

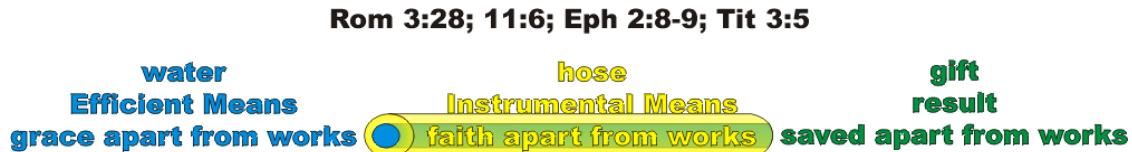
# What is Work?

Revised 10/252009

When the Bible teaches that we are not saved from eternal damnation on the basis of works, what does it mean by *works*? The working definition posed by Paul in Rom 4:4 is that a *work* is anything we do that results in a **reward**.<sup>1</sup> Stated negatively, a *work* is not anything we do that would result in a **gift**. The following hypothetical syllogism attests that a gift is not a reward.

1. If it is a gift, then it is not the result of works/*ergon* (Rom 3:28; 4:5; 11:6; Eph 2:2-9; Tit 3:5; 2Tim 1:9).
2. If it is not a result of works/*ergon*, then it is not a reward (Rom 2:6-7; 4:4; 1Cor 3:14-15; 2Tim 4:14; Rev 2:26; 22:12).
3. Therefore, if it is a gift, then it is not a reward.

To illustrate the difference between a reward and gift, we will picture water flowing through a hose. As [Charlie Bing](#) relates, water is the efficient means and faith is the instrumental means in putting out a fire.



When the resultant benefit bestowed is a gift, neither the efficient means nor the instrumental means are considered works. Calvinists would assert that the reason faith is not work is because God produces it; we merely passively experience it like a passive hose through which water actively flows. Although faith is passive persuasion. Nevertheless, the passivity of faith is not what proves that it is not a work. One of the reasons passivity cannot be the benchmark by which to judge if something is work is because this is not the case in Acts 2:38. In this verse, repentance and baptism are the co-conditions that had to be met in order to receive the gift.<sup>2</sup> Those meeting those conditions in Acts had to act in order to receive the gift. Moreover, God did not make them meet these requirements apart from their active cooperation. Since the benefit bestowed was a gift, the actions through which this gift was received are not works since neither the efficient nor instrumental means of receiving a gift are considered works.

Another reason passivity cannot determine what constitutes work is because even faith itself is sometimes considered a work. This is rather explicitly affirmed in some passages and may be deduced from other passages in which faith is rewarded. Since rewards are based on works, a rewarded faith would be regarded as a working faith. Thus, even passive persuasion may be considered a work. What determines whether or not something is a work, therefore, is not whether or not it is something we passively or actively do. By the same token, the fact that it is something we do does not make it a work. Certainly, it must be something we do in order to be considered rewardable (2Cor 5:10), but just because we do it does not make it a work. In response to the question, "What must I **do** to be saved?" Paul answers, "**Believe** in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." (Acts 16:30-31) Believing is something we *do*. Likewise, when asked, "What must we **do**?" the biblical answer on that unique occasion was that they should **repent** and be **baptized** in order to receive the gift (Acts 2:37-38). Yet on neither occasion would what they were instructed to do be considered works since what they did resulted in their receiving a gift.

If it be asked, "What must I do to get some rest?" one might well answer, "Sleep." Sleep is something we do. Likewise, believing is something we do. That believing is something we **passively** do does not prevent it from being considered a work, and that it is something we **do** does not make it a work. For anything we do to be considered a good work that might qualify us as an overcomer: (1) it must be done to the glory of God (1Cor 10:31), (2) it must be done by the energizing power of the Spirit (Zech 4:6; Jn 15:5), (3) it must be something we do lovingly and voluntarily (1Cor 9:17; 13:3), (4) it must be the basis for the benefit bestowed, and (5) the benefit bestowed must be a reward.

<sup>1</sup> Although work only comprises some of things we do rather than everything we do, from the perspective of outcome in terms of gift versus reward, everything we do that results in a reward is a work. See [Work is Something We Do](#).

<sup>2</sup> This view has now been superseded in my books by viewing repentance and baptism as preconditions.