

Law or Grace?

SCOTT HOEZEE

For each one of us, what question could be at once more personal and of greater significance than this one: How are we saved? How can we know if we are going to heaven, as we sometimes put it? Is it a sheer gift of grace, such that none of our good behavior adds anything to our salvation; even as none of our bad behavior subtracts from it? Or is what we do a part of the salvation equation? Do you get to heaven because you lived a very moral life, or only because Jesus lived perfectly for you? As many of us know, you can find Bible texts to support both options.

Today on *Groundwork*, as we conclude our series on contradictory Bible texts, we take up this very big, very vital question.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, as we conclude this recent series on Bible texts that at first glance seem to say opposite things, we come to an argument that sometimes in Church history has been framed this way; the Apostle Paul versus the Apostle James in the New Testament. Are we saved by grace alone or are we saved through our deeds?

DAVE BAST

To begin with, I think we should acknowledge the background of law, in the Old Testament in particular, but throughout into the New Testament as well; the fact that God gave his law to his people; supremely in what we call the Ten Commandments. Most people are still familiar with the Ten Commandments. In fact, there is often little political squabbles over whether you can put the Ten Commandments on the courthouse steps, or whatever; but it is certainly an underlying part of scripture and of any kind of formation of Christian people or, in particular, Jewish people; and it stems from the fact that God revealed the holiness of his own character, and therefore, gave his law to his people so that they would reflect that same character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Israel was to distinguish itself from the other nations, principally, not just by the God it confessed, but principally by how they conducted themselves. You think of the text from Leviticus: Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord your God. And there is, all along in the Old Testament with Israel, the idea that if a holy God is going to live in the midst of a people, that people need to be as holy as it can be so that God's holiness is not threatened by association; and so, there is always this threat hanging in the air that, hey, if you do not have your moral act together, I might leave; and indeed, eventually things get so bad in Israel – and we see this in the book of Ezekiel – God does.

DAVE BAST

There was a book published several years ago – part of a series – I think the author's name was Thomas Cahill, called *The Gifts of the Jews*, and one of the theses of that book was that the supreme gift that the Jewish people gave through their scriptures to the world was the revelation of the holiness of God; that God is himself moral; because that was unique in the ancient world. In fact, I remember one of the powerful

experiences I had traveling was the first time I went to India I visited a shrine to the goddess, Kali, in the city of Calcutta, and there were all kinds of people sacrificing there. Later I was told many of those people were thieves because Kali did not really care; she was just about power. She did not care what you used it for; whether it was right or wrong; if you gave her the offering, you got the power. That is the essence, really, of pagan worship; but Israel's God says: No, I am holy; I am moral and I want you to be moral and holy, too, because your behavior is going to reflect on me; on my character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you have these texts in scripture. Here is one from Ezekiel 33:19, from the Old Testament:

¹⁹If a wicked person turns away from their wickedness and does what is just and right, they will live by doing so.

So, there is this idea; apparently it looks like, if you behave you live. That you are, to some extent, saved by your works; by your deeds; and even in the New Testament, you can find that sentiment once in a while, and I think you have a passage that illustrates that, Dave.

DAVE BAST

Here is the poster boy for the importance of good works. It is James from James Chapter 2, beginning at verse 14:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? And then he goes on to say, ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do."

SCOTT HOEZEE

All right, so James here basically says, "You are not saved by faith." In fact, in verse 24 he says, "You see that people are justified by what they do, not by faith alone." Well, okay, thanks, James; but now let's hear from the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:20. It is like holding up James to a mirror because here is what Paul says: Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law. Or Ephesians 2:8, 9:

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God. ⁹Not by works, so that no one can boast.

So, if you want to get the James versus Paul fisticuffs battle in the New Testament going, these are the two texts to bring next to each other: James 2:24, Ephesians 2:8, 9 and Romans 3:20. Paul is saying: Of course you are not saved by your deeds; and James is saying: Of course you are saved by your deeds. Which is it?

DAVE BAST

And here is the really funny thing; both James and Paul appeal to Abraham as evidence for – here is the clinching argument for my view, James says: Look at Abraham, ²¹was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son, Isaac on the altar?

And Paul, in Romans 4, will take again just the opposite tack and say: Look at Abraham was justified because he believed God, it says in Genesis – so, James goes to Genesis 22, and says: Look, Abraham was actually justified before God when he offered to sacrifice Isaac; he did not actually go through with it. Paul says no; look back a little further to Genesis 15, where it says Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. So, they are both appealing to different parts of the same guy's life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But here is the distinction we need to be very, very careful to make. Both James and Paul, and various Old Testament texts as well, are talking about deeds, works, human output, what we do; but, we are never going to get very far in this contradictory text episode here if we do not make a distinction; and that is the distinction between deeds you do *before* you become a Christian and deeds you do *after* you become a Christian; because that is the kicker. What Paul is saying is, before you meet Christ or unless you have met Christ, unless you have been made one with Christ, nothing you do will ever make things right in this universe. But, what James is saying is, once you meet Christ and become one with him through baptism, of course you are going to do lots of things; and if you do not, there is reason to suspect you are not really one

with Jesus. So, that is a very, very important distinction: Pre-conversion deeds; post-conversion deeds. The ones before conversion will never save you, but once you are saved, they flow freely and naturally.

DAVE BAST

Well, another way, maybe, of putting this same distinction, is to talk about motivation; not only when you are doing these things, but why. So, if the question is: I am doing these things in order to earn God's favor and like me and get on my side and give me what I want – here Kali, I am offering you this sacrifice, so you give me power – that is not going to save you. If your motivation, on the other hand, is to say, “Thank You, God, for what you have done for me. I want to belong to you and I want to reflect your character; so give me the commandments that show me what you are like so that I can try to follow them and bring glory to you;” that is genuine faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let's explore some of that coming up next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are wrestling with the idea of faith versus works or salvation by grace or by deeds; and we are looking at James and Paul; the classic contrast. One of the things that you said, Scott, that I thought was really helpful in the last segment was the distinction between when you are doing these things; is it before or after you have been saved? And even, we see that in the case of Israel in the Old Testament. When they were given the Ten Commandments, it happened at Mount Sinai after God had brought them out of the land of Egypt. It was not like he was saying, “Okay, now; here are the ten things I really want you to do, and if you build up enough brownie points with me by doing this, then I will rescue you from your bondage in Egypt,” no, he just did that; that was pure grace; he delivered them; and then at the mountain he said, “Now look, you are going to be my people; here is how I want you to live in response.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

“Now that I have saved you, here is what you do.” So, right; nothing you do before salvation will get you saved; but once you are saved, there are things you are going to do. One of the things, in the New Testament in particular, that helps us to see that distinction between pre-conversion works and post is Paul and the famous passage – well, there are several times in the New Testament when Paul tells his story – but Philippians 3 is the classic one where Paul basically lays out his credentials. He has his résumé – it is his CV – his spiritual résumé, listing all the great things that he had done for God when he was a Pharisee and he was known as Saul. He was convinced all of this is this is going to get me to heaven; I am working my own way to heaven; look at this list of my deeds and merit points; how could God fail to save me; I am going to be at the head of the class; and then he met Jesus, and then he met the cross and saw what Jesus had to do; and so, in Philippians 3:7, 8, Paul says:

⁷But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.

So, his glittering achievements – what he thought attracted God to him – he now says: Oh, it turns out it is garbage. I've got to haul it to the curb; it stinks. Because once I see what Jesus did, and had to do to save us – he died – the Son of God died on a cross – how could I think that I could ever have done anything to make any difference at all?

DAVE BAST

If you think that you can be saved by relatively good behavior – I mean, let's face it, none of us really does all that well – if you dig down deep enough, you will find that even our best good deeds have quite a bit of self about them; a little bit of taint of the garbage of self-promotion; but if any of that could do any good, why did Jesus have to go to the cross, then?

SCOTT HOEZEE

If we could...

DAVE BAST

If we could make it on our own – I mean, if you could make it to heaven by climbing the stairs, why did Jesus have to come down in order to lift us up? So, clearly the cross is the final answer to the question of salvation by grace or by works; it is grace, grace, grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the question Paul often essentially puts in front of his readers in the New Testament is: Could you do what Jesus did? Could you be a perfectly sinless person who took on the sins of the world and died and suffered and went to hell; could you do that? And the implied answer is: No. So, therefore, why do you think that you could contribute, even, to your salvation, much less achieve it? Okay, that is good; but then the question becomes, why is Paul forever issuing commands in the New Testament? We referred to the letter of James – I preached on James recently, so I did some research and found out that 56% of the verses in the letter of James – so, 60 out of 108 verses in James are commands – they are imperatives: Do this; do not do this; do this.

So, if it is all grace, and if the cross of Jesus convinces us that what we do could never possibly matter; then what is with all of the imperatives? What is with all of the commands in Paul and in James?

DAVE BAST

One of the classic patterns of every New Testament epistle, really, is described sometimes this way, as indicative imperative; the indicative comes first; a description of what God has done – the cross, as we have been saying. So, you stake your life on that; on what God has done. But, the imperative flows from that. Again, it is a matter of what you do after you believe; after you have experienced the grace of God. So, it is never, never, never a case of saying, do this, do this, do this so that God will love you; do this, become a better person so that God will look kindly on you and offer his hand to you and lift you up; but much more a matter of, look, this is who you are; this is what you are; you are now living at a new address, a new zip code; your address from now on is in Christ – this great phrase, *en Christo*, that appears throughout the New Testament over and over and over. We are now living in Christ, so live out that new identity, that new reality, and here is how you do it. Here, let me give you a little owner's manual for this new you that you have become; and now, through the power of the Spirit, can begin to act in this new way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you do have to be careful with those commands. In fact, at the seminary where I teach we do not have students preach on the Epistles until their senior year. We want them to have some preaching experience under their belts, because if you are not careful, you can too easily turn those commands into to-do lists in order to make God love you and save you. That is not what they are, so we always say to the students, “You know, whenever you hear Paul saying, ‘Do this, do not do this, grow the fruit of the Spirit, keep step with the Spirit,’ it is not, ‘do this so you will become something you are not,’ it is rather,” what you just said, Dave, “be who you are. You are baptized. You have a new identity. You are in Christ, so now act like it. Be who you, by grace, already are.” That gets the order right. Galatians – with our students, too, in preaching class – I always use Galatians as the great test case; the Galatians after Paul left had become convinced that they had to live a certain way to contribute to their salvation. It was not just grace alone; some other teachers came in and said, “No, no, you have to do stuff, too, or God is not going to love you.” Paul was furious. The letter to the Galatians begins almost rudely. Paul dispenses with the usual niceties of giving thanks for them and just calls them fools for believing they could contribute to salvation. So, in the first half of Galatians Paul is saying: Will you stop thinking about your deeds? In the second half of Galatians, Paul says: Now, about your deeds... Flee the works of the flesh. Grow the fruit of the Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Keep in step with the Spirit, yes; walk by the Spirit, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But that is not contradictory for Paul because the deeds flow from the grace.

DAVE BAST

And, the Galatians were, frankly, in danger and had already begun to slide back into a performance-based religion; and performance-based religion is always deadly; it is just deadening to the Spirit.

But, let's look again at James because James is also a very necessary reminder for a different kind of problem, which is – I will use the big word for it – *antinomianism* – a dismissal of the law; an ignoring of the commands: Hey, we do not have to worry about those commands because it is all grace; we are saved by grace and all we have to do is repeat this little formula, and what James is getting at is the nature of real faith. Luther famously said: We are justified; we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves us is never alone itself; it always flows into this other. That is exactly what James wants to get at; so, as we bring this all home, in just a moment, we will unpack that as well.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are bringing this program – and actually, this entire series on contradictory texts – in for a landing here, Dave, and wondering now what you were talking about just at the end of the last segment. James is the one who seems to contradict Paul by saying: You are not saved by faith alone; you are saved by your deeds. But, we have already seen what he means by that. If it is true faith, it will issue in deeds. It will issue in moral living. I think the question we want to take up in this final segment is: So, for all of us who are believers; for all of us who are church attendees and people who live for Christ – we live the lives of discipleship – how are we supposed to think about our morality? How are we supposed to think about our deeds? What are some of the right ways to think about them? What are some of the ways we sometimes turn things around and mis-view and misuse our moral character?

DAVE BAST

A couple of the right ways of thinking about our obedience, the fruit that we trust that grace is producing in us, is to see it first of all as a testimony; a testimony to God and his character. We said at the outset, God is holy, and therefore he expects holiness of his people. So, it is though he wants to say: This is the kind of God I am; I want to be seen in the lives of the people who worship me, who claim to believe in me. I want them to be a testimony to the world by becoming the kind of people that people are supposed to be. It is a kind of advertisement for the reality of God's grace. If grace is not transforming us and helping us to become more Christ-like, then there is reason to suspect that it may not be real.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In one of the confessional documents of my own Reformed tradition, it even says at one point – it asks the question: Well, if you are not saved by your deeds, then why are they important, or how should you think about them? One of the first answers to that is: Hey, when you see yourself producing some good, moral fruit; you are doing good deeds; be encouraged. It reminds you that the Holy Spirit is in you. So, be thankful. In other words, keep all of the focus on the Spirit, not on you.

The problem is, we do tend to want to turn it around. We want to say: Hey, I think I should get a little credit for this. Or we just think more highly of our deeds than we ought; and I think I know at least part of why that happens to me. That is because grace is invisible, but what I do I can see; and so, it is a very human tendency to focus on what you can see and not on what you cannot see. I can see when I write a big check to a charity. I can see when I volunteer for a homeless ministry. I can see that I did not do that bad thing that other people

do. So, after a while I start to think: Yeah, that must be it. That must be what attracts God to me in the first place; look what a good life I live. How could he not love me?! I am morally cuddly. I am morally good, and that is what is attracting God to me. We turn it around.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but what about the opposite situation? Some of us tend to be “glass-half-empty” people. I look at myself and I think, “Why don’t I have more good fruit? Why am I still struggling with the same kinds of sins that seem to have been going on forever? What if I am not really saved? What if I don’t have grace? What do you say to the person who is downcast by their lack of good deeds or by their fumbling attempts at trying to do good deeds? Is there a word of encouragement for them?”

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think that what Paul says in the New Testament is – we are all works in progress; we are all trying to keep step with the Spirit; we are all in grace, but maybe we are not all at the same point of sanctification and we struggle – but what we go back to again and again – whether it is a good deed that we could otherwise feel super proud of, or a bad deed that we are very ashamed of and worry might condemn us to hell – I think Paul and Jesus and the witness of the whole New Testament says: Keep going back to grace. Grace forgives; grace restores; grace is also the source of your good deeds, so do not get too conceited about those.

C. S. Lewis was often so good at making analogies. On the one side, he said: We sometimes think that God loves us because we are so good. Whereas the truth is, God makes us good because he loves us and he already saved us in Jesus.

I love the story, too, how are we to think about our deeds, and he tells the story about a little girl – a little 6-year-old girl comes up to her father and says, “Daddy, can I have \$5.00 to buy you a present?” So the father gives her the money; she goes out and buys him some little bauble and wraps it up and brings it back to him and he is thrilled, he is so happy to get this gift from his little girl. But, as C. S. Lewis says in that tagline: Yeah, but do not think the father came out \$5.00 ahead on the deal. She could only do it because he gave her the money.

DAVE BAST

Even the present came from him, ultimately, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is where we are at as well. We can only do this for God because he gives us the grace; he gives us the money up front. So, do not be conceited about it; be thankful that you can do it, because it is a thrill to buy the present for your parent, but just keep it in context. Do not confuse fruits with roots. The roots are grace; the fruits are what flow out of the root.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is easy to make too much of this whole deal, too. Clearly, we can see the danger of one extreme or the other; relying on your good works to earn favor with God or so ignoring the need to obey God that we make a joke out of grace and turn it into a cheap grace. But, I love a story I read years ago from one of the old Puritan writers who was asked as he lay ill on his deathbed and the end was approaching, someone asked him how he was, and he replied, “I have taken all of my good deeds and all of my bad deeds and cast them together in a heap and fled from both to Christ, in whom I find sweet comfort.” I think that is, to me, the bottom line. Ultimately, just turn to Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That shows the balance in our perspective that we need.

Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture; so, go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and there you will have opportunity to list for us passages, topics, issues, or questions you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/law-or-grace>

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