*Is Salvation by Faith Alone or by works?*

Salvation is one of the core issues that separates traditional Christianity from every other religious group – including the Jehovah’s Witnesses. It’s important to note that this is one doctrine we cannot afford to get wrong. While we can be wrong about a lot of things such as politics, speaking in tongues, the end times and other secondary issues, the gospel is something we cannot get wrong. Being wrong about salvation is an eternal consequence that leads to eternal separation from God. As a result of this, I wanted to make a biblical case for faith alone and provide a few questions for Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The easiest way to describe faith alone is that a person makes a conscious decision to abandon all efforts to be saved by their good works. Simply put, we are fully, 100%, depending on Christ and his work on the cross to cover the payment we owe for our sins. The scriptures teach that salvation is only possible because of his mercy, not our works. Titus 3:5 tells us we are saved not because of the righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. We also learn in Romans 4:5 that people are counted as righteous not because of their works, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.

An important point that needs to be made is that when the Bible refers to the righteous, it is referring to people who have eternal life. We find in Matthew 25:46 that the righteous will be given eternal life. With this in mind, it’s important to remember that whenever the Bible is talking about the righteous, it is referring to people who have been given eternal life. That being the case, Paul is saying in Romans 4:5 that people are righteous (given eternal life) by faith and not works. Additionally, Paul says in says in Romans 3:28 we are justified by faith apart from works of the law. Notice Paul did not say we need to also do good works in order to be righteous. This was by faith and faith alone.

In Acts 16:31 the jailor asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” They didn’t say go do good works. They didn’t say to join an organization. All they said was to believe (trust) in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. We see an example of this type of faith with Abraham in Romans 4:22 where it says, “Because of Abraham’s faith, God counted him as righteous” (granted eternal life). It doesn’t say faith and works, it only says faith.

Another example is the thief on the cross in Luke 23:42. When the thief was being crucified next to Christ he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Asking Jesus to remember him was a plea and a confession of faith. And Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” We learn from 2 Corinthians 12:3 that paradise is in heaven. Nothing here gives us a hint that works played a part in the thief’s salvation. He had no time to do good works. Instead, he only had time to put his faith in Christ. By doing this alone, he was with Christ in paradise that very day. The stories of Abraham and the thief on the cross fit in perfectly with the doctrine of faith alone, but not the Jehovah’s Witnesses view of works. If works are required for salvation, how do we make sense of the scriptures above? We do not pay the price ourselves with works, Christ paid the price in full with his blood. Romans 5:9 says we have been justified by his blood. If we put all these verses together, we see that Christ paid the price for us and that faith leads to righteousness.

The most important point I want to make is that it’s the righteousness of Christ that is in believers. Because of his death on the cross, his righteousness can be credited to those who put their faith in him. Since this is the case, we are seen as righteous instead of being seen as guilty sinners. It is the righteousness of Christ that the father sees in heaven, not our sinful natures. One Christian apologist puts it this way:

“If someone were to look through a piece of red glass, everything would appear red. If that person were to look through a blue glass, everything would appear blue. If he or she were to look through a piece of yellow glass, everything would appear yellow, and so on. Likewise, when we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, God looks at us *through the Lord Jesus Christ.* He sees us in the white holiness of his Son. Our sins are imputed to the account of Christ and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to our account. For this reason, the scriptures indicate that there is now no condemnation – literally, *no punishment*— for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1).[[1]](#endnote-1)

In its simplest form, it is the righteousness of Christ that saved the thief on the cross, father Abraham, and any other person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. Without the righteousness of Christ in us, there is no hope for salvation.

As an alternative, Jehovah’s Witnesses try to argue that it is faith in Christ AND works that saves us. In other words, they say by God’s grace, we are saved by faith and works and not faith in Christ alone. From this angle, Jehovah’s Witnesses are basically arguing that Christ did most of the work on the cross, but we need to do our part with works as well. The problem here is that anyone who says they need to do good works are relying on their own righteousness. They are relying on their own works to cover the debt that they owe. As sinners, nothing we do can even cover 1% of the debt we owe for our sins. Romans 3:10 says there are none that are righteous. Not even one. Moreover, our goodness has nothing to do with whether or not we are innocent or guilty on judgement day. Imagine someone in court saying, “Your Honor, I understand that I raped that woman, but I’ve done so many good things.” Any righteous judge would not let a person go for doing good works. A price still needs to be paid. And that price can only be paid by the blood of Christ as our substitute. It is faith alone in Christ as our substitute— belief that his blood was sufficient for 100% of the debt.

In light of all this, anyone who claims that we are saved by faith and works is not really trusting in Christ as their substitute. They are also trying to pay a price themselves; that’s the problem. If a person believes that they must do any works in order to attain salvation, they are lost and have not accepted Christ as their savior. This is why faith and works is an unbiblical doctrine. Faith and works are opposites and cannot co-exist. As soon as a person says that works plays any part in getting saved, it reverses any claim they made about having faith in the work of Christ on the cross. It is a contradiction to say you have faith in Christ and at the same time claim good works is necessary to be saved. They are opposites. We either have faith in Christ or we don’t.

*Salvation produces good works*

Works comes after a person gets saved. If we look back to the thief on the cross, we see he was still accepted into paradise without doing any good works. If he went on living after he put his faith in Christ, he would have been a new person with new desires. After we accept Christ, we are given a new heart with new desires. Ezekiel 36:26 describes this as God taking away our heart of stone and giving us a new heart with a new spirit.

Since this is the case, a born-again believer cannot be comfortable in sin. We all struggle with sin, but a born-again believer cannot be comfortable and unrepentant in sin. Simply stated, salvation produces good works. Works is the result of salvation, not the cause. If we have true faith in Christ as our substitute, we are given a new heart with new desires and no longer want to sin. We will want to glorify him with our works.

To better understand this, imagine a person who lived a life where drugs and alcohol was all they cared about. A person who loved this lifestyle and was comfortable in it. If they were to put true faith in Christ as their savior, they would no longer want to live such a lifestyle. That is, they could no longer be comfortable in it. That does not mean they will never sin and fall into temptation. If a born-again Christian falls into temptation, they will not be comfortable in that sin and will want to get up and away from that sin. Norman Geisler sums this up as follows: “if you put a pig and a lamb in a mud pile, the pig will want to stay there and the lamb will want to get out. Those who continually practice sin are like the pigs (unbelievers), not the lambs.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Needless to say, unbelievers can be comfortable in sin, while believers cannot be comfortable in sin. Of course, we will never be perfect on earth, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, the desire to grow and glorify God will always be there resulting in good works.

We see examples as such in the scriptures. Good works followed after Abraham was counted as righteous in Genesis 15:6. Abraham offering Isaac up on the alter years later was a sign of his faith. Abraham getting circumcised was also a sign of his faith. In Romans 4: 9-11, we see that circumcision, a work, was a sign of his faith. Paul asks a rhetorical question in verses 10 where he asks if Abraham was righteous before or after he was circumcised? He answers his own question and says it was before he was circumcised. Paul’s point in this passage is that works was the sign, the seal, of Abraham’s righteousness. Remember what he says before this is Romans 4:5: “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Paul is using Abraham as an example to show us that good works will follow after we put our faith in Christ.

The Watchtower tries to use James 2 to argue that works is a requirement for salvation. In verses 14-26 of chapter 2, James is explaining how faith and works must go together. Verse 20 says faith without good works is useless. He goes further and says in verse 24 that faith without good works is dead. To be perfectly clear, James is not condemning the faith alone that Paul teaches in Romans. This would also be a contradiction. Rather, he is condemning faith that is alone without works. The key verse that always gets ignored in this debate is verse 14 where James says, “What good is it if someone says they have faith but does not have works?” This view does not condemn Paul’s teaching that good works are signs of the righteous. This entire passage is condemning people who only give lip service by only saying they have faith. Think of a person who claims to be a Christian but has no desire to go to church, no desire to read the Bible, no desire to do good works, and lives a very sinful lifestyle. This is the faith alone James is condemning in verse 17 where James says faith by itself if it does not have good works is dead. He condemns this a second time in verse 24 where he says a person is not justified by faith alone. Once again, those who say they have faith, but do not have good works as the sign of their faith is a worthless faith.

All James is doing here is condemning the bogus lip service of faith that is all alone without works being produced. It is this faith alone James is condemning— faith alone with no works being produced. It’s a mistake to view this passage as a contradiction to Paul given that Paul explained works are signs of faith in Romans 4:9-11. Very simply put, James is condemning a faith that *does not* lead to works getting produced, while Paul taught a faith that *does* leads to works getting produced. The perfect way to sum up the book of James was done my Martin Luther when he noted, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”

You would think that salvation being a free gift would excite Jehovah’s Witnesses, but they normally get defensive at this point and insist that we need to do good works in order to make it. It confuses me as to why anyone would insist on playing any part in their own salvation? And in a works-based system such as the Watchtower, you never feel like you’ve done enough. All their system instills in you in guilt and hopelessness. This is not the message God gave us. Romans 5:1 says, “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” After a person is justified, after a person is counted as righteous, peace is what follows rather than guilt or hopelessness. There is no peace in any organization that has created a system requiring works to be saved. If this system was biblical, you would never know if you’ve done enough to be saved. Contrary to this, 1 John 5:13 says we can *know* we are saved. If works are required, how could we ever know if we’ve done enough? There would be no chance of salvation if God kept a record of our sins. This is confirmed for us in Psalms 130 verses 3-4 where King David cried out to God, “If you Oh Lord keep a record of sins, who could stand a chance?” Thankfully, good works outweighing our sins is not the way to be saved.

*How can a person be saved?*

Paul tells us in Romans 10:9-11 that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the scriptures say, anyone who believe in him will not be put to shame.”

Acts 16:31 says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Another word for believe is trust. That said, if we trust in Christ, if we trust 100% in his work on the cross to pay our debt, we will be saved.

*Must believe in the real Jesus*

It must be remembered, however, that we need to believe in the real Jesus. We cannot believe Jesus is only a god, Michael the archangel, or only a good person because that’s not who he is. A false Christ cannot save anyone. Only the real Jesus— the creator in Genesis, the one who died and rose on the third day, and the only God— Jesus Christ has the power to save us.Peter tells us there is salvation in no other name (Acts 4:12). There is no hope in any other Christ because they are not real.

In short, a person only needs to repent and trust in Christ as the Lord and Savior of their lives. By accepting Christ, you are accepting him as your substitute. There are no further payments to make. And when we do this, God declares us as righteous.

*Questions for Jehovah’s Witnesses*

1. If good works is necessary for salvation, why did the thief on the cross make it to paradise?

2. How do you handle all the scriptures mentioned above that are against works? (Romans 3:28, Romans 4:5, Titus 3:5, Romans 5:1, 1 John 5:13).

3. How is a works-based system peaceful? Paul taught that justification leads to peace (Romans 5:1)

1. Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Catholics* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2000), p. 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Geisler & Jimenez, *The Bible’s Answers to 100 of Life’s Biggest Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), p. 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)