

## Good Works vs. God's Word

### James 2:23

Andy Stanley begins his little book *Since Nobody's Perfect...How Good is Good Enough* with a little story. What I am about to tell you could have taken place in any number of Sunday school classrooms around our country at any time, perhaps even ours. On this particular Sunday, the lesson assignment was to explain to a class of six-year-olds what someone had to do in order to go to heaven. In an attempt to understand what the little students already believed about the subject, the teacher asked a few questions. Keep in mind, they are 6 years old. If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven? No! the children answered. If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven? Again, the astute little tikes said No. Well then, he said, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my wife, would that get me into heaven? Once more they all shouted No. Well then, how can I get into heaven? A boy in the back row stood up and shouted "You have to be dead."

Almost since the dawn of time, there have been varying opinions about the topic of heaven, where it is, and how one attains entrance. We'll set aside the notion of those who believe that no such place exists choosing to believe that there is nothing on the other side of the grave to look forward to as a better place than this pitiful existence. Whatever you make of life in the here and now is all you get. They espouse to no religion and hold out no hope for an afterlife because they simply believe no such fairy tale place is real for the truly thinking person.

We'll also set aside the religious folk who conclude that faith of some kind is important, but such faith doesn't give any credence to an afterlife in some glorious other worldly place called heaven. They are kin to the religious group known in the New

Testament as the Sadducees who didn't believe in a literal heaven. That's why they were sad you see. They believe that heaven is in your heart or what you make it to be here on earth, just a state of mind that brings peace or tranquility of heart, living in harmony with yourself, others, and nature. They hold to strict religious beliefs, but those beliefs end with any notion of eternal life after this one ends.

We'll put these two groups aside and consider those who believe heaven exists and discuss this morning from **James 2:23** how someone is able to enter the place Jesus called paradise as He explained it to the dying thief next to Him. We believe in the reality of heaven and even hear a story or two of some who claimed to have gone there and returned, but none of them has answered the all-important question – how does a person get to heaven?

Man's idea of what it takes to get there is altogether different from God's provision. For millennia man has this perception that he must do something in his effort to appease God or for that matter any god (little g) to merit eternal life. It isn't just pagan religions who hold to the belief that they must act in such a way to appease the god(s) they serve. Even within some branches of Christianity there are those who believe that grace is insufficient for eternal life and that some effort on our part is necessary to shore up salvation and earn the golden ticket for entrance past the pearly gates. **How do I know I'm doing the right things or the right number of things?**

We spent a bit of time last week discussing the reason why grace plus nothing is the only acceptable means of gaining everlasting life. If I could sum it up in one sentence it would be this: If grace required works of some kind or amount on our part, then it would not be grace. If it is not grace, then, as Paul says, we would have something to boast about. And if works is all it takes, then Jesus died needlessly. But Scripture tells us that works are woefully inadequate.

**In my High school Senior year of Cross Country I missed the opportunity to run in the State meet by one runner. I finished 19<sup>th</sup> and the runner who finished just three feet ahead of me in 18<sup>th</sup> position**

was granted the privilege of running in the finals.

Now let's suppose for the sake of illustration that I decided I wanted to run in the State meet anyway. I showed up on race day, changed into my running outfit, donned my running shoes and headed to the starting line. When the official lining up all the runners looked at me and didn't see that I had a number on my jersey he would have me escorted from the starting line. But let's say for argument's sake that I was able to sneak into the group of runners and was able to finish the race, my time wouldn't have counted because my name wasn't on the roster of qualified runners. My efforts would have been inadequate. Jesus told the story of a wedding feast in which someone entered without the proper wedding attire and was immediately tossed out of the festivities. My efforts are inadequate.

As we consider our verse, that's exactly what we see about a goodness that is insufficient.

## I. A GOODNESS THAT IS INSUFFICIENT

In that verse we discover that it was Abraham's faith that was credited to him for righteousness. If that's the case, it stands to reason that there was a time that he had no faith and in that lack of faith as the logic goes, he also had no righteousness. It's very clear from Scripture that man's nature is steeped in sin. We could say that man's problem is undeniable.

### A. Man's Problem Is Undeniable

**Isaiah 64:6-7**  
**Romans 3:10-12**  
**Romans 3:23**

A few weeks ago we discussed three types of sin. Let me just mention them. They are inherited sin, imputed sin and individual sin.

**Romans 5:12-13**

All of us are guilty of sin because we received our sin nature from Adam. David said he was born with a sin nature. That's inherited sin. (**Psalm 51:5**)

All of us are guilty of sin because we have a law that no one can keep. Paul says in **Romans 3:20** that **"no one will be declared righteous in His (God) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."**

The law doesn't save, it only shows that I am a sinner in need of a Savior. All of us are guilty of sin because we have committed individual sins. I'm not a sinner because I sin, I sin because I am a sinner and every day I commit some sin that falls short of God's holy standard.

Each of us has an undeniable problem and it's the universality of sin and in man's perception of this problem he seeks a remedy to satisfy his own guilty conscience to find peace within himself for his sin. He seeks some remedy to rid himself of the sin problem and he does so through his own efforts. But what we find is that man's plan is useless.

## B. Man's Plan Is Useless

In the hymn we sometimes sing, man asks himself "what can wash away my sin" and in his mind man has some notion about what can do that. Let me just mention three methods by which man attempts to remedy the problem of sin on his own, each of which is insufficient.

We are familiar with the first one – good behavior.

### 1. Good behavior is useless

Perhaps we have brought this notion of being good on ourselves. We reward little Suzie for being good while visiting Aunt Millie's while we withhold reward or even punish little Johnny because he was acting up or acting out. We even sing about it at a certain time of the year by instilling good behavior.

You better watch out,  
 You better not cry,  
 You better not pout,  
 I'm telling you why.  
 Santa Claus is coming to town.  
 He's making a list,  
 And checking it twice;  
 Gonna find out who's naughty and nice.  
 Santa Claus is coming to town.

He sees you when you're sleeping.

He knows when you're awake.

He knows if you've been bad or good.

So be good for goodness sake!

We have this built-in barometer that measures out and weighs in the balance good vs. bad hoping that the good tips the scale in our favor so that we can be rewarded on a divine scale.

That was the crux of the question posed to Jesus by a man asking Him what he needed to do to earn eternal life. Jesus told the man he knew the commandments and then rattled off a few of them. The man declared that he had kept them since he was a boy. Jesus didn't commend the man for his good behavior, but instead showed him that his obedience was insufficient. He still lacked keeping the whole law. **(Luke 18:18-23)**

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that **“unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** **(Matthew 5:20)**

In other words, Jesus was saying that the kind of righteousness they were seeking by keeping the law was insufficient for anyone to receive eternal life. Jesus says that you can't get eternal life by merely an external keeping of the law. There must be a true inner righteousness based on faith in God's Word. You get a clear picture of that when you read the rest of **Matthew 5**.

One of the first questions you are taught in the course Evangelism Explosion is this: “if you stood before God and He was to ask you ‘why should I let you into my heaven’, what would you say?” Many will answer “I've always tried to be good”; or “I never...”; or “I do my best”.

Many people, including most adherents to other religions will answer the question in that way.

Fall into conversation with someone about a mutual friend and invariably someone will mention how good that person is or was.

Attend enough funerals and you will hear the minister or a eulogy about the person's goodness. Surely God would let them in based on being good.

A man with a bad reputation in a local town died and his brother told the minister doing the service that if he mentioned how good his brother was, he would make a sizeable contribution to his church. The minister prepared his remarks and during his message talked about what a scoundrel he was mentioning some of the things that gave him a bad reputation and concluded by saying that next to his brother he was a saint.

No matter how bad a person is, we want to find something that is good in them, because many measure their entrance into heaven on being good. But we have already made it clear that being good isn't good enough. **Who makes the measuring rod of what constitutes what is good? Just how good does a person have to be?**

If you think of the worst person imaginable and put them over here and then think of the most moral person you can imagine and put them over here, where would you put yourself on that scale? Maybe you have an Adolf Hitler on this end and Billy Graham is way over here on this end. I'm certainly not as bad as Adolf Hitler but neither am I quite as good as Billy Graham, but I'm pretty good most of the time, so I'll put myself here. We tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, don't we, so we give ourselves a better grade than we perhaps deserve because we're the ones estimating the value of our good behavior. What if someone else was grading our goodness? Would they agree with our exceptional rating or would they grade us differently, probably a little less favorably than we do when looking through our rose-colored glasses.

Let's say I need 90 events marked or graded as good behavior and I came up one short. I only have 89. I would have missed the mark by one event and would forever be complaining that the grader should have graded on a curve. But there's Billy Graham who messed the whole grading scale because he got a 99.

Keep this in mind as well. The standard of goodness keeps shifting. Who determines what is good? In this case it is the individual who sets the bar of good behavior, but the problem is our standard will always fall short or always shift, because we adjust the bar to meet our standard. **It's like shooting an arrow into a blank piece of paper and then drawing a circle around it with the arrow in the middle and saying "look, I got a bulls eye."** Good behavior is useless to earn righteousness. But so is good works.

## 2. Good works are useless

Let me ask you a hypothetical question. Mind you, it's never happened to me and I don't expect it ever will, but I can dream about and yes, I know how I'd answer if given the choice. Let's say, hypothetically, that someone came to you and said they had a million dollars to give you and then they said you could either work for it or receive it as a gift for free, which would you choose?

So when it comes to eternal life, why do people want to try and work for something that is free, especially when nowhere in Scripture do we ever read how many or what kinds of things constitute good works? If salvation was by works, the Bible gives us no guidance as to what works are required and how many. As David participates in the school Honor Society the requirements are clear. He must maintain a certain GPA or higher, be involved in a certain number of hours of community and school related activities and have godly behavior. They know what's expected. The Bible gives only one criteria for salvation and it isn't good works.

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that we can't earn salvation or eternal life through any works of our own doing.

**Titus 3:5**

**Ephesians 2:8-9**

Perhaps one of the reasons man feels the need to perform some measure of good works is because he wants to be in control of his own destiny. He wants to chart the course of this life and for the next life. Man has an inherent sense of what is right and wrong that is coupled with the notion that if we chart our own path then our good works must

outweigh our bad. That's why most every world religion has built into it doing something to earn whatever eternal life that religion holds to.

Another reason why we think earning our way to eternal life is the best way is that we don't fully grasp the magnitude of our sin. The Bible tells us that we only have to commit one sin for us to be condemned. So we think that if one sin condemns us then maybe two good deeds will overturn the guilty verdict. Think back for a moment to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said that unless our righteousness surpassed that of the Pharisees, we wouldn't receive eternal life. The reality is that God's standard, requires absolute perfection. We learned from **James 2:10** that if we stumble in one area of the law, we are guilty of breaking the whole law. No one could ever be saved if keeping the law 100% of the time was required.

One author wrote that **"Good works do not contribute to salvation, but they will always be characteristic of one who has been born again. Good works are not the cause of salvation; they are the evidence of it."**

No matter how much effort we put into it, our good works will always be insufficient. They are useless when it comes to our righteousness and eternal life.

Let me mention one more insufficient means of obtaining righteousness. We can combine good behavior and good works and believe in our heart that we are entitled to it.

## 3. Entitlement is useless

There is a lot in the news these days about entitlement or privilege. It's the belief that I deserve something, or that I should get something just because. Being in the 60+ age group now, I am able to receive certain privileges at restaurants. Even though I don't drink coffee, I'm entitled to a discount at McDonald's. Other places give me a discounted rate on a meal or some service. As a pastor I am entitled to receive a pastor's discount at the Christian bookstore.

People have that notion about righteousness. I

should be entitled because I go to church each week, I tithe regularly, I teach a class, I serve at the soup kitchen. Notice the operative pronoun “I”. It’s all about me when in reality righteousness and eternal life has nothing to do with me.

Man has an undeniable problem – it’s called sin. It’s a problem we can’t do anything about on our own. But that doesn’t keep man from trying, from developing a plan in an attempt to do something about the problem. But even that plan is useless. Any plan we conceive of to rid ourselves of this problem is insufficient because quite frankly, man’s perfection is unlikely.

### C. Man’s Perfection Is Unlikely

It should be obvious that our perfection is unlikely. You only have to visit a daycare for an hour or so to understand that angelic little Sally or good natured little Johnny also come with a bit of a nasty side. We all do, because no one is perfect. We are sinners to begin with and none of us can ever keep 100% of the law 100% of the time. In one way or another we will all miss the mark. Our goodness is insufficient. While our goodness is insufficient, we have a remedy in a grace that is ideal.

## II. A GRACE THAT IS IDEAL – v. 23

That Abraham was considered righteous means that prior to his being declared so by God, God had also declared Abraham to be unrighteous. Like everyone else, he was a sinner in need of a Savior. So God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who was perfect, who lived a perfect life in His humanity so that He could be the perfect sacrifice.

I hope you have come to believe that good people don’t go to heaven. They can’t. No person is inherently good enough on his own. He needs someone else’s goodness. So while good people can’t go to heaven, the more shocking thing is that bad people can. Bad people can go to heaven because they realize they are bad and in need of something they can never attain or earn. **So how is it possible for a person who is bad, a sinner, to get something that is good, eternal life?**

It’s a principle that is described here in **James 2:23**. It’s called imputation. Your translation may say reckoned or credited or declared. Imputation is a legal or financial term and means to credit to someone else’s account.

Paul taught it in **II Corinthians 5:21** “**God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.**”

**I Peter 2:24** says that Christ took our sins on Himself when He hung on the cross.

On the one hand, our sins were credited to Christ. **I Peter 3:18** “**Christ died for sins once for, the righteous for the unrighteous.**”

On the other hand, His righteousness was reckoned to us so that as Paul wrote “**that in Him (Christ) we might become the righteousness of God.**”

**R. C. Sproul writes that “the doctrine of imputation – the crediting of our sin to Him and of His obedience to us – is essential to the gospel.”** There are two things for which Christ was obedient. He was obedient to keep all the law so that He could be the perfect sacrifice and He was obedient to the Father in going to the cross to take on our sin and bear the wrath of God. He met the Father’s standard of perfection for us so we never have to fear God’s wrath for sin. But that only happens if we are in Christ through faith.

**Matthew 5:48** says that we must be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. But we can’t be perfect, so Christ lived a perfect life and through our faith in Christ who took our sin on Himself, God then imputes or credits to our account the righteousness of Christ. Our sin was credited to His account when He took it on Himself when He died on the cross. His righteousness was credited to our account when by faith we receive Him as our Savior. God put our sin on Him and He put His righteousness on us.

**Romans 5:6-8**

**Romans 3:20-24**

Double imputation is Christ taking our filthy rags of

sin and giving to us His robe of righteousness. James tells us how Abraham was made righteous, how anyone is made righteous. To be declared righteous, and by that I mean being made right with God, he believed, he had faith. We are and can only be made righteous in the same way – by faith. Old Testament believers looked forward to the sacrifice of the Messiah.

### Isaiah 53:1-12

Old Testament believers looked forward to what would take place. We look back at what did take place on the cross. There is no difference in how a person is declared righteous. It has been and always will be by faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Warren Wiersbe writes "Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross. It is not a process, but an act. It is not something the sinner does; it is something God does for the sinner when He trusts Christ. It is a once-for-all event. It never changes."

Unlike man's efforts to obtain righteousness by his own good behavior or good works that are always changing and always insufficient, there is only one way God accepts in order to declare a person righteous and that is faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our sin. He took our sin, by faith we receive His righteousness and are declared not guilty by God.

Abraham tells us how we can be declared righteous. It's by faith. John MacArthur helps us make some sense of it when he writes "His faith was acceptable to God only because God graciously reckoned, or counted it as righteousness. It was not the greatness of Abraham's faith (remember he also faltered and failed with imperfect faith) that saved him but the greatness of the gracious Lord in whom he placed his faith. Faith is never the basis or the reason for justification, but only the channel through which God works His redeeming grace. Faith is simply a convicted heart reaching out to receive God's free and unmerited gift of salvation...Although faith is required for salvation, it has no power in itself to save. It is the power of God's redemptive grace

alone, working through the atoning work of His Son on the cross, that has power to save."

We are not given what we deserve – that's mercy. We are given what we don't deserve – that's grace. We deserve God's condemnation and eternal wrath, but instead, faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross means we receive His righteousness instead.

Andy Stanley closes his book with a story that I hope will put **James 2:23** into perspective and help us see what God has done for us.

**Page 87-91 – *Since Nobody's Perfect...How God is Good Enough?* Andy Stanley**

If you were to read **James 2:23** and make it personal, could you insert your name in place of Abraham's? If you have believed by faith in the finished work of Christ, righteousness is credited to you and you too can be called God's friend.