

Grace and Baptism (Part 2)

Many people are shocked to hear someone read **Ephesians 2:8-10** and **Mark 16:16** in the same call to respond to the gospel. The former says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (ESV).

The latter says:

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (ESV).

How can both of these be true at the same time? The first says we are saved by faith without works, but then the second seems to suggest we are saved by faith with at least one work: baptism. After all, baptism seems to be something we have to do. It takes effort on our part. Once we have completed it, we can say, "I went and got baptized." Surely we have a big contradiction here. I don't think so.

In our previous article, we discovered that Jesus Himself sees a difference between submission to baptism and all the things He has commanded (cf. **Matthew 28:19-20**). Further, we recognized that baptism is not so much a command to be obeyed as it is a promise to be believed. But there is more. The Bible fact is that baptism is not a work in the sense that **Ephesians 2:8-10** is talking about. Allow me to explain.

The mistake made is defining "work" in this context as anything a person does or has to exert effort to accomplish. Since a person has to exert effort to get baptized, some immediately see it as a "work" and claim **Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; I Peter 3:21** must not mean what they literally say. However, that is not what Paul means by "work" in **Ephesians 2:8-10**.

First, notice that whatever "work" Paul is talking about would allow the person to boast regarding their salvation. This concept of boasting is not written in a vacuum, but has a history. In **Judges 7:2**, God explains to Gideon why his army of 32,000 is too large to go against their Midianite oppressors. He says, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'" (ESV). In **Judges 7:9**, God tells Gideon to "arise, go down against the camp." The story goes on to explain that the army had to put torches in empty jars and take trumpets. Then they were to blow the trumpets and break the jars with the torches and cry out. Notice every bit of this took effort on the Israelites part. The Israelites had to perform activity that took their own effort. Did they save themselves? Did they earn their victory? Could they boast? Not in themselves. They could only boast in God's saving work. They had to work, but they were not saved by works and could not boast.

So, when Paul talks about us being saved without works about which we can boast, he doesn't mean we can be saved without any activity or effort on our part. What he means is that whatever activity or effort God requires of us cannot actually save us. God's work saves us. So, the idea of "saving work" is recognizing that no effort we put forward is powerfully effective to accomplish our salvation. Only the work of God is powerfully effective to accomplish our salvation.

Second, **Titus 3:4-5** provides some commentary on **Ephesians 2:8-10**. Paul says: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy..." (ESV). It is not by works of our own righteousness. This should not surprise us. After all, **Isaiah 64:6** explains that once we have become unclean any righteous action we perform is defiled by our sinfulness. We can bring our actions of righteousness into God's presence, but they look like filthy rags to Him.

What is a "work done by us in righteousness"? This is not just any thing we ever do responding to God. Consider **Luke 18:9**, the preface to Jesus's story about the Pharisee and the tax collector. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous..." (ESV). The Pharisee talks about his righteous works that make him better than others. He fasted twice a week and paid tithes of all that he got. He even described some unrighteous actions he had avoided. But this is nothing but filthy rags. Like everyone else, he is a sinner and trying to impress God with these actions is like a debutante wearing a crusty burlap sack. But the tax collector prays. He actually does something that takes effort. Jesus proclaimed that he went away justified. He performed an activity that took effort, but it was clearly not a work done by him in righteousness because he was justified.

So what was the difference? The difference is whose righteousness is being displayed. The Pharisee was trying to display his own righteousness, which actually accomplished nothing more than highlighting his unrighteousness.

The tax collector, on the other hand, did something, but it was something that displayed God's righteousness. **Proverbs 28:13** promised God's child "whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy" (ESV). The tax collector was not justified because of his righteousness demonstrated by his great praying. He was justified because of God's righteousness that keeps His promises. The tax collector did nothing but believe the promise of God and accept the promise by doing what God said.

How does baptism line up to these two principles?

When we are done being baptized can we boast that our own hand has saved us? Of course not. How could anyone think they somehow saved themselves by having someone else dip them under the water? The very action of baptism is not so much something we do but something we have someone do to us. The action itself points to someone else's work, not ours. Did we save ourselves by getting baptized? No, God saved us in baptism as He promised in **Colossians 2:8-14**.

When we get baptized are we displaying our righteousness or God's? I guess this would depend on motivation. If you get baptized because you think somehow you are showing yourself to be some awesome person who obeys God better than everyone else, then you may be getting baptized as a work done by you in righteousness. That is no baptism at all. On the other hand, if you are getting baptized because you believe God's promise that those who believe and are baptized will be saved, you are doing just what the tax collector did. You are displaying God's righteousness.

Paul was not saying we exert no effort in connection with our salvation. He was saying we cannot boast and say our own hand saved us. He was saying our sinfulness has taken away the ability for any righteous act we do to powerfully affect our salvation. And so, if you haven't done so, let me encourage you to display God's righteousness just like Gideon did, just like the tax collector did. Believe, accept, and respond to God's promise of grace. Believe and be baptized so God will save you.

—Edwin L. Crozier