

Lordship Salvation

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What is Lordship Salvation?

There are two main theological systems of salvation by faith being taught today: lordship salvation and free grace. Both teach that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. And at first glance, the two seem identical. But they are not.

How are they different? Although both believe salvation comes by faith alone in Christ alone and teach that believers should strive for spiritual maturity, their difference lies in how they connect these two issues.

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 as a call for obedience, surrender, and commitment. They say, “true saving faith is a submission to the Lordship of Christ.” *Their position is that faith cannot be separated from commitment, and they interpret the conversion experience of faith as involving all the aspects of the Christian way of life.* This is back-loading faith. If works do not contribute to your salvation, then how can you maintain your salvation through your works afterward?

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior

Galatians 2:16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ

On the other hand, some of us view faith as “free grace” with no strings attached. This perspective is defined as follows:

The only requirement for receiving eternal salvation is faith (trust) in what the Lord Jesus Christ did on the Cross for you. Note that the passages above do not mention any act of obedience, before or after faith in the Lord, that could be added to or considered part of faith as a condition for receiving eternal salvation.

We conclude from Scripture that salvation is a one-time event. Additionally, in their theology, free grace proponents see two distinct stages in a believer's life. The first is salvation, called *positional sanctification*, or being set apart as God's own possession, which is what "sanctify" means—to be set apart. "Positional" refers to the new believer's identification with Christ, being "in Christ."

Ephesians 2:12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.
13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Galatians 3:26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

Once we were "separated from Christ," but as believers, we are now "in Christ," identified with Him. The phrase "in Christ" appears often in the New Testament and denotes identification with, or being made holy as, Christ's own.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

John 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Once saved—once identified with Christ—there is no longer any possibility of condemnation, and who has enough power to snatch you out of the hand of God? No one! And that would include you.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The second phase of a believer's life follows salvation, which we call the "spiritual life" or "experiential sanctification," and refers to the spiritual life *experienced* by the believer. It is a learner-centered approach to spiritual growth that builds knowledge and skills through direct experience and focused reflection. This is where "works" come in, but not as a condition of salvation. We were "created in Christ Jesus **for** good works."

If we are called to live like Christ—and we are—we must learn what that entails and how to carry it out. This knowledge is not zapped into the new believer's brain at the moment of salvation. It comes through training and experience. That is spiritual growth—growing in knowledge toward spiritual maturity. Aside from the fact that one must first be saved to experience this growth, it has no connection to the one-time act of salvation.

The lordship salvation crowd, however, maintains that salvation involves an obligation to live a righteous spiritual life, and any act of disobedience after salvation might suggest that a person was not truly saved or could lose their salvation. It is true that believers are called to live righteously and grow spiritually in the knowledge of God and His plan, but a believer's salvation does not depend on how well they execute the spiritual life. If it did, we would all be lost. As one well-known pastor said regarding the sinful nature of man, "If you could lose your salvation, you would."

Spiritual growth is a process of learning what God expects of you as one of His own, and then being tested and applying what you learned. Pass the test, and you advance to the next test. Fail the test, and you get to repeat it. Unfortunately, many new believers never get disciplined by more mature believers and never grow spiritually. They remain babes in Christ.

Hebrews 5:13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. 14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Some new believers never even drink the “milk,” much less consume “solid food.” Were they never really saved? No! But they remain babes and live failed spiritual lives.

History of Lordship Salvation

Evangelical Christianity has been in a relatively poor state over the last 60 or more years. Giving is down, church attendance is down, missionaries are down, and divorce among Christians is the same as in the secular world. Many Christians observe these facts and see a call for scriptural solutions. We need a remedy!

1. **The Charismatic Movement** views the issue as a lack of energetic, lively spiritual expression. They advocate for a renewal of God's work through the Holy Spirit, as they say, which is foretold in Acts 2. They clearly identify the problem as a need to “return to Holy Ghost power.” Their interpretation of what this entails is where we have an issue: tongues, prophecy, and healing. We agree with their point but disagree with their solution.
2. **Neo-traditionalists** point out that many years ago there was a departure from the liturgy and creed of the past, and claim that the solution lies in the authoritative traditions of mainline religions. Since we abandoned these beautiful, vibrant liturgies, the mystery has been lost. They call for a return to ritual.
3. **Neo-reformers** see the problem as a lack of depth in American theology. They criticize clichés like “honk if you love Jesus” and argue that evangelicals have lowered standards with “free grace.” They claim Jesus has been packaged like toothpaste to appeal to everyone. Their solution is a return to robust reform doctrines and the reestablishment of scriptural qualifications for being a Christian. They advocate revisiting the writings of the sixteenth-century reformers. While this is very appealing, we must remember that our focus should be on what the Word says, not on what man says. Bible-focused Presbyterians, such as Kennedy in Coral Gables, and many well-known evangelicals, fall into this group. They say “cheap grace” needs to be replaced with “good content.” MacArthur is probably one of the most famous and vocal advocates. In fairness, MacArthur might not identify as a lordship salvationist, but his teachings closely align with that 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.
- Not 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 redirect believers to look at their own works as *proof* of conversion. Our assurance does not depend on what we have done, but on what God has promised! Our confidence must come from faith in God and His promises. By looking inward, we overlook God's promises. The undeniable truth is that all believers fail at some point.

1 John 1:8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1 John 1:10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Discipleship—Lordship salvation combines conversion (or justification or positional sanctification) with discipleship (a part of experiential sanctification) into one integrated concept. “Those who believe in Christ follow him; those who do not follow Him do not believe in Him.

Repentance—Lordship salvation makes repentance essential for receiving eternal life, often diverting attention from the free gift of God. “Repent”

comes from the Greek word *metanoeo*, which means to change one's mind. Lordship Salvationists argue that repentance means feeling sorry for your sins. Maybe you do and maybe not, but that is not how the word was used in classical Greek.

Mark 1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent **and** believe in the gospel." (Emphasis added.)

Change your mind (repent) **and** believe. They previously did not believe and are now being called to change their minds to a condition of belief.

Matthew 21:32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward **change your minds** and believe him. (Emphasis added.)

Even when they saw the truth, they did not change their minds or believe.

In classical Greek usage, *metanoeo* simply means to change one's mind—to think one way about something and then to come to the conclusion that one was wrong, thus "change your mind" to another point of view.

Example: I was sure that Jesus was a false prophet and not the Messiah, but now I see that He is indeed the Messiah (change of mind, repented) and that salvation is through believing in Him and His work on the Cross (believe).

Changing your mind and believing in something are two different actions. You can change your mind about something without **actually believing** what it represents. For example, you might change your mind about Jesus being the Messiah and still not believe He can save you.

If the Gospel of John, chapter 20:30-31, states that John was written so you can have eternal life, and that is what the verse says, then why does John mention "faith" 99 times but never once mention repentance?

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, 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 the object of faith that matters.

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 in Heaven if you fail to meet these mandates and become a poor witness for Christ, and yes, as a poor witness for Him, God may remove you from this life under the sin unto death. However, none of these demands affect your salvation! The only thing your failure to follow these mandates proves is that you are, at best, human, and at worst, foolish.

Perseverance and Obedience

Lordship salvation states that you must persevere *all the way to the end*. If you fail or fall away, you were never truly saved. It teaches that obedience is *inevitable* after salvation. But it is not. In the Pauline epistles, we see Paul repeatedly chastising believers who have seriously messed up their Christian lives through false teaching, 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). If “eternal life” can be lost, then it is misnamed.

Easy Believism

Lordship advocates claim we teach an “easy believism.” They use this term in a mocking, derogatory way. The truth is that so-called “easy believism” isn’t actually easy. Salvation may be simple, but it is not easy. Often, mental, willful, and emotional obstacles hinder faith. How easy is it for an unsaved Jew to believe in Jesus Christ?

Scripture makes it clear that not everyone who believes in Christ continues to follow Him as a disciple. It is not guaranteed that all believers will reach spiritual maturity. In John 6:66, we see disciples become offended by Jesus' teachings and leave Him. Lordship advocates say they were not

truly saved. But what does the Bible say? The Bible explicitly calls them “disciples.” They were saved!

In John 12, we see believers who were afraid of what the Pharisees would do to them if their faith in Christ were known, so they hid their faith.

John 12:42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Later in John, we see Joseph of Arimathea hiding his discipleship.

John 19:38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.

Have you consistently practiced discipleship since becoming a believer? The concept of lordship is that failed discipleship shows that the person claiming 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 you believe it or practice it. He is not Lord because of any act performed by believers.

Grace Can Be Abused by Believers

The Pauline epistles contain many warnings about believers who show less than the “fruit of the Spirit” in their lives. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, there is disturbing immorality going on; the believer is involved in an incestuous act with the “wife of his father.” Would you conclude that this person is not saved? Paul doesn’t say that in verse five. He suggests that if he does not repent, they may have to treat him as an unbeliever and exclude him from the Lord’s table. But in 2 Corinthians, we see that the man repented and was restored to fellowship.

In 1 Corinthians 11:29, there was disorder at the sacred moment of the Lord’s table. Paul doesn’t say they are unsaved but warns that they will be chastened. In Galatians 5:4, believers are caught in legalism, as well as in Colossians 2:20-21. Second Thessalonians shows believers in laziness, but Paul doesn’t say they are unsaved. It is not inevitable that believers will

be obedient. A believer can get outside his area of operations (AO)! Lordship advocates say that this failure is clear evidence that the person was not saved in the first place.

The Prodigal Son

In Luke 15:11-32, we find the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger of two sons asks his father for his share of the inheritance, leaves for a distant land, and squanders it on “riotous living.” When a famine hits the land, the son is forced to compete with pigs for leftover feed in the fields. Realizing his mistake, he returns to his father’s house to seek forgiveness and offer to become a servant. The father welcomes him back, dresses him in a fine robe, places a ring on his finger, and kills a fat calf for a celebration.

Some teach that the son is a *new* believer being welcomed into the family. The lordship advocates say that he was only among the “elect,” and his return home is the fulfillment of his election. But what is he called throughout the passage? A son! He refers to his father as “father.” The prodigal son is unquestionably a believer who has departed from God's plan for his life and returns. He never lost his title of “son.” He never lost his salvation. He remained secure in his father’s love despite his disobedience. His father never stopped loving him and demonstrated that love when he returned home.

Every one of us has presumed upon grace. As believers, we have all behaved inappropriately, whether knowingly or unknowingly, and in doing so, we have abused God's grace. Because of that, has someone looked at you and concluded that you are not really saved?

Other Acts of Failure in the Scriptures

In Hebrews 10:29, we see punishment inflicted on a believer for his rebellion against God.

Hebrews 10:29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

The English word “profaned” is *koinos*, which is better translated as “common” or “ordinary,” reflecting its true meaning. By his actions, this

person has shown contempt for the saving work of Christ, treating it as if it were “common” and “ordinary.”

The word translated here as “despite” is the Greek word *enubrizo*, which means to insult. He has insulted the Spirit of Grace through his actions, and he will face punishment. But notice the phrase “...the blood of the covenant, wherewith **he was sanctified**...” Only believers are sanctified! This clearly refers to a believer! However, Lordship advocates claim that a believer can’t do these things!

Hebrews 12:15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

You can’t fail to obtain the grace of God unless you are saved and have God's grace in your life to start with. This serves as a warning to believers to be cautious about failing in their spiritual walk with Christ, not losing their salvation.

2 Peter 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

Are we examining believers or unbelievers here? What about the phrase “...denying the Lord that bought them...?” These false teachers and false prophets were saved—they were “bought” from the slave market of sin. Lordship advocates might argue that they could not be saved because of their false teachings and actions. However, the scriptures clearly say otherwise.

Some people think that getting saved will make everything in their lives perfect. That isn’t true. When you get saved, your eternity is assured, but you still have to live your life. And God's grace to help you can be misused. Christ is Lord, whether people recognize him or not.

The moment you trusted Christ, you didn't understand all of God’s word, much less everything you were given as a believer. That takes time and

teaching. When I trusted Christ, all I knew was that I didn't want to go to hell!

Difficult Passages

Because it suits their theology, lordship advocates take their interpretations of “difficult” passages and impose them on simpler passages. This approach is wrong! We should always reason from what is known to understand what is unknown. Lordship salvation often reverses that process, treating the study passage as the “evidence,” which then leads to the conclusion that the other X number of contrary passages must be in error.

Points:

- God's Word does not contradict itself.
- One principle of scriptural interpretation is categorical comparison. The scripture under examination is compared with other scriptures in the same doctrinal category that have established interpretations. This is the C in ICE — Isogogics, Categories, Exegesis.
- If the scripture being studied appears to conflict with established doctrines, and the weight of evidence strongly opposes the interpretation under study, then that interpretation can be confidently considered incorrect.
- There is clear and substantial evidence in the scriptures against works as a system of salvation.
- There is strong and overwhelming evidence in the scriptures supporting 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.

Speaking of “Troublesome Passages”

James 2:14-26 “seems” to teach salvation by faith and works. Using the categorical system of “rightly defining the word of truth,” the weight of the evidence clearly argues against interpreting James 2:14-26 as supporting salvation by faith and works.

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.

What is James talking about when he speaks of faith and works?

Your eternal security is never dependent on your works or moral behavior. You do not earn it, nor do you deserve it. In Romans 5:1, we are justified by faith and have peace with God. The unbelieving world lacks this knowledge and standard. The professing Christian will be judged by unbelievers using secular standards, not God’s. Your actions (divine good) or lack thereof serve as your “testimony” to the unbelieving world. The cynical, doubting world will judge your actions as proof for or against your salvation. At no point does a believer lose his eternal security, but the unbelieving world may assume so 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 is dead to Christ. Whatever faith he has is not being used, so it is unproductive.

In verses 18-20, we see an unbeliever mocking a believer without Christian production.

Then in verse 21, we have Abraham and Rahab being offered as evidence. The verse says that by Abraham's 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 initially doubted when he took the slave girl, Hagar, and had a child by her in a human viewpoint attempt to fulfill the promise. At 99, he learned 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, Sarah. Abraham was later commanded to take Isaac up on the mountain and sacrifice him to God. This time, 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 be killed. Did Abraham's "works" prove his faith in God's promise? You bet! But Abraham's salvation was never in question.

Rahab was a prostitute and is mentioned in the Book of Joshua. Joshua sent two men to spy on the Canaanites in Jericho. They hid in Rahab's house. The king of Jericho sent soldiers to capture them, but Rahab hid them on her roof and tricked their pursuers into going another way. Rahab was a believer. She knew the land of Canaan had been promised to the Israelites. She trusted in God and risked her life to help the spies. Does that mean her "works" proved her faith? Was she recognized as a believer through her actions? Certainly. Was her salvation ever at risk? Never.

What James is saying is that Satan's world will judge the believer by his works. If he is fruitful, he will be perceived as a Christian and thus "worthy" of bearing the title Christian. If his works are non-existent, not visible, or lacking in some way, and if they see just one small sin, he will not be seen as a Christian but rather regarded as any unsaved person or a hypocrite. Such a Christian may not be an ambassador for Christ, but this does not suggest a potential loss of salvation or that he was not saved to begin with.

The weight of the evidence is clearly against the salvation-by-faith-and-works interpretation of James 2:14-26.

Another lesson from this passage is that a believer who is not functioning in his area of operations is dead to Christ. We learned from a previous study that in such a state of carnality, he is cut off from God until he confesses his sins (1 John 1:9). "Works" or "production" is required of the

believer. It is God's will for our lives — we were created for it — and being outside God's will for our lives is an act of rebellion, in other words, a sin!

It is expected that the believer will produce. He is responsible for spiritual growth and becoming an ambassador for Christ. Sadly, few of us do, and many of those who do falter. Outside his AO, merely existing in carnality, the believer cannot produce divine good.

In summary, we must conclude that the evidence strongly opposes any form of salvation **plus** works or any salvation **that** relies on works. Any form of “faith+” is false teaching. 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* insofar as your salvation, establishing a relationship with God, is necessary first.

True, the believer is called to live in obedience to Christ, but some simply do not, and there are many examples in Scripture of born-again believers who never received proper discipling from other believers or were misled by Satan.

The only requirement for receiving eternal salvation is faith (trust) in the Lord Jesus Christ. No act of obedience, whether before or after faith in the Lord, can be added to or considered part of faith as a condition for receiving eternal salvation.

One should not conclude from this study that this excuses sin in the life of the believer. It is intended to point out that spiritual maturity is not bestowed instantly at salvation. We all need to grow spiritually, especially new believers, and that takes time. Meanwhile, all of us are capable of slipping into carnality, and we do so more often than we would like to admit.