

**“Works”**

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There is much confusion in the religious world over the subject of “works.” People have a tendency to select just one or two Bible passages where the word has a negative connotation and then use those passages to condemn *all* works. This is very dangerous, for the Bible uses the word “works” to describe several different types of works - some *good* and some *bad*. For example, in His sermon on the mount, Jesus instructs disciples regarding proper influence. He said, “*Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven*” (Matthew 5:16). Notice that Jesus called these works “good.” Obviously, not *all* works are bad.

Some works are indeed *evil*: Paul knew that the Lord would deliver him “*from every evil work*” (2 Timothy 4:18). Paul, in Galatians 5:19-21, condemned the “*works of the flesh.*” He said that these “works” will keep people out of heaven.

Some works are of God: The disciples asked, “*What shall we do that we might work the works of God?*” (John 6:28). Interestingly, the next verse says, “*Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe on Him whom He has sent’*” (v. 29). This means that comprehensive *belief* involves some type of *work*. The “work” of this particular passage can only be bad if *faith* itself is bad! Only an infidel would claim faith to be bad.

As some works are “of God,” other works are of the devil: “*...the Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil*” (1 John 3:8).

Obviously, the word “works” has a number of different applications in the Bible. Since one common Greek word is often used to describe these various “works,” one must look to the context to determine whether or not the works under consideration are good or bad. Failure to properly distinguish these works can result in people *doing* things that they should not do, and *not doing* the things that they should do. This is a serious matter.

Paul’s treatment of “works” in Romans 4:2-8 is often cited as proof against *all* works, including works of gospel obedience. Paul cites both Abraham and David to make his point. Abraham lived *prior to* the Law of Moses and David lived *under* that Law. Paul cites these examples, not to argue against *obedience*, but to argue against merit-based salvation. This is easily demonstrated from two related Scriptures: Romans 4:2 says that Abraham *was not* justified by works. James 2:21 says that Abraham *was* justified by works. Though the word “works” is the same in both verses (Gr. - *ergon*), the use is quite different. We know this because the Bible cannot contradict itself (John 10:35). In the Romans passage Paul is discussing the concept of works-based, or meritorious salvation (whether by the law of Moses or some humanly contrived law - the principle is the same). Whereas, James discusses simple *obedience* to God. There is a difference between earning salvation and receiving it conditionally. By meeting God’s conditions one is merely obeying God. Salvation remains the product of God’s grace. Sadly, failure to make this distinction between earned-salvation and conditions-based-salvation leads many people to take comfort in their disobedience to God. We should remember that Jesus is the “*author of eternal salvation*” only to those who “*obey Him*” (Hebrews 5:9). Salvation is not promised to the disobedient.

One of the most commonly misused “works” passages in the Bible is **Titus 3:5**. Paul said, “*He (God) saved us, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*” People often mistake the “works” of this passage for acts of *obedience* to God’s commands, such as water baptism. This view overlooks the previous two verses of the chapter. Verse 3 had already explained that people were in a state of sin because of their “*disobedience*” to God. What sense would it make for Paul to say that people were condemned for their disobedience, then just 2 verses later condemn them for being obedient? Such would be contradictory, yet Scripture does not contradict Scripture.

The harmony is seen in the fact that the “works” of Titus 3:5 are not the works of gospel obedience: Rather, they are the works of the Law of Moses. This is made clear from the context. Paul had already warned against the crafty tactics of “*the circumcision party*” (Titus 1:10). These people had devoted themselves to “*Jewish myths and human commandments*” (Titus 1:14). They were caught up in “*foolish*

*controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law*” (Titus 3:9). Obsession with “genealogy” was a particularly *Jewish* tendency. The “law” is a reference to the Law of Moses. Titus 3:5 is situated among these statements. Titus 3:5 is a warning against using the “works” of the Law of Moses as a merit-based system of justification. This same point is made by Paul to the Galatians when he taught that “*by the works of the Law shall no one be justified*” (Galatians 2:16; 3:11).

By way of *principle* application, Titus 3:5 is also a warning against *any* type of merit-based salvation. For example, Galatians 6:2 tells us that we are to “*bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” (Yes, Christ has a “law,” and we are told to “fulfill” it.) Again, Christ is “*the author of eternal salvation to those who obey Him*” (Hebrews 5:9). However, one does not *earn* salvation by obeying Christ - His obedience is merely an act of faith. Those who obey Christ are “*saved by grace through faith*” (Ephesians 2:8). God’s grace and man’s faith work in tandem in effecting salvation.

### **The Different Classes Of Works In The Bible**

Many people misunderstand the subject of Bible “works” because they have relied upon the faulty conclusions that have been reached and preached by others. As with other Bible subjects, the safest and best thing to do is to examine the Scriptures *directly* and *personally*. In order to assist the student, I have categorized the various types of works that are discussed and described in the Bible. As you will see, not all works are bad. In fact, some works are actually practiced by God Himself. Since all of God’s ways are “perfect” (Psalm 18:30), it would be an act of blasphemy to condemn God’s “works.” We must conclude that some works are *good*, and that not all works are contrary to faith.

#### **1. Some Works Are *Practiced* by God**

Matthew 11:2 - While in prison, John heard of “*the works of Christ.*” These works are later defined as *healing the blind, deaf, lame and diseased, raising the dead and preaching the gospel to the poor* (v. 5). I suppose that there may be someone who might try to argue that these works were bad. However, the fact that Christ never sinned (1 Peter 2:22), leads us to conclude that these were good works, not bad ones. And the brief narrative of Acts 10:38 says that Christ “*went about doing good.*”

John 4:24 - Jesus said that his “meat” (mission) was to finish His Father’s “work.” This “work” was the work of seeking, saving and redeeming the lost (Luke 19:10; Titus 2:14). This was good work, not bad work.

John 17:4 - Jesus prayed to the Father, “*I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given me to do.*” Notice that Christ did “the work” that had been given to Him by *the Father*. This work must have been good, and *could not* have been bad or unlawful.

Acts 15:18 - God has “works” which He has “*known from the foundation of the earth.*”

Romans 14:20 - Saints are themselves “*the work of God.*”

Ephesians 1:11 - God “*works all things after the council of His own will.*”

Hebrews 1:10 - The heavens are the “*work of God’s hands.*”

Hebrews 4:4 - God rested from His works on the seventh day.

Christ’s miracles were called “*mighty works*” (Matthew 11:20, 21, 23; 13:54, 58; 14:2). Were they *mighty* “bad” works? Of course not.

The “gifts” bestowed by the Holy Spirit upon early Christians were called “works” of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:6, 11).

## **2. Some Works Are *Prescribed* By God:**

Acts 13:2 - The Holy Spirit selected Barnabas and Saul for “the work” to which He had called them. This “work” was that of preaching the gospel to the lost. If all work is bad, then preaching to the lost is a bad work!

1 Corinthians 15:58 - Saints are to always abound “*in the work of the Lord.*” The “work of the Lord” cannot be “bad” work.

1 Corinthians 16:10 - Paul said that Timothy “*worked the works of the Lord.*”

Ephesians 4:12 - Saints were equipped by God for “*the work of the ministry.*” When people do the “work of the ministry,” are they doing a “bad” or unauthorized work?

Philippians 2:30 - While commending Epaphroditus, Paul said that he “*came close to death because of the work of Christ.*”

1 Thessalonians 1:3 - Upon remembrance of the saints at Thessalonica, Paul remembered their *“work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:12 - Elders are to be esteemed very highly in love for their “works sake.” Are elders wrong for doing the work that God prescribes them to do in the local church?

James 1:25 - A “blessed” man is one who is a “doer of the work.” James goes on to explain that this is how *“pure and undefiled religion”* is practiced - by *doing!*

### **God Will Judge People According To Their “Works:”**

Matthew 16:27 - The Son of Man to *“reward every man according to his works.”*

1 Peter 1:17 - The Father will impartially judge according to each one’s work.

As we have seen, “work” can be either good or bad. Humans will be judged by their works, whether “good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

### **The Work Of Physical Labor:**

The “work” of physical labor is commended throughout the Scriptures. In fact, the refusal to work is sinful.

Matthew 21:28 - The parable of the two sons says, *“Son, go work today in my vineyard.”*

Luke 13:14 - *“There are six days in which men ought to work.”*

Colossians 3:23 - People to do their *“work heartily, as for the Lord, rather than to for man.”*

1 Thessalonians 4:11 - *“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend your own business and work with your own hands.”*

2 Thessalonians 3:10 - *“If anyone is unwilling to work, then he is not to eat.”*

### **Some works are “good:”**

Matthew 5:16 - As noted in the introduction, people are to live in such a way that others can see their *“good works.”*

Matthew 26:10 - The woman who anointed Jesus with expensive oil did was commended by Jesus for having done *“a good work”* for Jesus.

Ephesians 2:10 - *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”*

Colossians 1:10 - The Colossians were to *“bear fruit in every good work.”*

1 Timothy 2:10 - Women to distinguish themselves, not by immodest clothing, but by *“good works.”*

1 Timothy 3:1 - The man who desires the office of a bishop desires *“a good work.”*

1 Timothy 5:10 - In order to qualify to be placed upon the church “role,” a woman must have among other things *“diligently followed every good work.”*

1 Timothy 6:18 - People are to be instructed to not cling to material wealth, but to be *“rich in good works.”*

2 Timothy 2:21 - Anyone wishing to be a fit vessel in the Master’s use must be *“prepared for any good work.”*

2 Timothy 3:17 - The Scriptures equip men for *“every good work.”*

2 Timothy 4:5 - Timothy was to *“do the work of evangelism.”* (Is evangelism a “good work” or a bad one? If all works are against God, then evangelism is against God!)

Titus 1:16 - People were classified as disobedient reprobates because they did not perform *“good work.”*

Titus 2:7 - Paul told Titus, *“In all things showing yourself a pattern of good works.”*

Titus 3:1 - People were told to *“be ready for every good work.”*

Titus 3:8, 14 - It is twice stated that saints are *“to be careful to maintain good works.”* The Bible often employs repetition for emphasis.

Hebrews 6:10 - God would not forget the saints’ *“work and labor of love.”*

Hebrews 13:21 - God would equip the saints to complete *“every good work.”*

### **Works Of Obedience:**

Acts 26:20 - Paul preached that people *“should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.”* Paul told the Athenians that God *“commands all men everywhere to repent”* (Acts 17:30). “Commands” are to be obeyed, thus repentance is an act of obedience to God. If all works are bad and counteractive to true faith, then repentance would be a bad thing! Not so, according to Paul.

Philippians 2:12 - *“Therefore my beloved brethren, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”*

James 2:14 - Some works make faith a saving faith.

James 2:17, 20, 26 - Some works keep faith from being dead.

James 2:18 - Some works enable one to show his faith.

James 2:21 - Abraham was justified by works.

James 2:22 - Works make faith perfect.

James 2:24 - People are justified by works.

James 2:25 - Rehab was justified by works.

Not all works are wrong or bad!

### **Works Of The Law Of Moses:**

Romans 2:15 - *“They (Gentiles) show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.”*

Romans 3:20 - *“Because by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified in His sight, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.”*

Romans 3:27 - *“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.”*

Romans 3:28 - *“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”*

Romans 9:30-33 - {30} *“What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; {31} but Israel, pursuing a Law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. {32} Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, {33} just as it is written, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.’”*

Romans 9:32 solves the difficulty of several of the “works” passages in the book of Romans. Paul explains that the Jews had misused and misapplied the Law. Some Jews had developed a check-box type of religion which promised justification upon the mere basis of command-keeping (of certain favored requirements - Matt. 23; Acts 15:1,5). They detached the Law from the Abrahamic Promise (see Galatians 3). During this time they were actually *disobedient* to God (Rom. 9:31; 10:21; Isa. 65:2; Hebrews 4:10, 11). As I pointed out earlier, there is a difference between *meritorious works* and works of simple gospel *obedience*.

Romans 11:6 - *“But if it (the election of grace) is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.”*

Galatians 2:16 - *“Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law will no flesh be justified.”*

Galatians 3:2 - Paul asked if the Galatians had *“received the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith.”*

Galatians 3:10 - *“For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law to perform them.’”*

### **Meritorious Works Only:**

Romans 4:2-5 - {2} *“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. {3} For what does the Scripture say, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as*



*righteousness.’ {4} Now to one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. {5} But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

Romans 4:6-8 - {6} *“Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: {7} ‘Blessed is the man whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. {8} Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”*

Matthew 7:22 - People will claim to have worked *“many wonderful works”* (which were actually iniquitous, v. 23). Ironically, some of the loudest critics of the principle of gospel obedience are the very ones who are constantly concocting various *“works”* (of men) as proof of their spirituality!

Matthew 23:5-7 - Pharisees did *“works to be seen of men”* (wore special clothing, sat in special seating, wore special titles).

Ephesians 2:9 - *“Not as a result of works (salvation), so that no one may boast.”*

2 Timothy 1:9 - *“Who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which has been granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”*

Titus 3:5 - *“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”*

### **Some works are “evil:”**

Matthew 7:23 - Some *“work iniquity.”*

John 7:7 - *“The world cannot hate you, but me it hates because I testify of its works, that they are evil.”*

Galatians 5:19-21 - *“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries and the like...”*

2 Tim. 4:18 - Paul knew that the Lord would deliver him *“from every evil work.”*

1 John 3:8 - *“The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.”*

Revelation 9:2 - *“And the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see, nor hear, nor walk.”*

### **Some Works Are “Dead Works”**

Hebrews 6:1 - *“Not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and faith towards God...”*

Hebrews 9:14 - The blood of Christ to *“cleanse one’s conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”*

### **Conclusion**

People should obviously be careful before condemning all work and works. Some works are indeed worthless and evil, however, some works are approved, being either practiced or prescribed by God.

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