime of shortcomings. Attempting to earn salvation leads to frustration and spiritual hardening.

Grace offers the opposite: unmerited favor. God freely credits righteousness to those who believe in Christ. As Romans 1:16-17 declares, the gospel reveals "a righteousness that is by faith from first to last." Romans 4 emphasizes the promise comes by faith so it may be by grace, guaranteed to all who share Abraham's faith.

James 2:14-26 clarifies that genuine faith is never alone: "What good is it... if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?" Faith without works is dead, like a body without spirit. Abraham's offering of Isaac and Rahab's aid to the spies show faith made complete by action. Works do not merit salvation but demonstrate living faith.

Ephesians 2:8-10 captures the balance perfectly: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Salvation is God's gift, received through faith in Christ's sacrifice. Good works flow as fruit—acts of love, obedience, and gratitude—showing we are His children. We do not earn heaven; we walk in the light as beloved children, trusting Christ's blood continually cleanses us.

The invitation stands: Believe in Jesus, be baptized for the remission of sins, and rise to new life. God offers righteousness freely to all who come. Receive the gift, not as wages, but as grace from a loving Father.

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