

THE OR SERIES 2: GRACE OR WORKS?

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:9, NIV)

GOLF PROVIDES PLENTY OF MAGIC, SOME OF IT GOOD, AND SOME OF IT VERY BAD. This ball bounces toward the hole and stops inches away, while that one skips sideways uphill, falls into the bunker, and rolls into an unraked footprint.

Where we find no magic is in how we improve at the game. Instead, this requires long-range diligence. Buckets at the range, hours on the putting green, rounds and rounds on the course—these are the ways we create the muscle memory and build the experience to put lower numbers on the card over time. Work.

Sadly, even then there are no guarantees. On the day you really need to perform, you may wake up with soreness in your knees. The wind might blow against your natural draw. Your competitor endeavors to chatter you right out of focus.

Religion based on good works suffers from the same uncertainties. Is it 25,000 sins that disqualifies you, or 24,999? Do 16 lies count for one act of adultery, or is it 60? What about helping your neighbor in an hour of need—do you get more credit for this before you turn 30, say? I once heard of a woman who told an evangelist that she had never sinned. “Say what?” he asked her. “Yes,” she confirmed, “I’ve done everything the nuns taught me.” But were those nuns teaching her only what’s on the pages of Scripture, or something more, you know, denominational?

If you open your Bible, you’ll find that the Pharisees were the hard workers of Jesus’ day. They knew every rule and all the explanations in the decisions book, too. But Jesus offered them no assurance that they were going to heaven. He even called them “sons of hell” (Matthew 23:15)!

But Jesus, you might ask, what about all the Pearly Gates and St. Peter stories, the ones where we tell him why we should be allowed to enter heaven? Everyone knows you’ve got show up with some good thing to offer.

Such musing isn’t all wrong. As long as that good thing is Jesus himself. You see, justification before God was purchased by Jesus’ very blood. And salvation comes by receiving the gift of that justification—through faith that it is his work, not ours, that counts. Call it magic if you want. Scripture calls it grace. It’s the only thing that makes us right before God right now.

Opening questions Have you been working on your game lately? What have you been focusing on? • Why do you think people choose works-based religions rather than just having faith in Jesus?

READING Romans 5:6-10; Ephesians 2:1-10; Romans 6:5-14

Sinners given the ultimate gift (Romans 5)
What did Paul emphasize about the timing of Christ’s death? What several things did that death provide for those who respond in faith?

Dead in sin, alive in Christ (Ephesians 2)
What is it that we need saving from, and how serious is this condition? What is it that saves us? Why can’t it be our works that produce salvation?

The outcome of grace (Romans 6)
In what ways are believers united with Christ? What should this unity produce in us in terms of the way we live our lives?

Written by Jeff Hopper ©2017 Links Players International. An introductory video for this study is available here: <https://youtu.be/XLRXIGyxd74>