

How Works 'Saved My Soul'

I grew up in a church that preached the Bible... and a little extra.

It started with the "Thou Shalt Nots." Even though the Ten Commandments are pretty straightforward, we felt the need to add a few "clarifications" to help keep us on the straight and narrow.

For instance, "thou shalt not see R-rated movies" (even PG was suspect). As for music, "thou shalt not worship the Lord thy God with instruments other than piano or organ." And dancing? "Thou shalt not even think about it!" Yep, we put the "fun" in fundamentalism.

As much as I now laugh about some of these additional "Thou Shalt Nots," other churches were even stricter. Some forbade watching TV; others called card playing a sin; and for others, ginger ale was off limits because it might appear to be champagne. I guess my home church was on the liberal side!

There were also the "Thou Shalts." "Thou shalt be in church every time the doors are open." "Thou shalt serve your time in the nursery or teaching Sunday school." "Thou shalt help out with all church workdays." "Thou shalt invite all your neighbors to church every Sunday." "Thou shalt read your Bible every day—even the Old Testament." Or else!

For years, I understood God's words as a series of "Thou Shalt" commands, which, if kept, would obligate Jesus to accept me into heaven. Perhaps he might even like me.

The result was that all my good works were draining the life from my soul.

And then—almost like a gift from above—the truth of Ephesians 2:8-9 was revealed to me: "For by grace you have been saved

through faith, and this is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, 9 not of works, so that no one should boast.”

It was like the weight was lifted. All my works couldn't make God love me any more that He already did. I was saved by grace. And just like that, the pressure was off. But then something else began to happen. I started to see good works as somewhat irrelevant.

So I gave up on them.

I thought, “If I'm not saved by works, what's the point of striving?” Sure, I should be a decent person, but why stress out over keeping all the laws, obeying all the directives or following all the wisdom of the Bible?

Let's be honest: haven't we all thought, “If grace gets me into heaven, why sweat all the works?”

The consequence of thinking this way was that my lack of good works made the Bible seem irrelevant. For me, if it wasn't a book of Thou Shalts, then it must be a bunch of “Never Minds.” If grace gets me off the hook, the commands in the Bible seem like mere guidelines or empty threats. I couldn't make sense of how the grace of God fit together with the works of God.

The problem was that I had failed to look at the next verse of the Ephesians 2 passage: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, so that we should walk in them” (v. 10).

There it was. Good works were never intended to save us from God. Good works are an invitation to partner with God in a mission he planned for us long before we were born. We're invited to join God in the grand work of advancing his Kingdom.

The Bible is filled with “When/Then” statements, inviting us all to join God in his great plan. When we remain in him, then

he makes us look like Jesus. When we trust him, then he proves his trustworthiness. When we are generous with him, then he becomes even more generous with us.

For years, I lived with a works-based view of salvation: When I've done enough good works, then God will save me. But that's not how it works at all. Our good works can bring God's blessing in our lives, but our salvation is purely by grace.

God's grace has saved us—and it's not a reward, it's a gift. But this in no way diminishes the truth that God uses a When/Then approach to pour out his blessings and invite us into partnership with him in his efforts to redeem the world.

For years, I thought I was saved by good works for Jesus.

But now, I know I am saved by Jesus for good works.

And that has brought new life to my soul. {eo}

*Excerpted from **Rusty George's** book, When You, Then God, copyrighted and published by Tyndale Momentum, 2016, and used with permission.*

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