

Faith can be either Law or Gospel

The common reference to faith today is to represent belief in the gospel. However, in the Bible faith is presented sometimes as law and sometimes as gospel. Certainly Jesus' comment, "Oh you of little faith" was law. In Hebrews, believers from the old testament who exhibited great faith were held up as the greatest examples of how we should live (law).

The act of believing something that we cannot see is not an easy thing to do. It is maybe the most difficult part of the law to perform. It is a form of the first commandment where we are told we are not to have other gods. Part of that requirement would be to trust God, even when the external evidence is not there.

Why, then, does the Bible usually connect faith to the gospel of forgiveness and grace? It is because the message of the cross, a freely given forgiveness and restoration found in Christ, is so foreign to us, that it really cannot be comprehended or understood without a reference to something that has occurred in our world. That reference is to faith, which believes something we cannot see. Our lives are sinful. God demands perfection. How will He be satisfied? Nothing in our lives will do. It is the gospel, which states that all is well with how God views us through the death of Christ. We can't see that requirement being met in our lives. It is invisible to us.

The modern Evangelicals are abusing the doctrine of faith. They are looking for a way that they can do something to merit salvation, even though the Bible explicitly says it is all of God and grace, and they dare not contradict the Bible, so they just arrive at a way of interpreting it that suits their practices. So, they use faith as a work that a person needs to do to receive salvation. Since faith is used as both law and gospel, it is easy to manipulate. They tend to focus heavily on the term "faith" as the basis for salvation, but their understanding of faith is neither a faith that requires nothing of us and that will rest entirely upon the work of Christ, nor a faith that is perfect, entirely believing the promises and word of God entirely that all sin will be resisted and no sin will occur. Instead, their view is a teaching that God will accept a half-way faith that is evidenced by a life that is better than it was before they became Christians. They teach that nobody is perfect, so God doesn't require perfection to be a Christian, a perfection that would flow out of a perfect faith.

The attempt to tie salvation to "being a Christian" is common. However, it is foreign to the Bible, because it implies that God would accept some lower standard than perfection, called "being a Christian" as acceptable for salvation.

Even though the promises of God were not as explicit in the old testament, Romans 4 seems to imply that Abraham also believed that God would provide for his justification. "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about - but not before God. What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as

an obligation. However to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” (verses 1-5) This was the beginning point which lead to his greater faith in other areas, such as being willing even to kill his son if God commanded it.

The idea that God would replace the requirement that the entire law be kept, which was based on all ten commandments, with just a requirement for a form of faith (based upon the law), which is really an extension of the first commandment, is wrong. But it is a mistake continually made by the modern evangelicals as a way to arrive at a practical way that we can contribute to our salvation.

Saving faith is a gift. We are no more able to create it than a baby can create faith. That is why we both receive it, although babies can receive it more easily. The comparison of saving faith to the lofty forms of faith that are difficult to achieve and considered exemplary behavior is mainly to indicate how foreign the idea of salvation as a gift is to us and how impossible it would be to achieve. Saving faith will be even more difficult to achieve than Abraham’s faith, and will not be achieved except by a miraculous action that is beyond our ability to contribute to.

As with many illustrations in the Bible, God has allowed an interpretation using either law or gospel. This applies to faith, also. To those who would make faith into a work that they do and that they can trust in for salvation, God shows in His word some great displays of faith as a use of the law. Does your faith compare favorably with those great displays? If not, then you should be driven back to the gospel again, realizing that there will be no assurance of salvation if your faith must be compared to those displays of great faith.

The faith that trusts the cross of Christ for salvation is a gift of the Spirit of God, and the realization that the gospel is true is a revelation of the Father. Often the purpose of the word faith is to represent simplicity to the believer. The believer needs accomplish nothing difficult. His salvation was an incredibly difficult accomplishment, but it was done for him.

It is entirely possible to understand how a person would turn from a life of destructive sin, hurting his family and those around him, to a life demonstrated by many today where he will avoid that painful destruction. It really is just a smart thing to do. But, it is inconceivable how a person who, by his sinful nature that is at the core of his being and is determined to work out his own salvation would abandon that goal, admit his wretchedness and trust the death of Christ alone as his basis for everything in his life. Saving faith is beyond our reach. It must come as a result of a miracle.

The realization of how faith comes to a believer as a gift is an important tool to keep a believer humble and receptive to the gospel, but even that should not be his central focus. The central focus of his assurance should be the message of the cross.

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