

Lordship Salvation: Is it by Faith or by Works? Or Both?

What is “Lordship Salvation?”

There are two major systems of salvation “by faith” being taught today: lordship salvation and what we call “free grace.” At first blush the two appear identical. Both teach that salvation is “by faith alone in Christ alone.” Both teach that the believer has an obligation to advance to spiritual maturity, or to walk with Christ. It is how these two issues are linked that makes them different.

Lordship salvation advocates call for a “faith” in Christ that involves making Christ “Lord of one’s life and conduct.” What’s wrong with that? Nothing! It’s the way they go about doing it. This call for “faith in Christ” redefines faith with a call for obedience, surrender, and/or commitment. They say, “true saving faith is a commitment and submission to the Lordship of Christ.” Their position is that faith cannot be divorced from commitment. This is back loading faith. They have taken the word “faith” and started reading into the conversion experience of faith all the forms of the Christian way of life—that is mixing discipleship with salvation.

By contrast, others of us see faith as “free grace” with no strings attached. This position is defined as follows: **“The sole condition of receiving eternal salvation is faith (trust) in the Lord Jesus Christ...no act of obedience, preceding or following faith in the Lord...may be added to or considered a part of faith as a condition for receiving eternal salvation.”**

History of Lordship Salvation

Evangelical Christianity has reflected a relatively low state of affairs during last 50 to 60 years. Giving is down, church attendance is down, missionaries are down, divorce among Christians is the same as in the secular world. Many Christians look at these facts and see a problem. This has produced a call for scriptural answers. We need a solution!

Three responses have come out of this:

1. **Charismatic** – They see the problem as a lack of dynamic, animated spiritual behavior. They call for a renewal of the work of God the Holy Spirit as they say is prophesied in Acts 2. They accurately define the

problem as a need to “return to Holy Ghost power.” Their definition of what that means is where we have a problem: tongues, prophesy, healing. We agree with their point but disagree with their solution.

2. **Neo-traditionalists** – They see the problem that many years ago there was a departure from the liturgy and creed of the past, saying that the solution is secured in the authoritative traditions of the mainline religions. Since we dropped all these wonderful and colorful liturgies, the mystery is lost. God is neatly boxed up and the sense of awe of God is gone. They call for a return to ritual.
3. **Neo-reformers** – see the problem as a shallowness of American theology. They take issue with the cliches like “honk if you love Jesus”. They say that evangelicals have lowered the standards with “free grace”. They say Jesus has been packaged like toothpaste in order to reach everyone. Their solution is a return to strong reform doctrines and reestablishing scriptural qualifications to be a Christian. They call for a return to the writings of the reformers of the sixteenth century reform movement. This is very seducing, but we must remember that the focus must be on what the Word says, not on what man says. Bible focusing Presbyterians like Kennedy in Coral Gables and many well known evangelicals are in this group. They say “cheap grace” needs to be replaced by good content. There are some very persuasive arguments for Lordship Salvation; MacArthur is probably one of the most famous and most vocal. In fairness, MacArthur might not define himself as a lordship salvationist, but his teachings come very close to this concept.

Catch Phrases of Lordship Salvation

- Make Jesus Lord of your life.
- If Jesus is not lord of all, He is not lord at all.
- Head belief and heart belief.
- No enough faith.
- Wrong kind of faith
- Easy salvation or easy believism.

Who Teaches Lordship Salvation?

- Catholic Church
- Lutheran Church
- Presbyterians

- Many Fundamentalists
- Many Charismatics
- Most Pentecostals
- Some Bible Churches

Lordship Salvation Links Salvation with the Christian Way of Life

- **Assurance** – Lordship advocates teach that if you believe, then certain things *must* happen to you, and if they do not happen, then you must have had a false faith. It redirects the believer to look to his own works as proof of conversion. Our assurance does not rest on what we do, but on what God has said! Our assurance must come from faith in God and his promises. By looking inward to ourselves, we cast aside the promises of God. All believers fail (1 John 1:8).
- **Discipleship** – Lordship salvation joins conversion (or justification or positional sanctification) with discipleship (part of experiential sanctification) into one unit. “Those who are saved follow Christ; those who do not follow Him are not saved.” What about the disciples in John 6:48-66 who did not follow him anymore?
- **Repentance** – Lordship salvation makes repentance essential to receiving eternal life, often distracting from the freeness of God’s gift. Repent comes from the Greek word *metanoeo* which means to change one’s mind. If the Gospel of John chapter 20:30-31 says that John is written so you can have eternal life, and that is what the verse says, then why does John mention “faith” or “believe” 99 times but never once mentions repent. If repentance is necessary for salvation, then the Gospel of John is unscriptural. Repentance in a salvation context means to change one’s mind about the work of Christ on the Cross and what that means to you.
- **Faith** – While Lordship salvation may not teach salvation by faith and works, it teaches salvation by faith *that* works. Works must follow or you did not have faith in Christ, or the right kind of faith, or enough faith. What did Jesus say about faith? You need only as much as a “grain of a mustard seed.” It isn’t the quantity of faith; it is object of faith that is the issue. What kind of works must you have to be proof of faith? Stop sinning? Get baptized? Join a church?

You are called to faith in Christ, and yes, you are called to be a disciple, and yes, you are obliged to walk with Christ, yes, you are obliged to stop sinning, yes, you are obliged to advance to spiritual maturity, yes, God will clobber you if you sin, yes, you will lose your rewards if you fail to meet these mandates, and yes, God will take you out under the sin unto death as a reversionist if that is the path you chose. But this has nothing to do with your salvation! The only thing your failure to follow these mandates proves is that you are at best human and at worst stupid.

Perseverance and Obedience – Lordship salvation declares that you must persevere all the way to the end. If you fail or fall away, you were never saved to begin with. It teaches that obedience is inevitable after salvation. But if we go to the Pauline epistles, we see Paul repeatedly chastising believers who have really messed up their Christian lives with false teachings, bad behavior, and immorality. Under Lordship Salvation you would have to conclude that everyone at Corinth was lost!

Scripture is clear that faith in the risen Christ brings eternal life. (John 6:47; 5:24; 3:14-16; 3:36)

Easy Believism

Lordship advocates say we teach an “easy believism”. They say this in a derogatory and mocking manner. The truth is that so-called “easy believism” isn’t easy. Salvation may be simple, but it is not easy. Often there are mental issues, willful issues, and emotional issues that stand in the way of faith. How easy is it for an unsaved Jew to believe in Jesus Christ? That is a huge hurdle for most of them to get over.

From Shawn Willson

Pastor Grace Community Bible Church

"Easy believism" is one of the worst phrases in Christianity today. There is nothing easy to believe that Jesus offers me His righteousness and cleanses me of my sin by grace and not works. There is nothing easy to believe I have eternal life that is not worked for or earned. In fact, it is easier to believe God would require one to work a life of sacrifice and religion in order to gain a place in the family of God. Works-based religion is easy to believe, because that is what all the religions in the

world offer. Grace-based, faith alone salvation based on Christ's completed work, is very difficult to believe, but it is true. Believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life.

Dr. Charlie Bing's GraceNotes No 11 and Lordship Salvation

Followers of Lordship Salvation insist that a person is eternally saved not only by believing in Jesus Christ as Savior, but also by committing completely to Him as the Lord or Master of one's life. Thus salvation also depends on repenting from all sins and giving subsequent evidence of changed conduct and good works. Those who do not persevere in good works and faithfulness till the end of life prove that they were never really saved to begin with. Adherents to Lordship Salvation teach that we are saved by "costly grace" which means they interpret the commands for discipleship (e.g., deny yourself, take up your cross, follow Jesus, etc.) as the price that must be paid for eternal life. Here are some key questions for those who hold to Lordship Salvation, asked in love of course!

How do you know when you've really believed? Since your idea of "genuine faith" must be proved by works and obedience, how do you know your faith qualifies as the real thing, since you can always do and obey more? What is it that really saves you anyway, your faith, or Jesus who is the object of your faith? How can your faith be validated by subjective introspection when your feelings and experiences fluctuate? And if the object of your faith, the Lord Jesus Christ, saves you, shouldn't you validate your faith only by whether it rests in Him?

How do you know when you've thoroughly repented? Since you are not conscious of every sin (cf. Lev. 4:2; 5:15), what if some sins are overlooked and not repented of? At what point do you think you've adequately repented: When your attitude changes about the sin? When you resolve to change your conduct? When your conduct actually changes? When you make restitution or ask for forgiveness? Or when you are sure that there will be no repetition of the sin? And if repentance is not just a change of attitude but a turning from sins and a change in conduct, then why does Jesus tell people to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8)?

How do you know when you're completely committed to Christ's Lordship? How much commitment is enough to secure your salvation? Is the willingness to commit enough, or must you actually commit everything? And how would you know what everything involves, especially as an unbeliever? Since you believe the commitments required for discipleship are also commitments needed for salvation, and they are ongoing (e.g., deny yourself, take up your cross daily, follow Jesus, abide in God's Word, love Christ supremely, etc.), how do you know when you have fulfilled them?

How can you expect an unbeliever to make spiritual decisions that reflect spiritual maturity and an understanding of God's will? Aren't you getting the cart before the horse? If an unbeliever is dead in sin, how can that unbeliever know and desire what God wants him or her to do and obey? Isn't knowing and obeying God's will the essence of the Christian's life after one believes?

Have you remained completely committed to Christ's lordship? If you haven't, isn't that an indication that you were never fully committed? And wouldn't that mean you were never really saved? Or is it an admission to the reality and power of sin, a reality that would make it impossible for anyone to make the full commitment demanded by your view of salvation?

Which sins disqualify a person as a true believer? Again, is there a list of certain sins that prove one is not saved? What about King David's sins of murder and adultery? Since he was surely saved, do sins have to be worse than his to prove one is unsaved? How much sin is a Christian capable of? Since you undoubtedly agree that Christians do sin, how much is too much before you deny he or she is a true Christian? Where do you draw the line? Why does the Bible instruct church discipline for Christians who sin?

If salvation depends on your perseverance in faithfulness and good works, how can you know for sure you are saved? Though you may be living faithfully now, how do you know what tests or temptations you will face tomorrow? If you cannot predict the future, isn't there a chance you could sin and die before you repent? As long as that is possible, how can you say with certainty that you are a true Christian and that you have any

assurance of eternal life? How could you honestly give assurance of salvation to anyone who says he or she believes the Gospel?

Where is there room to grow? If your saving faith included obedience, forsaking all sins, a committed life, and a guarantee of faithfulness, what is left to do? Why are there so many ethical demands in the Bible addressed to Christians? Aren't they unnecessary if a godly life is inevitable?

Did the apostle John preach a false Gospel? Since the Gospel of John does not mention repentance, or submission, or commitment to Jesus as Lord as conditions for salvation, but does mention "believe" as the condition for salvation 99 times, would you call that "easy believism"? Do you think John was ignorant or irresponsible (But I know you believe that is impossible since this is God's inspired Word)? Since his is the only book of the Bible that claims it was written to tell people how to be saved (John 20:31), shouldn't it determine what you believe about the condition for salvation?

And by the way, isn't your "costly grace" a contradiction in terms? If grace is a free gift to you paid for by Jesus Christ, how can it cost you anything? If you do anything or make any commitments to merit God's grace, doesn't that compromise and cancel it (Rom. 4:4; 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9)? How then can you receive the grace of salvation by any way other than simple faith?

Not All Believers Continue in the Faith

Scripture is clear that not all who believe in Christ continue to practice discipleship. It is not inevitable that all believers will advance to spiritual maturity. In John 6:66 we see disciples offended by Jesus teachings (verse 53-57) and leaving Him. Lordship advocates say they were not really saved. What does the Bible say? The Bible clearly calls them "disciples." They were saved!

In John 12:42-43 we see believers who never even make it to discipleship.

John 12:42 Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many **believed on him**; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they

should be put out of the synagogue: 43 For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

In John 19:38 we see Joseph of Arimathaea hiding his discipleship.

John 19:38 And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a **disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews**, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.

Have you practiced discipleship without fail since you became a believer? The lordship position is that failed discipleship demonstrates that the person who claimed to have faith did not have “real” faith. They say that if Christ is not lord of your life, then he is not lord at all. Sorry, Christ is lord whether or not you believe it or practice it. He is not lord because of any act performed by believers.

Difficult Passages

Often lordship advocates take their interpretations of the “difficult” passages and load them on top of the simple passages. This premise is wrong! We always reason from the known toward the unknown in order to understand the unknown. Let the Bible interpret itself. Lordship salvation often reverses that process, thereby making the simplest statements mean other than what they say.

Points:

- God’s Word does not contradict itself.
- One principle of scriptural interpretation is that of categorical comparison. The scripture under study is compared to other scriptures of known interpretation in the same doctrinal category. The Bible interprets itself.
- If the scripture under study is in apparent conflict with established doctrines, and the weight of evidence is solidly against the interpretation of the scripture under study, then the interpretation may be safely assumed to be incorrect.
- There is clear and massive evidence in the scriptures against works as a system of salvation—front-loaded or back-loaded.

- There is clear and massive evidence in the scriptures for salvation by faith.
- The Gospel of John mentions “believe” some 99 times but never once mentions “repent.” Nowhere in the Gospel of John is “believe” and “works” used as a system of conversion.

James 2:14-26 “seems” to teach salvation by faith *and* works.

Using the categorical system of “rightly defining the word of truth,” then the weight of evidence is clearly against the salvation by faith *and* works interpretation of James 2:14-26.

What then is the correct interpretation of James 2:14-26?

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Your eternal security is never an issue of your production or moral behavior. In no way do you earn it, and in no way do you deserve it. In Romans 5:1 we are justified by faith and have peace with God. The unbelieving world has no such knowledge or standard. The professing Christian will be

judged by unbelievers with a secular standard apart from God's standard. Your works (divine good) or lack of it is your "testimony" to the unbelieving world. The cynical, doubting, unbelieving world will hold your actions as a believer up for judgment as proof or non-proof of your salvation and your witness. At no time does the failed believer lose his eternal security, but the unbelieving world will presume such if your "works" do not meet *their* standards.

Note verse 17: So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

It doesn't say faith without works does not exist, but that it is alone. It says that the believer outside his area of operations (walking in the Spirit, Gal 5:16) is dead to Christ. That carnal believer is said to be "spiritually dead".

In verses 18-20 we see an unbeliever mocking a believer without Christian production. Abraham is used as an example in verse 21. It says that by his works he proved his faith. And that is true, but let's look at that for a moment.

At age 90 Abraham was given a promise by God, which he at first doubted when he took the slave girl, Hagar, and had a child by her to fulfill the promise. At 99 he found out that the child of that union was not the fulfillment of God's promise. The fulfillment would come through a child, Isaac, from his wife Sara. Abraham was later ordered to take Isaac up on the mountain and sacrifice him to God. Abraham trusted God, his faith so strong that he followed God's instructions, knowing in his heart that Isaac was the fulfillment of the promise and thus would not die. Did Abraham's "works" prove his faith in God's promise? You bet! **To you and me!** Not God. And Abraham's salvation never was in question.

Look at verse 25. Rahab was a prostitute and is seen in the Book of Joshua. Joshua sent two men to spy on the Canaanites in Jericho. They hid out in the home of Rahab. The king of Jericho sent troops to capture them, but Rahab hid them on her roof and sent their pursuers in another direction. Rahab was a believer in the context of the limited understanding of what that meant at that time in human history. She knew the land of Canaan had been given to the Israelites by God. She used her faith in God and risked her life in the process. Does that mean her "works" were

testimony to her faith? Was she known by her works as a believer? Certainly.

What James is saying is that Satan's world will judge the believer by his works. If he is fruitful, *by their definition of fruitful*, he will be perceived as a Christian and thus "worthy" of bearing the title "Christian".

Using the categorical system of "rightly defining the word of truth" and letting the Bible interpret itself, then the weight of evidence is clearly against the salvation by faith *and* works interpretation of James 2:14-26.

The other lesson we can learn from this passage is that a believer not functioning and in carnality is dead to Christ, and he is cut off from God's enabling grace while in such a state of carnality. He has "fallen from grace". Recovery is through 1 John 1:9.

"Works" or "production" are mandated of the believer. It is the will of God for our lives, and being outside the will of God for our lives is an act of rebellion against God, in other words, a sin! It is *expected* that the believer will produce fruit. He is *obliged* to grow spiritually and become an ambassador for Christ. Unfortunately today, few of us do and, of those, many falter. Outside the will of God for his life, the believer *cannot* produce divine good (fruit).

In summery, we must conclude that the evidence is weighted heavily against any form of salvation plus works or salvation that works. This is a false doctrine that we must label as "faith+". **Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.** That is step 1. Your walk with Christ is step 2 and depends on step 1 only in as much as a relationship with God through faith in what Jesus accomplished at the Cross is required first.

The sole condition of receiving eternal salvation is faith (trust) in the Lord Jesus Christ and what He did on the Cross. No act of obedience, preceding or following faith in the Lord may be added to or considered a part of faith as a condition for receiving eternal salvation or proving eternal salvation.

If you believe your works after salvation are a condition of salvation (faith+), then you believe in salvation by works.