ARE WORKS ACTUALLY IMPORTANT?

A biblical discussion of salvation should not include works except for the sole reason of clarifying that they have no contribution to it. With books like James emphasizing the practicality of Christianity, though, some of those lines can be blurred. Maybe salvation isn’t from works, but shouldn’t there be a stronger emphasis on works? What happened to living for God?

At the risk of over-repeating, one concept needs to remain crystal clear: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast,” “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Eph. 2:8, 9; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:8, 9, emphasis supplied).

Thus, the role of works is not salvific; no one can achieve, contribute to, or earn salvation through works. So, what’s the point of them? This week’s lesson will explore the main three points: works are a natural expression of genuine faith; works of faith bring the believer into the abundant life; and works of faith show Jesus to the world.
Write out John 15:1–17 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out John 15:4, 5. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
PROPERTIES OF WORKS

Natural Expression of Genuine Faith

Belief leads to action. If someone believes there is a test on Monday and they want an honest high grade, they will study. If someone else believes that gravity is a thing and they don’t want to die, they will not jump off a cliff without a hang glider or parachute. There is no process that these people go through in order to make themselves act on their belief. If a belief is genuinely held, it leads to action naturally.

This is James’s point when he explains the role of works. In the same way that finding someone who is naked and hungry and telling them, “Hey! Eat good food and be clothed!” is useless, so is saying that you believe something when there is no evidence in the actual life (James 2:14–17). Because it’s impossible to believe something so radical as the gospel and not have it show up in one’s life.

The Abundant Life

Jesus said that He came so that His sheep can have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). Before Jesus took humanity’s place, there was no choice other than sin; humanity was hopelessly enslaved to it. But Christ’s death gave the freedom of choice: everyone can choose to follow God, to abide in Christ, and to work the works of righteousness (Rom. 6:11).

This choice enables people to live the abundant life through the grace and power of Christ. There is none happier on earth than the one who does not steal or commit adultery, does to others as he would have them do to himself, is forgiving and gracious, is generous to those who can’t pay him back, and so on. Trusting obedience means doing what God has asked and then leaving the results and consequences in His trustworthy hands. The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and similar instructions from God were not given as arbitrary guidelines; they are quite literally the blueprints and practical instructions on how to live the most fulfilling, meaningful, and happy life possible.

Witness to the World

Jesus instructed you to “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Few people will have their first impression of God come from Scripture; more often, they read the lives of those who claim to follow Him (2 Cor. 3:2).

God has shared the ministry of reconciliation. His children are ambassadors for Christ, through whom God is pleading for all to be reconciled to Himself (2 Cor. 5:18–20). When ambassadors represent their home country, how do they conduct themselves? It’s simple. They conduct themselves in a way to represent their home country accurately, with respect and dignity. Thus also a Christian’s works should testify of the God they represent, the One whose interests they have in mind. Again, this is not to earn a place as an ambassador or child of God: it is a result of being both.
AM I DOING ENOUGH?

Variations of this question are often followed with explanations: “I know I’m not saved by works, but I surely have to do something.”

First, what exactly is being asked? “How do I know I’m doing enough?” Enough for what? It’s impossible to meet a vague standard, so what’s being aimed for?

Is it an attempt to retroactively earn salvation? “Thanks, Jesus, for getting me started. I appreciate it, but I understand that I have to take it from here.” That’s unbiblical (Col. 2:6). Is people-pleasing the goal? Is it to be seen as a godly person, known for all of the ministries, speaking appointments, and service? This is also not a good idea (Gal. 1:10).

Second, there’s a difference between conviction to serve and anxiety to serve. The first comes from God; the second does not. God does not motivate or communicate through anxieties or fears: He has not given a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and of a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7). His perfect love casts out all fear (1 John 4:18).

What is enough, though? There are the orphans to take care of, the widows, the church committee, literature evangelism, and there’s the need for weekly Bible studies. There’s also the need to preach several times a week, do home visitations, and write plenty of Christ-centered literature. We have to lead the people, serve in soup kitchens, donate clothing to a homeless shelter, and take up donations for the food pantry. Would that be enough? Well, there’s also learning rare languages to translate the Bible and visiting foreign lands to bring the life-giving words of Christ to those who do not know Him. We should also become excellent at our jobs and witness tirelessly and lovingly to colleagues. And, of course, we have to set apart a minimum of four hours a day for intercessory prayer, Bible study, and reflection.

If enough is defined as “all that there is to do,” then no one has the capacity to do enough. No one can meet every need, minister in every opportunity, or help everyone. Simply put, you and I cannot be God. We can follow Him, but we cannot be Him!

Instead of asking, “Am I doing enough?” choose the biblical rewording of, “Am I doing what God has asked me to do?” There are no biblical examples of God asking a single human to meet every need that they see. Instead, the apostles delegated responsibilities so that they could focus on their individual calling (Acts 6:1–7). In an even broader example, Paul explains that the church is the body of Christ, and “there are many members, yet one body” (1 Cor. 12:20). Each member is not a body unto itself, but a member of the body. As each part of the body has a specific function and focus, so does each child of God in being part of the body of Christ. God has not called anyone to be the entire church by themselves; He has called each to be a member of the church.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Isaiah 58
Ephesians 2:8–10
Philippians 3:1–12
John 6:28–29
Ezekiel 36:26–27

What other parables come to mind in connection with John 15:1–17?

Review your memorized verse from John 15:1–17.
HOW TO ACTUALLY CHANGE

In this week’s main passage, Jesus gave His disciples a clear picture of His relationship with them. Notice the wording carefully. The last verse does not say, “He who abides in Me and I in him can bear much fruit,” or “can now choose to bear much fruit,” or “might bear much fruit.” It simply says that this person “bears much fruit.” That is, it is a natural expression, a natural result of abiding in Christ and Him abiding in us.

Abiding in Christ when believing He is who He says He is leads to behaving a certain way. This is counter to legalism—this is living a life of belief.

Sometimes the idea of depending on Christ doesn’t bring a good reaction. It’s a natural (albeit sinful) reaction of the human heart to “shape up” in its own strength, to get credit for all the good actions and expressions of love. This desire can be exacerbated by the observation that people who don’t even know God are doing well enough (David confirms this from his own perspective in Psalm 73).

The answer to both hesitations is the same: reality. In reality, no one can change through his own power. It’s as ridiculous as de-spotting a leopard or drastically changing the color of someone’s skin (Jer. 13:23). In reality, no one can be credited with any of the kind, good, or selfless things they do—they’re all simply evidence of God working in and through them (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:6; 2:13). So they would be taking credit for something that they’re not actually responsible for.

The way to truly change, in a Christ-centered, lasting way, is to embrace reality. Embrace the reality that all humans are powerless in and of themselves to change (Jer. 13:23). Embrace the reality that God not only supplies the ability to change, but the desire to change (Phil. 2:13). Embrace the reality that God changes hearts in a way that humans are powerless to do, and by doing so, causes willing hearts to walk in the paths of good works, kindness, and love (Ezek. 36:26, 27). By living in this reality, by fully depending on, looking to, and trusting in Christ, people change. As Paul succinctly put it, “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Col. 2:6, ESV).

Walk in Him forever. Jesus is not a set of training wheels. He is not a charger for batteries, nor is He a temporary helper to get someone along their way. Jesus is more necessary for physical and spiritual life (and growth and usefulness and ability and everything else) than oxygen itself. All people need Him more often than they do air. Walking with Christ is not the ramp-up to a life of self-sufficient goodness. Instead, it is the journey, the freedom, and the joy of the rest of life. Relation to Christ is one of eternal dependence and love.
THE BEAUTY OF ABIDING

You are just as dependent upon Christ, in order to live a holy life, as is the branch upon the parent stock for growth and fruitfulness. Apart from Him you have no life. You have no power to resist temptation or to grow in grace and holiness. Abiding in Him, you may flourish. Drawing your life from Him, you will not wither nor be fruitless. You will be like a tree planted by the rivers of water.

Many have an idea that they must do some part of the work alone. They have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but now they seek by their own efforts to live aright. But every such effort must fail. Jesus says, “Without Me ye can do nothing.” Our growth in grace, our joy, our usefulness,—all depend upon our union with Christ. It is by communion with Him, daily, hourly,—by abiding in Him,—that we are to grow in grace. He is not only the Author, but the Finisher of our faith. It is Christ first and last and always. He is to be with us, not only at the beginning and the end of our course, but at every step of the way. David says, “I have set the Lord always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.” Psalm 16:8.

Do you ask, “How am I to abide in Christ?” In the same way as you received Him at first. “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him.” “The just shall live by faith.” Colossians 2:6; Hebrews 10:38. You gave yourself to God, to be His wholly, to serve and obey Him, and you took Christ as your Saviour. You could not yourself atone for your sins or change your heart; but having given yourself to God, you believe that He for Christ’s sake did all this for you. By faith you became Christ’s, and by faith you are to grow up in Him—by giving and taking. You are to give all,—your heart, your will, your service,—give yourself to Him to obey all His requirements; and you must take all,—Christ, the fullness of all blessing, to abide in your heart, to be your strength, your righteousness, your everlasting helper,—to give you power to obey. . . .

A life in Christ is a life of restfulness. There may be no ecstasy of feeling, but there should be an abiding, peaceful trust. Your hope is not in yourself; it is in Christ. Your weakness is united to His strength, your ignorance to His wisdom, your frailty to His enduring might. So you are not to look to yourself, not to let the mind dwell upon self, but look to Christ. Let the mind dwell upon His love, upon the beauty, the perfection, of His character. Christ in His self-denial, Christ in His humiliation, Christ in His purity and holiness, Christ in His matchless love—this is the subject for the soul’s contemplation. It is by loving Him, copying Him, depending wholly upon Him, that you are to be transformed into His likeness. (Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, 68–70.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How does this week’s lesson intersect with the rest of the letter of James?

Do you struggle with thinking you’ve done “enough”? Why or why not?

In your experience, why is it hard to depend on Christ sometimes?

How has Jesus shown you that He is trustworthy lately?

What have you learned about the practicalities of depending on Jesus?

What works do you want God to work through you?

What is something you feel convicted to do personally? What do you feel convicted that the community should do?

What lessons impacted you the most from this quarter on James?