

Harry Golden grew up in New York’s Jewish ghetto early in the 20th century. In his book, *For Two Cents Plain*, he tells how his Aunt Miriam spent her life doing good deeds. Her motive was very clear. She intended her good deeds to be paving stones on her way to paradise. She was not sure exactly how many good deeds were necessary to get to paradise, so she continued accumulating good deeds as a kind of eternal insurance. Golden writes:

“Each day brought new opportunities, and the belief was strong that these deeds were entered in a heavenly ledger where they were carefully studied, with the credits awaiting the individual when the time came for him or her to be judged.”

We might be tempted to be critical of the Jews for having a theology of works, but Golden’s story reminded me of my own Christian upbringing. I don’t think that anyone ever told me that God was keeping records on me, but I clearly thought that he was.

I imagined that the page on the left was for bad deeds and the page on the right was for good deeds. The objective was to insure that the good side filled up first. When God ran out of room and had to turn the page, I wanted it to be the “good deeds” page that was full—not the “bad deeds” page. But I was a normal boy, and I had the sense that the cards were stacked against normal boys. I hoped to live a long life. I sensed that it was easier for old men to do good deeds; perhaps I could balance the books in my old age.

That’s really bad theology, but I’m sure I am not the first one—not even the first Christian—to view things that way. Have you ever been afraid of God, the eternal bookkeeper, yourself? You’re not the first one to see it that way. Prior to the Reformation, the church had fallen into a theology of “good deeds” vs. “bad deeds.” The Reformation began when Martin Luther read in Romans: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus”* (3:23-24) and the Reformation was off and running. Very clearly, the Protestant churches were a “protest” against a theology of works. Luther’s great gift to us was the message that God saves us by faith—not works—and that salvation is God’s gift to us.

Luther didn’t like the book of James. He would have preferred that the book of James be eliminated from the New Testament. Keep in mind that Luther’s main message was that we are *saved by faith*—not by works. Listen once again to these words from James’ epistle: *“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”* (2:14-17).

It would seem that the book of Romans and the book of James are contradictory, wouldn’t it? Romans tells us that we are saved by the grace of God through faith, and James tells us that faith without works is dead.

It’s helpful to realize that the ways Paul and James spoke of justification are slightly different. For James, justification meant that salvation is demonstrated by the way we live out our faith. For Paul, we are justified the moment God saves us. I have always known about salvation by grace through faith, but I

always thought if we have faith we will also do good deeds. Therefore, if we have no good deeds, there is no evidence of our salvation.

In this chapter, the “apparent” conflict over whether salvation is by faith or by works comes into play. “James’ deep concern for the practical outcome of Christian faith seems to oppose Paul’s emphasis on salvation by faith alone. However, James’ position is not an attack on salvation by faith; it is a protest against hypocritical faith. He wants the world to know that faith is a transforming force. Salvation by faith results in Christ-like living. This does not contradict Paul’ teaching—it complements it. The two men emphasize the two facets of a full bore Christian faith—redemption and holy living” (as quoted from *The Wesley Bible*).

Faith is more than intellectual belief in God. Jesus himself shared a quotation from Isaiah that says: “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*” (Mark 7:6-8). Salvation is not for those who merely profess faith in Jesus, and call him Lord. Rather, salvation is for those who actually *do* God’s will. Our faith and actions must work in tandem. In fact, faith is “completed” through our actions.

Richard Neill Donovan* relays this story from his first year of seminary: I roomed with a German Lutheran foreign exchange student, Hans Knöch. One day I overheard Hans arguing with a friend.

Hans said, “We are saved by faith, not by works.”

The friend said, “But if you have faith, you will have works.”

Hans said, “But we are not saved by those works.”

My friend said, “But if you don’t have the works, you must not have faith and therefore are not saved.”

Hans said, “Wrong! We are saved by faith—not by works. Salvation and works are not connected.”

As they continued to argue—and as Hans continued to hold his ground—it occurred to me that this was a truly radical idea,” Donovan says. God saves us. Salvation is his gift. We gain it simply by believing in Jesus—and there is no connection with our works. It’s completely something God has done for us. That is such a radical idea—the kind of radical idea that could lead to a revolution, or a Reformation.

If that is so, why shouldn’t we allow Luther to throw out the book of James? Why even bother with it? Why read it in worship? Why base a sermon on it? Why not just ignore James altogether? Understand that God inspired James to write this book, and he inspired the early church to include it in the New Testament. He must have had something important in mind. If God had something important in mind, perhaps we should pay closer attention to it.

I believe that there is an important message in James. Missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, put it this way: “We are not saved *because of* good works, but we are saved *for* good works. Good works do not create salvation, they result from salvation.”

Bill Glass, a former All-Pro defensive end for the Detroit Lions and Cleveland Browns, talks about what he calls “The Baseball Game of Life.” He says that there are three bases which the Christian needs to

touch before crossing Home Plate. The three bases are: 1. First base: Salvation. 2. Second base: Sanctification. 3. Third base: Service.

Note that salvation is first base, and we get there before we touch the other bases. But the other bases are important too. First, we are saved. Then the Holy Spirit begins the work of making us holy in order to live our lives for God's glory. Then we begin our life of service in the manner of Jesus.

Gary Sanford, in talking about this passage from James, recalled playing baseball as a boy. Sometimes they didn't have enough boys to cover all the positions, so they played a game they called "Chicken-Base Baseball." When I played baseball as a kid, and we didn't even have enough players to bat or cover the infield, we would put ghost runners on base and keep batting. But in Chicken-Base Baseball, the runner was not required to run around all the bases. He simply ran from home plate to first base and back. He skipped second and third base completely. Gary makes a comment that the church is saddled with lots of "Chicken-Base Christians." These are Christians who care only about their personal salvation. They run to first base (Salvation), skip second and third bases entirely (Sanctification and Service), and take the short trip back to home plate. *

The message of Romans is that it is possible to do that. The message of James is that God doesn't want us to do that. He intends for us to be active Christians. God intends that "genuine faith" in a person results in "genuine works of love and service." As E. Stanley Jones says, "We are not saved *because of* good works, but we are saved *for* good works." So my friends...

Serve God. Not to get your ticket to heaven punched, but to show your gratitude for his love so freely given.

Serve God. Become a link in the great chain of Christians who have kept their faith and the church alive for over twenty centuries.

Serve God. Join him in the work of redeeming the lives of people in our community and in our world, who badly need God.

You will find that God can never be in your debt. To those with *genuine faith*, God returns much more than he receives. You will be blessed. But this one word of caution: I have seen too many Christians shrink the God of the universe down to a tool for personal success. James says it works this way: We keep faith alive with the good deeds that arise from genuine gratitude and genuine love.

In a book by Bob Goff that a friend recently gave me, Goff says, "Here's the thing: loving people the way Jesus did either changes everything in us or it changes nothing."

I think that's what *genuine faith* is like—faith that goes together with deeds. When you have both, you have the best possible combination. Amen.

(*Richard Neill Donovan, <https://www.sermonwriter.com/>)