

**A REVIEW OF ALAN P. STANLEY'S  
*DID JESUS TEACH SALVATION BY  
WORKS? THE ROLE OF WORKS IN SALVA-  
TION IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS***

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

The title of the book certainly grabbed my attention. Regardless of what answer Stanley gave to the question, this is a work I considered a must read.

When I discovered that the book is actually the author's doctoral dissertation, and that his dissertation was done at my alma mater, Dallas Theological Seminary, in the New Testament department, I was even more enthusiastic about reading it.

The subtitle alerts the reader to the fact that the stress in the work will be the Synoptic Gospels, not the Gospel of John and not the NT epistles. However, as one would expect in a scholarly work, Stanley comments fairly often on how what he sees in the Synoptics is consistent with his understanding of the epistles and John.

Stanley's answer is more or less Yes. The author is trying to avoid saying that Jesus taught salvation by works even as he asserts that the Lord indeed taught salvation by works.

**II. HIS THESIS: MILD WORKS SALVATION**

Readers who recall the first edition of John MacArthur's work, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, will recall that every ten pages or so he would give disclaimers that somewhat called into question the harsh statements he'd made until that point. It was reasonable to conclude, as many of us did at the time, that he meant what he said and his disclaimers were simply evidence of his discomfort with the practical problems associated with his view. Subsequent works, such as *Hard to Believe*,

have shown that he indeed meant what he said. No longer does he see the need to give disclaimers.

The reader of Stanley will find disclaimers, though to a much lesser degree. Stanley's thesis is that the Lord Jesus clearly and often taught salvation by works in the Synoptic Gospels. Yet occasionally Stanley will adopt a sort of theological doublespeak as he gives disclaimers. Here is an example:

First, Jesus understands salvation to be more than just an historical entry point. Salvation is submission to God's rule—His kingdom—now and entrance into His eschatological kingdom or eternal life in the future. Thus where Paul is primarily speaking out against *pre*-conversion works Jesus is endorsing *post*-conversion works. Therefore passages that appear to contradict Paul do not in fact contradict him at all.

Second, since the works that admit one into the kingdom are post-conversion works they are also necessarily produce or enabled by the power of God...

Third, it follows that for Jesus, works are the evidence of one's relationship to God (Matt 7:15-23)...However, this does not mean that every so-called good work is worthy of eternal life (cf. Matt 7:22-23) lest anyone think they can deceive God. This is the reason why only Jesus will judge humanities' works (cf. Matt 7:1). People may deceive people but they will not deceive God (Gal 6:7-8).

Fourth, even though works are necessary for salvation Jesus and the Synoptic writers do not mean sinless—or even something similar—perfection...Righteousness is being viewed as a *pattern of life*. In other words momentary lapses into anger, impatience, un-forgiveness, etc. do not exclude one from the kingdom as if what was required was letter of the law type "perfection" in every sense of the word... (Stanley, pp. 335-36).

Note that works are both a condition of entrance into the kingdom and evidence that one currently has a relationship with God. In addition, the evidence is not convincing. No one can know whether he indeed will enter the kingdom until he is judged by Jesus.

I never found a single sentence where Stanley stated his thesis. This is how I would state his thesis, based on my reading of his book, in just one sentence: While pre-conversion good works are not required, endur-

ing, post-conversion, God-empowered good works are conditions of eternal life and only God knows who will meet that condition.

Here's another way I'd state my understanding of his thesis: it is impossible to be sure of one's own eternal destiny, or the eternal destiny of friends and loved ones, since it is impossible for humans to know how Jesus will evaluate our lives until He actually does so.

If that seems a bit discouraging, Stanley never lets on that someone might find such a way of thinking the least bit depressing. Indeed, he seems to feel that God is being exceedingly gracious in that what is required is merely *a pattern* of righteous deeds and that momentary lapses into things like anger, impatience, and un-forgiveness do not automatically condemn one to hell.

Thus, while salvation is by works, it is certainly not by anything close to perfect works. God's grace means that even sinful believers can enter the kingdom provided that the Lord Jesus concludes at the final judgment that their lives had been characterized by righteous deeds.

### III. THE STRENGTHS OF HIS WORK

*Extensive bibliographic references.* Though I have read most of the books and other resources that he cites, I have not read all of them. I found a handful of books and articles that I now consider must reading. By itself this makes the book worth purchasing for anyone in full-time ministry.

*Superb footnotes.* Studies show that only 1% of all readers actually read footnotes. That would be a big mistake with this book. Much gold is buried in the notes. I went to the index and looked up every reference he made to Zane Hodges, Jody Dillow, Charlie Bing, and myself. I found this to be a very helpful way of seeing what he thinks of our position. I found that he understands what we are saying, but doesn't find it persuasive. If you get this book, be sure to at the least look up what he has to say about the writings of Zane Hodges and Jody Dillow. Better yet, read all the footnotes.

*Candid admissions.* Even though there are times when what he writes seems to be hedging and doublespeak, there are plenty of times in the book when he makes candid admissions. For example:

There are, in my view, passages that appear to teach the eternal security of believers...We might say that He knows who are His. However, there are also passages—especially John 15:1-6; 1 Corinthians 15:2; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 3:6,

14—that teach the possibility of forfeiting salvation through lack of endurance. These passages appear to teach anything but eternal security. However, in these instances the perspective in view is not God’s but ours. The NT writers do not know for sure who are God’s. Hence in a pastorally appropriate way they urge their readers on to endurance (Stanley, p. 327, emphasis added).

That gives us a lot to work with. For example, is it true that the NT writers do not know for sure who are God’s? If so, what did Paul mean in Phil 4:3 when he said that the names of Clement and the rest of his fellow workers “are in the Book of Life”? Could there be any doubt that Paul knew that Clement and Timothy and Titus and Silas and Barnabas and Luke and Aquila and Priscilla and Apollos were eternally secure?

In the Pastoral Epistles Paul called Timothy his true son in the faith (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). He called him a “man of God” (1 Tim 6:11). He said that the Holy Spirit dwelt in Timothy (2 Tim 1:14). He calls Titus, “a true son in our common faith” (1:4).

We might also discuss the pastoral value in threatening born-again people with hell unless they endure in faith and good works. We might discuss how salvation might be eternally secure from God’s perspective, yet from our perspective be forfeitable.

A candid admission like this would make for fantastic discussion in Bible college and seminary classes, in Sunday School classes, and in discipleship groups.

Here’s another example of a candid admission:

When judgment day comes (Matt 7:22-23) it will not be sinners who enter into the kingdom but the *righteous*. This distinction is important to make for it is only once anyone is in a relationship with Jesus that they are able to produce the kind of righteousness required to make it into the eschatological kingdom (i.e., post-conversion works). This does not mean that one is self-righteous but neither does it mean that one simply has righteousness as a gift from God (Stanley, p. 328, emphasis his).

Again, there’s much we could discuss here. Post-conversion personal righteous works are required to enter the kingdom. Why are these not “self-righteous”? The fact that God enables us to do these good works does not mean that we have nothing to do with producing them. Notice that Stanley says God makes us “able to produce the kind of righteous-

ness required." He doesn't produce those righteous deeds automatically in us. This righteousness is not simply "a gift of God." Some Reformed expositors attempt to say that since God enables the works, then the works themselves are a gift of God too and that the righteousness is thus a gift of God. Stanley openly admits that we must utilize the ability that God gives us and we must produce righteousness if we are to make it into the kingdom.

*Excellent indexes.* The Scripture and subject indexes are excellent. They make this work a nice reference tool. Pastors who are speaking on a text can easily find out what Stanley says about it. It is also easy to see what Stanley thinks about various authors and subjects.

#### IV. THE WEAKNESSES OF HIS WORK

*Surprisingly little exegetical work done.* This is a common problem today and is no way unique to this author. Seminaries are now teaching that Bible scholars need to be experts in what other Bible scholars say. Thus exegetical discussions today are primarily made up of the author interacting with the views of leading scholars on the passage he is discussing. Stanley does this throughout the book. Instead of interacting primarily with the words and phrases of the text, Stanley interacts primarily with the way other scholars understand various texts. It is hard to find places where he lays out a passage and discusses it.

Of course, we in the Free Grace movement have been spoiled with the writings of men like Hodges and Dillow. They lay out a text and clearly explain the evidence that reveals what it means. Unfortunately, that is not found in this work except in occasional comments that are not backed up.

Here is an example. When criticizing the view of repentance put forth by Hodges, Dillow, and me, he cites Acts 17:30, "God commands all men everywhere to repent." He also wonders about the Synoptic Gospels, "Do they not have a say on the matter? Both the Rich Young Ruler and the Jewish lawyer asked very similar questions to what the Philipian jailer (see v. 29). Should these passages not also have a bearing on how we understand what one must do to be saved?" (p. 230 n. 60). Note that he doesn't tell how the questions are similar and how they are different. He doesn't state what indicates that Acts 17:30 is being given as a condition of eternal life. Admittedly, this is in a footnote. But this is the same sort of discussion that occurs in the text all the time. Indeed, this

footnote runs almost a third of a page, and if it were in the same size font as the text, would take up half a page.

*Failure to adequately present the evidence for the Free Grace explanations.* As the example just cited shows, Stanley doesn't present the evidence for the Free Grace explanations of texts, that is, the evidence against his position. He merely states the Free Grace interpretation and then rejects it. To be fair he should give extensive treatment of the Free Grace evidence and then refute that very evidence. This he does not do.

*Proclaiming outright works salvation.* As I showed above, he openly admits that he is teaching salvation by post-conversion righteous works. Failure to endure in such works will result in the forfeiture, to use his word, of eternal life/justification/salvation. I characterize his position as mild works salvation. But mild or strong, it is clearly works salvation that Stanley believes Jesus taught. The book answers its title with a guarded Yes. Jesus taught salvation by works.

*Little effort to harmonize his conclusions with Jesus' teachings in the Fourth Gospel.* I found this especially troubling. If John's Gospel is the only evangelistic book in Scripture, then why didn't Stanley attempt to harmonize his conclusions with it? Actually Stanley says on several occasions that he intentionally was not discussing John's understanding of this question. For example when discussing Zane Hodges's view of discipleship, he says, "The evidence that Hodges marshals in support of a distinction between a disciple and a Christian comes exclusively from outside of the Synoptic Gospels and mostly that of John...His reasons for denying any affiliation between discipleship and salvation are that the conditions for discipleship conflict with John's view of salvation. *I cannot take the time or space to go into John's soteriology*; my point here is simply that the use of the term *mathetes* in the Synoptic Gospels does not support Hodges' contention" (p. 228 n. 46, emphasis added). I should note that he does cite verses in John's Gospel in the book. His Scripture index has 2.5 pages of citations from John. However, there are 14 pages of citations from the Synoptics. And the citations from John are almost exclusively mere mentions of passages. There are no discussions anywhere in the book of passages from the Fourth Gospel.

There are two pages devoted in this book to the use of the words *save* and *salvation* in Johannine literature (pp. 154-155, with four lines flowing onto p. 156). However, John rarely used those words in his Gospel. A better line of enquiry would have been what John said one must do to have everlasting life. There are two paragraphs on eternal life in

this section, however, even this truncated discussion fails to hone in on the condition of eternal life in John. His understanding of John seems to be that the one who believes in Jesus has the possibility of eternal life presently in a qualitative sense: "Qualitatively life is a present possibility for those who believe in Jesus" (p. 154). What he means by *possibility* is not explained. However, he then goes on to discuss "the quantitative element of [eternal] life." His concluding sentence in this section explains how one gains *quantitative* eternal life: "The destiny for those who overcome (nikao) is [eternal] *life* (Rev 2:7, 11; 3:5 cf. 2:17, 26; 3:12, 21; 21:7)" (p. 156, emphasis his).

## V. CONCLUSION

While I am abhorred by the thesis of this book, I highly recommend it to well grounded believers. This is not a book for new believers. Anyone who is not well versed in Free Grace theology would do well to stay away from this book until he is well versed. However, for the person who knows our issues well, this book is a wonderful resource.

Essentially this book shows where current scholarship is going. Calvinism is going a long way towards Arminianism. We've seen this coming before in other works (e.g., Schreiner and Canaday's, *The Race Set before Us*).

It is nice to see the issues put this baldly.

This book is well written, easy to follow, and irenic in tone.

Enjoy.