

WORKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

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One of the most misunderstood scriptures in the Bible is Ephesians 2:8-9. There, the Lord says, "*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.*" Many people wrongly conclude that the "works" referred to in this passage includes *all works*, even works of obedience to God. That erroneous conclusion then leads these people to succumb to the temptation to add the word *only* (at least in their minds if not their mouths) to the statement about salvation being by faith. There are actually quite a few other New Testament passages that teach the same point about works that Ephesians 2:8-9 does. In each case, it is essential to discern the *kind of works* within the particular context. It is vital to distinguish between the works of man's righteousness and the works of God's righteousness.

Works of God's righteousness

Perhaps the first clue that Ephesians 2:8-9 is not teaching us that works of obedience to God's commandments is not involved in our salvation is the statement in the *very next verse*. Ephesians 2:10 says, "*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*" It should be obvious to any honest and sincere person that the kind of works that Ephesians 2:9 says is not how we are saved must be different than the works that Ephesians 2:10 says that we have been created to do and are ordained to walk in! Clearly, there are works of righteousness according to God's word, and these works are *necessary for salvation*. Psalm 119:172 says, "My tongue shall speak of thy word: for *all thy commandments are righteousness.*" Acts 10:34-35 says that "*God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.*" Notice that we must "work righteousness" in order to be accepted by God! That is the same point of Ephesians 2:10. It is also the point made in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." And 1 John 3:7 says, "Little children, let no man deceive you: *he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.*" It is impossible to be righteous without doing what is righteous! And James 2:14-26 teaches that a *living faith* is

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demonstrated by works of obedience. “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (Jas 2:18-24). Obedience to God’s commands is the kind of “works of righteousness” which God demands (Matt 25:31-46; Titus 2:11-12; 1 Pet 2:24; 1 John 3:10).

Works of man’s righteousness

Ephesians 2:9 tells us that we are saved by grace through faith and *not of works*. Similarly, 2 Timothy 1:9 says that God “hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to *our works*, but according to his *own purpose* and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” And Titus 3:4-5 says that “the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, *not by works of righteousness which we have done*, but according to his mercy he saved us.” Notice the context clearly speaks about our own works of righteousness, as opposed to *God’s* purpose and righteousness (i.e. obeying His commandments). This same distinction is made in Romans 10:1-3: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. *For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.*” Is it important to understand the difference between the works of man’s righteousness and the works of God’s righteousness? Our salvation depends upon it! Teaching for doctrines the commandments of men makes a man’s worship of God to be in vain (Matt 15:7-9; Mark 7:1-13). If we are making up the rules for ourselves and following our own way (our own righteousness), we will be condemned. But Jesus Christ will save all who *obey him* (Heb 5:9).