# Are we saved by faith or works? (Or both?)

Salvation & the Gospel · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/are-we-saved-by-faith-or-works-or-both/

We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—not by works. Scripture is explicit that our works do not contribute to our justification before God (Eph 2:8–9; Rom 3:28). At the same time, saving faith is never alone; it produces good works as its natural fruit (Eph 2:10; Jas 2:17).

This distinction is essential. The Bible consistently teaches that salvation is grounded entirely in what Christ has done, not in what we do. Paul writes, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28), and again, “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). The logic is straightforward: if salvation could be earned, it would no longer be a gift of grace (Rom 11:6).

At the same time, Scripture speaks just as clearly about the necessity of good works in the life of a believer. This is where some confusion arises. James writes, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Jas 2:17), and even says, “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24). At first glance, that can sound like a contradiction to Paul—but it is not.

Paul and James are addressing different problems. Paul is confronting legalism—the idea that we earn salvation by our obedience. James is confronting a dead, empty profession of faith that produces no change in a person’s life. Paul answers the question, *“How is a person made right with God?”* Answer: by faith apart from works. James answers the question, *“What does genuine faith look like?”* Answer: it produces works.

In that sense, works function as evidence, not cause. They are the visible fruit of an invisible reality. As Jesus said, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt 7:16). Or as Paul puts it, we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10). The order matters: salvation comes first; works follow.

Historically, this has been expressed in the Reformation principle of *sola fide* (“faith alone”), which emphasizes that justification is by faith alone. Other Christian traditions, such as Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, articulate the relationship between faith and works somewhat differently, often emphasizing a more participatory or transformational process. Even so, all mainstream Christian traditions affirm that salvation ultimately depends on God’s grace and the work of Christ, not human merit.

## Key Scriptures to Study

### Core teaching passages

- Ephesians 2:8–10 — Salvation is by grace through faith, not by works; good works follow as God’s design
- Romans 3:28 — A person is justified by faith apart from works of the law
- Galatians 2:16 — Justification comes through faith in Christ, not by works
- John 3:16–18 — Eternal life is given to those who believe in the Son

### Supporting theological framework

- Titus 3:4–7 — Salvation is grounded in God’s mercy, not in righteous deeds we have done
- Romans 4:4–5 — Faith is counted as righteousness apart from works
- Philippians 2:12–13 — God works in believers, producing obedience as the result of salvation

### Clarifying or balancing passages

- James 2:17–26 — Works are the evidence and fruit of genuine faith, not the basis of salvation
- Matthew 7:21–23 — Not all who claim faith are truly known by Christ; obedience reveals the heart

## Objections & Misconceptions

**Common Objection:** “Doesn’t James say we are justified by works?”
**Response:** Yes, but in a different sense than Paul. James is speaking of works as the evidence of genuine faith (Jas 2:18). He is not saying works earn salvation, but that true faith will always produce them.

**Common Objection:** “If we’re not saved by works, why bother doing good works?”
**Response:** Because good works are the natural result of salvation. A changed heart produces a changed life (Eph 2:10; Gal 5:6). Works are not the root of salvation, but they are its fruit.

**Common Objection:** “Can someone claim to have faith but live however they want?”
**Response:** No. Scripture rejects that idea. A faith that produces no transformation is not saving faith (Jas 2:17; 1 John 2:3–4). While believers still struggle with sin, their lives will reflect a growing obedience to Christ.

## Why This Matters

Getting this right protects the gospel itself. If we add works as a requirement for justification, we undermine grace and lose assurance (Gal 1:6–7). If we remove works entirely, we risk promoting a shallow, lifeless faith. Biblically, salvation rests entirely on Christ, and the life that follows reflects that reality. This brings both confidence before God and a clear call to live faithfully in response to His grace.

## Recommended Resources

- *What Is the Gospel?* - Greg Gilbert
- *Are We Saved by Faith Alone?* - R. C. Sproul
- *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* - N. T. Wright
- *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* - Thomas Schreiner