

# Faith over Works

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October 5, 2012

Article from [www.messianicgoodnews.org](http://www.messianicgoodnews.org)

(Portable Document Format produced by [truthaccordingtoscripture.com](http://truthaccordingtoscripture.com))

The identity of the Messiah is usually considered to be the pivotal issue that divides Judaism and Christianity. However, authors Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin suggest that whether or not Jesus was the Messiah is not the most important question: “The major difference between Judaism and Christianity lies in the importance each religion attaches to faith and actions. In Judaism God considers people’s actions to be more important than their faith; acting in accordance with biblical and rabbinic law is the Jew’s central obligation. As Christianity developed, however, it did away with most of these laws, and faith became its central demand” (The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism published by Simon and Schuster).

Is this an accurate assessment of the position of Christianity and Judaism?

## THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

Although Rabbinical Judaism suggests that there is a dichotomy between law and faith, it should be noted that faith in God’s promise of redemption preceded the giving of the Law. Long before the Law was given at Mount Sinai, the LORD promised to bless all nations through the Messiah, i.e. the Seed, (or descendant), of Abraham. Abraham was the man of faith in that he firmly believed God’s promises in spite of his human shortcomings and weakness.

*...he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised* (Romans 4:20-21).

*The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise* (Galatians 3:17-18).

*It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath.”* (Romans 4:13-15).

The law proffered life and blessing to those who obeyed, but curses for disobedience. Paul described the Law of Moses as a covenant which brought death instead of life because of sin. To believe in God’s promises, in spite of our sin, is to believe in his promise to raise us from death to eternal life. When Abraham demonstrated his faith in God by being prepared to offer Isaac in

sacrifice, it was because he believed in the resurrection. *Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death* (Heb. 11:19).

Even contained within the very Law that brought death to sinners was the promise of the Redeemer. Although faith in the coming Redeemer was shrouded in mystery before the coming of the Messiah, the LORD had said through Moses and the Prophets that the Word of God would be personified in the Messiah whom they must obey (Dt. 18:18). Failure to listen and heed the word of God spoken through the Messiah is in itself disobedience to the Law. The Law itself provides a contrast between the promise of life and blessing which many may have thought was potentially attainable by observing the Law, and the assurance of life and blessing received by faith in God's promises in the redemption that was yet to be fully revealed through the coming of the Messiah. This is the faith which has now been made known through the resurrection of Jesus.

However, until the coming of the Messiah, the old covenant provided a temporary means of grace by which the people's sins could be atoned for through the sacrifices stipulated in the law. Those who acknowledged their sinfulness would have realized, even to their shame, that they were helpless and unable to attain life through obedience to the law. Faithfulness would have included offering the appropriate sacrifices, but also anticipating the coming of the Redeemer to whom they would be called to obey as Lord and King. The proud and the self-righteous believed that they could attain righteousness by observing the Law rather than trusting in God's promise of redemption, but those who were humble and who believed in Moses and the Prophets would have also believed in God's promise of a Messiah-King who would atone for their sins and become their only saviour and redeemer.

Jesus said, "*If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?*" (John 5:46-47).

Thus, the law provided a means of grace until the coming of the Messiah. The problem arose *after* the leaders and teachers of the Law rejected the Messiah of whom the Law and the Prophets had testified. The people only became fully accountable before God when they heard the good news that the Messiah had come and that he is Jesus whom they crucified and whom God raised from the dead and glorified as King of kings.

Jesus said, "*If I had not come and spoken to them (the Jews), they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfil what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason'*" (John 15:22-25).

The Jews, as with all of mankind, are accountable before the Lord when they hear the gospel of Jesus Christ: "*If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account*" (Deuteronomy 18:19).

There should be no dichotomy between the Law and faith in the Messiah since Jesus is both the goal and the end of the Law. The Law pointed to him as the ultimate phase of man's redemption from sin and as the final arbiter of judgement. God left former sins unpunished

before the coming of Jesus, but now he calls all people to repentance and faith in Christ through the message of the gospel. All men stand condemned as sinners by the Law but they become fully accountable when they reject the Word of God spoken through the Messiah, spurn the Spirit of grace and treat his atoning blood with contempt (see Hebrews 10:29).

Jesus said, *“Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned”* (John 16:5-11).

Those who reject the Messiah while professing to uphold the Law will only succeed in bringing themselves and their followers under the condemnation of the Law. Jesus said, *“But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set”* (John 5:45).

By rejecting the Messiah, they have stumbled over the stumbling stone (Isaiah 8:14) – and have effectively rejected the Word of the LORD which was the very goal of the Law. As was prophesied, the builders have rejected the Cornerstone (Psalm 118:22). There can never be genuine faithfulness while the living Word of God is rejected and that is the word of Christ: *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17). Those who think they are capable of earning God’s approval and blessing through strict observance of the law fail to realize that it is that very law which commands all people to listen to the Word of God spoken in and through the Messiah.

Paul wrote: *What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone”* (Rom. 9:30-32).

*Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness* (Romans 10:3).

The mystery of Christ was very near to Israel and was contained in the law – but the mystery is only fully revealed when the veil is removed by believing the gospel (see 2 Cor. 3:13-18): *“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,”* [Deuteronomy 30:11-14] – *that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming* [through preaching the gospel of Christ] (Romans 10:8).

## **THE RIGHTEOUS SHALL LIVE BY HIS FAITH**

The Soncino commentary on Habakkuk 2:4, *“...the righteous shall live by his faith”*, notes: *“The Talmud records the famous remark of R. Simlai (Makkot 23b), ‘Moses gave Israel 613 commandments. David reduced them to 10, Isaiah to 2, but Habakkuk to one: the righteous shall live by his faith.’”*

Paul wrote: *Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: “The man who does these things will live by them” [Lev. 18:5] (conversely the man who fails to obey the law will die on account of their sin). But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)”.* But what does it say? *“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” [Deuteronomy 30:11-14] – that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame” [Isaiah 28:16] For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [Joel 2:32] (Romans 10:5-13).*

In spite of being in covenant relationship with God and having the Law Israel was *unfaithful*. They could only ever hope to be reconciled to God through the coming of the Messiah-Redeemer and the promise of a new covenant. The law only succeeds in exposing the extent of our sinfulness and our need of a redeemer. As the apostle Paul taught: *...in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it (the law) produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful (Romans 7:13).*

Paul wrote: *...all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous (Romans 2:12-13).* He further noted: *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law (Galatians 3:11).*

The *good news* is that the Messiah has indeed come to set us free from bondage to sin. Quite apart from the Law, those who repent and trust in him receive the promised Holy Spirit who moves us to obey his new covenant law (Ezekiel 36:27) – i.e. to love one another as Jesus loved us – and are made righteous by faith. Being a Christian is to be anointed with the Holy Spirit – and if they do not have the Spirit they do not belong to Christ. It also means that if they are led by the Spirit, they are no longer under the old covenant Law. Jesus said: *I tell you 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 5:17-20).* The righteousness of those who live by faith in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit will indeed surpass that of even the most zealous Jew who tries to attain a legalistic righteousness through observing the law. Without the life giving Spirit not even the most pious person will attain life. Paul wrote, *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6).*

That – the righteous shall *live* by his faith – is not simply a passive belief in an historical event or in the truth of a particular doctrine which has no impact on one’s daily life and actions. A vibrant living faith trusts in the Messiah who justifies us in the sight of God and establishes us in a right relationship with God and our fellowmen through His Spirit. James was emphatic that there can be no genuine, living faith that is not evident in actions in line with such faith.

The Law continues to show people that they are sinners in need of salvation and new life through faith in the Messiah. Jesus came to condemn sin in sinful man, to put an end to sin (Daniel 9:24) and to set people free from the power of Satan (Acts 26:18) *...in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit* (Romans 8:4).

Rabbinical Judaism professes to believe in one God and to uphold and obey God's law. Religious Jews recite the cardinal creed of believing in only one God in their daily prayers – the Shema, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one* (from Deut. 6:4-9). However, James taught that believing in one God is not what justifies us in the sight of God: *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder* (James 2:19). James also taught, concerning the Law, that the covenant which binds Israel in unity and relationship with the LORD was constituted by the law as a whole and therefore: *...whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it* (James 2:10). However, he also implied that if one is genuinely moved by the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, then it will be counted as if they have obeyed the whole law (James 2:8-10). This conclusion is confirmed by the apostle Paul: *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love...The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself"* (Gal. 5:6; 14).

It follows, therefore, that the law is surpassed by one law – the only new covenant command – to love one another as Christ loved the church (Jn. 13:34). Christians are justified by faith which, despite our short-comings, is proven genuine by loving one another as Christ has loved us. *...we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law* (Rom. 3:28). *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins* (1 Pt. 4:8 cf. Prov. 10:12). Sincere love is proven as such only by responding to the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ. Those who reject Jesus Christ do not have the love of God.

## CHRISTIANITY – CREED AND DEED

Does justification by faith “alone” mean that we are justified by simply believing in a creed alone? *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing* (1 Cor. 13:2). Genuine faith encompasses faithfulness, repentance, obedience and love which is the effectual transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. A Christian is not justified or saved because of their good works, even good works motivated by the Holy Spirit as a result of their faith in Jesus the Messiah. However, such good works – which are an expression of the love of God – are evidence of genuine faith that saves us from a reckless, destructive path of habitual sin, rebellion and unbelief. *...the wrath of God is coming (because of sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry). You **used to walk** in these ways, in the life you **once lived*** (Col. 3:5-7).

Like Abraham, the man of faith, those who believe and trust in the word of God demonstrate their faith by doing what the Word says. A Christian is saved from a condemned life of sin, rebellion and death by hearing and believing the good news of the kingdom of God. Having believed, we are built up in the faith through being instructed in sound doctrine. We are exhorted

to: Watch our life and doctrine closely – to persevere in them until the end, because if we do, we will save both ourselves and our hearers (see 1 Tim. 4:16). We must: ...get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in us who believe, which can save us. We must not merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves, but we must do what it says (see James 1:22). To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (Jn. 8:31-32).

Paul wrote ... *thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness* (Romans 6:17-18).

Prager and Telushkin suggest that as Christianity developed it did away with most of the old covenant laws. Granted, Christianity is founded upon the final redemption from sin accomplished by the sacrifice of Jesus and made effectual through the law of the new covenant which is written upon the hearts of the redeemed. However, it is not that we have “done away with the law” – rather, we accept its verdict of death, but we have also been raised from death to new life by the power of the Spirit and are therefore no longer under the supervision of the law.

Although many corrupt and unspiritual church “leaders” over the centuries have abused their authority by introducing external rules and regulations in an attempt to exert control over the church rather than trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform sinners and exhorting believers to keep in step with the Spirit, Paul taught that Christians *are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in them. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ* (Romans 8:9).

Leading up to the Reformation, a large part of the professing church had become bound by various forms of legalism, false doctrines and superstitions, introduced by corrupt and deceived church leaders, such as the notion that sinners could pay sums of money to the church in exchange for the forgiveness of sins. It was against this background of wide-spread heresy and corruption that Luther set forth the liberating doctrine of “justification by faith alone”.

Luther’s challenge against papal authority was on the basis of the authority of “Scripture alone”. However, Luther himself struggled to reconcile Paul’s teaching on justification by faith *alone* with that of James and therefore rejected the authority of the epistle of James:

“I think highly of the epistle of James, and regard it as valuable although it was rejected in early days. It does not expound human doctrines, but lays much emphasis on God’s law. Yet to give my own opinion without prejudice to that of anyone else, I do not hold it to be of apostolic authorship, for the following reasons: Firstly, because, in direct opposition to St. Paul and all the rest of the Bible, it ascribes justification to works, and declares that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered up his son. St. Paul, on the contrary, in Romans 4[:3], teaches that Abraham was justified without works, by his faith alone, the proof being in Genesis 15 [:6], which was before he sacrificed his son. Although it would be possible to ‘save’ the epistle by a gloss giving a correct explanation of justification here ascribed to works, it is impossible to deny that it does refer to Moses’ word in Genesis 15 (which speaks not of Abraham’s works but of his

faith, just as Paul makes plain in Romans 4) to Abraham's works. **This defect proves that the epistle is not of apostolic provenance.**

“...In sum: he (James) wished to guard against those who depended on faith without going on to works, but he had neither the spirit nor the thought nor the eloquence equal to the task. **He does violence to Scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture.** He tries to accomplish by emphasizing law what the apostles bring about by attracting men to love. **I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my bible;** but I would not prevent anyone placing him or raising him where he likes, for the epistle contains many excellent passages. One man does not count as a man even in the eyes of the world; how then shall this single and isolated writer count against Paul and all the rest of the Bible.”

At face value one can understand Luther's struggle to reconcile the teaching of Paul with that of James. In an effort to reconcile the apparent contradiction between Paul and James, some have suggested that James is not speaking of the same “faith” as Paul. However, both refer to “faith” in the context of Abraham whose faith was demonstrated by what he did in response to believing the word of the LORD.

## **FAITH WORKS**

James wrote: *You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God's friend. You see that **a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.** In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so **faith without deeds is dead** (James 2:20-26).*

Paul taught that a man is justified by faith apart from works:

*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 (Rom. 4:3-5).***

Paul and James both refer to *faith* in context to the faith of Abraham. Paul is referring to *works of the law* which would also include feeble human works in trying to earn God's approval through observing external religious rules and regulations while being void of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

In what may at face value be regarded as a direct contradiction, James taught that a man is *not* justified by faith *alone* but by faith that is demonstrated by what he does. Rather than seeing a contradiction in the teaching of Paul and James, perhaps we should consider that the two

apostles were not referring to different kinds of “faith”, but rather to different kinds of “works”. There are “works” motivated by human effort to observe the Law (or any other kind of unscriptural superstitions, religious rules or regulations such as those imposed by the Roman Catholic Church) and there are “works” which are the result of genuine faith in response to the word of God and the moving of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers. There are no works which make us deserving to receive the promised Holy Spirit, only a response in faith to the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

The LORD promised through the Prophets that in reconciling people to himself he would restore sinful people to genuine faithfulness: “...*I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” (Ezekiel 36:27).

This promise was not because the people had been faithful according to the Law and thus merited his goodness, but on the contrary, because they had proven themselves incapable of meeting the righteous requirements of God. That is why the apostle Paul asked the gentile believers at Galatia, who had already received the promised Holy Spirit by believing the gospel: *Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?* (Gal. 3:2-3).

All had become disobedient so that all could be shown mercy (Rom. 11:30-32). Furthermore, the apostle Paul taught that, *those who are led, (or moved), by the Spirit are no longer under the (external) law* (Gal. 5:18) – for they demonstrate by their love that the new covenant law has indeed been written upon their hearts. No amount of good *works* prompted by human effort would make them deserving to receive the Holy Spirit. However, having received the Holy Spirit simply by believing the gospel, believers are saved from a life of habitual sin and rebellion and prompted by the Spirit to do the works which God prepared in advance for them to do. The power of the Holy Spirit working within the believer, moving them to faithfulness and obedience, is evidence that faith is genuine. Paul acknowledged that it was the power of the Holy Spirit working within him that made him an effective witness for Christ and for the gospel:

*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me* (Col. 1:28-29).

Prager and Telushkin describe the contrast between Judaism and Christianity as “Faith over Works”. However, what will hopefully become clear in this essay is that the New Testament does not create a dichotomy between *faith and works*, but rather between *works* accomplished through the indwelling, transforming power of the Holy Spirit as a consequence of faith in Jesus is the Messiah and *vain works* according to human effort to attain righteousness through observing the Law (or any other external, religious rules and regulations). Work that is not motivated by the Spirit of God is futile and produces nothing of eternal value

The following scriptures show these two kinds of works:

*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” Then they asked him, “What must we do to do **the works God requires?**” Jesus answered, “**The work of God** is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” So they asked him, “What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” “Sir,” they said, “from now on give us this bread” (John 6:26-33).*

Paul speaks of two kinds of works: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **not by works**, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to **do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*** (Eph. 2:8-10).

The writer to the Hebrews refers to six elementary principles concerning the doctrine of Jesus Christ, one of them being “repentance from dead works”. These are works which are not the result of faith, i.e. they are not an obedient response to the word of God but are works done in vain which do not lead to eternal life.

Paul also wrote: God “*will give to each person according to what **he has done**” (He will render to each one **according to his works** [ESV]). *To those who by persistence in **doing good** seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life* (Rom. 2:6-7).*

Being justified and reconciled to God is indeed a matter faith and not works of the law. We are indeed justified now by faith, but faith is not genuine faith unless it is a living faith demonstrated by repentance, faithfulness and love.

*Christ redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:14). Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law* (Gal. 3:23-25).

The call to follow Christ is precisely like the call of Abraham who was called to leave his country his people and his father’s household to go to the place God would show him. Those who believe and follow Christ are of the same faith as Abraham.

*Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:25-27).

*Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or*

*mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Mt. 19:28-29).*

*To walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had (Rom. 4:12), as Paul and James taught, requires us to forsake worldly attachments to follow Christ in order to *live* (walk) in obedience and faithfulness to the calling and word of God. Having received eternal life by faith in Jesus the Messiah we are called to a life of faithfulness. B.B. Warfield points out that “the notions of faith and faithfulness lie close to one another and are not uncommonly expressed by a single term *fides, faith*” (in the Hebrew אֱמוּנָה *emun* or *emunah*) to which we say Amen!*