

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Distinguishing things that differ: God's work for us and in us

When my wife was expecting our first child, we had many exciting preparations to make. We needed to get the nursery ready with a cot. We needed to buy a pram, and a car seat, and of course, we would need to buy baby clothes and nappies! When he was born, we had to get used to having a little baby in the house who kept us awake at night! Now he is 18, and it has been our privilege over these years to provide for him, and for our other children too. All this has been, if you like, our work for him. Simply because he is our son, we have provided for him. But we have also worked to develop him - to train him, to develop his character, to educate him. We encouraged him to talk, helped him as he learned to read, to ride a bike, to do his school homework, and so on. We needed to teach him manners and good behaviour, and importantly to teach him about God. In a sense, you could say that this was our work in him.

It is the same with our relationship with God. God works **for us**, and **in us**. I want to look at these two things today. What I really want to get across is this: it is important to understand the difference between the two. It really is. If we are confident in God's work **for us**, we will joyfully cooperate with Him in His work **in us**. I'm going to repeat that: if we're confident in God's work for us, we will joyfully cooperate with Him in His work in us. If we mix up the two, it is a fruitful source of discouragement and anxiety, as we start to worry about all sorts of things. We are going to look at this in some detail, so stick with me. I'll be illustrating it as we go along.

Just to give you some structure to keep in mind as we explore this together, let's just briefly outline some of God's work **for us** and **in us**. What has God done, and what is He doing, for us? He gave His Son to die for our sins, so that we could be born again. He has adopted us as His sons. The Lord Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us in His Father's house (John 14:3). The Lord Jesus cares for us now in heaven as our Great High Priest, ever living to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25). All these and more God has done and will do for us. Meanwhile God is working in us. He is conforming us to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). He is developing our Christian character. He is strengthening our faith. He is working in us and through us so that we can be channels of His blessing to others. All these and more are God's work in us.

Why does it matter to distinguish these? Well, if we mix them up, we can get discouraged and worried when there is no need to do so. We can start to get focused on our performance rather than on God's faithfulness. We live in a performance-related world. At school we have progress reports, and at work we have performance reviews. These are not bad things of course - we need to know whether we are on track. But we can quickly start to think that our self-worth and our acceptance depend on our performance. This is not true with God! We are loved and accepted by Him because of His sovereign grace, and because of Christ's work.

*"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8) It was when there was nothing in us to love, that God showed His great love by sending His Son!

*"We love Him because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19).

A really clear set of verses is in Titus 3:4-7: *"But when the kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."* Notice the important contrasts: It was not because of any of our works of righteousness, but because of God's mercy. We were justified because of His grace - and grace means God's undeserved blessing. It's not because of what **we did**, but because of what **God is!**

Now let's start to look at this in more detail. One of the clearest outlines of God's work for us is in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 53. If we compare this with Acts 8, which we will come to shortly, you will see that this passage is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ when He died for our sins.

Let's look at some of Isaiah 53: *"But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we*

*have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*" (Isaiah 53:5-6) This is clearly speaking about God's work for us. We were sinners, but God laid the punishment of our sins on Jesus. Now if we read Acts 8:26-40 which I mentioned, we see that an important Ethiopian official was reading this chapter of Isaiah as he journeyed back to his homeland, not long after the time when Christ had been crucified and had risen again. Philip the evangelist was directed by the Holy Spirit to go and meet this Ethiopian official. The official wanted to know whom the passage in Isaiah was about. He said to Philip, *"I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?"* (Acts 8:34). The Bible tells us that Philip *"preached Jesus to him"* (Acts 8:35), and so he explained to the man that Isaiah was writing prophetically about what Jesus would do for us. So as I said just before, that is one great aspect of God's work for us: Jesus took the punishment for our sins. That way, we can be accepted into God's family.

In Romans 8:15-16 we read, *"For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."*

Now, if we are God's sons by adoption, and if we are God's children by new birth, and all this because of what Jesus has done for us, it follows that God, as our Father, will care for us and He will want to train us and develop us. That is His work **in us**.

When we had our first pet cat, we needed to train him to use the cat flap. My wife spent a long time patiently training him to go in and out through the cat flap. At first he was scared of it. My wife had to coax him with cat treats and so on, and he needed praise and encouragement once he learnt to push the cat flap with his head and go in and out. He was a bit of a rascal though, because even when he was well used to it, and perfectly able to go in and out, he still preferred to make us get up and open the door for him!! I think he thought the cat flap was a little beneath his dignity! He was certainly a cat with personality!

My wife didn't get cross with the cat when he was scared at first, or when he needed encouragement and training. She patiently trained him. He was **our** pet cat, and we loved him and we were going to look after him. He needed to learn, so we taught him. This is a feeble illustration of God's way with us. We are His children, if we have accepted the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, and if we have been born again. So God, as a good Father, patiently trains us.

Now what is the important point in all this? It's this: if we understand and accept God's work **for us**, we will joyfully respond to His work **in us**. Let's just remind ourselves of some of God's work for us.

- He gave us His son to die for our sins, so that we could be forgiven and be born again.
- His Son now lives to intercede for us as our Great High Priest.
- He knows what we need and He makes sure that we receive it.

God has prepared a wonderful future for us. *"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him"* (1 Corinthians 2:9).

As we think on these things, it will lead to thankfulness, praise, worship and adoration, and trust in God's character. It will also lead us to cooperate with God as He works in us. Now the question is, how does He work in us?

Romans 8:29 says that God wants to conform us to the image of His Son. Quite simply, He wants to make us like Jesus. Circumstances, difficulties, answered prayers, opportunities, all have this aim. Indeed, the previous verse, Romans 8:28, tells us that *"all things work together for good to those who love God."*

A key point is that it is Jesus Himself who is the source of our transformation. He said, *"Without Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). We don't get to be like Him by trying by our own efforts, but instead we do it by considering Him. *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 3:18). The more we are occupied with Him, the more we will be like Him. We often say that we grow to be like the people with whom we live. The same is true spiritually. As we spend time with Jesus, we become more like Him.

God doesn't accept us on the basis of how well we perform as Christians. That doesn't mean that He doesn't care about our Christian life. He does care - He cares deeply. He wants us to be transformed. For example, we read in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, *"For this is the will of God, your sanctification."* What we can say is that because we know that we are accepted, therefore we want to please our loving, heavenly Father.

2 Peter 1 is a great chapter for this. 2 Peter 1:1 tells us that God has given us faith: *"Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and*

*Saviour Jesus Christ.*" There are other verses in the Bible also that tell us that faith is a gift of God, for example Ephesians 2:8: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."*

Now 2 Peter 1 tells us that we need to add certain things to this faith: *"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 1:5-8). The first in the list is 'virtue', which really means moral courage. You could perhaps paraphrase it as "faith in action". Faith is a gift from God, as we have said. That is part of God's work **for us**. Now God wants us to supply virtue and all the other things we read about to add to our faith. We will need God's help and strengthening to do this, and this is God's work **in us**.

Now let's look at what might happen if we mix up God's work in us and for us. I'd like to start this with a personal appeal. About twenty-two years ago, when I had first met my then wife-to-be, we had heard a preacher who had said that he had really moved on in his Christian life when he stopped worrying about his love for God, and started to think about God's love for him. At the time this comment by the preacher struck me, but I didn't let it go in deeply enough.

Do you remember the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-9, where the sower sows some seed, and some of it falls on the wayside, some on stony places, some among thorns, and some on good ground? I was a bit like the stony places, or the rocky soil in that parable, which received the word with joy, but did not really become rooted in the truth. I didn't sufficiently think it through and really take it to myself. Instead, over the years, I was often led by my feelings.

When I was conscious of failure - and I often was - I would start to question my relationship with God. I would think, "I'm a useless Christian. I'm no good at witnessing. I always let the Lord down. I keep getting things wrong. The Lord must be really disappointed with me", and so on.

All of this looking inwards and discouragement never leads to anything productive. It leads us to become absorbed in ourselves rather than with God, and it leads us to become performance focused instead of trusting in God's faithfulness. It leads to lack of faith, lack of peace, and lack of joy. Not surprisingly, it isn't very attractive to others. Who wants to be a miserable Christian? And so it leads to a cycle of discouragement.

This is mixing God's work for us and in us. As I remembered what that wise preacher had said, much of that discouragement faded. I need to focus on God's love for me, not on my performance. By thinking of His unconditional, faithful, patient love, it motivates me to want to please Him. And no doubt, or so I hope, I will be a better witness to others, as they see someone who is enjoying God's love. This will be more attractive than a self-centred and disappointed Christian.

Does any of what I have said resonate with any of my listeners? Maybe you can relate to some of this. If so, I would say: be encouraged, trust in God, and thank Him for His love. Focus on what He has done and is doing **for you**, and you will then find that you are enthusiastic for His work **in you**.

Remember what the Apostle Paul told the Philippians - *"He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ"* (Philippians 1:6). You see, God does not fail. He finishes what He starts. Some of us are good at starting projects but not so good at completing them! God finishes what He starts. Again, this is because of His work for us. God has been glorified through the work of His Son. He can - and does - forgive us righteously, on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection. God's holiness is not compromised because of our sin - He forgives us because Christ has suffered, not because He is brushing our sin under the carpet. So, He is at liberty to finish His work in us.

His work in us is the outflow, or the result, of His work for us. It doesn't depend on us. Of course, if we frustrate God's plans, we end up depriving ourselves of blessing. What a shame that would be! Let's not do that. Let's do what the Apostle Paul says: *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:12-14).

We still need to tackle one final thing. Why is it that we mix up God's work in us and for us? I suspect a large part of the reason may well be down to human pride. We are so used to living in an environment that rewards performance that we want to be successful and well thought of in our own right. But as I mentioned before, Jesus said, *"Without Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). The glory must go to Him! Let's put aside our own self glory and rejoice in Him! I've already quoted a few verses from Philippians today, and here is another one, from Philippians 3:3: *"For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."* Notice the

Apostle Paul's comments that we have no confidence in the flesh - we're not looking to trust in ourselves - but we rejoice, or boast in Christ Jesus - we give Him the glory.

So, to wrap up, we have considered the difference between God's work for us and God's work in us, and the take-home message is that if we are confident in God's work **for us**, we will joyfully cooperate with Him in His work **in us**. May this message be a blessing to you, as it has certainly been to me as I have been studying this topic! Here's one last verse in Philippians to finish off with - Philippians 2:13, "*for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*" May God bless you all.

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