

Episode 227

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. Today Jeff, Kevin, and I are taking a quick break from our Difficult Passages of the Bible series. Let me explain why. I've noticed, and it's been pointed out to me a few times, that there are some videos online—I'm not going to link to any of them, it wouldn't be that difficult to find—where people criticize either me or the podcast or GotQuestions.org for, in their mind, teaching salvation by works. So let me say at the outset, I, Jeff, Kevin, everyone at Got Questions, every article on our website teaches that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We absolutely reject that works are necessary for salvation.

Shea Houdmann

Now what the issue—and here we're going to be discussing what's called hyper-grace or free grace on one side, to lordship salvation on the other, we're going to be discussing those issues. Ultimately, what we want to get to is, what is the relationship between works and salvation? This is something that we want to be very careful with how we word, because I know people who absolutely believe the same as I do. I know they've said it in ways that, yeah, that can easily be construed as you teaching salvation by works. So let me say, if I were to summarize it in one word, I'd say, yes, salvation is by, again, grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone, but salvation will result in works. They will result in a change.

Shea Houdmann

That is 2 Corinthians 5.17 says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. To say that you can be in Christ, but the old hasn't to any degree left and the new hasn't to any degree come, that's a contradiction. Or even Ephesians 2.8.9, for by grace are you saved through faith, and this not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast. The very next verse, verse 10, says, for we are Christ's workmanship created to do good works.

Shea Houdmann

So works are the, I've used the phrase, the inevitable result that being saved will have a transformative effect on your life. I'm not saying it's always instant. Sometimes it is. It's progressive. It requires some degree of discipleship. It requires understanding sin and what repentance from sin means, and how to rely on the power of God to achieve victory over sin. So I'm not saying it's always instantaneous, but to say that a person can come to faith in Christ and have their life not be changed at all, we think that's

completely contradictory to Scripture. So hopefully, you've heard me again say salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and Christ alone. Works are not required for salvation, but we do believe that works are the result of salvation.

Shea Houdmann

So, Kevin, as you study this issue over the years, I know you've dealt with it many times. What are some of the key points that you've come across in your study, and how can we understand this faith, works, and grace, the relationship between the three?

Kevin Stone

Well, one thing I've learned is that we just need to always be going back to grace. That we are saved by grace through faith, not by works, but we are saved unto good works. As you mentioned, Shea, in Ephesians 2 and verse 10, it says that we are saved unto good works. God has prepared those works ahead of time for us to be doing them.

Kevin Stone

But when we get down to this whole area of lordship salvation versus the free grace movement, it's really kind of frustrating, because I've got people I respect on both sides of this issue. People in both camps. I've got on the free grace side, I've got Lewis Schaeffer, and on the lordship salvation side, I've got B.B. Warfield. On the free grace side, I've got Charles Ryrie, one of my heroes, and on the lordship salvation, I've got John MacArthur, who is somebody I highly respect and have read a lot of. So I've got good men in both camps, and it's frustrating in a way, but it also, I think, just shows that what we're talking about here is a discussion among friends. It should not be turned into a heresy kind of thing, where we're making those kind of accusations. It's a friendly fight. It's a friendly discussion that we should be having.

Kevin Stone

Ephesians 2.10, we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. So God prepared the works for us to be walking in them, for us to be accomplishing. But what if we don't? What if we are not walking in those good works that God has prepared for us? Does that mean that we're saved still? Can we still be saved in spite of that? The lordship salvation camp would say, no, that would be evidence that you're not saved. There's never been a change of heart. You've never had a born-again experience because you are not being sanctified. You're not walking in those good works that God would have for you.

Kevin Stone

The free grace people, though, would say, well, yes, it's entirely possible that you are saved and yet living carnally. You're living in a way that is displeasing to the Lord. It's not ideal, but it has nothing to do with your salvation perse. Your salvation is based on your choice to follow Christ. It is based on your faith in Jesus' promise of eternal life, and whatever happens after that doesn't affect your faith. That moment of faith is all important.

Kevin Stone

So, would the life of a believer resemble the life of an unbeliever? Lordship salvation says, no, it can't. There must be change. You must make Jesus the Lord of your life, and if that's not happening, then you're fooling yourself if you think that you're actually saved because you can't just say, Lord, Lord, and not do the things that he tells us to do.

Kevin Stone

Free grace people, though, would say, well, yes, it is possible for a believer's life to resemble an unbeliever's. We have examples in Scripture of godly men who fell into great depths of sin, and it's not ideal, but it can happen. It is possible, but again, it goes back to that faith that you had in Jesus' promise of eternal life. That's what saves. It is not the continuance of works that is what saves us.

Kevin Stone

So, the lordship salvation position, that would help to prevent people from just taking Jesus on as like another hobby. I've got all these hobbies that I'm interested in, and oh, here's Jesus. I like that, too. I'm going to bring him in, and some days I feel like working on this hobby. On some days, I feel like working on my Jesus hobby, and I just add that to my list of interests.

Lordship salvation says, no, no, you cannot do that. You've got to make Jesus priority. He has to be lord of your life. If you have a shelf full of idols, all those idols need to be swept off the shelf, and the cross is there by itself. Jesus is supreme, and he needs to be reigning in your heart.

Kevin Stone

Free grace position prevents people, though, from saying, I must believe, plus turn from sin, plus do good works, plus persevere to the end in order to be saved. I've got a lot of pressure on me to stay saved and to show that, to be assured of that through my good works. So, free grace, people say, no, to be saved, we must believe, period. We stop there. And so, I think both of these camps are in their own way trying to prevent an extreme from taking place, an extreme that would probably, yes, would lead to heresy. And I think that the truth of the matter lies somewhere in between these two camps.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, I do like the idea of guardrails. I think there's a lot of times God presents us with exactly that. Instead of giving us a path down the middle, saying, walk a tightrope, he says, keep it in between the lane markers. Don't go this extreme. Don't go that extreme. For me, almost, almost exclusively when I talk about this, and I wouldn't say every time, but it might be. Every time I communicate with somebody about this issue, and they disagree with the lordship salvation stance, it is always, always, always misrepresented or misunderstood as you are teaching that you have to do good things in order to earn or to be saved.

Jeff Laird

So, the reiteration is good. Nobody in our ministry believes that. We do not believe under any circumstances that there's anything you can do, must do, have to do, either to earn or to keep your salvation, period, end of story. However, there are so many things in scripture to talk about the change that you're expecting to see in life. And we know things can happen. We can be disobedient. We can do things we're not supposed to. Noah did it. David did it. Moses did it. Peter did it. All those things are possible. But there's too much in scripture where it repeatedly talks about how the things that we do are reflecting what we actually believe.

Jeff Laird

For me, there's a couple of scriptures that do a really good job of that. There's a controversy in James about the same issue, the relationship between belief, grace, works, and so on and so forth. But he makes a comment in there when he says, even demons believe in God, so what? And to me, that speaks to some of the free or the hyper-grace perspective, that it's not just this intellectual acknowledgement. That doesn't make any sense. There's nothing in the New Testament that says, as long as you agree, but you don't submit, as long as you agree, but you don't cooperate, as long as you agree, but you don't change, then that somehow counts as salvation.

Jeff Laird

Shea, you mentioned the idea that we're new creations.

That's in 2 Corinthians. There's another part of 2 Corinthians where Paul says, examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Well, how exactly is a person supposed to do that? Paul's the same one who said things like these certain lists of sins. He says this in 1 Corinthians. He mentions the idea that people who are identified by certain sins will not inherit the kingdom of God. He says, so were some of you, but you have been changed. You have been washed. Paul, John, everyone in the New Testament acknowledges that that doesn't mean that just because a Christian falls into a period of sin or struggles with something that they've lost their salvation.

Jeff Laird

Another thing we do not believe. You cannot lose your salvation when it's legitimately there. Those things are possible, but it just does not make theological or rational sense to say that somebody is accepting Jesus Christ as God incarnate, as the creator and the Savior in whom I am placing my trust to be forgiven of my sin when I am not sufficiently convicted or convinced that there's sin in my life, that it ever makes a change. And that's where some of the extreme comes up.

Jeff Laird

My favorite analogy for this that I bring up is the idea of disease. So take something like the flu, for example, if somebody tells me, Hey, Jeff, I have the flu and I say, okay, do you have a fever? Do you have headaches? Do you have muscle soreness? Do you have congestion, a cough, any of those things? If the person says, oh no, absolutely none of those. Well, in theory, that person may very well have the flu. And it's the same thing with a Christian. In theory, a person might demonstrate a life that does not show any marks of Christ's influence. And that's especially true in the early onset, both of your faith and when it comes to something like a communicable disease.

Jeff Laird

But there's no reason for anybody to suspect that that person actually has it. If there are zero symptoms, then the doctor is going to say, there's no reason for me to think that you have it. You literally exhibit no symptoms of having this disease. Whereas if the person has those symptoms and the more they have them and the more extremely they have them, the more obvious it is to them and other people that they actually are in that condition. And I think that's why when we read through scripture and we see all these things about how the Holy Spirit works in us, convicts us, we're new creations, we've moved away, we've changed. How can you be salt and light if there is literally no light coming out, if there's no influence on what's going on?

Jeff Laird

So the big misunderstanding is always trying to flip it to that other extreme and say that it's teaching works. It is not. It is simply saying that we are expecting to see symptoms. If you don't see symptoms, you have no reason to think that you or the other person actually has the condition. That's really the essence of where the positive side of something like lordship salvation comes down is that warning that you cannot simply look over at Jesus and go, oh, cool. And then keep on going and expect that to be your get out of hell free card.

Shea Houdmann

That's, Jeff, that illustration is helpful. It's kind of weird comparing salvation to a disease, but I get the point of your illustration there. Jeff, as you know,

someone related to BibleRef in the early days, this was a very big issue for them and resulted in us parting ways. And there's been volunteers with Got Questions Ministries who have disagreed with us strongly over this over the years. I had a former mentor who I disagreed with strongly over this. She said, this is an issue I've had to deal with many times. And often it comes down to, it's like, OK, Shea, you say that good works change life, progressively more obedience to God's Word, progressively more closely following Christ is the inevitable result of salvation. Well, what would you say if someone, they have trusted in Jesus Christ as their Savior by grace through faith, and there's no works? Would you say that person is saved? I'm like, OK, hypothetically, theoretically speaking, if the person has trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior by grace through faith, fully relying on Christ's death and resurrection as the atoning sacrifice for his or her sin and the resurrection for proof of that payment was sufficient to prove that there will be life after death, yes. Even if there's no works, I believe that person's saved.

Shea Houdmann

But what you're presenting is a situation I don't think is possible. I don't see how someone can go from death to life, can go from enslaved under the prince of the power of this world to being a follower of Christ. I can see how they can go from being an old creation, new creation, and the Greek word there, something entirely new, not just a new version of the old thing, but no, something entirely new to go from. So many different things change when we're saved. We're reconciled, we're redeemed, we're sanctified, we're justified. And all of these things, to say that that wouldn't result in any change whatsoever, I can't do that. So theoretically speaking, yes, if a person truly trusts in Jesus Christ and there's no works, yes, I would still believe that person's saved, but what you're presenting is an impossibility to me.

That salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, trusting in Jesus Christ, believing in him as your Savior, that is all that is required for salvation. But that is such a powerful event, that is such a transformative event that Kevin's going to hate me for butchering the English language here, but that cannot not have a transformative effect on your life.

Kevin Stone

No, that statement was easy enough to follow. That wasn't a butchering of the language at all. Usually, Shea, when I am confronted with that type of a hypothetical question, what if this person has confessed faith in Christ and then doesn't show anything, there's no evidence of it as far as good works or no changed life, usually I go back to just the fact that we don't know that person's heart. God knows. God knows the condition of that person's soul.

Kevin Stone

What gets really difficult, though, is on the free grace side, there are advocates of that position that would go so far as to say the person can make a profession of faith in Christ and then later totally deconstruct, totally become an atheist and be working against Christianity, and that person is still saved because that profession of faith was made. I don't know. That's very difficult for me to wrap my head around.

Kevin Stone

Part of the difficulty, I think, is also how some terms are defined and how they look at faith. So, the Lordship Salvation people see faith as an active thing. It is a living thing. It produces works. It will have a result of following Christ and being his disciple and taking up your cross and all the rest. But the free grace side would see faith as more passive. You believe and then Jesus does the transformation in your heart. He causes you to be born again, and there's not really much that's required. In fact, there's nothing that is required of us after that moment of faith.

Kevin Stone

And then repentance is looked at differently. Repentance, in a lot of people's minds, and I think in the Lordship Salvation for sure, involves a remorse for sin, a feeling of being sorry, and an act of the will to leave that sin behind and then to turn to Christ. So, as you're turning to Christ, you are turning away from sin. You're turning from sin. You're turning from something to something, and you're turning from sin and leaving wickedness behind, leaving that old lifestyle behind, and you are turning to Christ. That's repentance in Lordship Salvation because you're acknowledging Jesus as your Lord now. You're not following the devil. You're not following the flesh and its dictates, not following the world. You're following Christ. You make that conscious decision.

Kevin Stone

In the free grace camp, they see repentance more as strictly a change of mind. So, you have a change of mind about sin, but it doesn't necessarily follow that you are leaving it all behind, because as you are exercising your faith in Christ, you still have a lot of baggage. And God in his grace, you're working through that, through the sanctification process, but there again, we have kind of a different view of sanctification.

Kevin Stone

Sanctification is proof of salvation and provides assurance of one's salvation according to the Lordship Salvation people, but then the free grace people would see sanctification as more optional. It will happen, and hopefully it does happen as we serve the Lord out of gratitude for his salvation and we learn to love him. We will be sanctified. We'll start walking with Christ, but it's not required for our salvation. And that's the sticking point for the free grace side.

Shea Houdmann

All right, Kevin, I think you're entirely right. The definitions of repentance, that's a big difference between the two. So, the Greek word for repent, which is metanoe, it literally means have your mind changed. It's okay. You just got to change your mind about Jesus. That's kind of the free grace position.

But can you change your mind about something that actually changing your behavior? I don't see how that's possible. That's the Lordship Salvation side.

Shea Houdmann

So, to keep following through with this differences between the two, I would say the extreme Lordship Salvation side is too—I don't know if this is the right term—optimistic about how much change occurs at the moment of salvation. I've met Lordship Salvation advocates who are like, no, the moment you come to faith in Christ, everything in your life changes. You make Jesus the Lord of everything in your life right then and there. You repent each and every sin, right there at the moment of salvation. I view a lot of that as more discipleship. This is stuff that happens progressively in your life as you're taught, as you're disciplined, as you have the Christian life modeled, as you have a community of believers around you who are helping you to grow. There's things that happen progressively.

Shea Houdmann

But on the flip side, I think free grace advocates are pessimistic about what will happen when a person is saved, that they seem to be truly fine with nothing changing. Not that they're fine with that. Obviously, they want people to change. That's not a fair characterization, but they don't see that anything's inevitable. And yes, like I just said, being disciplined is hugely important in how much change there's going to be in your life and how much the gospel impacts you. Holy Spirit has chosen to work primarily through other people performing the discipleship work. Is He capable of bringing repentance in someone's heart? Yes. Is He capable of helping someone overcome sin without any other person being helped? Of course He is, but that, generally speaking, isn't how it works. So lordship salvation tends to put a little too much emphasis on so much is going to change the moment you're saved, and free grace tends to not put enough on what happens to a person when they're saved.

Shea Houdmann

That's kind of my observation, having multiple conversations with people on both sides. I think I fall somewhere in the middle here, but parsing the word, so to speak, making sure you define things clearly. This is not as clear cut as either side makes it to be. Jeff, what's in your experience? What are some of the other differences you see in how side approaches the various issues?

Jeff Laird

I think you pretty well hit the nail on the head with the idea that there's characterizations, there's caricatures, cartoons, versions of this that are not really what people believe. It's not true that a lot of free grace people think that they can literally just say, I will nod my head at Jesus and then go happily, blatantly decide to commit whatever sins I would like. There are some people who have that position, hyper grace, some other terms for that. I will say that that level is absurd to the point that it's basically not even worth taking seriously, but it's not generally true that people are saying that, well, that means I can just sin however much I want. No, that's not what free grace teaches. It teaches that there are still consequences for sin and that God does have things that he does and does not want us to do.

Jeff Laird

And then on the other side, that lordship salvation, there are some people who would say exactly as you did, that it means this lightning bolt moment where you say the word and you say Jesus. And it's like saying Shazam in the comic books and a bolt of lightning comes down and poof, you are now the apostle Paul. And that is not how that works.

Jeff Laird

If it was not possible for truly born again Christians to struggle sometimes with the flesh and things in there, then the Bible would not spend any time warning us about that. It would not tell us to be careful of those things. It wouldn't tell teachers to do things like correct and rebuke and so on and so forth.

Jeff Laird

However, if it was not possible for somebody to have a false sense of where they were in the faith, and that to me is where the biggest danger in the free grace attitude comes in is when Paul says something like examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith, that has to mean something. Matthew chapter seven is where Jesus says, there's going to be people at the end who are going to say, Lord, Lord. And he's gonna say, don't say that to me. I never knew you. It's possible for a person to be self deluded about what they think about Jesus, where they really are in faith. And that's another place that this is meant to come in.

Jeff Laird

The answer for both sides is we are always supposed to be sincerely seeking God's will. And I think the statement that's made where the man says, help me with my unbelief. He says to Jesus, I believe help my unbelief. I think that's the essence of what salvation is. Just like we say, the fruit of the spirit is not plural. It's not peace, joy, kindness as separate things. It's all describing one thing and belief, faith, trust, repentance. Those are all one thing in that

moment. I think that salvation is when a person just comes to Jesus and says, I believe help my unbelief. As the Lord brings stuff to your attention, you're going to want to address that. You're going to move that way. Maybe you're going to stumble. Maybe you're going to trip. Maybe you're going to backslide. That will happen. But there's not this idea that if you're truly a believer, that everything will always continue to improve or it's going to improve at a rapid pace. So I think that, again, is the misunderstanding.

Jeff Laird

When we talk about a virus or an illness or something like that, sometimes symptoms take a while to sink in. It's possible for some people when they become a believer, it just doesn't get very far at first. That can happen. That really can. And Kevin, what you said is extremely important. 1 Samuel 16, 7 says, we look at the outside. God knows the heart. So it's not my job to judge, but it is my job to warn and to tell somebody, look, on the Christian for however long, and your life looks absolutely exactly the same as it did before. And it looks exactly the same as the world around you. According to what I read in scripture, it would be criminally irresponsible for me to tell that person, yes, you should have assurance of your salvation. I should be telling them the opposite.

Kevin Stone

We come to Jesus as beggars, just asking for his free gift of eternal life. And there's a reason that we come to him. Obviously, we understand that we're sinners. We understand that he has life. He's the only one who can give us life. We understand that we need a savior. But at that moment, do we have to understand that he's also the Lord of all or does that come later? And I think that, yes, I mean, there's some sense in which you understand he's your Lord when you come to him as your savior, but then the true understanding of Jesus as Lord of all, including Lord of our lives, is a lifelong process as we are continually finding areas in our lives that have not been submitted to him. And the Holy Spirit works on us, and he molds us, he conforms us into the image of Christ.

Kevin Stone

Bottom line, salvation is a free gift. And we come as we are, but of course, we do come. We come to the savior. And in the process of admitting our sinfulness, we admit our helplessness, we admit our dependency on Jesus, we receive that free gift by grace through faith. And then the supernatural result of that coming to Christ is that we begin to see Jesus truly as Lord of all, and we begin to serve him in gratitude and joyful thanksgiving. That's sanctification.

Jeff Laird

You know, there's so much more that we could say on the subject. And Shea, I know that part of what we're doing is we're trying to address misunderstandings and the way that people misinterpret. So I would just like to, I guess, put a challenge out there for our keyboard warriors, because I know they're going to show up, they're going to comment, they're going to say what they're going to say. My challenge would be, mention that I said this when you type your comment or make your video about what we do and don't think about Lordship Salvation to demonstrate that you've actually gone through this and heard what we have to say. Because whether it's Lordship Salvation or free grace, too often we just hear a phrase and we react and we say what we think the other person believes without even listening. So before you look for your caps lock key, mention that you actually got to this point and heard this, and you do understand what's being said before you decide to accept or reject it, because that's the way we really should handle this.

Shea Houdmann

Oh, if so often, what is your, we're posting on social media or putting a video on YouTube. How many people just respond at the very beginning without ever actually listening to what we say?

Jeff Laird

But, um, I like how we put up 30 minute videos and five minutes after we post them, people are saying how wrong the whole thing was. That's, that's impressive. The whole thing at six X speed. That's good.

Shea Houdmann

I've, I've noticed that too. And I've tried listening to myself at even two times speed and I have no idea what I'm talking about. So let me close this episode with just a thought that was really helpful for me with this. When I came to faith in Christ in my late teens and then through actually going to Bible college and so forth, basically there's a, I left my old life, my old friends behind at a completely new set of friends. And so very few people who are in my life now knew me before there, there's a few, but at my 20 year high school reunion, a really good friend of mine in high school who knew me before I was just talking with them. And he actually asked me the question of Shea, like what happened to you? And so I think every Christian, someone should be able to ask them that question. What happened to you? What's different about you? Obviously there's degrees, progressiveness, is that a word Kevin, I'm not sure. Progressiveness to how much we are growing spiritually. Not everyone is going to have this Shazam moment where their life is utterly completely transformed the moment of salvation, that does happen to some people. Praise God. But if you are a Christian, maybe not instantly, but eventually

people should be able to look at you and your life and say there's something different about you. And that's what we are communicating.

Shea Houdmann

But above all, I started this episode and I'm going to conclude with this, salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, not of works. Works are the result of salvation not a require for salvation. I hope our conversation today has been helpful for you. I've enjoyed discussing this with Jeff and Kevin. As always, got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.