

WHAT DOES GOD EMPHASIZE?

In every age, since Moses revealed the first words of God, men have contended (sometimes ferociously) over questions of emphasis. Is salvation by faith or works? Is election by predestination or free-will? Should scripture be interpreted figuratively or literally? Should man bow in obedience to commands, or simply concede the wisdom of principles?

All these questions can be answered, with qualification, by a thorough study of the Bible. Salvation is by BOTH faith and works. Biblical faith is a working faith (not in works of the Law, but by works that confirm faith). Election is BOTH by predestination and free-will, and here again both terms need to be defined by scripture. The figurative parts of the Bible need to be interpreted figuratively, and the literal parts, literally (after we have determined which parts are figurative and which are literal). BOTH commands and principles, when they have the force of commands, require obedience.

In a controversy with an elder over the extension of divine commands to the government and work of the local church, I heard him say that only one principle in the Bible should govern us; that of Micah 6:8, which says, “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

I knew that there was more to godly living than this, and this was later confirmed in my happy discovery of Deuteronomy 10:12-13, which says, “And now, Israel, what doth Jehovah thy God require of thee, but to fear Jehovah thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve Jehovah thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?”

The “works and faith” controversy is settled in the same way. When Abraham believed a promise of God that seemed to have no chance of fulfilment by natural means,

God said that He “.....reckoned it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). Yet, when Phinehas took a spear and killed an idolatrous Israelite and his unlawful paramour, it is said that the action (or, work), which ended God’s plague, was “reckoned unto him for righteousness” (Psalm 106:31).

We need only to return to the story of Abraham to learn that his faith, and his work, in offering up Isaac, combined to justify him (James 2:21-24). From this evidence, we must not make the mistake of putting exclusive emphasis on either faith or works. The scriptural works that we do, whatever they may be, must not be flawed by maintaining a sinful skeleton in the closet. The frustration of God regarding this is shown in Isaiah 1:11-17. “What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Saith Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; new moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies,-- I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

Jesus rebuked men of his generation for maintaining the same attitude. In Matthew 23:23-24 , he is reported to have said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone. Ye blind guides, that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel!” There is a value system recognized in these verses. Justice, mercy and faith are termed “weightier matters” than the tithing of garden herbs. But, the warnings against the

failure to bring in the tithe offerings are just as explicit as those against the failure to show mercy. Of tithes, God said that they are closely tied to acts of mercy. In Deuteronomy 26:12-14, we read, “When thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithe of thine increase in the third year, which is the year of tithing, then thou shalt give it unto the Levite, to the sojourner, to the fatherless, and to the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled. And thou shalt say before Jehovah thy God, I have put away the hallowed things out of my house, and also have given them unto the Levite, and unto the sojourner, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all thy commandment which thou hast commanded me: I have not transgressed any of thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them: I have not eaten thereof in my mourning, neither have I put away thereof, being unclean, nor given thereof for the dead: I have hearkened to the voice of Jehovah my God; I have done according to all that thou hast commanded me.”

Where is the emphasis? Jesus said it all when he answered Satan with, “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). The religious world is rife with attempts to place emphasis on one aspect of religion, while neglecting the rest. One partisan may exalt the social agenda he sees in the scripture. Another may underscore the mystical and allegorical side of religion. Yet another may stress theological debate as the greatest of endeavors. The debate over regulation versus rejuvenation rages everywhere. However, as “children of obedience,” let us not emphasize commandment keeping over the spiritual governance of principle. That Christian serves best who exalts all that God has said, without distinction.