

# Bible Questions and Answers

(By Robert C. Veil, Jr.)

Question: What is meant by the term, “unprofitable servant”? Does this mean that works are unimportant in the Christian life?

Answer: Works are important, but we are not saved by works of merit by which we somehow earn our salvation. The works which are important to God are our works of obedience and works of righteousness.

The illustration of the “unprofitable servant” was used by Jesus as recorded in the book of Luke: “But who is there of you, having a servant plowing or keeping sheep, that will say unto him, when he is come in from the field, Come straightway and sit down to meat; and will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded? Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do,” (Lk. 17:7-10).

With these words, Jesus drew a helpful parallel between Christians and household slaves, which were common in the culture of that day. The master does not thank a slave and praise him for doing what the slave was duty-bound to do. He does not tell his slave to sit down and be served, rather he expects his slave to serve him. Jesus used that common reality to show that even after we have done all that we possibly can as Christians, we do not deserve special reward or payment. We have merely done our duty. We are still “unprofitable servants.”

Some have mistaken this illustration to teach that our works are unimportant to God or that works are not necessary for salvation. While it is true we are saved by the grace of God, that salvation comes “through faith” and not divorced from works of obedience, (Eph. 2:8-10). There is a great difference between works of merit and works of obedience.

Faith itself is said to be a work, (Jn. 6:27-29). No one would claim that faith is unnecessary for salvation, and yet some are quick to conclude that works of every kind are unimportant. We have to carefully distinguish between works of merit, whereby someone earns something, and works which spring from faith and obedience. The former are not involved in our salvation, but the latter certainly are.

James was speaking of works of obedience when he said, “Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only, (Jas. 2:24). Works of obedience accompany and are a natural part of our faith. James would rhetorically observe, “Show me thy faith apart from thy works, and I by my works will show thee my faith, (Jas. 2:18). Faith and works of obedience go together, (see Heb. 5:9).

As Christians, we are not working for wages, earning our salvation. We are like the “unprofitable servant,” who has a duty to perform without payment. He is simply doing that which he is required to do.

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