

Good Works: A Necessary Result of Justification?

by Jeremy D. Myers

Introduction

Writers and speakers in the Free Grace movement have taught that there is no logical difference between works being a necessary result of faith (as Perseverance theology teaches) and works being a condition for eternal life (as Catholicism and other religions teach).

Although logically and Scripturally accurate, the idea needs polishing and honing if it is going to stand in the theological arena. Therefore, it will be necessary first to examine some statements from prominent Free Grace teachers and then consider Perseverance proponents' attempts to refute such statements. Seeing where our wording and logic needs modification will help us defend the Gospel of faith alone in Christ alone.

Free Grace Statements

Joseph Dillow, in his landmark book *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, writes:

Here we can lay down a self-evident principle: a necessary result for which we are responsible which must be present for another result to occur is no different than an additional condition for the achievement of the second result.¹

There is no difference between a result for which we are responsible and a condition! Let the reader ponder this, and he will discover that it is impossible to come up with an illustration which contradicts this fact!²

My first encounter with this statement was as a Perseverance and Lordship Salvation advocate seeking to refute Dillow. While his excellent exegesis caused me to question some of my beliefs, this statement particularly spurred my thinking. As one who seeks to be logical, I accepted his challenge to offer any illustration which contradicted his statement. My complete failure to do so was an

¹ Joseph Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 233.

² Ibid.

important step in my moving away from the Lordship and Perseverance tradition.

As a result of studying Dillow, it was easy for me to concur with similar statements from other Free Grace writers. One such statement appears in an article by Charlie Bing for the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. He writes:

And so Lordship Salvation faith goes beyond trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior. Lordship faith includes obeying Him as Lord as a condition of eternal salvation. They have included obedience in their definition and understanding of faith. Therefore, Lordship faith requires works as a necessary condition of faith.³

After quoting some Perseverance teachers, he continues:

We know that the Roman Catholics teach that we are saved by faith *plus* works. Lordship Salvation teaches that we are saved by faith *that* works. But do not both definitions include works as a condition necessary for faith to be valid, for faith to be effectual? Either way, works are a necessary condition of eternal salvation.⁴

Like Dillow, Bing rightly understands the logical connection between a necessary result and a condition.

Dillow and Bing are not alone in this understanding. Zane Hodges—pastor, professor, speaker, author, and a knowledgeable defender of Free Grace theology—makes an almost identical statement in *Absolutely Free!*:

Lordship Salvation cannot escape the charge that it mixes faith and works. The way it does so is succinctly stated by MacArthur [in *The Gospel According to Jesus*]: “Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of saving faith.”

³ Charlie Bing, “Why Lordship Faith Misses the Mark for Salvation,” *JOTGES* 12 (Spring, 1999): 25, <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/1999i/J22-99b.htm> (accessed March 21, 2003). Though not all Perseverance theologians hold to Lordship Salvation, all who teach Lordship Salvation also teach Perseverance of the saints. So, although Bing refers only to Lordship Salvation, his statement is applicable to Perseverance theology as well.

⁴ *Ibid.* Italics his. Regarding his use of the term *Lordship Salvation*, see note 3 above.

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But this is the same as saying, “Without obedience there is no justification and no heaven.” Viewed from *that* standpoint, “obedience” is actually a *condition* for justification and for heaven.⁵

Zane Hodges provides several quotes from Perseverance proponents who admit that their system of theology requires works as a condition of justification.⁶ The majority of Perseverance theologians, however, seem to be content with emphatically denying Free Grace statements, rather than attempting honestly and logically to refute them.

A Single Reply

Two years ago I picked up a book titled *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* by John MacArthur, written in response to *Absolutely Free!* by Zane Hodges. Although the book itself was poorly written and even more poorly organized, it pleasantly surprised me with a serious and honest attempt to refute the necessary result vs. condition accusation so frequently leveled against Perseverance theology.⁷ MacArthur writes:

To say that works are a necessary result of faith is not the same as making works a condition for justification. Hodges himself surely believes all Christians will ultimately be glorified (Rom. 8:30). Would he accept the charge that he is making glorification a condition for justification? Presumably, both the lordship and no-lordship views agree that all believers will ultimately be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). We differ only on the timing.⁸

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989), 213–14, n. 4. Italics his.

⁶ Ibid. See also Jeremy D. Myers, “The Gospel Under Siege,” *JOTGES* 16 (Autumn, 2003). This article compares Catholic theology and Arminian theology with Perseverance theology and reveals that there are very few differences among the three systems.

⁷ In my wide reading of the books and articles written by Lordship theologians, this was my first encounter with an attempted rebuttal of the accusation. It sometimes seems that Lordship authors either have not read or have not attempted to understand what the Free Grace movement believes and teaches.

⁸ John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 53.

At first glance, he seems to make a good point! We do believe that glorification is a necessary result of justification, but as MacArthur says, we do not believe that glorification is a condition for justification. Is MacArthur right? Is the Free Grace logic faulty after all?

Although his argument might initially confound us, it has a number of flaws. MacArthur, in making this statement, simply proves the error of his position and reveals a lack of real understanding of the Free Grace charges against his theology.

Logical Analysis

MacArthur's Statement

MacArthur says that if works are a condition for justification because they are a necessary result of faith, then we must also say that glorification is a condition for justification because it (glorification) is a necessary result of faith. But since glorification is a necessary result of justification and not a condition for justification, works cannot be a condition for justification.

Let it be said, first of all, that MacArthur is absolutely right. Glorification is a necessary result, but not a condition, of justification. However, MacArthur has not refuted Dillow, Bing and Hodges; he has simply shown his failure to understand what Free Grace theology teaches.

Dillow, Bing, and Hodges make the following point: *There is logically no difference between a necessary result of faith for which we are responsible and a condition of eternal salvation.* Since MacArthur talks about *glorification* rather than *eternal salvation*, let us put ourselves on his turf and make these two terms interchangeable.⁹ The following is a restatement of the Free Grace position in MacArthur's terms: *There is logically no difference between a necessary result of faith for which we are responsible and a condition for glorification.*

He writes, "To say that works are a necessary result of faith is not the same as making works a condition for *justification*."¹⁰ MacArthur's attempt at refutation simply shows that he never understood the charge! Free Grace proponents have never (to my knowledge) said that Perseverance theologians make works necessary for justification, but rather that they make works necessary for glorification, for eternal salvation, for entrance into heaven. The charge is not that they teach, "no

⁹ Though eternal salvation and glorification are not identical, for the sake of argument and for clarity, this temporary concession is appropriate.

¹⁰ MacArthur, 53. Italics mine.

works—no justification.” The charge is that they teach, “no works—no heaven.”

Regrettably, Free Grace adherents may not have been clear regarding the kind of salvation to which they refer. *Eternal salvation* is somewhat ambiguous, and perhaps MacArthur took it as a reference to justification. Furthermore, of the three Free Grace statements above, Dillow’s is probably the clearest, for he makes a very important distinction which neither Bing nor Hodges clarify.¹¹ Dillow includes the crucial words: *for which we are responsible*. These words are the nail in the coffin of Perseverance theology regarding this particular issue.

If the Free Grace statement were simply that there is no difference between a necessary result and a condition, MacArthur would have been right. Glorification is a necessary result of justification, but nobody claims that glorification is a condition of justification. That would be illogical and incorrect. Nevertheless, Dillow’s choice of words effectively makes the distinction between God’s part in salvation and ours. It is God who justifies and glorifies one as a result of one’s faith.¹²

Believers are not responsible for their justification and glorification. But they are, as nearly the whole Bible testifies, responsible for personal faith in Jesus Christ, which is not a work (Romans 4:4–5; Ephesians 2:8–9) and is prior to, and therefore a condition of, justification. Believers are also to some degree responsible for their temporal sanctification, which is achieved by the filling and fruit of the Spirit as they walk in faith (Galatians 2:20; 5:16–26; Ephesians 5:18; Colossians 2:6; Hebrews 4). The works of sanctification, therefore, are something for which Christians are responsible¹³ but which are not a necessary result of faith.

¹¹ Both Bing and Hodges imply it but do not state it as clearly or concisely as Dillow.

¹² It is exegetically indisputable that faith is neither a work (Rom. 4:4–5) nor a gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9). Faith is antithetical to works; that is, it is the complete opposite of works. Therefore, faith is not meritorious before God, but is the persuasion that Christ has accomplished all that is necessary for one’s justification. Some use Eph. 2:8–9 to say that faith is the gift of God, but a careful study of the Greek reveals that the antecedent of the term *this* is the whole “salvation-by-grace-through-faith” package. See Timothy R. Nichols, “Reverse-Engineered Outlining: A Method for Epistolary Exegesis,” *CTS Journal* 7 (April–June, 2001), 25–40.

¹³ Perseverance theologians might take exception with this statement. They place such a strong emphasis on the all-consuming sovereignty of God that they might say that works can be a necessary result of faith *because believers are not responsible for them. God does them in and through Christians, whose will*

This is why Dillow's choice of words makes his case airtight. A vast difference exists between a work for which one is responsible and a work for which one is not responsible. Works are a condition for temporal sanctification, but not for justification or glorification. Justification and glorification, while necessary results of faith, are not results for which believers are responsible; therefore, they are not conditions for entering heaven.

In light of MacArthur's misunderstanding, all Free Grace teachers and writers should phrase any future criticism of Perseverance theology in the following way: *There is logically no difference between a necessary result of faith for which we are responsible and a condition for glorification.*

A Practical Syllogism

This is a complex statement and as such might be better understood with the aid of the following practical syllogism:

1. If **a**, then always **b** (where **b** is something a believer is responsible for).
2. If **a** and **b**, then **g**.
3. Not **b**.
4. Therefore, neither **a** nor **g**.

With Perseverance theology plugged in, this syllogism would read thus:

1. If one is justified (**a**), then one will perform good works in life (**b**).
2. If one is justified (**a**) and it has been proved by works (**b**), then one can be sure that one will get to heaven (**g**).
3. One does not have the necessary works (not **b**).
4. Therefore, one is neither justified (**a**) nor is going to heaven (**g**).

plays no part in justification, sanctification, or glorification. To escape the logic that works are the necessary result of justification but not a condition of glorification, one must appeal to the sovereignty of God in controlling every single aspect of a Christian's life. And this is exactly what many Perseverance theologians do. Refuting this unscriptural idea is far beyond the scope of the present article, but basically, the warning passages throughout the Bible reveal that Christians must *at least* cooperate with God in order to produce good works. See Robert Wilkin, *The Road To Reward* (Irving, TX: GES, 2003), 128.

According to this logic, if a person does not have good works, he will not make it to heaven. And if a person does not make it to heaven, then he was not justified. So, a person who does not have good works is not going to heaven. Dillow, Bing, and Hodges are right. Perseverance theology, in requiring works as a necessary result of faith, ends up making works a condition for going to heaven and for glorification.

This error is easily avoided when faith alone in Christ alone is made the sole condition for justification and glorification. The good news found in Scripture is that works are in no way required for justification *or* for entrance into heaven. Justification and glorification are free gifts of God, given by grace and received through faith. This is the only logical result of *by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*.

A Supporting Hostile Witness

Surprisingly, the Catholic apologist and theologian Karl Keating serves as an unintentional ally to this position. Although he believes that both Perseverance and Free Grace theologies are incorrect, he says that if *faith alone in Christ alone* is true, then only the Free Grace position is logical. In his explanation and defense of Catholicism against “fundamentalism,”¹⁴ he rightly attacks the Perseverance position:

Most fundamentalist writers state the assurance of salvation in a slightly different way. They do not emphasize the logical consequence of their position, that later sin, no matter how great, cannot undo one’s salvation. They agree . . . that assurance can be absolute, but instead of arguing that “no personal breaking of God’s or man’s laws or commandments can nullify” that assurance, they emphasize that someone who has been saved will not, in fact, sin as frequently as he did before accepting Christ as his personal Savior. . . . Most fundamentalists [are] satisfied to say that the saved man either will not sin or will not sin grievously.¹⁵

¹⁴ This is Keating’s term for any person who “discards the sacramental and liturgical core of Catholicism” in favor of *Sola Scriptura*. He includes both Arminian and Perseverance theology in this category. See Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on “Romanism” by “Bible Christians”* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 10.

¹⁵ Keating, 170–171. Interestingly, Erasmus, a contemporary of Martin Luther, criticized Luther by saying that, when it was all boiled down, Luther’s teaching was no different from the Catholic teaching after all. He said, “Whether works justify or faith justifies matters little, since all allow that faith will not save

He later writes:

How can any fundamentalist know his salvation experience was real, that it “worked”? He cannot. Leading a good life immediately after being born again proves nothing, since one might sin grievously at a later time.¹⁶

While most Free Grace proponents would differ with most Catholic soteriological teachings, all can say a hearty *Amen* to this! Although Keating thinks this view is an error, at least he understands the issue and presents it logically! Assurance of salvation is no assurance at all if it is grounded in and based on perseverance in good works.

Keating goes on to discuss the only logical result of “fundamentalism.” He states that very few “fundamentalists” hold to the logical results of their position. The only person he names who does is Wilson Ewin, a man who wrote a booklet called *There Is Therefore Now No Condemnation*.¹⁷ In the extensive quotes provided, it is clear that Ewin essentially holds a Free Grace position. In one place, Keating quotes Ewin as writing:

No wrong act or sinful deed can ever affect the believer’s salvation. The sinner did nothing to merit God’s grace and likewise he can do nothing to demerit grace. True, sinful conduct always lessens one’s fellowship with Christ, limits his contribution to God’s work and can result in serious disciplinary action by the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

Of course, having stated that this is the only logical result of *by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*, Keating rejects this view as absurd—for it could possibly lead to an abuse of grace and to godless living.

Sometimes those on the outside can see the issues most clearly. Keating, a Catholic theologian, not an impartial judge by any measure,

without works.” See E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio, 1999), 162. I am convinced that we have Perseverance theology today because Luther and Calvin did not go far enough in their attempt at reforming Catholic theology.

¹⁶ Keating, 173.

¹⁷ Keating states that this booklet is distributed by the Bible Baptist Church of Nashua, NH.

¹⁸ Wilson Ewin, *There Is Therefore Now No Condemnation*, quoted in Keating, 169.

clearly shows that Free Grace theology is the only logical result of *faith alone in Christ alone*. He is an unwitting ally in the defense of the true Gospel of Grace.

Conclusion

The good news is that God gives eternal life freely to all who simply believe in Jesus Christ alone for it. There are no works involved in gaining, keeping, or proving justification. Free Grace writers have been saying all along that those who add works as a necessary result of justification are in reality making works a condition for getting into heaven. If the works we perform are a necessary result of justification, then those works are also a condition for getting to heaven, and therefore, eternal life is not by faith alone. Faith alone in Christ alone, without any kind of works, truly is the only Gospel of grace.

—End—

Jeremy D. Myers received a B.A. in Bible and Theology from Moody Bible Institute. He is the founder of Til He Comes Ministries (<http://www.tilhecomes.org>) and the Senior Pastor of Fortine Community Church in Fortine, MT, where he lives with his wife, Wendy, and their two daughters, Taylor and Selah. He may be reached either at jmyers@tilhecomes.org or (406) 882-4515.