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## **Decency, Works, Faith, and Grace**

I want to head off a potential problem between my view and Christian ideas of works, faith, and grace.

The controversy over Justification, Faith, Grace, and Works is a good example of how theology screws us up and often is not worth the effort.

If you understand the issue of Justification, Faith, Grace, and Works in Western Christianity, then you can skip to PART 3: "OK, Now Back to Me".

### **PART 1**

In some versions of Judaism, and in Christian stereotypes of Judaism, the goal is to be Justified before God, both as individuals and as a nation. I am not sure what all was available to Jews to be Justified and what Justified meant to Jews. I think Justified meant to do the positive acts required by the Law as well as you could; avoid doing what the Law forbade; avoid breaking of the Law as much you could; and ask God to forgive your sins through particular procedures such as washing, prayer, and sacrifice. It is not possible to completely follow the Law perfectly and to avoid breaking all points of the Law. None of us is perfect. So it is necessary to ask forgiveness using the given means, which I will call Ceremonies. It is not clear to me if the Ceremonies are guaranteed, that is, you do them, and then God must forgive you and hold you Justified. As far as I can tell, simply performing the Ceremonies was not effective unless you truly repented in your heart. If you genuinely repented and did the Ceremonies, I am still not sure if the Ceremonies are guaranteed, that is, God has to forgive. I need not settle this question for Judaism here but it is worthwhile for the reader to pause to think about it.

When Christianity arose, it had to deal with Justified and Saved. Briefly: To be Saved, you have to be Justified. But nobody can be Justified through His-Her own acts. God has to Justify you. It is not clear to me what all God has to do to Justify you to himself. Because Christianity wished to break with Judaism, and for other reasons, Christians could no longer use the Jewish Ceremonies to get Justification and so be Saved. So what did Christians need for Justification and Salvation? Now begins a big fight.

(1) Christians would like to substitute their Ceremonies and like to make other conditions necessary to be Justified and Saved.

(2) Christians wish to make as a condition of being Justified and Saved that you believe: Jesus is God; Jesus was Resurrected; and Jesus' birth, death, and Resurrection somehow save at least some of the people. It is not necessary here to spell out how his birth, death, and Resurrection Justify and Save people, or even if they Justify before Saving. It is not clear if they Justify people before they Save people

so as to Save them by first Justifying them. That is, it is not clear if Justification comes before Salvation or they come together.

(3) Faith is needed.

(4) The Jewish Law was a code of conduct. It said how its followers were to behave and not behave. Jesus urged on his followers additional conduct that was not explicitly in the Jewish Law. So some specific acts that are typically Christian are needed to be Justified and Saved. It is not needed here to spell out the added acts.

In summary, we need (A) Faith, and (B) Works. Works includes distinct Ceremonies (B2).

It was never clear if any of these three alone was sufficient to provide Justification and so Save. I think the early Church said the combination of them, in Ceremonies and Works sanctioned by the Church, following Faith prescribed by the Church, was enough to Justify and Save. The Church had to offer a pretty good guarantee of Salvation, and had to be able to threaten Damnation convincingly, to make sure people wished to join. In the New Testament, Jesus said the Church (Peter) could decide who is to be Saved or not Saved. Saved people likely are Justified. I think most people were happy with that combination under the direction of the Church and subject to ratification by the Church.

It is useful to give the full answer of the Church before the Roman Catholics and Protestants split, as best I know it (this answer includes the Eastern Orthodox Church): We can never do any particular thing to be Justified and Saved. The Ceremonies alone do not require God to see us as Justified and so Saved. The Ceremonies combined with a genuinely contrite heart are not enough to require God to see us as Justified and Saved, although a contrite heart helps much. There is no set of Works, including Ceremonies, that, by itself, is enough to compel God to see us as Justified and so Saved. There are no magic acts, not even magic Ceremonies. Faith alone is not enough but lack of Faith dooms us never to be Justified and Saved. On top of Faith, a good heart, Ceremonies, and other good acts, we need Grace from God. Only Grace from God finally Justifies and Saves. God adds his Grace to Faith, Ceremonies, and Works to make sure we are Justified and so Saved. Apparently the Church could decide who had Grace and who did not. It is not clear if the decision by the Church could compel God and it is not worth going into this issue here. If you do the Ceremonies, believe (have Faith) in what the Church tells you, have a genuine heart, and do other good Works, then it is likely God will extend his Grace and you will be Justified and Saved.

Then along came the Protestants. Protestants denied that the Roman Catholic Church could say who was Justified and Saved. The Ceremonies, Faith, and Works ratified by the Roman Catholic Church were not enough to make sure that God would extend his Grace and so Justify and Save a person. Only God could extend his Grace and only for God's own reasons. Only God could say who is Justified and Saved.

Protestants put this situation in terms of Faith versus Works (Acts including Ceremonies). According to Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church said a person could be Justified and so Saved by Works (Acts

including Ceremonies) alone, especially works sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, and so the Roman Catholic Church de-emphasized the roles of Faith and God's Grace. Protestants accused the Roman Catholic Church of misleading people for nefarious reasons. Protestants emphasized that only God's Grace could Save, and emphasized that humans are so depraved that nothing we do can remotely lead God to see us as Justified or worthy of his Grace. Grace is a huge gift. Protestants said the most important force in getting God to give us the gift of Grace is Faith. Faith is far more important than any Works, including Ceremonies and good deeds. Without Faith, the rest is mere crap (literally in the view of Martin Luther), merely a clumsy attempt to force God to give Grace. Protestants said the Roman Catholic attitude is a big sin. The Roman Catholic Church is complicit in a big sin.

To forestall confusion, I need to stress the official Roman Catholic Church position before the Protestant split from Roman (Western) Catholicism. Protestants might have been right about Roman Catholic Church practice, how the Church presented Christianity, and the common misconceptions of average Church members. I leave that question alone. I do emphasize that many Protestants are wrong in the same arenas, and are wrong in the ways that they accuse Roman Catholics of being wrong. In any case, the Protestants are wrong about official Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church official teaching. The Church was, and still is, clear that humans cannot compel God with any acts including good deeds and Ceremonies. The Church was clear that only God's Grace can save us. The willingness of Jesus to die on the Cross showed the willingness of God to give his Grace if only we will take a few steps toward God. While acts (including Ceremonies) cannot force God to give his Grace, they do show the condition of our hearts and they are a step toward God. Acts not only show the condition of our hearts, they help to mold hearts, help make us sincere, and help us believe the truth of Church dogma. They are evidence of Faith and they bolster Faith. Works and Faith are inextricably blended. Both Works and Faith are needed to receive God's Grace. Neither Works nor Faith can compel God to give his Grace and so Justify and Save us but both help us. We need both. Just as we are a blend of Spirit and Material Body, so we are a Blend of Faith and Works (including Ceremonies). The fact that we are a blend of Spirit and Material Body makes us superior to the angels who are only Spirit. In the same way, our ability to mix Faith and Works (including Ceremonies), and actually mixing Faith and Works (including Ceremonies), is superior to Works or Faith alone.

In my opinion, the best evidence and clearest statement of Church position is the letter of James in the New Testament. I cannot here quote it. Many statements of Paul make clear the need for both Works and Faith and the interaction of Works and Faith. Paul did extol the virtues of Faith, and Protestants have taken him to put Faith above Works. I don't think Paul should be taken that way. I think Martin Luther wished to remove the Letter of James from the Bible.

Officially Protestants say that Faith alone is not enough to compel God to give his Grace. Faith is an absolute prerequisite but not enough. God gives his Grace for his own reasons. No Church can say that a person has enough Faith because no Faith is enough. A Protestant Church can say that a person does not believe in the right Faith (the Faith of the Church) and so cannot get God's Grace even if the person believes fervently. In contrast to theory, in practice, Protestants (sort of) act as if Faith alone were enough to compel God's Grace. They also act as if a Protestant Church can ratify the content and quality

(strength) of a person's Faith and so a Protestant Church can ratify that God will bestow his Grace or can say that God will not bestow his Grace. In practice, if you believe in what the particular Protestant Church says, and you believe hard enough, and you do as the Church says you should do, then you have the right kind of Faith and enough of the Right Kind of Faith, so that you are Justified, God will give Grace, and you will be Saved. Protestants make the mistake that they had accused the Roman Catholic Church of making. Protestant Churches do not all believe the same, that is, they have different Faiths. I do not know how they reconcile having different Faiths with the belief that you must have the right Faith even if Faith alone is not enough. In practice, they split churches when they differ.

Protestants stress Faith over Works. I don't know what various Protestant Churches say officially about the interplay of Works and Faith. As far as I can tell, officially they do not take Works as indicators of Faith, and do not take Works as ways to build Faith. Works and Faith are absolute dichotomies like Free Will and Mechanism. If Works and Faith can have nothing to do with each other, then we must choose one or the other. Protestants chose Faith. My guesses as to why they promoted this dichotomy and why they chose Faith are not useful here.

The question of Salvation, and so of Justification, Faith, Works, and Grace is severe in Christianity (as in Islam) because there are only two (sometimes three) options: Heaven, (Purgatory), and Hell. You are not graded or assessed. You get no second chances. You pass or fail, and you cannot pass on our own, either through any Works or even through Faith.

Even without the dichotomy, but especially in that dichotomy, people need to know if they are Justified and Saved, or not. People need to know what they need to believe (or say they believe, or convince themselves they believe) so that they can know they are Justified and Saved. People need to know they have received the Grace of God because of their Faith. If people don't know, they get really anxious.

For common people, it did seem as if Ceremonies and good deeds could lead a person to be Justified and so Saved; it did seem as if Ceremonies and good deeds could lead God to give his Grace even if they did not compel God to give his Grace. This is a common mistake. The Church never held this position. Whether the Roman Catholic Church did not teach people well enough that this position is wrong, and did not teach them well enough what is better, I do not know and I do not dispute.

Some lay people see the interplay of Faith and Works (including Ceremonies) but likely most do not. Some lay people see that Works are evidence of Faith and can bolster Faith but likely most do not. It is not worthwhile here for me to guess about rates or to advise churches how to deal with the tendencies of common popular religion.

As Protestantism went along, likely through the pressure of human nature, it made the same mistake that it had accused the Roman Catholic Church of making. While officially no Works are sufficient to call forth Grace, in practice most Protestant Churches have a clear list of good Works that are highly likely to induce God to give his Grace. You look Justified enough to induce God to give his Grace. Faith, and Confession of Faith of the particular Protestant Church, becomes a kind of Work. Protestant Churches

unofficially recognize that Works are signs of Faith and can bolster Faith. Protestant Churches are more likely to look on active members who do a lot of church business as Justified and so Saved. Protestants also have a list of bad acts that make you un-Justified and so Damned by compelling God withhold His Grace. Protestant Churches unofficially recognize that you are not likely to hold Faith if you do not also do Works or at least if you do not have a sincere desire to do Works.

One sometimes beneficial consequence of Protestantism and its emphasis on Works as Signs of Faith is that Protestants are usually much more active hands-on Christians than Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox believers. They go out and do acts of charity. Many Protestants are common people who do not disdain other common people. They give food and build houses. Of course, they also proselytize and mission-ize beyond the point of annoying other people, but that is another story.

Unfortunately, Protestant Churches have a tacit list of signs that people can look to as indications that God has bestowed Grace, such as wealth, power, fame, and success. This is a big mistake but also quite normal due to human nature.

While placing Faith above Works (including Ceremonies) and officially denigrating Works, Protestants do argue strongly and incessantly about a few Ceremonies such as Baptism, Eucharist (Lord's Supper), and Public Confession of allegiance to the church and-or Public Confession of sins. They demand charitable works and demand people get out in the field. Works and Ceremonies are important to Protestants but the roles of Works and Faith are confusing.

Protestants are as confused as the Roman Catholic Church might be, as confused as they accused the Roman Catholic Church of being, and they are as hypocritical as well.

If only Faith can Justify and Save, then people desperately need to know What Faith and How Much Faith? In Protestantism, believers worry greatly if they have the right Faith and enough Faith. They agonize over whether they believe strongly enough. They do not take to heart the idea that not even Faith is enough to Justify and Save. They substitute Faith alone for a combination of Faith and Works. That stance can make some Protestant sects borderline crazy.

## PART 2: Works versus Faith as a Trap

Thinking in terms of Works versus Faith is a trap. Thinking in terms of Heaven or Hell alone is a trap. We do act well sometimes, we do need faith, and faith does benefit us, but trying to use Works and Faith to get to Justification and Salvation ruins us. The basis for the trap is the idea of Saved versus Damned but here I don't focus on that issue but on Works and Faith. When you are either Saved or Damned, then people absolutely must know if they are Saved or Damned. They become obsessed and go crazy. The craziness plays itself out in Works versus Faith.

If Works don't get us Saved, then we have to rely on Faith. What kind of Faith and how much Faith? No fallible human being, not the greatest theologian, can know all the Truth about God and Jesus, so we

have to rely on fallible human ideas of what to believe in, Faith. Fallible human ideas do not guarantee us the Truth that we need to be Saved for sure. So we go crazy.

An alternative is that, while no fallible human person knows the full Truth, the Holy Spirit has given the Church enough guidance through Revelation and through its fallible theologians so that the Church does know enough of the Truth to serve as a basis for Faith. The Church knows what to believe in and what not to believe in, and can explain it well enough to everybody. I think this is the dogma of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. I am not sure about all the various Protestants. Even so, it is clear that individual people, even bright individuals, within the Church do not understand enough of the Faith and disagree on the Faith. Most Christians are not really correct in their beliefs and even believe heresies. I have yet to read an adequate account of how Jesus saves people and who all he saves. There is enough room left so that again people worry about exactly what Faith to believe in to make sure they are Saved.

If the content of Faith is not enough then maybe strength of Faith will do it. If we are not quite sure what to believe, then maybe if we believe hard enough we will be Saved. This is like the Lost Boys in Peter Pan believing hard enough to fly or to save Tinker Bell. It is people on their knees begging God for enough Faith in Church dogma. It is some Christians denying that other Christians are really Christians because those other Christians don't believe hard enough and have not had that huge moment when they know God. You cannot force yourself to believe or trick yourself into belief. That is the foolishness of Pascal's Wager (look it up). People are capable of only so much faith, and we have to learn to live with that. I think we are born with the capacity to have enough faith fairly easily. The problem is not faith but is learning to trust God – another essay.

If the content of Faith is unsure, and we can never believe hard enough, then maybe we have to get back to works and we have to look for signs. Maybe I can make a lot of money and give a lot to the church, both to show my Faith and to make up for any misdeeds I might have done while making all my money. Maybe I can volunteer at a homeless shelter or at the church enough hours to prove to God that I do believe in the right things and believe hard enough. If God makes me a deacon or an elder in the church, doesn't that mean I have the right Faith, and enough Faith, so I am saved and so God trusts me? God would not give me such an office if He felt I would misuse it. If I as a politician do enough good for my country then God can forgive me all the lying and bad deal-making that I did to stay in office and augment my power.

If works are one way to God, then what about the person who is not a Christian but is a good person and does a lot of things but does not believe Jesus is God and who even believes in another religion. Do all good Jews, even great doctors and scientists, go to Hell? Did Gandhi go to Hell? Did Mohammad go to Hell? If you are a Muslim, then do all Christians, even good Christians, go to Hell? Does God forgive a politician, and who does more bad than good even if the politician thinks he did more good than bad, if the politician is a Christian and believes hard in correct dogma?

PART 3: OK. Now Back to Me.

Remember, I am not trying to get Justified or Saved. I am not trying to go to Heaven or avoid Hell. God will assess me when I die. He will do with me what he deems best. I am not perfect and don't expect to be. I trust God to make the best assessment and disposition. I base my acts on my trust in God and on what I think is right in itself. I have learned what is right in itself largely from the teachings of Jesus.

On the one hand, I do recommend that we act. I recommend that we do the right things for the right reasons; that we work hard to make the world better. I do not require that you believe as I believe in order for you to do the right things for the right reasons, I only require that you do the right things sometimes. If you do bad things, then God will be hard on you when you die. If you do good things, then God will praise you at least a little bit – don't expect a lot. If you confront your bad deeds and the harm you have done while you are still alive, things will go much better with you after you die. We can never do enough but what we do will help us when God assesses us. Still, we should not do it so we can please God and so make it easier on ourselves but because it is the right thing in itself. I trust God not to send us to Hell for a mistake belief or a mistake in dogma.

In the New Testament, demons know who Jesus is. Demons know for sure there is a God and that they will be judged. Demons have Faith. Yet demons still refuse to do the right thing for any reasons let alone for the right reasons. I believe this portrait applies to many humans. It is not enough to be absolutely sure in what you believe, you have to do good things, hopefully you have to do good things because they are right, and hopefully you have to do good things on the basis of your faith and Jesus' teachings.

All this can be taken to mean that I stress Works over Faith and can be taken to mean that I think we can work our way to a state of Grace. It can be taken to mean that I overlook the need for Faith. That view is false. More accurately, it is not relevant because I don't worry about Grace and Salvation. You just do what you do. If you really do it because it is right and not to get Saved and go to Heaven, then it doesn't fit into the Works versus Faith debate.

On the other hand, I believe in God and his good will. I believe God assesses us when we die. I believe God sent Jesus to help us out. I believe we can never do enough, have to trust God to give the world a chance, and have to trust God to assess us best when we die. I have to trust God not to send us to Hell over some misdeed or fault. I have to trust that God believes us when we try to sincerely repent even if we can never be totally sincere. My trust in God is like Faith; in fact, trust requires previous faith. My acts are based on my trust and faith. I could do the right things for the right reasons without trust and faith but I am far more likely to do the right things for the right reasons with trust and faith.

All this can be taken to mean that I stress Faith over Works, and can be taken to mean that I denigrate Works. Again, that view is false because I don't fit into the Faith versus Works dichotomy. To follow the letter of James in the New Testament: Faith without Works is empty. Demons have absolute faith in God and Jesus, because they know the truth of God and Jesus, but they are going to Hell anyway. You

do what you can, knowing it is not enough, knowing you will do it anyway, knowing that you do it for its own sake, and knowing that it can help you when you die.

#### PART 4: More Kind Words on the Church

Until Protestants got caught up in the trap of Faith versus Works, the Church (both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) had the right idea of a mix of faith and works. The Church followed the Letter of James in the New Testament. The Church might have erred, even erred badly, in some of its practices and interpretations but that does not mean the idea (dogma) of mixing faith and works is wrong and that the Church botched the idea. Not only do the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches have an idea of faith and works that does not fit into the Works versus Faith dichotomy and is similar to my idea of faith and acts but so also do most Protestant Churches in practice. They all know that a mix of faith and works is needed rather than one or the other, and they all know there is no magic formula. They all know that ideally we should do the right things for the right reasons alone but that we are mere human and so we also do the right things out of hope of reward and fear of punishment. They all know that mere limited humans cannot fully understand and fully have correct dogma, and that many people err, but that God does not punish us severely for that. I suspect even the various Churches know that their Church does not know the full simple truth - but they can't admit it. That does not bother me as long as churches continue to advise their members to do the right things for the right reasons, and have pretty good ideas about the right things and the right reasons.

I like old ideas of the old Church where we need both Works and Faith. I like the idea that Works and Faith help each other. I even like the parallel of Works and Faith to Material Body and Spirit although I do not literally hold that idea. Don't fear to use good ideas no matter where they come from. Don't fear to question and reject bad ideas no matter where they come from.