

right doctrine that speaks to one's spiritual condition.

FAITH VERSUS WORKS

The necessity of obediently conforming one's life and actions to the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant is one of the most important controversies discussed in the pages of the New Testament. It is especially important in Paul's writings. (It is the primary issue being discussed in Galatians, one of the important issues in Romans, an important part of the discussion of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, and it is mentioned in passing in most of Paul's other letters.) When one becomes clear on the various issues that surround this controversy, he achieves greater clarity in his understanding of the gospel itself. In the notes that follow, I will attempt to articulate Paul's (and Jesus's) perspective on all of the various issues by approaching them from a few different angles. It may prove somewhat repetitious. But the issues are so complex, multifaceted, and tangled that I hope it will prove to be as clarifying as it is tedious.

Important Concepts For Understanding the Issues Surrounding "Faith" and "Works"

If we are to understand the issues that surround the question of whether "works of the Law" have any role in one's salvation, we must understand some important concepts and make some important distinctions. In this section of the notes I explain some of these concepts and make some of these distinctions.

WHAT IS MEANT BY "WORKS"

The terms "works" and "works of the Law" are not always employed univocally. That is, each does not always mean exactly the same thing each and every time it is used. The term "work" always means a "deed" or an "action." And a "work of the Law," therefore, is always an "action taken in an effort to obey the Mosaic Covenant." Beyond that, each term can mean something a little different in each different context.

134. In the New Testament, a "work of the Law" is an action taken or a deed that is done in an effort to do what the Mosaic Covenant requires.
135. There are at least two ways that the term "work" is used in the New Testament:
 - 135.1. The term "work" can be used as a shorthand for a "work of the Law." When it is used in this way, it will have all the flexibility of meaning and nuance that the fuller phrase "work of the Law" has. [See note below on "What Are Included in 'Works of the Law'?" for an explanation of some of that flexibility.]
 - 135.2. The term "work" can be used to indicate some kind of deed or action other than a "work of the Law." Notably, it can be used to indicate a "work of belief" (i.e., a "work of faith"). That latter is a deed or action that follows naturally from the fact that one believes and is committed to the truth of the gospel.
 - 135.2.1. Logically, it could also be used to indicate a "work of love," a "work of goodness," a "work of righteousness" (or, for that matter, a "work of unrighteousness"), a "work of service," or any other sort of deed or action that one could imagine. In each and

every context in which the term is employed, it is very important that one be clear about what class of actions or deeds is in view when the term “work” is used.

THE BASIS FOR MERCY VIS À VIS CONDITIONS FOR MERCY

136. Three important concepts that we need to understand clearly are the following: (i) the basis upon which one is granted *aionic* Life, (ii) a necessary condition for receiving *aionic* Life, and (iii) a sufficient condition for receiving *aionic* Life.

136.1. If X is the basis upon which I will be granted *aionic* Life, then X is a full and adequate explanation for *WHY* God will grant *aionic* Life to me.

136.1.1. According to Paul’s gospel, God’s sovereign choice to show me mercy is the ultimate basis for my receiving *aionic* Life. God’s choice to act toward me in mercy is the ultimate explanation for *WHY* I will receive the blessing of *aionic* Life. However, it can also be said that Jesus’ choice of me, accompanied by his crucifixion, his propitiation, his redemption, and his intercession on my behalf is also part of the basis upon which I will be granted *aionic* Life. All that Jesus has done or will do on behalf of those who belong to him contributes to a full and complete explanation for why I will be granted *aionic* Life.

136.1.1.1. In brief, the basis for my salvation is the sovereign choice of God to grant me mercy in connection with the work of Jesus on my behalf. Or, alternatively, it is the sovereign choice of God to respond positively to Jesus’ appeal for mercy on my behalf.

136.2. If X is a necessary condition for my receiving *aionic* Life, then if X is not the case (that is, if X is not a fulfilled condition), then I will not receive *aionic* Life from God. [In other words, if it is necessary for X to be true before I can receive *aionic* Life, the X is a necessary condition.]

136.2.1. According to Paul’s gospel, the only necessary condition for my receiving *aionic* Life is the presence in me of a “sanctified heart” (which typically, but not necessarily, manifests itself in my believing the truth with regard to Jesus being the Messiah). If there *does* exist a “sanctified heart” in me (or, if I *do* believe the truth about Jesus out of a sanctified heart), then I will, in fact, receive *aionic* Life; but if there *does not* exist a “sanctified heart” in me (or, if I *do not* believe the truth about Jesus out of a sanctified heart), then I will not, in fact, receive *aionic* Life. [The latter clause is what qualifies a “sanctified heart” as a necessary condition for *aionic* Life.]

136.2.2. NOTE: X can be a necessary condition for my receiving *aionic* Life without its being

the *basis* for my receiving *aionic* Life. However, X cannot be the *basis* for my receiving *aionic* Life without also being a *necessary condition* for my receiving *aionic* Life.

- 136.2.2.1. God's choice to act in mercy toward me is as much a necessary condition for my receiving *aionic* Life as is the presence in me of a sanctified heart. Both conditions must be met in order for me to receive Life, and they are independent of one another. It is logically possible for me to have a sanctified heart and for God to fail to choose to grant mercy to me. But while this is logically possible, it would be in violation of all that God has promised in and through his gospel. God has promised that he will grant Life to everyone who manifests a sanctified heart.

While the basis for my salvation (namely, God's sovereign choice of me in connection with all that Jesus has done or will do on my behalf) can be construed as a necessary condition of my salvation, yet it is different from other necessary conditions for my salvation in this respect: it is a condition that has already been met by God himself. God chose me before the foundation of the world. God sent his Son Jesus into the world to die for me and to intercede for me in his capacity as my high priest. While these are all necessary in order for me to be saved, they are not things that need to be true about me (about what I do or who I am), they are things that God has put in place outside of me. Note, therefore, that the basis of my salvation is something that God does. It is a necessary condition that God meets on our behalf. The other necessary condition of my salvation is something that I must meet. In order that I be saved, it is necessary that I be a certain sort of person—namely, one who is sanctified.

- 136.3. If X is a sufficient condition for my receiving *aionic* Life, then if X is the case (that is, if X is a fulfilled condition), then I will necessarily receive *aionic* Life from God; no other condition need also be met before I will get *aionic* Life.

- 136.3.1. According to Paul's gospel, given that God has seen to it to create the basis for my receiving *aionic* Life, then we can think of my having a "sanctified heart" as a sufficient condition for my receiving *aionic* Life. In other words, in order for me to receive *aionic* Life, it suffices that there be present in me a "sanctified heart" (which will, typically, but not necessarily, manifest itself in my believing the truth with regard to Jesus being the Messiah). If there exists a "sanctified heart" in me (or if I do believe the truth about Jesus out of a sanctified heart), then I will, in fact, receive *aionic* Life. Nothing else need be true of me besides that.

This sounds like I am contradicting what I just said above. But note that in this note I am assuming that all the necessary conditions for my receiving eternal Life that constitute the BASIS of my salvation have already been met by God himself. Hence, because God has already fulfilled every other condition necessary for salvation, only one yet remains for me to fulfill in order to get eternal Life. Namely, that I give evidence of being sanctified by God in my inner being. Since showing evidence of sanctification is the only necessary condition that yet remains, in order for me to get eternal Life, it suffices that I show evidence of sanctification. In other words, in the light of what God has already done to lay the basis for my salvation, having a "sanctified heart" is a sufficient condition for me being

saved. Strictly speaking, it is NOT a sufficient condition (as we saw in the note above). But, for all practice purposes it is, because all the other necessary conditions have been fulfilled by God.

136.3.1.1. Therefore, in the sense I have just described, having a sanctified heart is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for receiving Life.

136.3.1.2. If having a sanctified heart is a sufficient condition for receiving Life, then conformity to the religious requirements of the Law (Mosaic Covenant) such that I live like a Jew is not necessary in order to receive Life (assuming that one can have a sanctified heart without manifesting obedience to the religious requirements of the Law).

(A) Hence, a Gentile with a sanctified heart—who is living like a Gentile, and not like a Jew—can receive Life from God.

WHAT ARE INCLUDED IN “WORKS OF THE LAW”?

When the New Testament (Paul, especially) speaks of “works of the Law,” to what that phrase refers is dependent upon the particular context within which it occurs. Therefore, whether “works of the Law” stand in opposition to “belief” depends upon what is meant by “works of the Law” in a particular context and upon exactly what issue is being addressed in that context.

137. One can find three different ways in which the phrase “works of the Law” is used in the New Testament:

137.1. In some contexts, the phrase “works of the Law” is used to refer to any and every requirement that can be found in the Mosaic Covenant.

137.1.1. In this case, “works of the Law” include obedience to the moral requirements contained in the Law.

137.1.1.1. So, for example, obedience to instructions like “Do not murder”, “Do not steal”, “Do not bear false witness”, “Do not commit adultery”, etc.

137.1.2. But, it is not limited to moral requirements. It includes all the religious (both individual and communal) requirements and the requirements regarding social life as a people as well.

137.2. In other contexts, the phrase “works of the Law” is used to refer more narrowly to just those requirements found in the Mosaic Covenant (or the Torah generally) that constitute the distinctive religious way of life of Jews who keep the Mosaic Covenant.

137.2.1. So, for example: circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary regulations, and observance of Jewish festivals.

137.2.1.1. This aspect of the Mosaic Covenant that makes the Jewish way of life distinctive consists of requirements that are not inherently moral in nature, but are strict-

ly religious in nature.

- 137.3. In still other contexts, the phrase “works of the Law” seems to be used, even more narrowly, to refer to the offering up of animal sacrifices and/or the temple rituals that went along with those sacrifices—offerings and rituals that were required by the Mosaic Covenant. These offerings, of course, constituted a very important and central part of the Jew’s distinctive way of life under the Mosaic Covenant.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “KEEP” THE LAW

A common understanding of the role that God intended for his Law is that it leads us to come to an understanding that we are sinners who stand condemned. The typical explanation runs like this: God knew that Israel (and analogously every human being) was incapable of “keeping” the Law. Hence, God commanded Israel to “keep” the Law, not because he expected them to do so, but in order that they might come to see—from their own experience—that they were incapable of “keeping” the Law. While this common understanding contains a very important insight into what Paul does teach concerning the Law, it is an incomplete and somewhat distorted understanding of his teaching. Paul would never say that we are INCAPABLE of keeping God’s Law. Consistent with what should be clear from the Torah itself, Paul understands that God fully expected Israel to “keep” his Law. However, Paul knew that it was in the very process of “keeping” the Law that one gained a profound understanding of his own innate sinfulness. The following notes are intended to clarify this perspective.

138. A common misunderstanding of the Bible is to construe the notion of “keeping” the Law as synonymous with obeying the Law. That is not strictly correct.

- 138.1. To “keep” the Law (i.e., the Covenant that God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai in the time of Moses = the Mosaic Covenant) is to value it enough to want to preserve it, remember it, give heed to it, and, generally, to ensure that it is available to actively govern one’s life and behavior. The core idea is this: at heart, the one who “keeps” the Law is one who values and treasures it.

A keepsake is something that one values enough that, rather than dispose of it or throw it aside, he takes steps to protect it, preserve it, and sustain it. The one who “keeps” the Law is one who values God’s covenant enough that, rather than dispose of it or cast it aside, he takes steps to protect it, preserve it, and sustain it.

- 138.1.1. Included implicitly in the notion of “keeping” God’s Law is the notion of striving to live one’s life in conformity to its commands. If one treasures and values God’s covenant, as the notion of “keeping” it entails, then one will of necessity desire to live as it requires one to live. So, “keeping” the Law entails striving to obey the Law, but the meaning of the phrase “to keep the Law” is not, strictly speaking, identical in meaning to the phrase “to obey the Law.” The phrases are not synonymous. They mean different things.

- 138.1.2. A very important ramification of the above point is this: keeping the Law does not mean strict, total, and absolute obedience to each and every jot and tittle of the

Law. God's stated desire that Israel "keep" his Covenant is his desire that they value and treasure his Covenant and, therefore, act like they value and treasure it. But one could value and treasure God's covenant without being absolutely flawless in his obedience to each and everything that it required. God's stated desire is not that Israel be absolutely and completely flawless in meeting the requirements of the Law. His stated desire is that Israel be true and authentic in their desire to honor God and his covenant by striving to do what the Law requires.

- 138.1.2.1. In other words, it is entirely possible for a person to be said to have "kept" God's covenant who did not flawlessly meet each and every one of its requirements. For, ultimately, the issue is not one's performance. Ultimately, the issue is one's attitude toward God and the things of God (as those get expressed through choices and actions).
- 138.1.2.2. Built into the Law itself was a provision for moral failure. If one transgressed a commandment of the Law (e.g., one failed to love his neighbor [a moral commandment]), other instructions in the Law taught him what was required of him as a response to his moral failure. Namely, he was to offer up a particular offering in a particular sort of way. By offering up just what God required in response to his moral failure, the person was successfully "keeping" the Law, even though he had transgressed a commandment of the Law. In other words, he valued God and his covenant enough that when he transgressed God's Torah, he responded in just the sort of way that God had instructed him to respond. Hence, clearly one can be a moral failure at the same time that he is a keeper of the Law. What God had asked of Israel is that they "keep" his Law, not that they be morally perfect and perform moral goodness flawlessly.
- 138.2. From the above, we can see what Paul had in mind when he taught that "through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." He did not mean to suggest that it is through one's FAILURE to "keep" the Law that a person comes to understand his own sinfulness. Rather, it is through one's SUCCESS at "keeping" the Law that a person comes to understand his own sinfulness. Only when one earnestly strives to obey the Law (i.e., when one "keeps" the Law) can one discover how utterly void of moral goodness he is. His attempts to obey the Law confront him with all the many ways that he is not a morally good person, with how utterly powerless he is to actually be good. He may be able to meet the religious requirements of the Law. But with respect to the truly moral requirements, he is completely incapable of meeting them. And even if he offers up every offering that the

Law requires in response to his moral failings (thereby keeping the Law), such offerings do not make him a good person. Rather, those very offerings stand as clear evidence that he is NOT a good person. (If he were a good person, he would have no need to offer up such offerings.) Hence, it is through one's SUCCESS at keeping the Law that one confronts his FAILURE at being a good and worthy person.

•What I am saying here about what the Bible means by "keeping" the Law could also be said about what the biblical authors usually mean by "doing" or "practicing" the Law. Those phrases do not typically entail moral perfection and flawless performance of the Law's requirements any more than "keeping" the Law does.

Mistaken Beliefs among Paul's Contemporaries Regarding the Law

There were a number of different mistaken beliefs and/or mindsets that Paul's Jewish contemporaries—conditioned as they were to obey the Law—were inclined to have. All of these false beliefs and faulty mindsets contributed to his Jewish contemporaries being mistaken about the role of the Law in their salvation—that is, about the relationship between obedience to the Law and the blessing of aionic Life. Paul confronts and opposes all of these different beliefs and mindsets at one point or another in his letters in the New Testament. If we can identify and analyze these false beliefs and mindsets and understand why Paul rejected them as dangerous, we will better understand Paul's gospel and better understand what Paul believed to be the truth about God's purposes. All of these false beliefs or mindsets are anti-gospel. That is, they are inimical to the gospel and tend to lead to a rejection of it. That rejection took two different forms in Paul's day. Sometimes it took the form of out and out unbelief—a refusal to believe the gospel. But other times it involved ostensible belief in the gospel, but it was belief in a distorted and corrupted version of the gospel. Either way, it involved a rejection of the true gospel taught by Paul.

139. When Paul insists that a person is saved by *pistis* (belief/faith) and NOT by "works of the Law," he is attempting to counter one or more of seven different mistakes. The first three mistakes, while different, overlap and are interrelated. These first three mistakes are the mistaken beliefs that obedience to the Law and/or zealous support for Law-obedience is (i) a sufficient condition for receiving aionic Life, (ii) the basis (or, part of the basis) upon which one is granted aionic Life, or (iii) a necessary condition for receiving aionic Life. The fourth mistaken belief is the belief that because the Law is universal in its scope and relevance, it, therefore, must certainly be obeyed by anyone who seeks to receive aionic Life from God. The fifth mistaken belief is the two-fold belief that God can only grant aionic Life to a person who deserves it and that it is obedience to God's Law that renders a person deserving. The sixth mistaken belief is that God's ultimate provision and basis for extending mercy was the system of animal sacrifices included in the Law. And, finally, the seventh mistaken belief is that mankind, while imperfect and flawed, is not hopelessly damnable.

• All of these mistakes are mistakes that could be made either at the level of one's conscious, explicitly articulated beliefs or at the level of one's unconscious, tacit beliefs. What Paul opposes in his writings are not always, or necessarily, doctrines that are explicitly held and promoted by others. Often, Paul's opponents would ostensibly embrace doctrines that were identical to Paul's. But while they embraced identical doctrines in theory, in practice they held very different attitudes and a very different mindset. In other words,

their mindset and understanding, insofar as these were exhibited through their choices, actions, attitudes, etc., were fundamentally different from that of one who embraced Paul's understanding of the gospel. Their different mindset arose out of implicit assumptions that ran contrary to what Paul held to be true.

- The choices that human beings make and the lives they lead do not arise out of their conscious explicit beliefs; they arise out of an underlying implicit understanding of things. If one's implicit understanding of things is wrong, then his whole life will be wrong, regardless of how accurate his explicit, ostensible beliefs might be. Paul earnestly desired that those to whom he wrote might come to embrace, at the level of their real, working, implicit understanding of God and his promises and purposes, that which was accurate and true. It was not sufficient that they give an explicit nod to what is true. It was critical that they embrace what is true from the depth of who they were, with they result that they live their lives on the basis of it. It is out of that desire that Paul wrote his letters.

- The complaint is sometimes raised against Paul that the Pharisees (or Jews) did not actually believe what Paul accuses them of believing. Such an objection, of course, can only be based on their writings. But their writings—by their very nature—do not reflect the actual, real, working beliefs of the Pharisees (or Jews). They reflect their ostensible, explicit beliefs. Paul is never primarily interested in the explicit, ostensible beliefs of his opponents. His concern is what they ACTUALLY believe as evidenced by the way they live their lives. Accordingly, none of us today can legitimately object that the Pharisees (or Jews) did not actually believe what Paul accuses them of believing. We are in no position to know what their actual working beliefs were. But Paul WAS in such a position. He understood the Phariseism of his day, intimately.

140. One tendency of the Jews in biblical times was to consider their zealous support for and promotion of Law-obedience to be a *sufficient condition* for their receiving the blessing of Abraham, *aionic* Life. In other words, their tendency was to believe that, because they zealously supported and promoted Law-obedience they would, by virtue of that fact itself, be granted *aionic* Life. Paul (and Jesus) contended that such a belief was false.

140.1. Often this took the form of thinking that simply being a Jew was a sufficient condition for their being granted *aionic* Life. However, with this, there was an underlying assumption that every Jew was *ipso facto* a zealous supporter of and promoter of Law-obedience. They would likely concede that a Jew who rejected Law-obedience altogether was, by virtue of that fact, rejecting his very identity as a Jew. And, as a consequence, such an individual could not expect to be granted *aionic* Life.

140.1.1. Some Jews of the time believed that zealous support for and promotion of Law-obedience would be sufficient to their obtaining *aionic* Life in and of itself. Their assumption was that God would be pleased by an individual's fervent support for and advocacy for obedience to his Law—irrespective of whether that individual himself obeyed the Law. Hence, they believed that God would consider the person who *championed* Law-obedience to be righteous and would grant him *aionic* Life. By the same token, God would oppose and condemn anyone who made himself a detractor of Law-obedience.

140.1.1.1. To this mindset, Paul makes the following point: the fact that a person would

“champion” Law-obedience is not, in and of itself, particularly significant nor pleasing to God. What is significant to God is when a person is himself obedient to the Law, not when he supports or champions obedience to the Law. The person who champions obedience to the Law, while not actually obeying the Law, is an evil pretender. He is not an authentically sanctified individual.

140.1.1.2. This is the primary point that Paul is pressing in Romans 2:11–29.

140.1.2. Many Jews of the time likely recognized (as Paul himself counseled) that zealous support for and promotion of Law-obedience—without actual personal obedience to the Law— would most certainly NOT result in *aionic* Life. Therefore, the perspective of these Jews, cannot be characterized as holding this mistaken belief: that zealous *support* for Law-obedience met a sufficient condition for receiving *aionic* Life. Rather, the mistaken belief they held was this: that their personal *obedience* to the Law is what met a *sufficient condition* for receiving *aionic* Life. In other words, they believed that *aionic* Life would be granted to anyone who lived a life that successfully conformed to what the Law required.

140.2. This mistaken belief likely took two different forms:

140.2.1. Zealous support for Law-obedience (or, alternatively, personal obedience to the Law) was a sufficient condition for being granted *aionic* Life because such a person deserved the blessing of *aionic* Life.

140.2.2. Zealous support for Law-obedience (or, alternatively, personal obedience to the Law) was a sufficient condition for being granted *aionic* Life because such a person would receive mercy from God and, as a gift of mercy, God would grant the blessing of *aionic* Life.

140.2.2.1. According to Paul, this belief is wrong. When it takes the form of personal obedience to the Law being a sufficient condition for obtaining Life, it is only subtly wrong. But while it is only subtly wrong, it is tragically wrong nonetheless.

140.3. Paul insisted that this perspective—even in its least objectionable form (namely, that obedience to the Law was a sufficient condition for God granting mercy)—was false, because it completely misunderstood God's purposes. In particular, it misunderstood what God had purposed to do in and through his *messiah*, Jesus. In God's eternal purposes, the basis for his granting mercy and *aionic* Life was centered in all that Jesus the Messiah did on our behalf. Especially, it is centered in Jesus' interceding for us and securing mercy from God on our behalf. Therefore, Jesus' choice to serve as an individual's advocate is a

necessary condition that must be met in order for an individual to be saved into Life. Hence, Law-obedience is not a sufficient condition for being saved. One must also receive the approval of Jesus the Messiah in the form of his choosing to act as that person's advocate and intercessor.

140.3.1. And for whom will Jesus choose to serve as such an advocate? In God's eternal purposes, there is ultimately one and only one condition placed on being an individual for whom Jesus will serve as advocate (and thereby secure the divine mercy that results in *aionic* Life). Namely, the one who shows evidence of a *sanctified heart* is the one for whom Jesus will choose to intercede. According to Paul, the *typical* evidence that one is sanctified in his inner core (and, therefore, meets the one absolutely necessary condition for being saved from death into *aionic* Life through Jesus' intercession) is the fact that he embraces the truth that Jesus is God's *messiah*. Living a life of conformity to what the Mosaic Law requires—as valuable and important as that can be—would not result in Jesus' interceding for him, unless it was accompanied by a sanctified heart that embraced the truth about Jesus being the Messiah. Hence, Law-obedience *per se* is not sufficient to save a person. It is necessary to show evidence of a sanctified heart—and, typically, that means that it is necessary to believe the truth about Jesus.

140.3.2. In this sense, no human being can ever attain Life (and be saved from death) by his "works of the Law." That is to say, one's Law-obedience alone—no matter how blameless he is by the standard of the Law—is not sufficient to secure for him the mercy from God that will grant him Life.

141. A second tendency of the Jews in biblical times was to manifest an implicit mindset that obedience to the Law was the basis (or, was part of the basis) upon which one would be granted *aionic* Life. Paul (and Jesus) contended that such a belief was false.

*Note that what was said above with respect to the first false belief would apply to this false belief as well. Specifically, one might consider his zealous support for the Law—rather than his actual personal obedience to it—as the basis for his receiving *aionic* Life. Or, he might hold this belief as an unconscious, working belief rather than an explicit belief. (Indeed, he might explicitly deny that he believes it and yet, at the same time, show by his actions that it is his true working belief.) Also, this belief could take one of two forms: it could involve his believing that Law-obedience is the basis upon which he deserves *aionic* Life, or it could involve his believing that Law-obedience is the basis upon which he will be granted *aionic* Life as a gift of divine mercy.*

141.1. Paul insisted that the one and only way that any human being will ever receive *aionic* Life is as a result of, and on the basis of, God's sovereign choice to grant mercy—specifically, his sovereign choice to grant *aionic* Life as a merciful gift to whomever he wills. The reason why a particular individual will be granted Life, then, is none other than the fact