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FAITH THE SOLE SAVING ACT.

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"Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."—JOHN vi. 28, 29.

IN asking their question, the Jews intended to inquire of Christ what particular things they must do, before all others, in order to please God. The "works of God," as they denominate them, were not any and every duty, but those more special and important acts by which the creature might secure the Divine approval and favour. Our Lord understood their question in this sense, and in his reply tells them that the great and only work for them to do was to exercise faith in him. They had employed the plural number in their question; but in his answer he employs the singular. They had asked, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?"—as if there were several of them. His reply is, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." He narrows down the terms of salvation to a single one; and makes the destiny of the soul to depend upon the performance of a particular individual act. In this, as in many other incidental ways, our Lord teaches his own divinity. If he were a mere creature; if he were only an inspired teacher like David or Paul; how would he dare, when asked to give in a single word the condition and means of human salvation, to say that they consist in resting the soul

upon him? Would David have dared to say, "This is the work of God,—this is the saving act,—that ye believe in me?" Would Paul have presumed to say to the anxious inquirer: "Your soul is safe if you trust in me?" But Christ makes this declaration without any qualification. Yet he was meek and lowly of heart, and never assumed an honour or a prerogative that did not belong to him. It is only upon the supposition that he was "very God of very God," the Divine Redeemer of the children of men, that we can justify such an answer to such a question.

The belief is spontaneous and natural to man, that something must be done in order to salvation. No man expects to reach heaven by inaction. Even the indifferent and supine soul expects to rouse itself up at some future time, and work out its salvation. The most thoughtless and inactive man, in religious respects, will acknowledge that thoughtlessness and inactivity, if continued, will end in perdition. But he intends at a future day to think, and act, and be saved. So natural is it, to every man, to believe in salvation by works; so ready is every one to concede that heaven is reached, and hell is escaped, only by an earnest effort of some kind; so natural is it to every man to ask, with these Jews, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"

But mankind generally, like the Jews in the days of our Lord, are under a delusion respecting the nature of the work which must be performed in order to salvation. And in order to understand this delusion, we must first examine the common notion upon the subject.

When a man begins to think of God, and of his own relations to him, he finds that he owes him service and obedience. He has a work to perform, as a subject of the Divine government; and this work is to obey the Divine law. He finds himself obligated to love God with all his heart, and his neighbour as himself, and to discharge all the duties that spring out of his relations to God and man. He perceives that this is the "work" given him to do by creation, and that if he does it he

will attain the true end of his existence, and be happy in time and eternity. When, therefore, he begins to think of a religious life, his first spontaneous impulse is to begin the performance of this work which he has hitherto neglected, and to reinstate himself in the Divine favour by the ordinary method of keeping the law of God. He perceives that this is the mode in which the angels preserve themselves holy and happy; that this is the original mode appointed by God when he established the covenant of works; and he does not see why it is not the method for him. The law expressly affirms that the man that doeth these things shall live by them; he proposes to take the law just as it reads, and just as it stands,—to do the deeds of the law, to perform the works which it enjoins, and to live by the service. This, we say, is the common notion, natural to man, of the species of work which must be performed in order to eternal life. This was the idea which filled the mind of the Jews when they put the question of the text, and received for answer from Christ, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” Our Lord does not draw out the whole truth in detail. He gives only the positive part of the answer, leaving his hearers to infer the negative part of it. For the whole doctrine of Christ, fully stated, would run thus: “No work *of the kind of which you are thinking* can save you; no obedience of the law, ceremonial or moral, can reinstate you in right relations to God. I do not summon you to the performance of any such service as that which you have in mind, in order to your justification and acceptance before the Divine tribunal. *This is the work of God,—this is the sole and single act which you are to perform,—namely, that you believe on him whom he hath sent as a propitiation for sin.* I do not summon you to works of the law, but to faith in me, the Redeemer. Your first duty is not to attempt to acquire a righteousness in the old method, by doing something of yourselves, but to receive a righteousness in the new method, by trusting in what another has done for you.”

1. What is the *ground* and *reason* of such an answer as

this? Why is man invited to the method of faith in another, instead of the method of faith in himself? Why is not his first spontaneous thought the true one? Why should he not obtain eternal life by resolutely proceeding to do his duty, and keeping the law of God? Why can he not be saved by the law of works? Why is he so summarily shut up to the law of faith?

We answer: Because it is *too late* for him to adopt the method of salvation by works. The law is, indeed, explicit in its assertion that the man that doeth these things shall live by them; but then it supposes that the man begin at the beginning. A subject of government cannot disobey a civil statute for five or ten years, and then put himself in right relations to it again by obeying it for the remainder of his life. Can a man who has been a thief or an adulterer for twenty years, and then practises honesty and purity for the following thirty years, stand up before the seventh and eighth commandments and be acquitted by them? It is too late for any being who has violated a law, even in a single instance, to attempt to be justified by that law. For the law demands and supposes that obedience begin at the very *beginning* of existence, and continue down, *uninterruptedly*, to the end of it. No man can come in at the middle of a process of obedience, any more than he can come in at the last end of it, if he proposes to be accepted upon the ground of *obedience*. "I testify," says St. Paul, "to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the *whole* law" (Gal. v. 3). The whole, or none, is the just and inexorable rule which law lays down in the matter of justification. If any subject of the Divine government can show a clean record from the beginning to the end of his existence, the statute says to him, "Well done," and gives him the reward which he has earned. And it gives it to him not as a matter of grace, but of debt. The law never makes a present of wages. It never pays out wages until they are earned—fairly and fully earned. But when a perfect obedience, from first to last, is rendered to its claims, the compensation follows as a matter of

debt. The law, in this instance, is itself brought under obligation. It owes a reward to the perfectly obedient subject of law, and it considers itself his debtor until it is paid. "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. If it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. iv. 4; xi. 6).

But, on the other hand, law is equally exact and inflexible in case the work has not been performed. It will not give eternal life to a soul that has sinned ten years, and then perfectly obeyed ten years—supposing that there is any such soul. The obedience, as we have remarked, must run parallel with the *entire* existence, in order to be a ground of justification. Infancy, childhood, youth, manhood, old age, and then the whole immortality that succeeds, must all be uninterruptedly sinless and holy, in order to make eternal life a matter of debt. Justice is as exact and punctilious upon this side as it is upon the other. We have seen that when a perfect obedience has been rendered, justice will not palm off the wages that are due as if they were some gracious gift; and, on the other hand, when a perfect obedience has not been rendered, it will not be cajolled into the bestowment of wages as if they had been earned. There is no principle that is so intelligent, so upright, and so exact as justice; and no creature can expect either to warp it, or to circumvent it.

In the light of these remarks, it is evident that it is *too late* for a sinner to avail himself of the method of salvation by works; for that method requires that sinless obedience begin at the beginning of his existence, and never be interrupted. But no man thus begins, and no man thus continues. "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" (Psa. lviii. 3). Man comes into the world a sinful and alienated creature. He is by nature a child of wrath (Eph. ii. 3). Instead of beginning life with holiness, he begins it with sin. His heart at birth is apostate and corrupt; and his conduct from the very first is contrary to law. Such is the teaching of Scripture, such is the statement

of the Creeds, and such is the testimony of consciousness, respecting the character which man brings into the world with him. The very dawn of human life is clouded with depravity, is marked by the carnal mind which is at enmity with the law of God, and is not subject to that law, neither indeed can be. How is it possible, then, for man to attain eternal life by a method that supposes, and requires, that the very dawn of his being be holy like that of Christ's, and that every thought, feeling, purpose, and act be conformed to law through the entire existence? Is it not *too late* for such a creature as man now is to adopt the method of salvation by the works of the law?

But we will not crowd you with the doctrine of native depravity and the sin in Adam. We have no doubt that it is the scriptural and true doctrine concerning human nature, and have no fears that it will be contradicted by either a profound self-knowledge, or a profound metaphysics. But perhaps you are one who doubts it, and therefore, for the sake of argument, we will let you set the commencement of sin where you please. If you tell us that it begins in the second, or the fourth, or the tenth year of life, it still remains true that it is *too late* to employ the method of justification by works. If you concede any sin at all, at any point whatsoever, in the history of a human soul, you preclude it from salvation by the deeds of the law, and shut it up to salvation by grace. Go back as far as you can in your memory, and you must acknowledge that you find sin as far as you go; and even if, in the face of Scripture and the symbols of the church, you should deny that the sin runs back to birth and apostasy in Adam, it still remains true that the first years of your *conscious* existence were not years of holiness, nor the first acts which you *remember* acts of obedience. Even upon your own theory, you *begin* with sin, and therefore you cannot be justified by the law.

This, then, is a conclusive reason and ground for the declaration of our Lord, that the one great work which every fallen man has to perform, and must perform, in order to salvation,

is faith in *another's* work, and confidence in *another's* righteousness. If man is to be saved by his own righteousness, that righteousness must begin at the very beginning of his existence, and go on without interruption. If he is to be saved by his own good works, there never must be a single instant in his life when he is not working such works. But, beyond all controversy, such is not the fact. It is, therefore, impossible for him to be justified by trusting in himself; and the only possible mode that now remains, is to trust in another.

2. And this brings us to the second part of our subject. "This is the work of God, that ye *believe* on him whom he hath sent." It will be observed that faith is here denominated a "work." And it is so indeed. It is a mental act, and an act of the most comprehensive and energetic species. Faith is an active principle that carries the whole man with it and in it—head and heart, will and affections, body, soul, and spirit. There is no act so all-embracing in its reach, and so total in its momentum, as the act of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In this sense it is a "work." It is no supine and torpid thing, but the most vital and vigorous activity that can be conceived of. When a sinner, moved by the Holy Ghost, the very source of spiritual life and energy, casts himself, in utter helplessness and with all his weight, upon his Redeemer for salvation, never is he more active, and never does he do a greater work.

And yet faith is not a work in the common signification of the word. In the Pauline epistles it is generally opposed to works in such a way as to exclude them. For example: "Where is boasting, then? It is excluded. By what law?—of works? Nay, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law. Receive ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" In these and other passages, faith and works are directly contrary to each

other; so that in this connection faith is not a "work." Let us examine this point a little in detail, for it will throw light upon the subject under discussion.

In the opening of the discourse we alluded to the fact that when a man's attention is directed to the subject of his soul's salvation, his first spontaneous thought is, that he must of *himself* render something to God as an offset for his sins; that he must perform his duty by *his own* power and effort, and thereby acquire a personal merit before his Maker and Judge. The thought of appropriating another person's work—of making use of what another being has done in his stead—does not occur to him; or, if it does, it is repulsive to him. His thought is, that it is his own soul that is to be saved, and it is his own work that must save it. Hence, he begins to perform religious duties in the ordinary use of his own faculties, and in his own strength, for the purpose and with the expectation of *settling the account* which he knows is unsettled between himself and his Judge. As yet there is no faith in another being. He is not trusting and resting in another person, but he is trusting and resting in himself; he is not making use of the work or services which another has wrought in his behalf, but he is employing his own powers and faculties in performing these his own works, which he owes, and which, if paid in this style, he thinks will save his soul. This is the spontaneous, and it is the correct, idea of a "work,"—of what St. Paul so often calls a "work of the law;" and it is the exact contrary of faith.

For faith never does anything in this independent and self-reliant manner. It does not perform a service in its own strength, and then hold it out to God as something for him to receive, and for which he must pay back wages in the form of remitting sin and bestowing happiness. Faith is wholly occupied with *another's* work and *another's* merit. The believing soul deserts all its own doings, and betakes itself to what a third person has wrought for it, and in its stead. When, for illustration, a sinner discovers that he owes a satisfaction to eternal justice for the sins that are past, if he adopts the method of

works, he will offer up his endeavours to obey the law, as an offset and a reason why he should be forgiven. He will say in his heart, if he does not in his prayer: "I am striving to atone for the past by doing my duty in the future; my resolutions, my prayers, and almsgiving, all this hard struggle to be better and to do better, ought certainly to avail for my pardon." Or, if he has been educated in a superstitious church, he will offer up his penances, and mortifications, and pilgrimages, as a satisfaction to justice, and a reason why he should be forgiven, and made blessed for ever in heaven. That is a very instructive anecdote which St. Simon relates respecting the last hours of the profligate Louis XIV. "One day," he says, "the king, recovering from loss of consciousness, asked his confessor, Pere Tellier, to give him absolution for all his sins. Pere Tellier asked him if he suffered much. 'No,' replied the king, 'that's what troubles me. I should like to suffer more, for the expiation of my sins.'" Here was a poor mortal who had spent his days in carnality and transgression of the pure law of God. He is conscious of guilt, and feels the need of its atonement. And now, upon the very edge of eternity and brink of doom, he proposes to make his own atonement, to be his own redeemer and save his own soul, by offering up to the eternal Nemesis that was racking his conscience a few hours of finite suffering, instead of betaking himself to the infinite passion and agony of Calvary. This is a "work;" and, alas! a "*dead* work," as St. Paul so often denominates it. This is the method of justification by works. But when a man adopts the method of justification by faith, his course is exactly opposite to all this. Upon discovering that he owes a satisfaction to eternal justice for the sins that are past, instead of holding up his prayers, or almsgiving, or penances, or moral efforts, or any works of his own, he holds up the sacrificial work of Christ. In his prayer to God, he interposes the agony and death of the great substitute between his guilty soul and the arrows of justice. He knows that the very best of his own works, that even the most perfect obedience that a creature could render, would be pierced through and through by

the glittering shafts of violated law. And therefore he takes the "shield of faith." He places the oblation of the God-man—not his own work and not his own suffering, but another's work and another's suffering—between himself and the judicial vengeance of the Most High. And in doing so, he works no work of his own, and no dead work; but he works the "work of God;" he *believes* on him whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation for his sins, and not for his only, but for the sins of the whole world.

This, then, is the great doctrine which our Lord taught the Jews, when they asked him what particular thing or things they must do in order to get eternal life. The apostle John, who recorded the answer of Christ in this instance, repeats the doctrine again in his first epistle: "Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandment, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, that we should *believe* on the name of his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John iii. 22, 23). The whole duty of sinful man is here summed up, and concentrated, in the duty to trust in another person than himself, and in another work than his own. The apostle, like his Lord before him, employs the singular number: "This is his commandment,"—as if there were no other commandment upon record. And this corresponds with the answer which Paul and Silas gave to the despairing jailor: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,"—do this one single thing,—and thou shalt be saved." And all of these teachings accord with that solemn declaration of our Lord: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." In the matter of salvation, where there is faith in Christ, there is everything; and where there is not faith in Christ, there is nothing.

1. And it is with this thought that we would close this discourse, and enforce the doctrine of the text. Do whatever else you may in the matter of religion, you have done nothing until you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God

hath sent into the world to be the propitiation for sin. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, it is *the appointment and declaration of God*, that man, if saved at all, must be saved by faith in the person and work of the Mediator. "Neither is there salvation in any other : for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts iv. 12). It of course rests entirely with the Most High God to determine the mode and manner in which he will enter into negotiations with his creatures, and especially with his rebellious creatures. He must make the terms, and the creature must come to them. Even, therefore, if we could not see the reasonableness and adaptation of the method, we should be obligated to accept it. The creature, and particularly the guilty creature, cannot dictate to his Sovereign and Judge respecting the terms and conditions by which he is to be received into favour, and secure eternal life. Men overlook this fact when they presume, as they do, to sit in judgment upon the method of redemption by the blood of atonement, and to quarrel with it.

In the first Punic war, Hannibal laid siege to Saguntum, a rich and strongly-fortified city on the eastern coast of Spain. It was defended with a desperate obstinacy by its inhabitants ; but the discipline, the energy, and the persistence of the Carthaginian army were too much for them ; and, just as the city was about to fall, Alorcus, a Spanish chieftain, and a mutual friend of both the contending parties, undertook to mediate between them. He proposed to the Saguntines that they should surrender, allowing the Carthaginian general to make his own terms ; and the argument he used was this : "Your city is captured, in any event. Further resistance will only bring down upon you the rage of an incensed soldiery, and horrors of a sack. Therefore surrender immediately, and take whatever Hannibal shall please to give. You cannot lose anything by the procedure, and you may gain something, even though it be little." Now, although there is no resemblance between the government of the good and merciful God and the cruel purposes and conduct of a heathen warrior, and we shrink

from bringing the two into any kind of juxtaposition, still, the advice of the wise Alorcus to the Saguntines is good advice for every sinful man in reference to his relations to Eternal Justice. We are all of us at the mercy of God. Should he make no terms at all; had he never given his Son to die for our sins, and never sent his Spirit to exert a subduing influence upon our hard hearts, but had let guilt and justice take their inexorable course with us; not a word could be uttered against the procedure by heaven, earth, or hell. No creature anywhere can complain of justice. That is an attribute that cannot even be attacked. But the All-Holy is also the All-Merciful. He has made certain terms, and has offered certain conditions of pardon, without asking leave of his creatures, and without taking them into council; and were these terms as strict as Draco, instead of being as tender and pitiful as the tears and blood of Jesus, it would become us criminals to make no criticisms even in that extreme case, but accept them precisely as they were offered by the Sovereign and the Arbiter. We exhort you, therefore, to take these terms of salvation simply as they are given, asking no questions, and being thankful that there are any terms at all between the offended majesty of Heaven and the guilty criminals of earth. Believe on him whom God hath sent, because it is the appointment and declaration of God that, if guilty man is to be saved at all, he must be saved by faith in the person and work of the Mediator. The very disposition to quarrel with this method implies arrogance in dealing with the Most High. The least inclination to alter the condition shows that the creature is attempting to criticise the Creator, and, what is yet more, that the criminal has no true perception of his crime, no sense of his exposed and helpless situation, and presumes to dictate the terms of his own pardon!

2. We might, therefore, leave the matter here, and there would be a sufficient reason for exercising the act of faith in Christ. But there is a second and additional reason which we will also briefly urge upon you. Not only is it the divine appointment that man shall be saved, if saved at all, by the

substituted work of another, but there are *needs*, there are crying *wants*, in the human conscience that can be supplied by no other method. There is a perfect *adaptation* between the redemption that is in Christ Jesus and the guilt of sinners. As we have seen, we could reasonably urge you to believe in him whom God hath sent, simply because God has sent him, and because he has told you that he will save you through no other name and in no other way, and will save you in this name and in this way. But we now urge you to the act of faith in this substituted work of Christ because it has an *atoning* virtue, and can pacify a perturbed and angry conscience; can wash out the stains of guilt that are grained into it; can extract the sting of sin which ulcerates and burns there. It is the idea of *expiation* and *satisfaction* that we now single out and press upon your notice. Sin must be expiated—expiated either by the blood of the criminal, or by the blood of his Substitute. You must either die for your own sin, or someone who is able and willing must die for you. This is founded and fixed in the nature of God, and the nature of man, and the nature of sin. There is an eternal and necessary connection between crime and penalty. The wages of sin is death. But all this inexorable necessity has been completely provided for by the sacrificial work of the Son of God. In the gospel, God satisfies his own justice for the sinner, and now offers you the full benefit of the satisfaction, if you will humbly and penitently accept it. “What compassion can equal the words of God the Father addressed to the sinner condemned to eternal punishment, and having no means of redeeming himself: ‘Take my only-begotten Son, and make him an offering for thyself;’ or the words of the Son: ‘Take me, and ransom thy soul’? For this is what *both* say when they invite and draw man to faith in the gospel.” In urging you, therefore, to trust in Christ’s vicarious sufferings for sin, instead of going down to hell and suffering for sin in your own person; in entreating you to escape the stroke of justice upon yourself, by believing in him who was smitten in your stead, who “was wounded for your transgressions and bruised for your

iniquities ;” in beseeching you to let the Eternal Son of God be your substitute in this awful judicial transaction ; we are summoning you to no arbitrary and irrational act. The peace of God which it will introduce into your conscience, and the love of God which it will shed abroad through your soul, will be the most convincing of all proofs that the act of faith in the great atonement does no violence to the ideas and principles of the human constitution. No act that contravenes those intuitions and convictions which are part and particle of man’s moral nature could possibly produce peace and joy. It would be revolutionary and anarchical. The soul could not rest an instant. And yet it is the uniform testimony of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that the act of simple confiding faith in his blood and righteousness is the most peaceful, the most joyful act they ever performed ; nay, that it was the first *blessed* experience they ever felt in this world of sin, this world of remorse, this world of fears and forebodings concerning judgment and doom.

Is the question, then, of the Jews pressing upon your mind ? Do you ask, what one particular single thing shall I do, that I may be safe for time and eternity ? Hear the answer of the Son of God himself : “ This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.”