

Salvation by Works or by Faith: The Gospel in the Balance

By Bob Nyberg¹

A Tragic Decision in the Remote Jungles

In the rugged and remote regions of West Papua, a missionary pilot faced a critical decision that would ultimately lead to a tragic outcome. This was a time before the advent of GPS technology, when pilots relied heavily on their instincts and rudimentary navigation tools. On this particular day, the weather was unforgiving, with thick clouds obscuring the treacherous terrain below.

Believing he knew his location, the pilot made a fateful decision despite the poor visibility. Unbeknownst to him, he had veered off course and was heading into a box canyon—a narrow, dead-end valley surrounded by steep cliffs. As he flew deeper into the canyon, the walls closed in, leaving no room for a safe turn. Realizing his mistake too late, the pilot attempted to climb out, but the aircraft lacked the power to escape the trap. The plane crashed, resulting in the loss of his life and the lives of his passengers.

This tragic story serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of taking the wrong path, even with the best intentions. It parallels the critical moment in Acts chapter 15, where the early church faced a pivotal decision regarding the nature of salvation. Just as the pilot's misjudgment led to disaster, imposing unnecessary burdens as a requirement for salvation could have derailed the spread of the Gospel.

A Significant Controversy in the Early Church

In the early days of the church, a significant controversy arose when certain individuals from Judea began teaching that Gentile converts must be circumcised according to the custom of Moses to be saved. This teaching caused considerable debate and confusion among the believers. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this view and engaged in sharp disputes with these teachers.

To resolve the issue, the church in Antioch decided to send Paul, Barnabas, and some other believers to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders. Upon their arrival, they were warmly received by the church and shared the remarkable stories of how God had been working among the Gentiles.

However, some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees insisted that Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses. This led to a crucial meeting of the apostles and elders to discuss the matter.

After much discussion, Peter stood up and addressed the assembly. He reminded them that God had chosen him to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, and that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentile believers just as He had to the Jewish believers, without making any distinction. Peter argued that God had purified their hearts by faith, not by adherence to the law. He questioned why they would test God by placing a burden on the Gentile believers that neither their ancestors nor they themselves could bear. Peter concluded by affirming that salvation comes by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, for both Jews and Gentiles alike.

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The Jerusalem Council's decision to affirm salvation by grace through faith alone was a turning point that ensured the message of Christ remained accessible to all, free from the yoke of legalistic demands.

The heart of this debate is encapsulated in Acts 15:10, where Peter addresses the Jerusalem Council, saying, "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" This statement is profoundly important today as we consider the implications of Lordship Salvation versus Free Grace.

A Relevant Application of the Biblical Narrative

Lordship Salvation teaches that in order to be saved, one must fully submit to the Lordship of Christ in every area of life. In contrast, Free Grace teaches that in order to be saved, one must simply believe in the finished work of Christ.

As good Protestant Christians, we understand that salvation does not come by being circumcised or by keeping the law of Moses as the Pharisees taught. That is obviously salvation by works. Yet many within Protestant Christianity do teach salvation by works. Some teach that you must be baptized in order to be saved. Others teach that you have to stop sinning or at least promise to stop sinning in order to be saved. Lordship Salvation teaches that you must submit every area of your life to Christ in order to be saved. Yet these same people claim that they are not teaching salvation by works.

In the Jewish culture, circumcision was a big deal. But in our culture today, it has nothing to do with how a person gets saved. As a result, it is easy to lose the import of this passage since the issue being debated was circumcision as it relates to salvation. But what if we used our sanctified imaginations and replaced circumcision with today's proposals for works-based salvation? Rather than Paul and Barnabas debating Pharisees about circumcision, what might that passage in Acts 15 look like had they debated today's proponents who attempt to add works to the gospel of grace? Today, the narrative of Acts 15 might look something like this:

Acts 15 (A Modern Narrative)

¹ Certain individuals came down from a prominent church and were teaching the believers, "Unless you fully submit to the Lordship of Christ in every area of your life, you cannot be saved." ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to the central church council to discuss this question.

³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through various regions, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴ When they came to the central church, they were welcomed by the church and the elders and theologians, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the Lordship Salvation camp stood up and said, "The unsaved must be required to submit to the Lordship of Christ in every area of their lives and obey all His commands to be saved."

⁶ The elders and theologians met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them ... just as He

accepted us.⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of anyone a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

My intention is not to change or add to the text of scripture. My only intention with this *Acts 15 Modern Narrative* is to replace the circumcision issue with an issue relevant to what we face today in Christian circles.

The Futile Requirements of Lordship Salvation

Lordship Salvation teaches that salvation is contingent upon a person’s ability to demonstrate complete obedience and surrender to Christ’s authority. According to Lordship Salvation, “Saving faith is a commitment to leave sin and follow Jesus Christ at all costs. Jesus takes no one unwilling to come on those terms. ... A person not willing to turn from sin, possessions, false religion, or selfishness will find he cannot turn to Christ in faith ...”² “Saving faith retains no privileges. It clings to no cherished sins, no treasured possessions, no secret indulgences. It is an unconditional surrender, a willingness to do anything the Lord demands.”³ “The gospel that Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a call to follow Him in submissive obedience ... It was an offer of eternal life and forgiveness for repentant sinners ... It put sinners on notice that they must turn from sin ...”⁴

This raises a critical issue: the demands of Lordship Salvation are impossible for anyone to fulfill. The concept of Lordship Salvation requires a person to demonstrate complete obedience and total surrender to Christ’s authority in every aspect of their life. This includes turning away from all sin, renouncing all personal ambitions, and fully committing to follow Christ’s commands without fail.

The problem with this requirement is that it sets an unattainable standard. Human nature is inherently flawed, and even the most committed believers struggle with sin and imperfection. The Bible itself acknowledges this reality. For instance, Romans 3:23 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This highlights the universal nature of human sinfulness and the impossibility of achieving perfect obedience.

The demands of Lordship Salvation are impossible for unbelievers to achieve and can lead believers to a sense of despair. If salvation is contingent upon our ability to perfectly submit to Christ’s Lordship, then no one can be assured of their salvation, as no one can achieve such perfection. This contradicts the essence of the Gospel, which is based on grace and faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 emphasizes that salvation is a gift from God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast.

Peter’s argument in Acts 15:10 underscores this point. He questions why the early church would impose a burden on Gentile believers that neither the apostles nor their ancestors could bear. This

² Ibid., 87-88.

³ Ibid., 139-140.

⁴ John MacArthur, “An Introduction to Lordship Salvation,” *Grace to You*. <https://www.gty.org/library/Articles/A114/An-Introduction-to-Lordship-Salvation> (accessed 11/12/2024).

burden refers to the strict adherence to the Mosaic Law, which parallels the stringent demands of Lordship Salvation. Just as the law was an impossible yoke, so too are the demands of Lordship Salvation. Both create a standard that no one can meet, highlighting the need for a salvation that is based on grace through faith, not human effort.

Lordship Salvation imposes an impossible standard which not only leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of salvation but also undermines the assurance and hope that the Gospel offers through grace and faith in Jesus Christ.

The Double Standard of Lordship Salvation

Those who advocate for Lordship Salvation often find themselves in an untenable position. They impose rigorous standards on others that they themselves have never been able to keep. This double standard is evident when we consider the lives of even the most dedicated believers. No one can claim perfect obedience or complete submission in every aspect of life. By demanding such standards from others, proponents of Lordship Salvation are essentially setting up a system of salvation that they themselves fail to adhere to.

The core issue here is the inherent inconsistency in the expectations set by Lordship Salvation. Advocates of this doctrine insist that true salvation requires a complete and unwavering submission to Christ's authority in every area of life. This includes turning away from all sin, fully committing to Christ's commands, and demonstrating a life of perfect obedience. However, this expectation is unrealistic and unattainable for any human being.

The fact is that Christians do indeed struggle with sin and imperfection. The Apostle Paul himself acknowledged this struggle in Romans 7:15-25, where he describes his ongoing battle with sin despite his desire to do what is right. This passage highlights the reality that no one, not even the apostles, could achieve perfect obedience.

By imposing such rigorous standards, proponents of Lordship Salvation create a double standard. They expect others to meet criteria that they themselves cannot fulfill. This duplicity undermines the credibility of their message and places an unnecessary burden on both unbelievers and believers alike. It also leads to a sense of guilt and inadequacy among those who strive to meet these impossible standards, potentially driving them away from the faith rather than drawing them closer to Christ.

Furthermore, this approach contradicts the essence of the Gospel, which is based on grace and faith, not human effort. By adding the requirement of perfect obedience and submission, Lordship Salvation shifts the focus from God's grace to human performance, which is contrary to the message of the New Testament.

The Impossible Demands of Lordship Salvation

An unsaved person, without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, lacks the means to fulfill the demands placed on them by Lordship Salvation. The New Testament teaches that it is the Holy Spirit who empowers believers to live godly lives (Galatians 5:16-25). Expecting an unsaved person to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit and complete submission to Christ's Lordship is unrealistic and contrary to the transformative process of salvation.

Lordship Salvation places the cart before the horse by demanding that an unsaved person demonstrate complete obedience and submission to Christ's authority as a prerequisite for salvation. This expectation is not only unrealistic but also contrary to the biblical understanding

of how salvation and sanctification work. Salvation is the starting point of a believer's journey, not the culmination. It is through salvation that a person receives the Holy Spirit, who then begins the work of transforming their life.

Without the Holy Spirit, an unsaved person does not have the spiritual resources necessary to live a life of godly obedience. Romans 8:7-9 explains that the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God and cannot submit to God's law. It is only through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that a person can truly begin to live in accordance with God's will.

Therefore, expecting an unsaved person to meet the demands of Lordship Salvation is not only impractical but also theologically flawed. It misunderstands the nature of salvation, which is a gift of grace received through faith, and the process of sanctification, which is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life. By placing such demands on an unsaved person, Lordship Salvation sets an impossible standard that can lead to frustration and despair, rather than the hope and assurance that the Gospel offers.

The Compelling Indictment of Lordship Salvation

Peter's closing argument in Acts 15:11 is a powerful indictment of any system that adds human effort to the equation of salvation: "No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." This statement underscores the fundamental principle that salvation is a gift of God, not something earned through human effort or adherence to the law.

When people impose the impossible demands of Lordship Salvation, they are, in essence, testing God. They are challenging the very nature of His grace and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. The concept of testing God here refers to questioning His provision and the simplicity of the Gospel message. It implies that God's grace alone is not enough, and that human effort must be added to complete the work of salvation. This is a serious theological error because it undermines the core message of the New Testament.

Peter's argument highlights the futility and duplicity of placing such burdens on others. He points out that neither the apostles nor their ancestors were able to bear the yoke of the law. This historical context is crucial because it shows that even those who were closest to God and most knowledgeable about His laws could not achieve perfect obedience. If they could not meet these standards, how can we expect others to do so?

Advocates of Lordship Salvation are placing unattainable demands on others that they cannot bear themselves. This is a double standard and a form of legalism that Jesus condemned. In Matthew 23:4, Jesus criticized the Pharisees for tying up heavy, cumbersome loads and putting them on other people's shoulders, while they themselves were not willing to lift a finger to move them. Similarly, imposing the impossible standards of Lordship Salvation on others while failing to meet those standards themselves is both unjust and unbiblical.

Peter's closing argument in Acts 15:11 serves as a powerful reminder that salvation is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ alone. By adding human effort to the equation, advocates of Lordship Salvation test God, place unbearable burdens on others, and undermine the very grace that makes salvation possible. The Gospel is a message of grace and faith, not of works and human achievement.

Conclusion

My dad often told me, “Do as I say, not as I do.” He placed expectations on me that he himself was not willing or able to meet. This experience is similar to what happens with Lordship Salvation. Proponents of this doctrine impose stringent and impossible requirements on unbelievers for salvation—demands that even they cannot fulfill. Just as my father placed a burden on me that he could not bear, advocates of Lordship Salvation impose a yoke on others that they themselves cannot carry.

This approach creates a double standard. It sets up a system where salvation is contingent upon human effort and perfection, which no one can achieve. By demanding such rigorous standards, Lordship Salvation shifts the focus from God’s grace to human performance, which is contrary to the essence of the Gospel. It imposes impossible requirements on unbelievers, undermining the very grace that makes salvation possible. The Gospel is a message of grace and faith, not of works and human achievement.

The teaching of Free Grace affirms that salvation is a gift from God, received through faith in Jesus Christ alone. It is not contingent upon our ability to fully submit to Christ’s Lordship in every area of life. While obedience and submission are important aspects of the Christian life, they are the result of salvation, not the requirement for it. By defending Free Grace, we uphold the true essence of the Gospel and avoid the pitfalls of a works-based salvation that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear.