

# FAITH AND FORGIVENESS

By

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Forgiveness must take place in the mind of God for it is against God that we have sinned. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." One may feel deep remorse for sin, and determine to never sin again; he may punish himself, perform good works with great sacrifice, or receive expert counseling from psychologists, yet have no assurance of forgiveness from God. He might offend religious services where his emotions are stirred with feelings of ecstasy, and even be convinced by some evangelist that he has "been saved." In his own mind he may think he is forgiven. But has forgiveness taken place in the mind of God?

Many heathen experience remorse for sin and do good works. They may bequeath millions to orphanages, or give all their money to the poor, yet remain sinners in the eyes of God.

Since God is the one sinned against, He is the only one who can forgive, and He has provided only one means for our forgiveness. "The blood of Jesus Christ, his son, cleanses us of all sin" (I John. 1:7). "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures"(1 Cor 15:3). This is the result of God's great mercy and grace. No one deserves His forgiveness, and no one can earn it. In love He gave His own son on the cross to pay the penalty for sin that believers might not perish but might have everlasting life. That's grace.

Grace is what God extends to man. Faith is what man extends toward God. There is no forgiveness without both. "By grace have you been saved through faith" (Phil. 2:8). By grace God provides forgiveness through Christ; by faith we received it.

When we say that we are saved by grace alone, we do not mean that grace stands alone. We mean that we do not deserve salvation, that we cannot earn it by our good works, and that we can contribute nothing toward our salvation; therefore it is by God's grace alone. But this does not mean that God does nothing more than to be the vessel of grace. If God had only the abundance of grace in His mind, and did nothing more we would still be in our sins. His grace was the motive for the exceedingly hard and mighty work of providing atonement for our sins, which included the miracle of begetting a son through the virgin Mary, perfecting that son through years of growth and temptation in which the son became perfect through obedience, having that son sacrificed as an offering for sin, then raising him from the dead and exalting him to the place of authority above all the rest of creation.

In the same way, when we say that we are saved by faith, we do not mean that faith stands alone. We mean that our good deeds, and all the service we may render to God, do not add up to some kind of price to pay for our salvation. Obedience to His

commandments does not gain forgiveness for our sins, as Paul wrote: “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20).

But just as God's grace compels Him to act in mercy toward us, and thus does not stand alone, so our faith compels us to act in obedience to God, and thus does not stand alone.

The term “faith” is banded about with all kinds of meanings. Various sects are described as different “faiths.” Someone says, “You just believe in God.” But the devil believes in God, and is not saved. There are no true atheists; all know by nature that God exists. The guilt sinners’ bear and the animosity toward God that is demonstrated by the secular humanists prove this. They would not so rebel against God if they did not believe that He exists.

What is it, then, that one must believe in order to have the faith by which he can be justified and forgiven? It is to believe what God has done to justify us through His son Jesus Christ. It is to believe that Jesus actually died, not that his body died and left him to live on in some other form for three days, but that he himself died, that he gave up his life as he had said, that he poured out his life as Isaiah foretold, with confidence that God would raise him up again and glorify him which He did. (John. 10:15; Is. 53:12). This was the hope which was held by the prophets from the beginning, as Peter declared: “To him (Jesus) bear all the prophets’ witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). The apostles used prophecy, not to forecast the future, but to authenticate the gospel, that whosoever believes on Jesus “shall receive remission of sins.”

There is a popular notion among many sincere believers that since we are justified by faith, nothing else is required of a believer in receiving God's grace. They hold that anything other than faith would amount to “works,” and thus invalidate the faith. This is a shallow idea. Faith is to believe in the words of Christ, including the promise that he made concerning salvation. He said, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Luke 16:16). This is a far cry from the instructions given by many evangelists, who tell a believer to “pray the prayer of salvation.” I find no scripture that promises salvation on the basis of such a prayer. Peter, when asked by the crowd on Pentecost, “What shall we do?” replied, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The response to this by the 3,000 who were baptized that day contributed nothing to the grace by which they were saved, but it was the answer of faith that God would do what He promised to do.

Baptism is not an act performed to earn forgiveness; it is a way God gives by His grace to let us know we are forgiven by Christ's death. The faith is not in baptism, but in the Christ's death and God's promise. “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also you are raised with him through *faith in the working of God*, who has raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). Forgiveness does not take place in the water of baptism, but in the mind of God by His grace and our faith, not faith in baptism but faith in God and His acceptance of Christ's atoning death. That's why it is written that we are baptized into Christ's death. (Rom. 6:3-7)

The faith that saves is the same faith that brings forth fruit in good works. It is a tragic error to think that because one is saved by grace through faith that he can ignore the commandments of Christ. Jesus warned that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cast into the fire, saying, 'Not every one that says unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Matt. 7:21). For this reason James wrote that "Faith, if it has not works, is dead in itself" (James 2:17).

Good works are not done for the purpose of gaining forgiveness, but in gratitude for the forgiveness already granted. Good works are the natural product of a heart that is set on following Christ, "who went about doing good" (Acts 10:28). A Christian is motivated by faith to a love for God and neighbor. Love moves one to do a good work and faith enables him to do it.

Salvation is "the gift of God" (Eph 2:8), and "not by works of righteousness which we have done" (Tit. 3:5). Works done to earn salvation will not save. Nevertheless, we demonstrate our love and our faith by our works of obedience. (John 14:15; James 2:24).

According to scripture, "without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him (God); for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Heb. 11:6). While eternal life is a gift, there is great reward for the believer's good works. James wrote that by works faith is made perfect. (Isa. 2:22).

Where does this faith come from? Many say that it is a gift of God, and in a sense this is true, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"(Rom. 10:17). Faith is belief in the truth, so that truth has to be read or heard before faith can occur. We have never heard of missionaries going into territory where the gospel had never been preached and finding the faith already present. Faith is believing God will do what He has promised to do; therefore faith grows as we grow in the knowledge of His word.

It is by faith that one can say, "I can do all things in him that strengthens me"(Phil. 4:14). It is faith that allows us to say, "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Such faith is strengthened and matured in the trials of living in an evil world.

When we are firm in our faith we can enjoy an unshakeable peace of mind in the midst of those trials. Then we can heed the command of Jesus to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness and enjoy the assurance of eternal life and immortality.

"Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have had our access by faith into this grace wherein we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1, 2).

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