

Have you ever seen someone going about a task in completely the wrong way? It could be seeing someone trying to pull open a push door, a child telling another child that he HAS to play with him, a teenager asking a girl out with absolutely no confidence in his voice or body language, or a wife trying to get her husband to do something by dropping very subtle hints spread out over several weeks. People often think they know how to get what they want, but may stubbornly cling to the one solution they try, even though it doesn't work. People have always clung to the idea that they can make God happy with them if they keep God's rules. That is a solution that will never work, we can't save ourselves by obeying God's law. Yet this is so common and popular that Christians in the past and present have tried to save themselves. 499 years ago one man began to ask questions and he looked for answers in God's word. Martin Luther found that God has *always* told us that we are saved by grace through faith, we are saved through faith *alone*.

Now the reason why this is so hard for people to remember, may be because God himself gives us *two* options. The first option is the one we call works righteousness. God says that if we are perfect and holy, we are righteous, worthy of living with him in heaven. It doesn't take much to know what the instructions are for being perfect. In fact God gives everyone a nice list to follow. Step one: Don't have other gods, step two: don't misuse my name, step three always go to church, step four: always listen to your parents, step five: don't hate or kill, step six, don't lust or commit adultery, step seven don't steal, step eight: don't tell lies, step nine, don't covet anyone's house or wealth and step ten: don't covet anyone's spouse, property, cars, or employees. There you have it, the ten-step plan to perfection. Oh and by the way, if that was too long or hard to remember, God gives us the summarized, simplified, version: Love God with all your heart and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Got that? Oh! And just to be sure that isn't too hard, we have a backup system. It's called your conscience. Anytime you're not sure of what to do you have a little voice or a gut feeling that will actually direct you to do what you think is right.

Have you tried this option? Have you tried the ten-step plan to perfection? Did it work?! How did that part about following your conscience all the time go? Show of hands: how many of you know you are perfect and holy because you followed the ten-step plan for perfection, always loved God and your neighbor flawlessly and always listened to your conscience? Huh, it's odd that we would be given this way to righteousness if it has such a high failure rate. What's the big idea? Why would God give us this option if never works for anyone? Well it was always supposed to work. It was actually going to work for everyone. God set Adam and Eve on the path to be actually be able to keep his laws and commands flawlessly. Adam and Eve could have met God's standards for perfection and kept themselves righteous in God's eyes. Yet they failed when they consciously disobeyed God's command and caused the human race to fall into a deadly cycle of imperfection.

People recognize from God's law that he has standards for us to meet. Human beings also know that they have failed to meet them. Humans reason that God must have given us this way to righteousness because it's going to work out somehow, whether we can do it perfectly or not. You can still pass a course with a D, right? Instead of being perfect, people suppose that if we give our best, God will give us a wink and a nod and pat us on the head like a grandpa who spoils his grandchildren. Some believe that God looks at your record and gives you a long time-out in a make believe place called purgatory. Once your payed off that sin you had, he'll let you run off to play in heaven. Others tell themselves that has to put some people in hell, so he will put the really bad ones there as examples. You just have to make sure we aren't on the bottom of the list. Once you start playing the comparison game it's natural to conclude that some people actually lived a lot better lives than you or me ever could. These people had so much extra good works that they didn't need them all to go straight to heaven and left the extras at the door. Maybe God, or leaders in the church could hand these extra good works as a gift, or perhaps for a suitable donation. Sadly, many people in the past and present believe in these ideas, instead of what God actually says. We too fall into thinking many of these things as well in our attempts to minimize our sin. Yet God tells us to be perfect

because he is perfect, to be holy because he is holy. He gives us the law so we realize our sin and that we will be held eternally accountable for it.

Following the law didn't work for Adam and Eve, and it doesn't work for us either. We just aren't equipped to be flawless and perfect. Yet there is one person who was. Jesus was especially sent here to be a human being who could live and obey the law flawlessly every single day. God's requirements for perfection were met in the life of Jesus. He kept the ten commandments, loved God and his neighbor, and followed his conscience. He did this for you and me. Jesus did this because he is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Savior for all the world, for everyone who can't save themselves by works. Jesus gives us our second option, an option where trusting and believing in him is all that is needed for us to be saved.

This idea that we are saved through Jesus work isn't something new. This promise was recorded in the first books ever written. Adam and Eve were told that a Savior would come, who would restore their lost status. Abraham knew and believed that a Savior would come through his line, and God promised him righteousness through his faith. Moses gave the Israelites instructions on sacrifices, which were to foreshadow the spilling of blood that was necessary for atonement (at one ment) with God. King David was told the same, and was given more and more details about the coming Savior. Throughout the centuries, prophets recorded more and more about the coming Savior and how he would pay for the sins of the whole world and give everyone righteousness through believing in him.

God kept his promise of the Savior when he sent his Son Jesus to live in our place to keep the law, every commandment, every day. Jesus was the only perfect sacrifice, the only one whose death could pay off the debt of sin. We were slaves to sin and belonged to the devil and his dominion of hell. With Jesus blood, God bought us back. We belong to him for good. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is for you and me too. We've been raised from our spiritual death, and will be raised physically as well! Our forgiveness and salvation and resurrection are a free gift given through faith!

Faith, it is a simple thing, or so it seems at first. I tell you my name is Ben, you believe it, you believe me. You don't ask for proof, or references. You believe me because, I hope I can assume, you trust me. Yet when we are asked to trust in God for everything, for our eternal salvation it seems as if it is almost too big of a thing to let someone else handle; even though he gives you written proof and testimony of hundreds of witnesses in his Word.. We might seek for reassurances in our own obedience to the law. Realize though how that only ends in despair. You might have good days and say I must really be saved, look at how well I am doing. But when you have that bad day, that bad week, or year, you might question if you are really saved, did you do enough to prove it? There is clear distinction between the first option of saving yourself, where you do everything, and the second option where God does everything.

We all need this second option for salvation. We all fail to keep the commandments, love God and our neighbor, and listen to our consciences. We can't get the salvation that comes from ourselves. We NEED this second option, the free option, the option where our acts and participation level don't impact the outcome. If this second option were up to us and how good we are at it, we would be lost once again. Instead we trust and believe in God and his son Jesus and his gift of righteousness. *This* righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Works righteousness doesn't work for us. We can't possibly force ourselves into its all or nothing framework. Adding our works to other people's works, or to faith doesn't get anything done. The only way we are saved is through alone faith. Faith alone brings us a complete forgiveness, redemption, and the resurrection that Christ won for us. We are saved by faith alone.

Theme: We are saved by faith *alone*

Part 1 Trying to save yourself won't work

Part 2 We are saved by grace through faith

1. What's one method of saving ourselves that will never work?
 2. What are the instructions of how to be perfect?
 3. What is one way to summarize these instructions?
 4. Could anyone ever be perfect?
 5. List several ways people try to make up for not meeting God's standards for perfection
 6. What does Jesus give us?
 7. How well known was God's plan to save us by faith?
 8. Once we believe, what do we have to do to get the benefits of Jesus' work?
 9. Why is looking for assurances of your salvation in your works a dangerous thing?
 10. What do we get through faith?
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1. Agree or Disagree: Martin Luther faced stronger opposition to preaching "by faith alone" in his times than we do today.
 2. Why do people (including us) find it so hard to believe that their salvation is given to them freely?
 3. Did Adam, Abraham, and David believe the same thing that you and I do?
 4. What role does good works have in a life of faith?