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Why Do Some New Testament Passages about Salvation Ignore Faith and Focus on Works?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about why some passages about salvation in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 25:31-46) seem to focus on works rather than trust in Jesus and whether the symmetry between Adam and Jesus described in Romans 5 indicates everyone will be saved from Hell.

- * Why are there so many passages in the New Testament that seem to focus on works rather than trust in Jesus when it comes to dividing the saved from the unsaved?
- * Doesn't Matthew 25:31-46 sound like we'll be saved by our deeds rather than grace?
- * Since Romans 5:18-19 talks about the symmetry between being condemned in Adam and righteous in Jesus, would that mean that just as we don't opt into Adam's sin, so we don't opt into Jesus' salvation, and therefore everyone will be saved from Hell?

Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's #STRask.Podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl! (Hi Amy.) Hi Greg. Okay, this first question comes from hopefully I'm pronouncing his name correctly, Yerji. (Yerji, okay.) Here's his question.

The dividing the line between saved/unsaved is a trust put in Jesus. Works come later. Why are there so many New Testament places that seem to ignore this? He gives examples.

The sheep, goats, parable, divides according to works and the whole book of Revelation ignores this faith approach and keeps on bringing up works-based approach? That's the first question, but I'm going to add to that another question is very similar. This one comes from the C. Cooper and he also asked, "Doesn't Matthew 25 31-46 sound like we'll be saved by our deeds rather than grace?" Yeah, I remember back in the Jesus movement, the performer Keith Green, when he did Jesus Northwest 78 and he was a

huge influencer, died in 1982 in an airplane wreck and a magnificent guy and magnificent performer. I met him a couple of times way back when.

In fact, I went to an event once, a very small event that he was participating with with another Christian guy and he wasn't even a Christian then at that point. Kind of made a mess of things, but in any event at Jesus Northwest 78, he talked about the parable of the goats and he said, "Look at everybody's determined. The consequence or the outcome of their lives eternally is determined based on what they did or they didn't do." I've heard this so many times listening to the recording.

That's the way to characterize what they did or didn't do. The question here is, "Are these examples used in the text?" I'm going to draw a conclusion about the way they're being used here by Jesus and other passages like them because of other passages that I have to take into consideration. I have to be careful.

When I make a statement or a draw conclusion about something like this, I have to keep in mind other passages. I can't just say, "Hey, it's based on what they did or they didn't do." Therefore, our works are the determining factor, ultimately the determining factor. We are saved by our works.

We can talk all day long about how much we love Jesus. If we don't do the works that need to be done, then we're not going to be saved because the salvation, the locus of our salvation is somehow in our works. I'm completely sympathetic that in some cases there are passages that seem to make this point.

In other passages, let's take Romans 4. How could you be more contrary than this? For him, who does not work but believes in a God who justifies the ungodly to him, it is reckoned as righteousness. Now, what we have there appears to be a stark and rank contradiction. Unless we understand the passages that were just brought up here by Yershi as "indicatives." What's an indicative? It means something that indicates something else.

We see that in Matthew chapter 5, I mean, sorry, Matthew 25. "These, my sheep, are characterized by these things, and you know that they are my sheep based on what you see them do." Here's what they did. The goats, they didn't do that.

They're not my sheep, they're the goats. The sheep act this way because they're my sheep. So, I'm offering this characterization calling these kinds of things.

What was the first verse again? I'm sorry, the Romans wanted to know. The only specific verse is Matthew 25, 31 through 46. He talks about the parable of the goats.

So, I'm going to characterize this as an indicative. In other words, this is the way my people act because they're saved. You can tell by the way they live.

Now, what I've done here, there's a couple of things going on. What I'm trying to do is avoid a really rank contradiction. If one makes this claim that this teaches work salvation, then I'm going to ask, how do you make any sense out of Romans 5? Romans 5 is just one example.

There are lots and lots of lots of examples where very strict, "What must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you'll be saved." That's Paul in the Philippian jailer in Acts chapter 16. So, bunches and bunches and bunches and bunches of passages. I am trying to repair what looks like a contradiction.

If somebody doesn't like my calling that an indicative, then they still have to repair the contradiction. How are you going to do that? That's what I'm going to ask because we believe the whole corpus, the whole body of the Scripture is God's word, God breathed, so let's make, but I can go a step further than that. I can offer a way of looking at it that helps us to harmonize these concepts.

That's very important when you have contrary views. How can what view harmonizes most of the passages? So we have unity. But I can show you where the Bible actually says this kind of thing.

That would be, for example, James chapter 2. You say that you have faith and you have no works. Can that faith save you? You show me your so-called faith without works. I will show you my faith by my works.

So there James is clearly making the point that works are an indication of the faith undergirding it. There are evidence of it. He gives two examples.

One is Abraham, which is also what Paul talks about Romans 4, and the other one is Rahab the Harlot. Abraham did this great thing, and Rahab, which is a sacrifice, or being willing to sacrifice his son. That's like Genesis 22 or something like that.

And Rahab does kind of a small thing by comparison. She hides the Jewish spies so that they are killed in Jericho. So both cases, though, are evidences, James says, both works that justify them.

He uses the same language, but he's not using it, in my view, as salvation, he's using it as evidence. And the word "justify" can be used either way. Okay, justify yourself.

That doesn't mean that means, well, give me reasons why you did that. Justify those actions. Well, here are the reasons.

That's how he's using it. But here's another passage. And one of my favorites, because I think it's so powerful.

It's in Colossians chapter 3, and not Colossians, I'm sorry. [laughs] Oh, that's in the New

Testament, I'll think of it. When the kindness of God our Savior appeared, when the kindness of God our Savior appeared.

I mean, this is from memory now, because I don't have in front of me. So that's why I can't remember the word. You know, Titus.

Titus, yeah. Titus, okay. When the kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not according to deeds which have been done in righteousness, but according to his mercy by the washing and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, which he poured upon us lavishly.

And I want you to be convinced of this, Paul writes to Titus, so that those who are will be careful to engage in good deeds. So first Paul there in Titus 3 says, God saves us, not according to our deeds, but for good deeds. Oh, Ephesians 2, verse 8 and 9, the first verse I ever remembered, like memorized.

I don't really memorize, it just stuck. By grace you are saved to faith, it's not of yourselves, not of works, lest any man boast. And then it says that God is created you for good works.

So the relationship is it is faith in Christ that saves and regenerates, and that transforms our lives so that our lives are given to the kind of good things and good actions that God intended for us from the beginning. And the good works are indicators of the faith that has already saved us. That's why they're in dictatives.

I would also add that perfect righteousness is necessary for entering the kingdom of God. The question is how do we get that righteousness? So here's what I think we need to look at, because obviously the New Testament is very clear about our being saved by grace. So the question here is why did Jesus talk about all of these things? Because he mentions Revelation, but we can talk about that in a second.

Why is it that Jesus talks about our work so much? And I think it's because he was accomplishing something very specific when he came, and what he wanted to do was show people their need for perfect righteousness. So he says, when he leaves, he says, "The Holy Spirit will come and convict you of righteousness and judgment." - Same righteous right. Yes.

But while he was there, he was revealing to them his perfect righteousness so that they would see their own lack of righteousness and their need for righteousness. So it is the fact that it's necessary. He talks about how no one will enter the kingdom of God unless the righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees.

But I don't think his point was, therefore you must do more works in the Pharisees. His point ultimately was to point to the fact that we need his righteousness. Right.

And he even talks about this. So when he talks about the tax collector and the Pharisee in the temple, which one goes home justified? The one with faith and repentance. So he even says there, that is what gave him the righteousness that he needed.

He also talks about how the last shall be first. The people who are unexpected will enter the kingdom before the Pharisees. Why? Because of their faith.

Because of their trust. Because of the fact that they will receive righteousness from God. So, and by the way, you'll notice in James, you'll notice in James that the works, James cites are works of faith.

Abraham be willing to sacrifice his son. That was an act of faith. It wasn't just a good work.

It was an act of faith. Same with rehab. And Paul talks about their Romans as well.

Right. So, Jesus certainly did talk about the necessity of faith and the justifying nature of faith. But he was also there to reveal to them their need for this.

Because we do need that perfect righteousness and we only get that from Jesus. Now, he also brought up revelation. And I know we've talked about this on the show before, Greg.

But if you look at the very end, when it's talking about how, oh, let's see, I have the wrong place here. Okay. He says, I can't find the spot now, but he says that the books are open and people are judged by their deeds.

For relation 20. Yes. And those who enter in, he doesn't say they're the ones who did the good deeds.

That's right. He says, they're the ones who were in the Lamb's book of life. Exactly.

So even in the case of revelation, when it's talking about deeds, ultimately our righteousness comes from Jesus. And obviously, Romans talks a whole lot about how we are saved so that we may bear fruit for God. So that is obviously a goal that God wants for us.

He wants us to bear fruit for him. He wants us to reflect him to the world. But when it comes to salvation, that comes by grace.

And I think everything indicates that. It's just that when Jesus talks about our works, he's using it to condemn us so that we know the need that we have for him. Yeah.

You know, it's interesting about your revelation 20 passage is that every, and this is in verse 11 and following, but especially in verse 13, the sea gave up the dead. I'm sorry. In verse 12, it says, and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books according to their deeds, verse 15.

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire, point being every person judged by their deeds parishes forever. There's only one rescue and it's not their deeds. It's that the names are in the book of life, as you pointed out, in virtue of their trust in Christ.

So this leads really well into our next question, Greg, from cross examined. Romans 5, 18 and 19 talks about the symmetry of Adam and Jesus. Then in the same way that we don't opt in to take on Adam's sin, we don't, we don't opt in to get Jesus' salvation.

It just happens. By that reading, Jesus saves us all from hell. What are your thoughts? This is a point that other people have made.

Okay. And the difficulty here, let me just read the passage just so we know what we're working with starting verse 17, where if by the transgression of the one, that would be Adam, death reigned through the one much more those who receive the abundance of grace. Notice the qualifier and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one Jesus Christ.

Okay. So we haven't got to even to the verse yet. It's verse 18.

18 and 19 and 19. But notice how there's a qualifier there. All right.

Those who receive the abundance of grace, there is a parallel. Okay. But we have to be careful and make the same parallels that the author himself is making verse 18.

So then as through one transgression, there resulted condemnation to all men, even so the one act of righteousness, there resulted justification of life to all men. Now the question here is, well, I'll read verse 19, for astray, the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners, even so to the obedience of the one, the many who made righteous. Okay.

So the question then is who are the many and the all and that are in view here. And certainly, the many and the all regarding Adam are all who are sons of Adam. That's everybody.

But the many and the all referring to Jesus can't be those that are sons of Adam because that would result in universalism. And that reading is inconsistent with the rest of the teaching of the Bible. In fact, the book of Romans is explaining how salvation works as a means of extending the invitation of grace to people who need it, because if they don't respond to it, then they're not going to heaven.

The whole book of Romans presumes that universalism is false. So reading some universalism into a sentence is just a misreading of it, given the large context. But how do we solve the problem? And the answer is all those who are sons of Adam, I was going to say benefit from Adam in the same way, but then we're not benefiting.

It's not a benefit. We have the consequence. We bear those things that are consequences of the sons of Adam and all who are in Christ, sons of God through Christ, bear all the things that Christ gives them.

In the first case, all who are sons of Adam is every human being. In the second case, the all in the many are all those who are in Christ, and those are those who receive the benefits that Christ offers. And by the way, I'm not making this up.

It's right there in the prior verse, "For if by the transgressions for 17 of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one Jesus Christ." The qualification that is, it makes it crystal clear, is in the verse prior to the one cited. And once again, the rule never read a Bible verse is in play here to give us information in the larger context that completely removes the confusion. We have to keep the symmetry where it belongs.

So this cross-examine asked about the symmetry between Adam and Jesus, and that symmetry is when we're in the one, we bear the image of that one. We have the guilt of the one or the righteousness of the one. I think that's as far as it's meant to go.

And luckily, this passage is in Romans because Romans is abundantly clear about this. You know, it makes sense that it's different in terms of how we get there because we all start off in Adam. We're automatically in Adam.

It doesn't follow from that that will automatically be in Christ. In fact, if you just keep reading in Romans in the next two chapters, the idea is that we have to die with Christ and be united to Christ in order to be raised with Him. And chapter 7 talks about how we died to the law so that we could be raised so that we could be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead.

So it's two different things. Something has to happen in order for us to be in Christ. And there's no reason to think it happens to everybody because nothing else indicates that it does.

Does that make sense? It makes perfect sense. It's again, and this goes along, I think, the earlier question, yeah, from this hour, we do a bunch of these together. So for this show podcast goes consistent.

When you see apparently conflicting passage, you can't just camp on one verse and say, "Here's the whole thing." You have to look all the passages that relate to that issue. And then what it's not unusual then to come up with what appear to be contradictions. And so we talked about that with the goats and the sheep, for example.

And so now, if we are committed to the idea that the Bible is inspired by God and there's a unity there and it does not contradict, then we have to figure out, well, then is there a

reasonable way that we can make these verses work together? And sometimes by reading the larger context, we understand that we have been misreading some passage. And it gives us an explanation that then creates harmony. And that's what we're looking to do.

We're looking to harmonize the passages. By the way, this is not a trick. Yeah, so Christians can avoid apparent contradictions.

This is called a charitable reading. And if you read any book that I write, I'm sure you're going to find something that you read that sounds like I'm contradicting something else that I've said. But if you read it charitably under the presumption that, well, Greg's not an idiot, probably.

Maybe there's an explanation. And then you read wider. You may be able to find a way to harmonize these concepts.

So this is a very common way of reading texts, trying to find a harmony between them, reading them charitably and making sense of the passages. Much more important, by the way, with the Scripture than reading anything that I wrote, because we want to know what God actually means. And on this issue, we're talking about something really core foundational and central, and that is what, back to the Philippian jailer, what must I do to be saved? And like I said before, luckily, this is part of Romans.

Chapter five leads directly into chapter six. And I, a verse just came to mind here. This is at the beginning of chapter six in verse three.

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death. Therefore, we have been buried with Him through baptism into death so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. And then a little bit farther down, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.

So He's definitely making a distinction here that not everyone dies with Christ. Everyone's born in Adam, but only those who die with Christ will be raised with Him. All conditionals there.

Well, thank you, everyone, for your questions. We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, you can send that on Twitter with the hashtag #strsk or just go to our website.

Look for the hashtag #strsk podcast and you'll find a link there. You can give us your question. And we love hearing from you.

We love having tons of questions to pick from because there are so many interesting different questions out there, Greg. So the more the merrier. All right, thanks for

listening.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Kolkle for Stand to Reason.

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