

# The Scriptures on Works

by Sebastian R Fama

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is only possible because of what God did. On their own, men can do nothing to attain salvation. However, the Bible makes a distinction between the works performed by man’s own strength and those accomplished by the grace of God. The apostle Paul puts it all together in Philippians 2:12: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Why does he say “work”? And if we have assurance of salvation, as some contend, why would “fear and trembling” be a part of it? Paul qualifies his meaning of the word work in verse 13: “For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” So, when a Catholic says he works for his salvation, it is shorthand for: “I can do all things in Him [Jesus] who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Only those acts **performed by God, through man**, can lead to eternal salvation. This is an important distinction, a distinction which explains why the following passages of Scripture do not contradict Ephesians 2:8-9:

Matthew 7:21-23 – **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.** On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’”

Matthew 19:16-17 – And behold, one came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. **If you would enter life, keep the commandments.**”

Matthew 25:31-46 – “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, **‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’** Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, **‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’** Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Romans 2:4-11 – Do you not know that **God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?** But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. **For he will render to every man according to his works:** to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, **but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.** There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

Romans 2:13 – For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of **the law who will be justified.**

1 Corinthians 10:6-12 – Now these things were warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. **Do not be idolaters** as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance.” **We must not indulge in immorality** as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. **We must not put the Lord to the test**, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. **Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.**

2 Corinthians 5:10 – **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.**

Colossians 3:5-8 – **Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:** immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth.

1 Timothy 6:18-19 – They are to do good, to **be rich in good deeds**, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.

Titus 1:15-16 – To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted. **They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds;** they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed.

James 2:18-26 – But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that **faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works**, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness;” and he was called the friend of God. You see that **a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.** And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so **faith apart from works is dead.**

Revelation 20:11-12 – Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also, another book was opened, which is the book of life. **And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done.**

At the end of the day the Bible means exactly what it says. Allowing God to work through us is necessary if we are to be saved. It is important to note that not one of these passages of Scripture is in opposition to any of the passages that are used to discount the value of works. As we pointed out earlier, all the works in question are accomplished by the grace of God. Indeed, even our belief in God is an act of grace: “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). Scripture gives other examples that illustrate the role of grace and our response to it:

Romans 1:4-6: Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom **we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith** for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:10: But **by the grace of God, I am what I am**, and his grace toward me was not in vain.

2 Corinthians 1:12: For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, **not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God.**

Ephesians 4:7: **But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.**

Philippians 4:13: **I can do all things in him who strengthens me.**

2 Timothy 2:1: You then, my son, **be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.**

Titus 2:11-12: **For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world.**

Hebrews 4:15-16: For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. **Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

James 4:6: **God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.**

1 Peter 4:8-10: Above all hold unflinching love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. **As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.**

Merit, in human relationships, generally refers to something earned. However, merit, in the theological sense, is not something earned but a reward:

Matthew 19:17: If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor **and you will have treasure in heaven.**

Luke 6:38: **Give, and it will be given to you;** good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. **For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.**

1 Corinthians 9:16-17: For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! **For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward.**

Ephesians 6:6-8: As servants[a] of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, **knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord.**

Salvation, like an inheritance, cannot be earned. But just like an inheritance it can be lost, by betraying the one who bestowed it upon us. The apostle Paul underscores this fact when he refuses to consider even himself to be saved:

1 Corinthians 4:2-5: Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. **I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.** Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

In other words, Only God can say who is saved and who is not. And that will not be done until the second coming. In a general sense we can say people are being saved. And that is because we see the Gospel bearing fruit. But when it comes to any particular individual, the judgement is God's and God's alone.