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# BAPTISM AND "WORKS"

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(by George Battey)

## **Ephesians 2:8-9**

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,  
9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

It is believed by many that this passage negates all "works" done by people in an effort to be saved. For example, this passage is often used to teach baptism is not necessary for salvation. Baptism is declared to be a "work," and since this passage teaches people are not saved by "works," the conclusion is: baptism is not necessary. Here is one sample of many which could be offered to demonstrate the reasoning:

### **Question: "Does Acts 22:16 teach that baptism is necessary for salvation?"**

**Answer:** As with any single verse or passage, we discern what it teaches by first filtering it through what we know the Bible teaches on the subject at hand. In the case of baptism and salvation, the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of any kind, including baptism (Ephesians 2:8-9). So, any interpretation which comes to the conclusion that baptism, or any other act, is necessary for salvation, is a faulty interpretation.

(S. Michael Houdmann, <http://www.gotquestions.org/baptism-Acts-22-16.html>; accessed 10/24/13)

Houdmann goes on to explain that:

Concerning the words, "be baptized, and wash away your sins," because Paul was already cleansed spiritually at the time Christ appeared to him, these words must refer to the symbolism of baptism. Baptism is a picture of God's inner work of washing away sin (1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 3:21). (*ibid.*)

According to Houdmann, the words, "Be baptized and wash away your sins," do not mean Paul still had sins to wash away. "Wash away your sins" means Paul had no sins to wash away. Anyone reading the text would have reached that conclusion ... wouldn't they? Surely no one would be so ignorant as to read the text and carelessly reach the conclusion that: (a) Paul had sins (b) that needed to be washed away and (c) that baptism was required to reach the goal of forgiveness. Acts 22:16 means exactly what it sounds like it is saying – S. Michael Houdmann (and others) to the contrary notwithstanding. The passage is teaching that Paul was lost in sin and needed to be baptized. Acts 22:16 is a divine commentary on Rom 10:13 showing that one "calls on the name of the Lord" in the act of baptism.

## **EPHESIANS 2:8-9**

The Eph 2:8-9 passage focuses on motives/attitudes. What is the motive on the part of God to save sinners? His motive is grace. In fact, grace is the only motive (attitude) which God has moving Him to save sinners. He does not save sinners out of a sense of obligation, because He is not obligated in the slightest to save rebellious sinners. He is not motivated to save sinners because of a sense of justice, because if justice were done, every sinner would be lost in hell for eternity. God's only motive to save sinners is His grace and love for sinners.

Although grace is God's only motive, this does not mean that men are saved by "grace alone." If men were saved by "grace alone," then every sinner would be saved because "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." (Tit 2:11) Put in the form of a syllogism, here is the argument:

- a) If grace alone saves sinners, then all sinners who have saving grace extended to them will be saved.
- b) All sinners have saving grace extended to them. (Tit 2:11)
- c) Therefore, all sinners will be saved.

Yet Jesus plainly taught that most people will be lost. "For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." (Mt 7:13) Obviously something is wrong with the reasoning that "grace alone" saves sinners.

If men were saved by "grace alone," why did Jesus come to the earth and die on a cross? (Heb 9:22) Why were the apostles sent out to preach the good news to "every creature" if salvation is by "grace alone"? (Mk 16:15) Grace alone is the motivating factor moving God to save sinners. He saves sinners only because He is gracious toward them. Yet this one and only one motivation does not exhaust the list of things which God had to do on His part to make salvation possible. He had to formulate a plan. (1 Cor 2:7-10) He had to patiently work the plan out. (Gal 4:4) He had to choose Abraham and later Isaac and Jacob. (Gen 12:1-3) He had to send prophets to reveal the plan so people could one day correctly identify the Savior out of a lineup of false pretenders. (Lk 24:27) He had to sacrifice His son on the cross and then raise Him from the dead. (Lk 24:46) Grace alone was God's motivation, but many items make up the list of things God had to do in order to make salvation a reality for even one sinner.

Eph 2:8-9 reveals that faith is the motivation for sinners in response to God's graciousness. Faith means trust. In order to be saved, sinners must trust in God and in God alone. If sinners trust "mostly in God" and "partly in themselves," there is no salvation. Trust (faith) in God alone is the only motivation a sinner can have if s/he to be saved. Yet people are not saved by "faith (trust) alone." (Ja 2:24, 26) The scriptures plainly teach a person can "say" one thing and "do" another. (Ja 2:14ff) If a person "says" s/he has faith (trust) in God, but is not willing to obey what God says, does s/he really trust God after all? "Was not Abraham our father justified

by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God." (Ja 2:21-23) Abraham, Rahab and others demonstrated their faith (trust) in God by obeying what God commanded. When these people obeyed, they had total trust (faith) in God. They did not have partial faith (trust) in God and partial faith (trust) in themselves. They had faith only in God. Faith alone is the motivating factor in sinners. Yet this one and only one motivation does not exhaust the list of things sinners must do on their part to make salvation a reality. They must believe God's "only begotten Son" is Jesus. (Jn 3:16) They must repent of their sins. (Lk 13:3) They must verbally confess their faith (trust) in front of others. (Rom 10:10) They must be baptized "for the remission of sins." (Acts 2:38) Faith alone motivates a sinner wishing to be saved, but many items make up the list of things sinners must do in order to make salvation a reality.

### **THE "WORKS" OF EPH 2:8-9**

Look carefully at the "works" under consideration in Eph 2:8-9. S. Michael Houdmann reads this passage and makes at least two unwarranted conclusions.

- a) First, he assumes there is only one kind of "works" described in scripture.
- b) He assumes the "works" mentioned in Eph 2:8-9 are acceptable under some circumstances, but not acceptable in order to be saved.

### **ASSUMPTION #1**

Consider the first assumption: Is there only one kind of "works" described in scripture? The answer is, "No." The scriptures clearly teach there are at least two different kinds of works: (a) works motivated by trust in oneself and (b) works motivated by trust in God/Jesus.

#### **Luke 18:9-14**

9 Also He spoke this parable to *SOME WHO TRUSTED IN THEMSELVES* that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Lk 18:9 envisions works motivated by trust in oneself. (See also Dt 11-18; 1 Kings 11:4, 9; 15:3; 2 Kings 10:31; 2 Chron 12:14; 26:16; 32:25; 36:13; Dan 5:20; Lk 16:15; Rom 10:3; Phil 3:4) These works do not and cannot save a sinner. Such are the works envisioned in Eph 2:8-9.

### **James 2:21-26**

21 Was not Abraham our father *JUSTIFIED BY WORKS* when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?

22 Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?

23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God.

24 You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also *JUSTIFIED BY WORKS* when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Ja 2:21, 25 envisions works motivated by trust in God. These works do justify a sinner. These works justify the sinner simply because (a) God graciously made the offer (b) that if they will obey what He commanded (c) He will forgive them and view them as if they had never sinned in the first place. (For additional passages showing obedience with faith (trust) in God as the motivation, see 2 Kings 23:3, 25; 2 Chron 17:6; 22:9; 30:19; 31:21; 34:31; Ezra 7:10; 9:7-8; Lk 17:10; 1 Cor 9:16; 15:9-10; Phil 3:8-9.)

Houdmann's first mistake is assuming there is only one kind of "works" discussed in the scriptures. This unwarranted assumption results in Houdmann reaching the wrong conclusion about baptism.

### **ASSUMPTION #2**

Now consider Houdmann's second assumption: Are the "works" mentioned in Eph 2:8-9 acceptable under some circumstances? Houdmann assumes this point, but is it true? The answer is, "No." The works envisioned in Eph 2:8-9 are never acceptable. Put in the form of a syllogism, here is the argument:

- a) If the "works" of Eph 2:8-9 are forbidden, they are never acceptable under any circumstance.
- b) The "works" of Eph 2:8-9 are forbidden.
- c) Therefore, the "works" of Eph 2:8-9 are never acceptable under any circumstance.

The "works" of Eph 2:8-9 are works motivated by trust in oneself. It is never, under any circumstance, acceptable to "trust in oneself" rather than God. It is never, under any circumstance, acceptable to "trust a little bit in self and a little bit in God." All trust (faith) must be placed in God. Yet Houdmann assumes the "works" of Eph 2:8-9 are acceptable under some circumstances. Houdmann teaches baptism is a "work" which is excluded by Eph 2:8-9. If this is true, then baptism is never acceptable under any circumstance simply because the "works" of Eph 2:8-9 are forbidden. Put in the form of a syllogism, here is the argument:

- a) If baptism is a "work" envisioned by Eph 2:8-9, then baptism is never acceptable under any circumstance.
- b) Baptism is a "work" envisioned by Eph 2:8-9 (according to Houdmann).
- c) Therefore, baptism is never acceptable under any circumstance (the logical conclusion of Houdmann's reasoning).

Yet Houdmann himself would disagree with the above conclusion. He believes baptism is appropriate in some circumstances. He writes:

If a person knows the Lord Jesus as Savior, understands that Christian baptism is a step of obedience in publicly proclaiming his faith in Christ, and desires to be baptized, then there is no reason to prevent the believer from being baptized. According to the Bible, Christian baptism is important because it is a step of obedience—publicly declaring faith in Christ and commitment to Him—an identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

<http://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-baptism.html>, accessed 10/24/13)

Houdmann involves himself in a contradiction. If baptism is a "work" envisioned in Eph 2:8-9, one should never be baptized under any circumstance. Simply put, any action performed with the motivation of trust (faith) in oneself is never, at any time, acceptable. Self-trust-works are the kind of works envisioned in Eph 2:8-9. Houdmann reaches an incorrect conclusion about baptism because of two, unproven and false assumptions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The effort to exclude commands given by God on the basis of labeling them as "works" (excluded by Eph 2:8-9) is an effort rooted in hell. The serpent was the one teaching God did not have to be obeyed. (Gen 3:1-4) Heaven teaches obedience to God's commands are necessary. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." (Mt 7:21) "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city." (Rev 22:14) "[Jesus] became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him." (Heb 5:9) "Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is

righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning." (1 Jn 3:7-8)

The list of scriptures teaching obedience is required is virtually endless. From start to finish the Bible teaches people to obey whatever God commands. When people fail to obey, they have committed sin. (1 Jn 3:4) When people sin, they deserve death in eternal hell. (Rom 6:23) Yet God, in His grace (Eph 2:8), has provided a way for people to receive forgiveness and be treated "as if" they had never sinned in the first place. The terms of pardon include belief in Jesus as God's "only begotten Son" (Jn 8:24), repentance (Acts 17:30), confession (Mt 10:32), and baptism (Mk 16:16; Acts 2:38). All of these steps must be performed in faith (trust) in God. "Then I would not be ashamed, When I look into *ALL YOUR COMMANDMENTS*." (Ps 119:6) Any motivation besides faith (trust) in God is forbidden and will result eternal loss. (Eph 2:8-9) In closing, consider the words of Mary, "Whatever He says to you, do it." (Jn 2:5) Any interpretation drawing the conclusion, "People do not have to obey God in order to be saved," is incorrect and of Satanic origin.

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