

WORK, WORKS, WORK

Ted Wise

This is exchange between myself and a Christian who sent me a "spam" email. I normally give Christian mass-emailings a very quick read and trash them. Sometimes I think I'm led to reply. This is from one of those times. The man responsible for the message seemed very alarmed, agitated and not at all resting in Christ so I visited his page and wrote back to him.

WBW's stated purpose is to warn the Christian Church worldwide of the peril we are in because of what we believe about our "works," The Rapture ,and The Great Tribulation. At first I wasn't sure, but I now believe that Mr. WBW means well.

Excerpted from WBW's emailed warning and his stated purpose:

Dear Fellow Christians,

This E-Letter is sent to people interested in Second Coming Prophecy.

"...is to help Christians everywhere to be ready for the Second Coming of Christ. This includes an effort to get Christians worldwide to join in united prayer and fasting. The underlying position that motivates this is the view that most Christians will not be ready. The Great Tribulation will be as much a great chastening of Christians who are not ready as it will be judgment on the sinful world. This is not something that Christians like hearing, but there is ample support for it from both the Bible and reality, i.e. the present state of the Church..."

God bless you all.

Yours in Christ,

WBW

I wrote to WBW

Dear WBW,

All things being equal and just for the sake of discussion, do you think you might possibly like the idea that some Christians are "not ready"? As you said in your email, "... most Christians will not be ready. The Great Tribulation will be as much a great chastening of Christians who are not ready as it will be judgment on the sinful world." Do you like to think about folks being "chastened"?

Where do you see yourself in relationship to this chastening? I,m serious about these questions so please be kind enough to answer.

Thank you,

Ted Wise

Excerpted from WBW's email reply:

Dear Ted Wise,

I tell people never to assume that they are ready, and I don't make that assumption either. I say as a reminder, in several places in my Web site, that St. Paul at the height of his ministry didn't assume that he was ready (I Corinthians 9:24-27, Philippians 3: 12-14). Neither should any of us. Although I do seriously believe that The Tribulation will be as much a great chastisement of the Church as a great judgment of the unsaved world, it is not something I like. When I start to really think deeply about what I expect will happen, I start to cry, and I don't cry easily.

I do not like the idea of Christians not being ready at all. That is why I am working at exhorting them to be ready. I am seriously convinced that most Christians are not ready.

I just visited the Peninsula Church Web site, and read the letter wherein you discussed legalism. You make some very good points, but...

In the realm of physics, scientists have proven that there are real paradoxes in nature. That is, two things are demonstrably true that seem by ordinary reasoning to be contradictory. I am convinced that the same thing is true of Christian faith. In short, we are saved by grace through faith. And yet works are required. I believe this is implied in Ephesians 2:10. In fact, I hold the position that quoting verses 8 & 9 without including verse 10 is taking Paul's statements out of context, and therefore effectively false doctrine.

In short, all the "belief from the heart" in the world won't save you if the works aren't there. See Matthew 7:21-23 and James 2:20. Bluntly, the article on your Web site suggests that you ignore statements like this in the Scripture.

One final comment: I believe that the admonition of Ezekiel 33 still holds, and if a Christian believes that he has a warning to communicate to the entire world, it is his God-given duty to do it. That is what I seriously believe I have, and I am doing it.

Thanks for your interest.
God bless you and your ministry.
Yours in Christ,
WBW

My Reply:

Mr. WBW,

Thank you for reading my article on legalism. I have visited your site too. In fact that's why I asked you about yourself in relationship to God's judgment. I think you are mistaken about there not being an example in the Scriptures of salvation without works. May I direct your attention to the thief on the cross. I suppose one could stretch things a mile or two and call his weak defense of Jesus a righteous work. I think I have a better plan. When I'm standing before our Lord God Almighty (actually I believe I already am), I intend to point to Jesus and say, "I'm with Him". Please consider doing the same. I'm certain that it will not rob you of any motivation you have to do good works. I know well intentioned Christians sometimes think that if they have what the old hymn calls, "blessed assurance" they will lapse into inactivity.

IN Christ,
Ted Wise

Excerpted from WBW's email reply back to me:

Dear Ted,

I am not going to argue that you won't make it into heaven on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ alone. I consider myself saved by grace. I am aware that my works won't make the grade, regardless of how much I do or how

well. My sin still has to be atoned for, and only the Blood of Jesus can do that. However, I nevertheless believe that works matter.

There is a name for the doctrine that says that works don't matter at all, and I think you have heard it before: "cheap grace". But see Hebrews 10:26-31. Do you not believe there are such things as willful sins of omission? See James 4:17.

I think that faith devoid of works might get you into heaven, though James 2:20 seems to say differently. But if it does, you would, as I like to put it, get you there "scorched and smelling of smoke" (see I Corinthians 3:11-15). I am sure that is exactly what is going to happen to most Christians living now, if they leave this world prior to the Tribulation, and that is why most who are alive then won't be ready. Their works will be of the variety that will be burned up.

In reference to this, can you quote a Scripture reference that speaks of anyone being judged by his faith? Seems to me that its always works that are judged. Call it works. Call it obedience. Call it performance. But no matter what you call it, it matters.

I seriously hope that this gives you something to think about.

Yours in Christ,
WBW

My reply:

Dear WBW,

It seems to me you think the results of one's complete dependence upon our Lord will not produce the works that you think we leave out of our theology. In your last email you wrote, "...as I like to put it, get you there "scorched and smelling of smoke". I'll go you one further and advocate that the burning up of our unfruitful works of darkness is extremely good news! Who would want all those dirty rags hanging around for eternity?

I also believe that we should be careful that we don't make faith a work. I agree that it would be impossible to claim one had faith if it was unproductive. Faith is a gift and the test of its reality is certainly a changed life filled with good works. I think the book of Haggai and Romans are excellent texts to find the works problem made clearer.

WBW, the following paragraphs are part of an email I wrote to a friend who was troubled by his disobedience. Perhaps you will find it helpful too.

All of us are perplexed by why we still sin and probably more importantly what does this disobedience mean in relationship to God. The Apostle Paul had this problem too. He wrote the following after being a Christian for many years. It is/was written in the present tense, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom 7:24). Sounds to me like Paul and I have something in common.

WBW, If I were to tell you to go and find me ten men who truly confess that the law is good, who would you look for? I would be willing to bet that you would search for ten guys who outwardly appeared very obedient to the Commandments and produced a lot of good works. However, according to the Apostle Paul, the best obeyer of Commandments the world has known, a man who said this about himself, "...as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless..." (Phil 3:6). He also claimed the title, "chief of sinners" because his kind of obedience led him to try to kill the very God he thought he was obeying. What a strange religious condition, yet what an excellent example of how the letter of the Law kills.

According to what Paul wrote to the Roman Church, he had your/our problem but he saw it differently. He said, "For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing

the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good." (Rom 7:15-16).

Can you see it? The man who confesses that the law is good is not one able to do the good he wants, but rather a man who suffers a new internal contradiction because he can't. We have a new kind of conflict that was not in us before Christ came into our lives. I still cannot do the good I wish but instead of rationalizing it, I now confess it as sin. I'm at peace with God. Peace is not merely a feeling. It is that state that follows the end of a war. The end of a war certainly feels differently than fighting a war, but if we seek the feeling of peace without resolving conflict, then all we desire is a kind of heavenly tranquilizer.

WBW, I presume the war is over between you and God. You both seem to agree that your behavior stinks, well actually God doesn't really see you as a sinner anymore but as one who is as righteous as Jesus Himself (by faith Jesus, righteousness is ours).

Conflict we do have, praise God. It is the evidence that we, like Paul, confess that the Law is good.

Strange isn't it? The evidence that we belong to God is not perfect behavior but increased distress over how short we fall from being as wonderfully loving as Jesus is. Love is part of the problem. If we love God it produces obedience, while effort to do better is doomed to failure. Ron Ritchie, a friend of mine, used to say it like this, "Everything from God and nothing from us". I would add that what God wants is not your behavior, He wants you. Giving God one's good deeds as in, "Get me out of this and I'll never do it again" is kind of like offering Him a bribe.

Let me press on with a bit more scripture so you can see the problem more clearly. This is not an easy thing to understand and will require re-reading the book of Romans and that little two page Prophet in the OT named Haggai. You will find the comments in Hebrews about resting in God interesting too.

In Haggai the people are perplexed by a very strange drought that did not end when they repented of working on their own homes and neglecting God's House. As they worked on the Temple, they expected conditions to improve and God to bless the work of their hands as He had blessed their fore-fathers when they had laid the Temple stones. But the people in Haggai's time were baffled, their work on the Temple looked shabby to the older folks who remembered its former glory. So God sent Haggai to them with a sort of two part riddle.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Ask now the priests for a ruling: 'If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, will it become holy?'"

And the priests answered and said, "No."

Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will the latter become unclean?"

And the priests answered and said, "It will become unclean."

Then Haggai answered and said, "'So is this people. And so is this nation before Me,' declares the LORD, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.'" (Hag 2:11-14)

The usual human problem with works and God is present here: they repented, therefore God owes them at least a blessing for their efforts. The lack of God's blessing the "work of their hands" is not easy to grasp.

The book of Romans in and around the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8 teaches us almost the same thing. Inwardly we are indeed new creatures in Christ. However, the treasure is in an earthen vessel and this produces the conflict of falling short of the glory of God in our behavior. Like the people in Haggai's time we have a problem when it comes to doing what is right or doing "works" that are acceptable to God. Because we have the Holy Spirit in an unrenewed body, everything we do comes out through a dirty filter, the flesh. Thus it becomes contaminated. Fortunately, God is at work outside of us as well as dwelling within us. He can correct what we do

and will use anything and everything to work good in us and for us. He is faithful to complete what He has begun.

I find that it helps to remember that being saved wasn't my idea, I told Jesus on our first day together that if He wanted any of this stuff in the Bible done He was going to have to do it Himself because I didn't think like Him and I sure didn't do things the way He did them. I had the distinct impression that it was a deal. I stopped "doing" and He started "accomplishing". Later I fell in with bad company, Christians who taught a kind of mixture of God's will plus your will add up to super-will and one can then leap tall building programs in a single bound.

More on this subject can be found in Hebrews. I find it a difficult but very rewarding book to study. "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience." (Heb 4:9-11)

Incidentally, one can almost insert "unbelief" for "disobedience" in this passage from Hebrews.

WBW, the Holy Spirit can be trusted to produce good works through us. One need not threaten people with loss to motivate them to do good works. The problem you see in the Church is that there are not very many Christians who are confident in the new covenant.

Only advocating good works will produce a bunch of Pharisees instead of fruitful Christians. I share your concern that no one seems to care much about allowing the love of God to motivate them into a Godly life of good deeds, but finding threats of loss in the scriptures won't do what you want it to. It is better to put new wine into new skins. I found a considerable number of them hanging around the streets of San Francisco years ago. Some have been productive, about what one would expect considering Jesus' parable of the seeds and the sower.

In Christ,
Ted

Excerpted from WBW's email answer:

Dear Ted,

For most of your letter, we are actually in fairly good agreement. The thing that hits me is your use of the word "threats". Understand this, first of all: What I say in reference to the coming chastisement is meant as a warning, not a threat. If you are really familiar with Biblical Prophecy, you are surely aware that warnings constitute a major theme in it.

Bluntly, I do not believe that a person who is really walking a righteous walk of obedient faith would feel threatened by anything I have said. One thing I have noticed, though, about human nature, is that people do not like being warned. Especially not when the warnings have to do with the consequences of their sin. Yet the message of Scripture is that God's warnings are something we should be thankful for. As David said, in Psalm 19:11, relevant to the God's Laws, "Moreover by them is thy servant warned, And in keeping them there is great reward". David was obviously glad enough to be warned. The only ones who shouldn't be expected to be are, again, those who aren't obeying.

Christians are usually eager to talk about God's promises. There is a book that I think is still in print, and has been something of a Christian long-term bestseller, "The Jesus Person's Pocket Promise Book", compiled by David Wilkerson, that lists over 800 of them. Yet I don't know of anyone who has every made a compilation of all the warnings in the Bible. Frankly, though I am not scheduling it at this time, I feel inclined to do so. I have a serious hunch that I could find at least as many warnings as promises, and maybe more.

The Prophets in particular are full of them. And in the New Testament, for example, what would you call Matthew 5:22? Warnings are as much a part of Scripture as promises, and they are not there to be ignored. A Christian who

doesn't consider the warnings is ignoring them to his own hurt. A pastor who does not preach them is not preaching the full counsel of God. But one good way to get called a "legalist" is to start warning people on the basis of Scripture. I repeat, the purpose of my ministry is to warn, not threaten.

I was just given an example of the thinking of another Christian that illustrates that I am not the only one who has noticed the paradox between faith and works in regard to salvation. The following paragraph is excerpted from a Calvinist's email to me. He is saying exactly what I would say with slightly different words. The fact that a Calvinist would say this, in my view, affirms the validity of the observation.

"Too many Christians, including myself, have the strange notion that it is always someone else 's' job (God, angels, other Christians and even non-Christians) to bring about 'God's will.' Yes, we ultimately trust God in accomplishing His will (predestination), but God expects us to make 100% effort from our point of view (free will). Too many of us live our lives as if predestination handles 50% or more of reality, while free will handles 50% or less of it. The blessed paradox of reality is that both predestination AND free will BOTH in themselves handle 100% of reality, which we cannot comprehend in our finiteness. I had to and continue to struggle with such an amazing concept the Bible quite often alludes to. If we cannot accept this paradox, then the Bible truly has a contradiction within it." (Arnie Stanton.)

So, he says. To which I say, "Amen!!!!"
So should you.

Please think about these things.

Yours in Christ,
WBW

My reply:

Dear WBW,

You said, "Amen!!!!" to quite a mouthful in your last email. First you say, "For most of your letter, we are actually in fairly good agreement." That's good. Christians in agreement is a pleasant state of mind. But then you "paradox" that by agreeing with, "...but God expects us to make 100% effort from our point of view (free will). Too many of us live our lives as if predestination handles 50% or more of reality, while free will handles 50% or less of it...".

I have some trouble with that, WBW. "Free will" as most Christians think of it is puzzling to me. God sticks His commandments in my ribs and say's obey or die and I should call my response "free will"? I don't think so. If you stepped out of your house and a man put a gun in your face and said "your money or your life" and you gave him your money, you would think the policeman quite mad if he told you that you parted with your goods by your own free will.

Jesus does it with lots more gentleness but the message is still the same, give Him your life or perish in everlasting hell. Free will? Not exactly.

WBW, can you prove that you even have free will if I offer you nothing to choose? If I were to hold out my hands in front of you and say, pick right or left, you can demonstrate what looks like free will. But if don't hold out my hands, how will you show me your free will? I don't mean this as a Zen puzzle about the sound of a falling tree, it's just that free will seems more like having a baby than any other simile I can think of off hand. I have the potential to father a child but not without a mate. I have the potential to choose but not without something to choose.

Adam had free will but we as his descendants only have the slightest shadow of its remains. Because death entered the world the day Adam sinned, what humanity calls free will (choice) has become rather pointless. And I mean death as we Christians understand it: a life of worthless acts ending in the smoke of the eternal burning of

both deeds and worker. If one doesn't have a choice about the real "death" then free will is hardly free at all.

When Jesus came into the world, so did free will. For those who like to discuss these kinds of things, the issue is not the actual existence of free will but whether or not the Holy Spirit fiddles with our choices. We know He does externally by means of the Word of salvation through Christ. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. We know from books like Job that He can and does bring man to his knees. We know faith is a gift and that one can pray that most desperate of prayers, "I believe Lord, help my unbelief". We know God has offered us the opportunity to participate in the only work that will pass through that awful fire: the things done through us by Him. My friend and mentor Ray Stedman said that he believed that we were all going to be very surprised by what was Spirit and what was flesh when it came to good works. I agree with him.

Is it predetermined for some to perish?. Absolutely! The Devil, the Anti-Christ, his Prophet and Judas because he was born to perdition. "...and not one of them perished but the son of perdition,..." (John 17:12). That leaves a lot of undecided folks out there. We can certainly pray that the Lord will use us to make sure the number of those who perish will be very small. If thinking about this "work" doesn't compel one then perhaps one's faith should be called into question.

In other words, the Lord has entrusted Christians with the "free will" of the lost. We carry the message that offers them the only choice that matters: what will happen to them when they face the Lord God Almighty? Today and on that Great Day.

I think predestination will probably turn out to be more like water running down hill. It is predestined to do so as part of the preordained order of the universe. The order or way of the universe is a little over my head. We have a tendency to habitually think that there is only one possibility to the outcome of a given choice. Adam made a choice but God intervened. My salvation is God's intervention into what would have been my destiny. I was born predestined to die. God came into my life and gave it a new ending and a lot of new possibilities.

Loosen up WBW. Rejoice, it's a great witness. Be encouraged, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short That it cannot save; Neither is His ear so dull That it cannot hear." (Isa 59:1).

Ted Wise

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