

Trinity 12

One of Christianity's great controversies and theological discussions has been whether we are saved solely by God's grace through faith, or whether we are saved by an accumulation of good works.

One way of looking at the second of these notions is as a "works-based" plan of salvation. This idea is that if we can do enough good deeds we can "earn" our way into Heaven. Many clergy and churches of this persuasion explain our eternal fate as though it were judged on a set of scales. On one side of the scales would be a person's sins, on the other side would be his good deeds. If the good deeds "outweighed" the sins, then, these people felt, that worshipper might "earn" salvation.

This second theory is certainly in opposition to Scripture, where we are taught that it is only through God's redeeming grace that any of us can be saved. On our very best day, our works are but "filthy rags" compared to God's righteousness. The scriptures teach us that all of us have sinned. We all fall short of God's law. God is the author of salvation, period.

When I first started to work on my discernment process as preparation for movement to the diaconate, I felt very much like I was not worthy of this calling and I had no business being ordained. When I met with Fr. Ian I talked to him about my concerns. I guess I was expecting some rebuttal to this thought but instead he surprised me by saying. "You are right, you are not worthy. None of us are. But through the grace of God we continue to struggle and improve.

The other way of looking at this is the Protestant Reformation doctrine of "justification by grace through faith." This doctrine is certainly Scriptural, as far as it goes, as it does acknowledge that it is only through God's forgiving grace that we can be saved. Unfortunately, this doctrine, as taught by many of the Reformed churches, doesn't take into account Scriptures such as were read in our Second Lesson today:

“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

Unfortunately, many denominations and churches, teach a very selfish salvation. They teach that good works are not necessary at all. They teach that it is not necessary to do good to others, or to do works of charity. As long as you believe and come to church, you are saved. They often teach that it is not our responsibility for anyone’s salvation, except our own.

Christ Himself issued to us His “Great Commission”, that we are to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, in order to bring souls to Christ. Through the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Christ also taught us that we must help those around us in need to the best of our abilities. Scriptural evidence is abundant that, as Christians, our faith is expected to produce the “fruits” of good works.

The Anglican Church is not a product of the Protestant Reformation. We are the result of the English Reformation, which sought to rid the Church of error, to restore the importance of scripture as the basis for doctrine, and to simplify and restore the Anglican Church to the doctrine and practice of the primitive Catholic Church founded by Christ and His Apostles.

What does classical Anglicanism believe in this debate over the “justification” that leads to salvation? As has been the tradition of classical Anglicanism, we believe in the fullness of Scripture and that all doctrine must be verified by the fullness of Scripture, not just a portion of Scripture taken out of context of the rest of the Scriptures.

We believe that we are saved only by the grace of God through faith; but, in addition, we believe that good works flow naturally out of the life of someone who has been saved by grace. We believe that it is essential that the life of a Christian produce “fruits” including acts of charity, mercy, and sharing the Gospel with those who are in need of Christ as their Saviour.

To help us understand this, let's examine what the 39 Articles of the Anglican Church say on this subject:

“Article XI. 11 *Of the Justification of Man.* We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only, is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort, as more largely is expressed in the Homily of Justification.”

Then, immediately following:

“Article XII. 12 *Of Good Works.* Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgement; yet they are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”

Classical Anglicanism never doubted the truth of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, but classical Anglicanism illuminates that such doctrine is only part of the Scriptural teaching. The distinctive Anglican teaching emphasizes our involvement in the process of salvation. God works through us in such a way to make our cooperation with God possible. Anglicanism teaches that we cannot be passive in our acceptance of God's gift of salvation by grace. Rather, God's gift of salvation by grace frees us from our sins so that we are enabled to do God's will.

Truly to be a Christian requires us to be disciples. We are expected to do such things as Bible study, daily prayer, faithfully receiving the Sacraments, and serving others in whatever kind of need we find them. By doing these things our thinking, believing, and behaving are conformed to Jesus Christ. Anglicanism teaches that this is a life-long process of working out our own salvation. This process is often called “sanctification”, or “making holy”. As today’s second lesson teaches, we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, attempting always to work toward a life of holiness.

The Lord be with you.....

Let us pray:

Almighty, All-Loving and Merciful God, whose forgiving grace allows us to receive Thy gift of salvation, completed by Thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ on the cross: grant that we may always be thankful for Thy gift of redeeming grace to us; enable us always to do Thy will by being faithful in Bible Study, constant prayer, receiving the sacraments, and serving those others Thou sendest our way who are in need of our help; guide us and correct us, as we attempt to live a life of holiness. Through Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, who watches us with tender care. *Amen.*