

“Faith & Works”

*Matthew 20:1–16; Ephesians 2:8-9;
James 2:14–18*

God’s grace pours out on us.

Praise be to God!

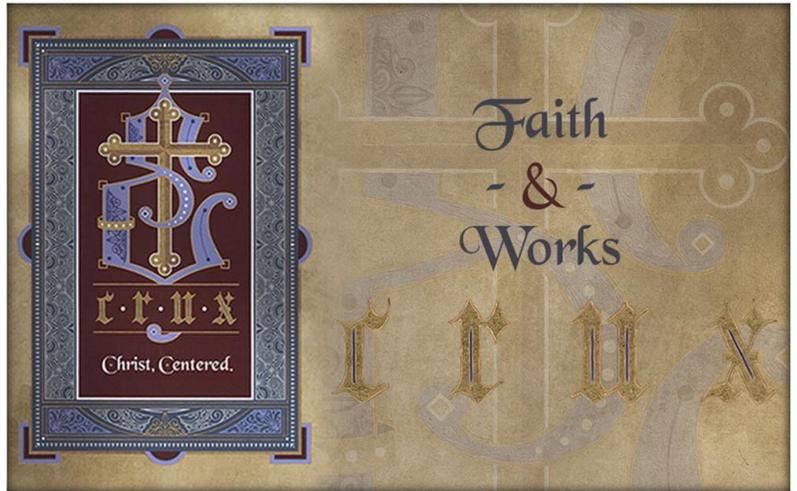
In my experience, no one is totally comfortable with grace, God’s or anyone else’s. We want things to be fair—in our own eyes. “That’s not fair,” are usually the first words out of everyone’s mouth these days when they feel aggrieved. Read the above parable from

Matthew again and tell me you don’t think the workers who spent all day in the fields were treated unfairly.

The eccentric landowner ends up paying all the workers a full day’s wage, whether they worked ten hours or one. Those who worked the full day get exactly what they were promised, but they envy those who came later in the day. It all just seems so unfair to them, but only because they lack any appreciation of grace. They have rejected the good life the landowner has given them (a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work) and obsess over what the landowner gave someone else. Though Jesus ends the parable there, you wonder what would have happened that evening. Would the envious workers have attacked the late-arrivers, seeking to make things “fair”?

Our salvation lies at the **crux** of the tension between grace and our efforts, between faith and works. As we’ll see in a bit, resolving this tension inevitably leads us to undervalue grace or diminish the importance of our own good efforts. But what is grace, really? Grace is unmerited favor, whether it comes from God or someone else. Here is more on the New Testament understanding of grace:

The New Testament concept of grace is represented by χάρις (*charis*, “grace”) and χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*, “to give graciously”) terms that refer to the quality and practical application of a beneficent disposition toward someone. The theme of grace permeates the New Testament in a variety of ways. The word *charis* conveys the idea of a favorable disposition toward another—Mary is described as finding favor (*charis*) with God (Luke 1:30), Jesus grows up in the favor (*charis*) of both God and humans (Luke 2:52), and the early church finds favor (*charis*) with the people (Acts 2:47) and with God (Acts 4:33; 13:43). Grace (*charis*) can also refer to an act born out of grace, such as healing, the canceling of a debt, the release of a prisoner, or monetary and spiritual gifts. Paul also describes his calling to be a minister of the gospel as the grace of God (e.g., Rom 1:5; 1 Cor 3:10; Eph 3:7–8). Most importantly, grace is associated with the salvation of humanity through the life and death of Jesus, who is understood to embody the grace of God (e.g., John 1:14–16; Acts 15:11; Rom 5:15–17). For this reason, the gospel is described as the good news of God’s grace (*charis*; Acts 20:24, 32), and Paul adapts the common GraecoRoman letter opening from χαίρειν (*chairein*, “greetings”) to χάρις (*charis*, “grace”) in order to reflect the grace of God manifest through Christ (e.g., Rom 1:7; Col 1:2). In several of his letters, Paul emphasizes the unmerited nature of grace in order to proclaim that, due to the death of Jesus (understood as a free gift), God’s redemption and promised salvation is now accessible through faith in Jesus, apart from following the customs of the Jewish law (e.g., Rom 11:5–6; Gal 2:19–21; Eph 2:8–9). In the New Testament, the salvation that is obtained through faith in Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s grace to all [people] (Titus 2:11).¹



¹ Jonathan W. Lo, “Grace,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

“By grace, through faith” and good works?

In *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, the UMC holds that Scripture is “primary,” “authoritative,” and “decisive.” And doesn’t Paul write in Ephesians that we are saved by faith, not works? But then doesn’t James ask sarcastically, “Can faith save you?” Paul seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus’ half-brother, seems to make it all about works. We wonder, which is it?

But, as in much Christian theology, we don’t have to and, indeed, must not choose between them. The Christian faith is built on a series of “ANDs” not “ORs.” God is three AND one. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we have to choose one or the other. Coming to embrace the ANDs and not feeling forced to choose between false ORs is essential to grasping the biblical message.

So, how much of a part do we play in our own salvation? Are we like a drowning passenger who is tossed a life preserver and must grab the life preserver to be rescued? Or perhaps we merely have to hold out our hand to accept the salvation God offers us by his grace? Others would say that we are like the dead and it is up to God and God alone to bring us to new life. But, then, where does this leave our own free will? Does this mean that God drags people into salvation whether they want it or not?

Sometimes these different perspectives are expressed as the difference between *Calvinism*, after the teachings of John Calvin, and *Arminianism*, after the teachings of Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian of the Reformation. In Calvinism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God’s sovereignty. In Arminianism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God’s love. Because love necessarily entails a free and willing heart (who wants to be “loved” by a robot), Arminians tend to emphasize the role of free will in salvation. Yet, how could there be any role for us to play in our own salvation – after all, as Paul wrote, our salvation is by God’s grace and not our own efforts. How do we possibly make any real sense of this?

Roger Olson of Baylor Seminary is an Arminian theologian and offers the following illustration, which gets about as close to peering within this mystery as we are going to get. This is from his excellent and provocative book, *Questions to All Your Answers*, which I highly recommend.

Let me try out a homely illustration on you. Imagine that we humans are fallen into a deep pit (sin) with steep and slippery sides. We’re helpless to free ourselves but must get free or we’ll die. There are three Christian views of how we get out of the pit. The *semi-Pelagian* says God throws a rope down into the pit and says, “Grab the rope and start pulling yourself up and then I’ll pull from up here and together we’ll get you out.” The *Calvinist* says God throws a rope down into the pit and comes down on the rope, ties it around some people (the elect), and carries them out without their help or cooperation. Once they get out of the pit he gives them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and revives them. They do absolutely nothing.

The *Arminian* says God pours water into the pit and says, “Float!” All people have to do to get out of the pit is allow the water to do its work — lift them out of the pit. That means not resisting it by holding onto things at the bottom of the pit or struggling against the water. If people get out of the pit, the water did all the work. All they had to do is let it lift them up and out by relaxing and floating on it. That “relaxing” is a picture of admitting our need for God to do everything for us because we are helpless sinners. Yes, we have to make a decision. Yes, we have to do the “work” (which is not really work at all) of allowing God to save us. But the initiative and power are all from God.

Well, no doubt the analogy has its limits. All analogies do. But which is a more biblical picture of salvation as both gift and task? Grace is God’s gift to us. Faith is our contribution, which is simply receiving and not resisting God’s provision. Grace goes before (prevenient grace) and enables even our faith.

Salvation is both gift and task. Our re-birth into God’s family is all about God’s grace and his grace alone. We don’t contribute to it or assist in any way. AND...it is our own willingness to entrust ourselves wholly and

completely to our Savior (i.e., faith) that makes our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. Further, genuine faith in Christ must result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Faith AND works

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God’s saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our “works”) is the embodiment of our faith. It isn’t so much that the good works are an “ought,” but that they are the inevitable outworking of genuine faith. Thus, the New Testament writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God’s kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God’s way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren’t to be just hearers of Jesus’ words, but doers of them. And before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and make still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born into Christ, but we are made into disciples. Salvation encompasses acting like the people God has already made us into. Gift *and* task. Faith *and* works. This is God’s way.

Daily Bible Readings *More on faith and works*

Monday	Genesis 12:1-9	God chose Abraham by God’s grace.
Tuesday	Romans 4	Abraham was made right with God by his faith.
Wednesday	Matthew 26: 31-46	Those who spend eternity with God are those that fed the hungry, clothed the naked, etc.
Thursday	Philippians 2:1-18	“Work out your own salvation,” v. 12
Friday	Ephesians 2:1-10	From death to life
Saturday	Galatians 2:15-2	“The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”