

FAITH VERSUS WORKS
Ephesians 2:8, James 2:17
By Raymond White

Now let's deal with the age old conflict of salvation by good works versus salvation by faith alone.

Christians are constantly at odds with each other over this, and at times, violently at odds. One of the essential differences between Martin Luther's theology and Roman Catholicism is this very thing.

All Christians believe that salvation is by grace through faith. Many Christians, like Lutherans, believe that means faith alone, not works. While other Christians, like Catholics, insist that if one's faith does not produce good works it is not faith at all but only a pretense. So a typical argument might go like this: A Lutheran would say to a Catholic, "You believe in salvation by works, but your works can never be good enough so salvation has to be by faith alone." A Catholic would defend, "Half true. We agree that our works never can be good enough, but we are not teaching salvation by works. We teach salvation by faith. But a faith that doesn't produce good works is not faith." Then the Lutheran fires back, "Ahah! You *are* teaching salvation by works. For if works are required, then that is salvation by works."

And Christians have been lining up on either side of that theological aisle ever since. (Then John Calvin jumped into the fray and insisted that not only is salvation by grace through faith and not works, but that the outcome was predestinated. But that's for another article. Let's just stick with faith versus works, that's challenging enough.)

Here is my view: Whichever side you want to argue for, you have all the scriptures you need to make your case. The Bible takes *both* sides, that's the problem. The New Testament authors engaged the same debate; in fact, Paul debated this with himself. The Old Testament authors had no idea there would ever even such a debate.

That being the case, it seems pointless that Christians should argue about it at all. Since both sides are Biblical, what's the point? A rational discussion about what the Bible says and what it means certainly is in order, but heated arguments... why bother?

Okay. Now to the text. Here is my list of Bible verses that keep this ball bouncing back and forth. When you see it all together, perhaps you will lose your impulse to argue.

To the right of each verse, I've annotated F and W (Faith and Works) so you can more quickly find the verses you need to prove whatever you think you need to prove.

[1] OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 15:6 *And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and he [LORD] counted it to him for righteousness.*

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This is Paul's big verse, the one he quotes in **Roman 4:3** to make his point that salvation is by faith and not by works. But James rebuts that conclusion in **James 2:21-22** so you believe which ever you wish. Martin Luther wanted James out of the Bible.

Deuteronomy 30:15 *See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil: :19 ...therefore choose life...and...live!*

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1 Chronicles 19:13 *Be of good courage, and let us behave ourselves valiantly for our people, and for the cities of our God: and let the LORD do that which is good in his sight.*

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This verse wants to have it both ways: fight as though everything depends on us and pray as though everything depends on God. Faith and works operating together at the same time. They are not inconsistent. Or, if they are, no one notices.

Psalms 18:20 *The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands...*

	W

The *cleanness of my hands* is what I touch, what I do. If I touch something unclean, that makes me unclean.

Psalms 62:12 *Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work.*

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This verse also wants to have it both ways. It's all about mercy, but you have to have works to get the mercy. If salvation is a result of mercy, then it is in spite of our misdeeds. So then, how can it be contingent on our works?

Jeremiah 7:9 *Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; :10 And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?*

	W

Evil is bad enough. But imagining that God excuses your evil, that's doubly bad because you make God an accessory. Some Evangelical types cross the line with their notion of "I'm saved therefore I'm saved to do whatever I want."

Jeremiah 17:10 *I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.*

	W

Ezekiel 18:5 *But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, :9 ...he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord GOD.*

	W

This text is a short checklist of right living. Live this way and God will protect you. That's the promise.

Psalms 24:5 *He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.*

F	

God demands that we be righteous. But we're not righteous. So, what do we do about it? Repent? We can try. But even that falls woefully short of the goal because a

man can never correctly say, “Now I a righteous.” So if we are ever to get righteousness, where would it come from? This verse says that what righteousness a man *does* have, does not come from within the man, but from God. It is a gift.

But then the problem is that some take this “righteousness from God” to mean “license to sin.” So let’s quickly go to this verse —

Psalms 24:3 *Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or shall stand in his holy place? :4 He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.*

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So is this a reasonable balance? You get your hands clean and keep your heart right, and don’t get overly impressed with your achievements (vanity), and be honest, then you don’t have to worry. But will these good behaviors make me righteous or not? They don’t. To think they do would be vanity. But that’s not the point. The point is: God looks upon such a person with favor, and *God* makes that person righteous.

Psalms 31:1 *In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness.*

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The psalmist can’t make up his mind. Now, to escape guilt, he’s back to needing God’s righteousness, his own won’t do.

Ecclesiastes 9:7 *Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.*

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Well now, this is a twist. Yes you need works, but God accepts your works so don’t worry about it. Go party and get drunk. You’re okay. That’s what it says. So is this a works verse or a faith verse?

Proverbs 17:2 *A wise servant shall have rule over a son that causeth shame, and shall have part of the inheritance among the brethren.*

	W

The principle here is simple. Just because you’re a son doesn’t mean your privilege is guaranteed — it can be squandered by misbehavior. Your father can disinherit you and give everything to a faithful servant rather than to an unfaithful son.

Don’t think you have a lock on heaven. The Jews thought that, “we’re the children of Abraham,” and Jesus put them straight. Evangelical Christians believe that “we’re saved and cannot lose our salvation.” Maybe it is true that you cannot “lose” salvation, but it is also true that you can throw it away, according to this text anyway.

Proverbs 17:3 *the fining pot is for silver, and the furnace for gold: but the LORD trieth the hearts.*

	W

God wants to see what you’re really made of. He assays you as we would gold or silver. And don’t think your works don’t figure into it. What do you think the fining pot and furnace are all about but to see what you’ll do under fire?

[2] THE GOSPELS

But of course all that was Old Testament, and salvation is New Testament, so we can disregard everything we just read in the Old Testament, right?

Well, not quite. Everything that the New Testament says about salvation is influenced by the Old Testament. Paul and James and all the other authors, and Jesus too, they are all looking back to what the Hebrew Scriptures say about our relationship with God, and it is those look-backs that shape their thinking. And guess what. The contradictions in the Old Testament have been rolled forward into the New Testament.

Luke 10:28 ...*this do, and thou shalt live.*

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Luke 14:13 *But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: :14 And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.*

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Jesus promised rewards at the resurrection for doing good to those who can't return the favor. This certainly is opposite to the notion of salvation by faith alone. This has nothing do with faith other than faith motivates such behavior, or should.

John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

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This is pretty clear. *Whosoever believeth on him* is a pretty generous requirement. God is not asking much.

John 5:29 *And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.*

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Argue faith and grace all you want, and nobody does it better than Paul, but the Lord's words here still stand: your behavior determines your eternal fate.

John 6:40 ... *every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. :47 ...He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.*

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A big faith only verse. If you believe on Jesus, you're in. There is no inference of faith plus works, not even works as a proof of faith. Now maybe works is understood. But if Jesus had meant that, surely he would have said so, don't you think?

John 7:16 *Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. :17 If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.*

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These verses point us in both direction. Suppose it is true that a person is saved by faith and not by works as Paul says. Well, this verse insists that faith is predicated on works, doing something causes faith.

But this is also a catch-22. Perhaps works cause faith as this verse says. But doesn't faith also cause works? We become better people because we believe? So it works both ways. The two are intertwined, and inescapably so.

John 14:15 *If ye love me, keep my commands. :21 He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me ...:23 ...If a man love me, he will keep my words...*

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Of course. This is so obvious that I am still amazed that anyone should miss the connection, grace notwithstanding. I will give you my simple contra-positive argument, which is this: If A implies B, then not B implies not A. This is a simple enough tautology. Applying that irresistible logic to salvation, we get this:

If loving Christ means keeping his commandments, then not keeping his commandments means not loving Christ. It is impossible to not understand that. Yet evangelicals accuse us (Mormons, Catholics, and other Christians who believe you have to actually do something and allow the gospel message to change your life) of being “works oriented.”

John 15:10 *If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love...*

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John 15:14 *Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.*

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[3] ACTS

Acts 2:40 *...Save yourselves from this untoward generation...*

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“Save yourselves” is something that you must do — an action, a work. Now evangelicals will say rightly that “save yourselves” means believe. Well, maybe. But even so, it is something that you must choose to do.

Acts 5:32 *...the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him*

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Who does the Holy Ghost come to? To those who obey. Now that seems like a catch-22. If you don't have the Holy Ghost, how can you obey?

Acts 11:18 *...repentance unto life.*

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What is repentance if it isn't a change of behavior? And what God demands that it be is a life-long change of behavior.

Acts 13:39 *And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.*

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Acts 15:7 ...Peter rose up and said... :9 ...purifying their hearts by faith. :10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? :11 But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. :13 ...James answered saying... :20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornications, and from things strangled, and from blood.

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Peter is clear, salvation is by grace through faith and not by the ceremonies of the law. But then why so quick to add some law back in? James can't leave it alone, he has to attach an amendment: abstain from idols, fornication, etc. Why? Because salvation by grace implies license to sin, and they want to make clear that that is not the case.

James is making the point that salvation by grace does not alleviate the need to live a right life. Repentance and righteousness are not optional, they are required, and they do not conflict with the notion of salvation by grace through faith. And Peter does not disagree with James.

James remains adamant about this, that's why he wrote his Epistle of James, to balance the excessive interpretation of Paul's writings about grace alone.

Acts 15:28 ...these necessary things; :29 ...abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: ...

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What could they possibly mean by "necessary things" other than that they are necessary? Is that not required works? And if required, then how is salvation by faith alone?

Acts 16:30 ...Sirs, what must I do to be saved? :31 And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

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This is a very interesting faith-only verse. Believe, and nothing more.

But notice the little detail at the end: *and thy house*. Is that literally true? That if a man believes and is saved, then his wife and children are also saved? That's often true, but often not. That much divine nepotism would be hard to take literally. And if it is an exaggeration, than isn't the rest? Shouldn't we rather believe that believing causes us to live right lives, and so in that sense, believing saves us, but not believing alone.

Suppose this jailer (*Acts 16:30*) had said, "I believe, but I must kill you anyway because it's my job." I think we would doubt his salvation. The inference is that believing changed his life.

Suppose you ask me, what moves a car? And I answer, gasoline moves a car. You might reply, but what if it doesn't have an engine. I think I'd be right to reply that you're messing with me and being much too picky — that when you asked me the question, you said "car" and I understood that to mean it had a working engine, and tires, etc. Without those, it's not a car.

I think we are having the same discussion here. What causes salvation? Answer: Faith. That does not imply without works, anymore than gasoline can move a car without an engine.

However, Paul forces that very discussion on us in Romans and Galatians and Ephesians, as we shall see.

Acts 17:30 ...God...commandeth all men every where to repent: :31
Because...he will judge the world...

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Repentance is not a request, it is a demand. The notion of faith alone and nothing else doesn't square with verses like this.

Acts 26:18 ...sanctified by faith that is in me.

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And so it flips again. Not faith and works, but just faith. Paul is offering Agrippa and his sister Bernice (**Acts 25:13, 25:23, 26:30**) an incredible deal: forgiveness and sanctification by faith.

They should take it. Particularly since Agrippa and his sister Bernice had an ongoing incestuous relationship (Josephus). Now is their opportunity to escape.

But Paul follows up faith with —

Acts 26:20 ...repent...

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That's the fine print. "Oh, did I mention, Agrippa, that in addition to believing you have to also repent?" And Agrippa and Bernice had a lot to repent of.

[4] PAUL

Romans 1:5 By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name:

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The two words "grace" and "obedience" occur in the same verse, in the same sentence. We received grace because we obeyed — "...obedience to the faith..." This means that we did what our faith demands of us. Therefore saved by faith necessarily means obedience.

Romans 2:7 To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.

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The reason we do well is because we seek for eternal life. And it is a patient, on-going thing.

Romans 3:8 And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? Whose damnation is just.

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This is a key verse. Paul understands that he is being misunderstood, that people are exaggerating his doctrine to justify their sin. That's the heart of the tension in the debate between faith versus works.

How literal are we to take Paul's doctrine? Paul is telling us right here. He is saying that his doctrine of salvation by faith is not to be construed to mean license to sin. But he is also saying (without realizing it) that his doctrine of salvation by faith is so nearly that, license to sin, that it can easily be construed as license to sin. So the difference really is razor thin.

Romans 3:22 *Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference.*

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God's righteousness is offered to everyone who believes.

One could read "for there is no difference" to mean whether you repent or not, you still get God's righteousness just for believing. That's not what the verse means. It means "for there is no difference" between Jews and gentiles which is the point of the verse. It's assumed that believe implies repenting.

Sometimes repentance is his subject, sometimes belief is his subject. When he says believe, he generally means believe and repent. Paul does not feel a need to say repent every time he says believe. He assumes we'll understand that, having said it so many times. So, even though he sometimes says believe without also saying repent, to read into that that believe without repenting will save, is a sinful corruption of what he means. Believe means "believe and repent" every time he uses the word. He assumes we're that smart anyway. But some people are not, I guess. That or they're trying to short circuit God, trying to get saved without giving up their sins. That is exactly what Paul is warning us against.

Romans 3:28 *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.*

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Since the law fails to save, we must turn to something else; namely, faith in Jesus Christ. (Notice that Paul neglects to say "in Jesus Christ" where it is certainly understood. He can't possibly mean faith in a rock.) Faith justifies, not the law. But sin still condemns. If the faith does not lead to repentance, that justification by faith will not last long.

Romans 4:2 *For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. :3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. :4 Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.*

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In other words, if salvation is a reward for what you do, then it was not a gift at all; in fact, God owed it to you.

Do you really want to believe that God owes you? Most Christians get squeamish about God owing them anything, and rightly so. If I believed that, then I would be in constant despair because I can never believe that I am good enough to earn anything.

That's the point. Salvation has to be a gift or it is always out of reach, which is the nemesis of all Christians who are still trying to "earn" heaven and know they can't.

But the scriptures argue adamantly for both sides. So how do we reconcile them?

First: Salvation is a gift of grace, triggered only faith in Jesus Christ.

Second: Faith will result in a Christian life.

Third: That does not mean that salvation is a reward for that Christian life.

Fourth: But if that Christian life didn't happen, that's proof that faith didn't happen.

Fifth: A true Christian can point to his/her life and say, "God, it doesn't earn me anything, that I know. But at least it evidences that my faith was real."

Sixth: Here's my proof. I call it **Ray's Contra-Positive Argument**.

In mathematics, we say: if A implies B, then not B implies not A. That's the contra-positive logic. It is a tautology. It simply cannot not be true.

Apply that to theology and we get: If faith implies works, then not works implies not faith.

How can you argue against that? You cannot. It's iron-clad.

Romans 6:1 *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? :2 God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?*

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Paul mitigates his own argument, or tries to. He knows that some disingenuous Christian will use his salvation-by-faith theology to justify sin, so he nips that in the bud here, or tries to.

Here is Paul's argument: Grace is good. So, in order to get more grace we need more sin. Is that a correct conclusion from my doctrine? No. Why? Because we are dead to sin; that is, now forgiven, Christ causes us to not seek sin.

Here is what is wrong with his argument: It brings us right back where we started. If you are a Christian, you are *necessairly* dead to sin. If not so, then salvation by faith *does* imply license to sin which cannot be — that's *his* argument.

But dead to sin *is works!* Thus works is a *necessary* result of being a Christian. And if works is a *necessary* result of being a Christian, than how is that any different that saved by works?

See my contra-positive argument above. If faith implies works, then not works implies not faith. So works, some kind of works, is necessary for salvation, however strongly Paul argues the opposite. He has locked himself into necessary works here.

☛ **Romans 8:1** *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*

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Everything prior — (that was complex and convoluted and contradicted) — is brought together and made sensible in this one verse. It is not a fault free life that God expects from Christians. Nor does he allow a laissez-faire sin filled life excused by "faith" so-called. What God expects and demands of us is a holy walk "not after the flesh, but after the spirit."

Understand that a holy *walk* is different than a holy *arrival*. A walk is progress, passage, the struggle to get from here to there. God accepts that we are a work in progress. Yes, God expects works from us, but not the work of perfection.

That, we Christians *can* do, and *must* do. This is not quite the faith without deeds theology that Paul preaches in **3:28** and **4:2-4**. But this *walk*, which he finally arrives at, is much more reasonable.

Romans 8:7 *Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.*

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Not only has Paul made his point for works, now he defends it. This is wonderfully clear. You claim to be saved because you have faith? But you retain your carnal mind and excusing it with God's grace? You're lying to yourself. You're not saved at all, *neither indeed can be!* Don't fool yourself.

Romans 8:11 *But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.*

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This is a guarantee. The spirit, if it is in you, *will* change your behavior.

Romans 8:13 *For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. :14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.*

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A claim to being "saved" has nothing to do with it. "Am I saved?" is the wrong question. "Do I have the spirit?" is the right question. If no, you will live after the flesh and die. If yes, you will live after the spirit and live. Now if you want to believe that that is the definition of being saved, I won't quarrel. But you have to start at the right place.

Romans 8:17 *...if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.*

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That troubling "if" pops up again and again. We will be glorified "if" (fill in the blank). The problem with **Romans** is that we often read it half way and stop to form conclusions. It's like hearing a person's argument but cutting him off in mid-sentence and forming an opinion without having heard all of what he had to say.

In **Romans**, the temptation is to read any of chapter 1 to 7 and basing your theology on that. But those early chapters are the foundation thinking. It is chapter 8 that brings it all together into a sensible theology on salvation. You must hold your opinion in abeyance until you get to chapter 8, or else your theology will be wrong.

Paul wants it both ways. Faith without works on the one hand, but on the other hand, no condemnation *if* you walk after the spirit. If walking after the spirit is not works, then what it?

So, what exactly does "faith without the deeds" mean? It does *not* mean that you can be saved by faith and ignore the "walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." I can

accept Paul's saved "by faith without the deeds" because I understand that it also means "walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." In other words, without the perfection that the law demands.

The problem evangelical types create for themselves is that they too often ignore the "not after the flesh, but after the spirit" and want to grant to themselves unconditional salvation and license to do whatever you want. That's antinomianism, "against the law," or simply, license to sin. Paul rejects that in **8:1** (and also in **6:1**) and so do Catholics, Mormons, and a host of other Christians.

In addition to creating a license to sin, antinomianism does something even worse: it causes other Christians to avoid talking about "saved" and "grace" and "faith without deeds" and "born again," things they should be talking about but don't because those true notions, when evangelicals speak of them, do sound an awful lot like antinomianism which other Christians reject. Both sides really need to come together in the middle, and that middle is **Romans 8:1**.

Romans 9:31 *But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. :32 Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law... :33 ...whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.*

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Paul returns to his original premise: we're saved by faith and not by obedience to the law. There are lots of atheists who are law abiding, but that will not save them.

Romans 10:9 *That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. :10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*

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If you were getting bored with just faith versus works, now we have something in the middle. Earlier verses said just believe and nothing more. Then **8:1** said believe and walk in the spirit. Now this verse says believe *and confess*. Well, believe and confess is more than just believing. So which is it, Paul? Just belief? Or believe and confess? Or believe and walk after the spirit?

My point is that they are all the same thing, if you are to make any sense at all out of the Book of Romans. What is *required* is this: Belief, *true* belief plus whatever that belief leads you to: confession and walking not after the spirit but after the flesh. Why? Because Paul says so! That's why. If your belief does not lead you to those things, than it is not belief, but just wishful thinking and that doesn't count! So cut out the nonsense, please. Faith alone does not save, because there *is* no such thing!

And, by the way, why is it that confession saves, and not belief alone? Earlier verses say faith alone saves. But this verse says faith moves you to confess and it's the confession that saves. Well, that actually makes sense. Confession is the actual commitment because it's public. When you risk of exposing your faith to the world with all it dangerous consequences, you are committed. *That is a work!*

Romans 10:11 *Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.*

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Back to faith alone. Is Paul really so oblivious to his flip-fopping?

Romans 10:13 *For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

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If confession is something more than faith alone, what about “calling upon the name of the Lord,” prayers of petition? Is praying something less than works? It is certainly more than faith. Prayer is an action, a work.

A really interesting thing in this discussion of prayer is that there is no mention of faith. Can you pray without faith? Of course you can. Men in battle do it all the time. “There are no atheists in foxholes” goes the saying. Men who don’t believe often turn to prayer in times of stress just on the outside chance that someone might be listening. Now Paul says call on the Lord, and nothing more, and you’ll be saved. Oh, Really? Paul, are you reading what you’re writing? Did you edit this at all? Clearly Paul had no concept of the future theological debates that would result from his exclusive use of one word in one verse and another word in some other verses. His theology does not require such precise verbiage.

Paul is not contradicting himself. He muddles it all together because it *is* all muddled together. Paul is not concerned with linguistic purity, but evangelicals are very concerned. Evangelicals have a hissy-fit whenever anyone says, “faith plus whatever” Well, guess what? “Faith plus whatever” is all over Romans. When Paul writes, “faith without the deeds of the law,” he means exactly that: “without the deeds of the law,” the Jewish law, exclusive to Jews. He does not mean “faith without anything else at all.”

Romans 11:5 *Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. :6 And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.*

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I understand. Paul is again defending salvation by grace and not works. But let’s go back one verse and also understand the historic event he uses to make his point.

Romans 11:2 *... Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias? How he maketh intercession to God against Israel saying, :3 Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life. :4 But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.*

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From this great old story of Elijah, Paul makes his point that we are saved by grace and not by works. But let’s pay attention to the story. Yes, the grace is that God reserved to himself seven thousand men. True enough. It was God’s doing and not men’s doing. But, Paul, you’re saying this episode had nothing to do with works? How can that be? The point of the story is that they did not bow to Baal. That is a work. Risking one life to worship the true God and not a false one counts as “doing,” not just “believing.”

So, let's review. Salvation by grace? Yes. But salvation by grace without a resulting work? Not in this story. Paul, I understand your point, but you need to be a bit more careful with the details. There are too many antinomianists out there who are using your words as an excuse to sin.

Romans 11:22 ...if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.

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Continue or else! That's a work, and a work with a major consequence: if you don't continue, you'll be cut off. Do you want to call that salvation by works or not? I don't care what you call it, it's the truth.

So that's Romans. Did you arrive at any certain conclusion about faith and works? I did, but it's a bit squishy. Did you do any better? One thing I do know: my salvation is not jeopardized by a misunderstanding one way or the other. An evangelical once told me that I'm going to hell. Well, he's wrong, and one day, when we are both in heaven, I will rub his nose in it. I'm sure he will be glad to see me, as I will be to see him.

Now it's time to move onto something else.

1 Corinthians 1:21 ...it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

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Believe only? And nothing else? We'll see. Let's read the rest of the book.

1 Corinthians 6:9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, **:10** Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

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Paul does not add, "unless you are saved, because if you're saved it doesn't matter what you do." He doesn't say any such thing because it *does* matter what a Christian does. It also matters that Paul is saying this in judgment *of Christians* (read the whole chapter and the previous) otherwise one might argue that Paul's threat applies only to non-Christians. But that is not the case here. It is Christians he is threatening.

You think "threat" is too strong a word? I disagree. I think "threat" is the only word that applies. He is telling Christians, if you live like that, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. That is a threat.

1 Corinthians 7:19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.

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It's not Jewish law that matters or non-Jewish law. Not these words or those words, but God's commandments. Well, now that's strange. How is doing the "commandments of God" not works?

1 Corinthians 9:21 *To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to god, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.*

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Paul quickly clarifies himself. “To them that are without law I became without law” can be misunderstood. He does not mean he or they can do whatever they like, so he quickly adds, not literally without law, lawless, but under the law of Christ.

Here we have some duplicity, or at least playing politics; that is, both sides of the aisle. For the Jews he acts Jewish, and for the gentiles he acts like a gentile. If that were just a matter of social behavior then it’s not a big deal. What is a big deal is that it affects his theology — Jewish Christians see it one way and gentile Christians see it another, and so he has to adjust his conversation to placate whoever he is talking to at the moment.

And don’t we do the same thing, and isn’t that okay, and does it really matter? The problem is when you say that someone else is going to hell because they see this differently. Well, that’s just mean, and not at all consistent with Paul’s inconsistency.

2 Corinthians 5:19 *To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them...*

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This is a very important grace verse, one that all Christians should embrace. “Impute” (Gr: logizomai, λογίζομαι) is a bookkeeping word. It means to itemize in a ledger. What this verse is saying is that God does not enter your mistakes, your foibles, your sins in his sin-keeping ledger.

But is that not then license to sin? It could mean that, but what it does mean is that those who God has reconciled, true Christians, don’t live a sinful life but still sin. So, while you can turn from Christ and live so sinfully that you are no longer a Christian and therefore no longer under grace, short of that, God has you covered. In the Old Testament vernacular, “covered” is exactly the right word. Hebrew atonement means to cover.

The Catholics really have this pretty close to right in distinguishing between mortal and venial sins. There are sins that cause you to not be a Christian: mortal sins. All other sins are venial sins, the point here is that God doesn’t keep track of venial sins.

I think Catholics have a solid Biblical basis for believing that, and I am not a Catholic. Other Christians believe that too, they just don’t use those words.

Galatians 2:16 *Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.*

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Galatians 5:19 *Now the works of the flesh are manifest, where are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, :20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, :21 Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.*

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Now we have wonderful doubletalk. Paul tells us plainly enough that salvation comes from faith and not from works of the law. Then four chapters later he reverses himself (although he'd deny it, but he did), by saying that if you commit these sins which are violations of the law, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. How can that not be a contradiction? Paul intentionally mitigates his own saved-by-faith argument, and he does it to make clear that he is not preaching that grace is a license to sin. What he fails to understand is that his mitigation, reasonable as it is, undoes his opening argument.

Ephesians 2:5 ...*(by grace ye are saved;)*

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Ephesians 2:8 *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: :9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.*

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Paul is clear, and so adamant that again he needs to clarify; that is, he needs to mitigate his own theology, and he does —

Ephesians 4:30 *And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.*

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Ephesians 5:5 *For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

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Again Paul carefully and expressly mitigates his own “saved-by-grace” theology. He says we are saved by grace and not by works, and we are sealed. But then, to make sure we do not misunderstand, he just as clearly says whoremongers, etc. cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, saved by grace is not license to sin.

It is frustrating that when faith-and-works Christians point out this important clarification of Paul’s, that we are accused by faith-only Christians of being a works oriented legalists. But it is not we who say it, the words are Paul’s, and we are right to not let the faith-only Christians skip over them.

Let’s wrap up Ephesians with this —

Ephesians 5:6 *Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.*

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What else could Paul possibly say to convince you? Salvation is not a license to sin, and living a life of sin is a sure indication that a self-proclaimed Christian is not a Christian at all.

Philippians 2:12 *...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. :13 For it is God which worketh in you...*

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Here Paul mitigates himself immediately, before concluding his sentence. He’s picking up his pace. Who is working out your salvation? You? Or God who is working in

you? Or both? And if both, then why is Paul adamant to say in other places that it is grace through faith and not works, when here he clearly has both, your works *and* God's grace, in mind?

Colossians 3:5 *Mortify therefore you members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness...:6 For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience:*

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Question: Can a Christian be a child of disobedience? Answer: Of course! Why else would Paul write this to them? This is a warning. Don't do fornication, etc. or you will incur the wrath of God.

Colossians 3:25 *But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is not respect of persons.*

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Again Paul directs a stern warning directly at Christians. "No respect of persons" means Christians have no special immunity against God's wrath.

Titus 3:5 *Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us...*

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And again Paul turns us. It's not what we do that saves us, it's God's grace. So, putting it all together, Paul is at odds with himself, which is fine because the truth is at odds with itself.

[5] EVERYONE ELSE

Of the 23 epistles in the New Testament (Acts to Revelation) 13 of them were written by Paul (Romans to Philemon). That's more than half. That plus the fact that Paul architected this subject, salvation by faith and not works, puts Paul in a category by himself.

Now that we are done with Paul, it's time for everyone else (James, Peter, John, Jude, and whoever wrote Hebrews) to weigh in.

Hebrews 10:26 *For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth...*

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If faith is all that's required, this willful sinning would be impossible. But it's not impossible. The point is that the faith must be life changing faith or it is useless; actually, worse than useless, it's dangerous.

Hebrews 10:38 *Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.*

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How much simpler can it be? Yes, we are saved by faith, but if we draw back then all bets are off.

Hebrew 12:14 Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:

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This is clear too. Faith notwithstanding, you have to live a right life or you will not see God.

James 2:17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. **:18** Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. **:21** Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? **:22** Seeth thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?

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This is the quintessential proof text that faith-plus-works Christians use to prove their case, and they are right to use it, particularly **:21** which purposely opposes Paul's **Romans 4:3**.

This is not a happenstance text. Clearly James wrote this with the specific purpose of refuting antinomianism as it sprang out of Paul's theology. Paul's words take both sides as I have shown. But still some of his contemporaries intentionally misunderstood him in order to justify their sinful living — I have also shown that in **Romans 6:1-2**.

James had finally just had his fill of it — the whole notion of salvation-by-faith-alone — and wrote against it. He is saying here: “What are you talking about, Paul? Faith with nothing to show for it can save you? How can that be? Then you say that you *do* need works, then you say that you *don't* need works. Come on, Paul. Make up your mine.” Finally, James just decided to take it on: “*Of course* you need works! Faith without works is dead!” And that's really all that needs to be said about it, except too many Christians still won't hear it so I decided to write this article.

Martin Luther wanted the Epistle of James excluded from the Bible. I thank God that he did not succeed.

1 John 2:3 And hereby do we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

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That's the point of the whole matter. How else *would* you know? There is only one way to know and that is how you live your life.

3 John 1:11 ...He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.

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You can't have it both ways. It's impossible to be in Christ by grace and faith, and continue to live a life of evil. That is John's precise point here.

And yet, having it both ways is exactly what the Bible, and John, seems to insist on.

Revelation 22:11 *He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. :12 And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. :14 Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. :15 For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie. :17 And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. :21 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen*

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So, how can this be? You must be a righteous person — at least in the sense of not being an evil person — but at the same time, salvation is *free*, and a gift from God as an act of *grace*; meaning, of course, without works.

Do you see a conflict there? I do. Live right or else, but salvation is free — I’m sorry, but I see a conflict. But it doesn’t matter what I see, it only matters what God sees, and he sees no conflict. Well then, that’s fine with me. He gets the last word and we should stop haggling over it.

So, be righteous, as righteous as you can be anyway, and accept the *free grace* that’s offered because you know, deep down, you can never be really righteous. And that’s okay, isn’t it? Well, it had better be okay because that’s what the Bible says.

[6] EPILOG

That’s pretty much it, for now anyway. There are lots of other verses that I could have included in this article but then I’d just be pecking at it forever and never finish. I think I have included the really important ones. Any others that I think of that are important, I will add sooner or later.

Let me share this final thought. I listened to a lecture in the Great Courses series, and the professor (whose name I don’t recall, my apologies) said something so insightful on this subject, and I’ll do my best to give you an acceptable paraphrase.

He said:

[1] The Catholics believe in faith and grace, but they also believe that their faith and grace must be demonstrated by works. But their stress is that they are never sure if their works are sufficient.

[2] Martin Luther taught, and the Lutherans believe, that faith and grace are sufficient without works. But their stress is that although they have faith today, they are never sure that they won’t lose their faith tomorrow and lose their salvation.

[3] And so John Calvin taught, and the Presbyterians believe, that we are predestined; that is, we are chosen to salvation, or not, from before the creation. And so, once we have saving faith, we cannot lose that faith because we are pre-destined to it. But their stress is: “Am I really sure that I am one of those pre-destined to salvation or am I just fooling myself as I will one day discover?”

And with that, this lecturer suggested to us: “Therefore, pick the stress that you feel most comfortable with and go for it.”

As for me, I believe that the Bible does contradict itself. The list I’ve given you is adamant. But that is acceptable and is not outrageous. At least it is not any more outrageous in theology than it is in science.

Consider: (1) Werner Heisenberg showed us the limits of physics and we are forced to accept that “the truth is the cloud,” (electron probability cloud). (2) Kurt Gödel showed us the limits of mathematics, that no matter what direction we take, it all leads to contradictions. (3) If nothing can travel faster than light, then how do entangled particles communicate? (4) If nothing can escape a black hole, then how could the big bang have happened?

The universe is a strange place indeed, and I think we’re just seeing the beginning of it. So don’t fault me for accepting that the Bible is full of contradictions and that I believe it anyway.

Final verse —

1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

This is Paul’s promise that one day we will know everything, just as God now knows us. That’s a promise of omniscience. Could it happen that we might even understand what contradictions mean?