

On the Relationship Between Praise and Works

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Introduction

In a recent paper I discussed the relationship between faith and works as seen from the respective viewpoints of Paul and James.¹ The conclusion was that neither faith nor works can be maintained in purity apart from its opposite counterpart. Below I would like to add a further dimension to this relationship, arguing that just as works derive from faith, so faith derives from praise.

Faith and Works

If Heb 11 is the faith chapter, it is also the works chapter. Consider some examples. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did" (vs. 4). "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family" (vs. 7). "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went" (vs. 8). In the life of Abraham there was no conflict--no inherent discrepancy--between faith and works. Jas 2:22 ("You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did") does not contradict Rom 4:3 ("Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness"). "By faith Abraham, . . . obeyed" (Heb 11:8). On what other principle could he have done so? Returning now to vs. 7, my late father was a carpenter. I know how hard he worked and yet what Noah did would have been vastly more strenuous, because my father was able to use power tools for at least some tasks. By hard work Noah built an ark. And here, "By faith Noah, . . . built an ark" (11:7). Must we choose between these statements? Which one shall we deny? Similarly, vs. 4 does not say, "By faith Abel thought he should offer a better sacrifice than Cain." It says, "By faith Abel offered . . ." (vs. 4).

Thirty-seven examples of faith leading to practical action are recorded in Heb 11.² By faith the people whose lives are reviewed there did what God wanted them to do and achieved the results He wanted them to achieve. Faith is a natural basis for action. Action is a natural outgrowth of faith. But the connection is not only natural. The Holy Spirit brings these elements together supernaturally in the life of anyone who will let Him. In this way our faith leads us to work for the One in whom we believe. But if it does not, then how can we account for the scope of Paul's efforts in preaching Christ "from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum" (Rom 15:19) and then so far as Rome? He wanted to go to Spain.³ Perhaps Paul's circumstances were somehow less rigorous than we had supposed. Perhaps he received "the forty lashes minus one" only four times instead of five or was shipwrecked only twice instead of three times (2 Cor 11:24, see vss. 21b-29). No, we can believe the numbers just as they read. Paul worked harder than anyone else and one reason for this is that he had commensurately greater faith. He, like James, has shown us his faith by what he did. The proof that Paul had more faith than James is based on Jas 2:18, i.e., that he did more for Christ.

Praise and Faith

Faith is not a state of mind which makes us willing to speculate about the future. On the contrary it looks primarily to the past. It is the soul's capacity for remembering just how trustworthy God has always been.⁴ It is precisely on this basis of past experience that we can know it is safe to trust Him in the present, and that it is unsafe not to. Certainly faith is required to believe what God says about the future. But the reasoning involved in doing that is the same as what we have been discussing above. From the memory of God's faithfulness then, we derive the assurance that He will be no less faithful now. In faithfulness, as in knowledge and foreknowledge, God rises over and above time.

An awareness of these facts can be gained from reading about God's dealings with earlier generations of His saints. This is one value of Bible study. But if we are ever to have a Christian experience of our own, there must be a recognition that in many specific ways He has shown the same trustworthiness to us as He did to them. When He does this the only appropriate response is praise. Praising God intelligently for specific blessings is the only way I know of to develop faith, which if it is genuine will lead to obedience and good works--in service of the One who gave us the blessings we are praising Him for. But my point here is that intelligent praise leads to intelligent faith.

Discussion

Saying that praise leads to faith and that faith leads to works is still not a complete formulation. Perhaps many other factors could be added but here I have one particularly in mind, i.e., what God does that leads us to praise Him in the first place. His own sovereign acts are where the process begins. First He works on our behalf. Then we notice what He has done and acknowledge it with praise. Our faith grows as a function of the accumulating evidence that He is able and willing to bless us. And faith, if it is genuine, leads us to work on God's behalf in turn. He works for us. We praise Him. We believe more fully in Him. We work for Him (see Matt 11:28-29).

Praise of the sort I have in mind is the vehicle by which we acknowledge that God has done something for us. It is the method by which we internalize such knowledge and store it up for future use as faith.⁵ More than this, it is just about the only method available. We can read in the Bible of God's faithfulness to people long ago. But we must learn for ourselves by practical experience that He has not changed with the passing years. Having acknowledged God's leading on many specific occasions in the past, we can reliably know that He will work for us again in the present. And if He is doing this much for us, how eminently reasonable it would be for us to do something for Him in return. This is widely different from us working first and Him doing something for us in return.

If we form the habit of ignoring God's blessings, we will soon lose the ability to discern them. Forming the habit of responding to each individual blessing when it occurs, on the other hand, will help to develop spiritual discernment--the habit of realizing the fact when God acts on our behalf.

Here is the broader context for saying that faith and works belong together. How shortsighted it is to think of separating them! Jesus certainly did not. On the cross He did just the opposite, inseparably uniting these two principles.

Conclusion

Unfortunately things that can be done right can also be done wrong. There is empty praise just as there are empty professions of faith and empty works. When praise is emptied of significance it is no longer praise but mockery.⁶ The difference between the two lies in our willingness or lack of willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our amiable talk of God's goodness into a living experience of faith, obedience, and good works.

What I have been describing in this paper is a cycle of causes and effects by which God lives to bless us and we live--in harmony with all His requirements--to bless others. This does not mean that grace is no longer grace. It means that grace is no longer merely something we talk about.

The Two Commandments (see Mark 12:28-31) are a summary and abbreviation of the Ten. And let me add, more specifically, that one reason why the fourth commandment is so fundamental a part of the code summarized in this way is that it shows we are God's children. He created us (see Exod 20:11). If He is our Father (see Luke 3:37), we will be like Him in heart and character. We will not be capable of being unlike Him if He really is our Father in the biblical sense of the term.⁷ His own concern for others is the driving imperative undergirding the whole law. And so it must be for us.

At issue in all of this is whether obedience and good works belong side by side in a Christian's daily life along with praise and faith. Working for Jesus--or even doing what He has plainly commanded--might seem dangerous to some people. There is a clear danger in believing that anything we do will save us. But there is also danger in the belief that we may disobey God and yet please Him, or more flagrantly, that He requires disobedience. Such a thought turns reason upside down. There is nothing biblical about it.

(20) May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, (21) equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

What pleases "the God of peace" most is for us to do "His will." Of course our doing--even of God's expressed will--cannot save us. Why should it have to? Christ has provided amply for our salvation. So let us not be afraid to serve Him. It is not wrong to do right. The very completeness of His provision is in itself the best reason why we would want to serve Him.

NOTE: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹See Hardy, "Paul and James," *Historicism* No. 27/Jul 91, pp. 72-77.

²The author's thirty-seven examples of faith are performed by thirty-four different persons or groups of persons. "Abraham" is mentioned three times (Heb 11:8-10, 11-12, 17-19) and "the people" (i.e., the people Moses led out of Egypt) are mentioned twice (11:29, 30). Of the thirty-four seventeen are specifically identified (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the people, the prostitute Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets) and seventeen are left unnamed (those who conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, became powerful in battle, received back their dead, were tortured, faced jeers and flogging, were chained and put in prison, were stoned, were sawed in two, were put to death by the sword, went about in sheepskins and goatskins, and who wandered in deserts and mountains). Some of the allusions in this second category can be traced with more or less certainty while others remain obscure. The one who "shut the mouths of lions" (11:33) was Daniel (see Dan 6:16-23). Those who "quenched the fury of the flames" (11:34) were Daniel's three friends (see Dan 3:19-30). In my view those who "escaped the edge of the sword" (11:34) were Esther and her fellow Jews during the reign of Xerxes (see Esth 8-10). One at least of those who was "chained and put in prison" (11:36) would be Jeremiah (see Jer 37-38). The only case we know of where a man was "sawed in two" (11:37) was Isaiah (Martyrdom of Isaiah, chap. 5).

³See Hardy, "Paul's Intention to Go to Spain," *Historicism* No. 17/Apr 89, pp. 37-56.

⁴Consider an analogy from the field of memory training. "You see, when people say, 'I forgot,' they didn't, usually--what really happened was that they didn't remember in the first place" (Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas, *The Memory Book* [New York: Ballantine, 1974], pp. 5-6). See n. 5 below. We must come to initial awareness of God's blessings if we wish to benefit from such knowledge later.

⁵In the previous note I speak in terms of practical memory training. A more sophisticated treatment of memory is found in Geoffrey R. and Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Human Memory: The Processing of Information* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1976), pp. 7-10, 73-84, 108-13. According to Loftus and Loftus, in order to be remembered for a long time information must pass through sensory storage (lasting about 1 second) and short-term storage (primarily acoustic, lasting about 15 seconds) before being transferred to long-term storage (which is primarily semantic). They do not say whether it is possible to eliminate the middle step. Some of the things we remember do not lend themselves to acoustic rehearsal. But in any event, when we notice that God has helped us the knowledge of that fact must be assimilated if we hope to benefit from it at a later time. The process by which we assimilate such information is praise. This might be a rough analogy but I believe it is a useful one.

⁶As an illustration of this fact consider that our English word "jeering" originated as an alternative way to say "cheering." It is cheering in a pejorative sense. It is mockery.

⁷See Hardy, "What Does the Hebrew Word *bēn* Mean?" *Historicism* No. 18/Apr 89, pp. 59-70.