

Grace, Faith and Works

نعمة الإيمان والعمل

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Introduction

Islam is a religion which gives importance to both inner belief as well as outer works. Being a Muslim does not entail that one merely carries out acts of ritual worship, nor that one only hold a certain belief in the heart without it being apparent in one's actions. Some incorrectly believe that Islam places works over and above inner faith, while in actuality, Islam teaches that inner faith is the first, foremost, and most important of the five pillars and fundamentals of Islam. The Islamic view is that it is both inner belief as well as outward action which make up what is known in Islam as "faith".

Islam teaches that salvation is attained by God's Grace, and that God bestows His Grace upon those who have **both** inner belief **and** good works. The difference, then, between Western Christianity and Islam is not that one religion believes inner faith is important while the other does not; indeed, both Western Christianity and Islam believe that inner belief is the most integral factor for attaining salvation. The difference is that Islam teaches that although belief is the most important factor, it is not the only one. In order to attain salvation, inner belief must be coupled with good works. In this article, we will first examine the Islamic viewpoint, after which we will then take a critical look at the Christian doctrine of "faith alone".

The Components of Faith

Islam teaches that works are a *branch* of faith. Faith (*iman*) is not defined as mere inner belief, but rather is the sum of inner belief and works (*amal*). Thus, Faith and works are not two separate entities, but rather one is a part and component of the other. Therefore, the debate about "faith versus works" is irrelevant to the Islamic discourse, since the latter is a part and component of the former. Muslims believe that faith (*iman*) is

comprised of three parts: (1) belief in the heart (*i'tiqad*), (2) affirmation by the tongue (*qawl*), and (3) works (*amal*).

Belief of the Heart

Of these three components of faith, belief in the heart is considered the most important. Therefore, even from this angle, it is incorrect to say that Islam emphasizes outward actions over inner belief. Rather, no works are accepted by God if one does not hold correct inner belief, one such as the belief that only God is to be worshipped. God says:

“If you associate others with God, (then) surely all your works will be rendered vain, and you will certainly be among the losers.” (Quran 39:65)

Works are only accepted if correct belief is held. Thus, whenever God Almighty mentions works in the Quran, the word “belief” precedes it, indicative of the Islamic view that belief has more importance in the religion than works:

“And those who believed and did good works, they are the inhabitants of Paradise, abiding therein eternally.” (Quran 2:82)

“God has promised those who believed and did good works, that for them is a tremendous reward (in Paradise).” (Quran 5:9)

“And those who believed and did good works...they are the inhabitants of the Garden (of Paradise), abiding therein eternally.” (Quran 7:42)

“Those who believe and do good works, their Lord guides them by their faith. Rivers will flow beneath them in the Gardens of Delight.” (Quran 10:9)

“Upon those who believed and did good works shall The Most Gracious [God] bestow [His] Love.” (Quran 19:96)

“Those who believed and did good works, We shall blot out their transgressions and shall reward them according to the best of that which they used to do.” (Quran 29:7)

“And He (God) answers those who believe and do good works, and gives them more out of His Grace.” (Quran, 42:26)

To explain this concept, Muslim scholars have likened faith to a tree. Belief in the heart is considered the root; it is hidden beneath the surface, not visible to the eye. Yet, the root is what gives the tree a firm foundation, without which there can be no tree. Works then are considered what is apparent above the surface, such as the trunk and branches of the trees. This is one of the reasons why it is improper to debate “faith *versus* work”; a person may compare one tree to another, but it would be invalid to compare a tree (faith) with its branches (works). However, if we compare belief in the heart to actions of the limbs, then we know that the former is the root or foundation, whereas the latter is the branch; the root or foundation is always more important than a branch. A branch can fall off and the tree still stands, or sprout anew, but if one chops the root, then the entire tree falls and ceases to exist.

Belief in the heart is the foundation of the tree of faith, without which it dies. Good works are the trunk and branches of this tree; if there were no branches and only a root, there would in essence be no tree. The more the branches, the more perfect the tree is. Therefore, we say that the base of faith is belief of the heart, but it is incomplete without good works. While a tree is not a tree without its trunk and branches, a tree cannot stand without its foundation or root.

Therefore, the Islamic position is stated thus: faith (*iman*) is the fundamental and most important pillar of Islam. Faith consists of both the (belief of the) heart and the (actions of the) body. The former is more important than the latter, and faith ceases to exist if it is absent.

The importance of belief in the heart can be demonstrated by the fact that seemingly good deeds can be negated if belief in the heart is not present. For example, giving money in charity to seek the Pleasure of God is a good belief accompanied by a good action, and as such there is a reward from God for it. Yet, if one were to donate money in charity in order to boast of one's generosity to the people, then this is a seemingly good action with an evil intent and corrupt inner belief, and as such, this does not earn God's Good Pleasure at all. The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“Actions are judged by their intentions.” (*Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

What is meant by this is that actions of the tongue or the limbs are of no avail if they are not rooted in the belief of the heart.



The Statement of the Tongue

One must publicly declare faith to God. Even Satan had belief in his heart, but he did not declare his pledge of loyalty to God, but rather he declared himself in rebellion and opposition. Therefore, a Muslim must declare that “there is none worthy of worship except God” and must believe in all of the Prophets of God who taught this message.

Ibn Taimiyyah stated in *The Book of Faith*:

“One who believes in his heart but does not verbally state his belief is not considered as a believer, neither in this life nor in the Hereafter. God has not declared such a person—who simply has knowledge of faith in his heart—to be a believer in the Message [of God]. He is not considered a believer unless he confirms it by his speech.

“Therefore, the outward speech is an essential aspect of Faith, and according to the earlier and later scholars, one will not be saved unless he verbally testifies... he, who does not make the confession of faith although he has the ability to do so, is a disbeliever. He is a disbeliever both inwardly and outwardly.”
(*Kitab al-Iman*)

The Importance of Deeds

Belief in the heart results in good works. How could it be that a person would say he believes in the heart but never does good works? The great scholar Ibn Taimiyyah said:

“And that is because Faith’s root is what is in the heart and the outer deeds are inevitable due to that. It is inconceivable that there would exist Faith in the heart yet there be no [good] works from the limbs [as a consequence]. Rather, when the outer deeds diminish it is due to the diminishing of the belief which is in the heart... Since works are correlated to the heart, then surely it is desired that a man is not contented by the heart’s belief; rather, the righteous works are definitely with it.” (*al-Fatâwâ*, 7/198)

Islam teaches that there is no dichotomy between belief and works. Rather, belief and works compliment each other and are intertwined. The person who claims to believe—and does not show it with works—is a hypocrite.

If a man loves his wife in his heart, then he will treat her well with his actions. If a man neglects and abuses his wife, then surely he does not truly love her. Love manifests itself in works. If a man loves his wife, then he will do what pleases her. If a man truly loves God, he would show it in his obedience to God’s Commandments. Such a person would know to do good deeds to earn God’s Pleasure. He would strive through his works to seek the Pleasure of God, and that is the Path to Salvation.

Al-Hasan al-Basri, a great scholar of Islam, explained:

“Faith is not by embellishment or wishful thinking, but it is what settles in the heart and is verified through your actions. Whoever says good but does not do good, will have his words compared to his deeds by God. Whoever says good and does good will have his words raised by his deeds. This is because God said:

“To Him (God) ascends the good word, and the righteous deed raises it.” (Quran 35:10)

(Ibn Battah in *Al-Ibaanah Al-Kubraa* 3/120, and Al-Khateeb Al-Baghdaadi in *Iqtidaa' Al-'Ilm Al-'Amal* #56.)

True faith means having hope in and dependence on God's Promise. God Almighty says in the Quran:

“So worship Him (God) and have total dependence on Him.” (Quran 11:123)

“Have total dependence on the Living One, Who will never die, and glorify His praises.” (Quran 25:58)

There is a difference between true hope in God and mere wishful thinking. Ibn al-Qayyim (2/27-28) explained:

“The difference between mere wishful thinking and true hope is that mere wishful thinking involves laziness wherein the person neither exerts himself, nor strives [to achieve what he wishes for]. Hope and trust in God, however, entails striving, exertion, and beautiful reliance [on God]. The first [mere wishful thinking] is like the one who wishes that the earth would plant and sow its own seeds for him. The second [hope in God] is like the one who [actually] tills the soil, plants the seeds and then hopes that crops will grow... Hope is not correct, except if accompanied by action.”

Shah al-Kirmani said:

“The sign of sound hope is good obedience.” (as quoted by Ibn al-Qayyim, 2/27-28)

Ibn al-Qayyim (2/27-28) continued:

“And Hope is of three types; two are praiseworthy and one type is blameworthy and mere delusion. The first two are: (1) the hope of a person who does an act of obedience for God, upon guidance from God, hoping in its reward; (2) someone who commits a sin, then repents from it, hoping for God's forgiveness,

pardon, kindness, magnanimity, clemency and generosity. (3) The third [type] is like a person who persists in sinning and transgressing the limits, yet hopes for God’s mercy without doing any action [to warrant it]. This is delusion, mere wishful thinking and false hope.”

We must love God. But we must not only love God with our hearts, but love God with our actions. If we pray throughout the night, then this will instill in our hearts the remembrance of God; from this, we see that an action (such as prayer) can reinforce our inner belief. On the other hand, sinful actions decrease faith. If a man spends the night in illegal fornication, this will affect his heart and decrease him in faith. Good action fortifies the heart’s belief, whereas evil action corrupts the heart.

The truth of the matter is that those who claim to love God—yet have no works to prove this—neither have belief in their hearts, nor have conviction in their tongues, nor do their actions reflect anything but the emptiness of their hearts. We find that many people of some faiths make ostentatious claims about their supposed love for God, yet they do not back it up with their deeds. A Muslim must recite the Declaration of Faith, or *shahadah*, as it is known in Arabic. The word literally means “to witness”, and it means to be a witness that there is nothing worthy of worship except God. Yet, witnessing with one’s tongue is an easy matter; it is a much greater sign of belief to witness God’s Glory with one’s body, actions, and even life. This is why the word *shaheed* (the one who physically gives his life to God) comes from the same root as *shahadah* (Declaration of Faith), because the most excellent way to declare God’s Glory is with one’s actions and not just by one’s tongue.

It is a matter of common sense: a son telling his father that he loves him is one thing, but if he offers him his own kidney, then this is a higher level of love. A man may *say* he loves his country, but it is a higher level for a man to risk his life in the army defending his country. It may sound cliché, but it is a truism that

actions speak louder than words. Oftentimes we find that some adherents to certain faiths are busy *telling* us how much they love God, but they do not know that we Muslims are too occupied *showing* how we love God! We *show* our love to God five times a day, when we bow to Him in prayer, and when we adhere to God's Commands. Moreover, Muslims are too humble and shy to claim that our love for God is so strong that we are promised Paradise! Who is superior: the person who continually boasts his love for God, or the one who humbly manifests it in his works, toiling away to please His Lord Most High?

In the Quran, God Almighty commanded the Prophet to tell those who claim to love God to back it up with their works in obedience:

“Say: If you indeed love Allah, then follow me! Then God will love you and forgive you for your sins, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Quran 3:31)

This is a challenge from God Almighty, whereby He tells us that if we *truly* love God, then we should obey God's commandments to prove it. If, however, we defy God's laws, then we do not really love God, and this is insincerity and mere hypocrisy



God's Grace

Some people may think that Islam teaches that Paradise can be *earned* by one's own deeds. This is not true; the Islamic belief is that neither faith nor works are what enter us into Heaven. Rather, it is only God's Grace and His Mercy which allows us to enter Paradise. To believe otherwise is to question God's Power and Absolute Sovereignty. God is The Forgiver, and to claim that man can grant himself forgiveness is to take away from God's Names and Attributes; this would be exalting the creation (i.e. oneself) to the status of the Creator, making oneself a partner in God's Glory and Power, which is the heinous sin of *shirk*, i.e. associating partners in worship to God.

A house in this worldly life costs a certain price; the better and larger it is, the more its price. A mansion costs more than a regular sized house, and a palace costs more than a mansion. One can only imagine how much a palace in Paradise costs! If deeds were our currency, then the truth is that none of us could save up enough good deeds to ever be able to afford even one square inch of property in Paradise. One of the reasons that we human beings could never save up enough good deeds is that we are so heavily in debt already. No amount of good deeds could repay God Almighty back for what He has given us, such as our eyesight, our

hearing, and the like. Therefore, the conclusion is that no human being can earn Paradise on his own merit or deeds.

Nobody will attain eternal Salvation due to his own level of faith or deeds, but rather, it is only attained through God's Grace. Prophet Muhammad, may God raise his name, said:

“...Be aware that none among you can attain Salvation only by virtue of his own deeds.”

The people asked him: “O God's Messenger, not even you?”

To which, the Prophet replied: “Not even me, unless God encompasses me with His Mercy and Grace.”

It is known that the most righteous from humanity was Prophet Muhammad, yet we find that even he would only enter Paradise due to God's Grace. This becomes even clearer in another Prophetic Saying (*hadeeth*) in which we are told of the man who did good deeds his entire life and then thinks he will enter into Paradise on this basis, without the Grace of God. Such a person—who is arrogant enough to think that his own deeds will earn him Paradise—will be thrown into Hell, because He disbelieved in God's Grace.

Yet, this is not to diminish the importance of faith and works. Muslims believe that God Almighty grants His Grace and Mercy to those who have faith and who do good works. God Almighty says:

“And He (God) answers those who believe and do good works, and gives them more out of His Grace.” (Quran 42:26)

God Almighty tells us that His Grace, Mercy, and Love are for those who “believe” and do “good works”:

“Upon those who believed and did good works shall The Most Gracious [God] bestow [His] Love.” (Quran 19:96)

Muslims believe that God loves the good doers and that He hates the wicked. This is in contrast to what some Christians say, i.e. that God loves everyone, including the evil, the wicked, and the sinners. Yet, this idea is rejected even in the Bible:

“God is angry with the wicked every day.” (Psalms 7:11)

“How oft is the candle of the wicked put out? And how often comes their destruction on them? God distributes sorrows [to the wicked] in His anger.” (Job 21:17)

The idea that God loves every human being might be a nice fluffy neo-hippy ideal, but it is nonsensical and it is not supported by God’s Message. Christians, too, believe that God created Hell, and that some humans will be sent there. Does God love those whom He Himself damns to Hell? If this is the case, then what sort of love is this? If God truly hates the sin and not the sinner, then why is it that it is the sinner—not the sin—who is thrown into Hell?

Surely, God does not love the wicked. What kind of a God would love Adolf Hitler, Stalin, the Pharaoh, and so many other evil oppressors? Nay, God does not love murderers, rapists, and criminals. To believe that God would love the wicked is to question the Justice of God. Rather, we say that God only loves the good, and He hates the wicked. Yet, God’s Attribute is that He is Most Merciful, so if the wicked turn to Him in sincere repentance, then God is quick to accept.

To conclude the matter, whoever is loved by God will enter the Abode of Heaven, and God bestows His Love and Grace upon the good doers, those who believe with true sincerity and who do works of righteousness. God bestows His Grace only upon those who strive to attain it. How can anyone hope to attain God’s Grace without working with one’s own two hands to obey God’s Commandments?

Belief of “Faith Alone” Rejected by the Bible

Christians believe that human beings must attain Justification before they enter Heaven. Western Christians claim that they attain this Justification simply by “faith alone”. Yet, this doctrine of “faith alone” is rejected in the Bible itself. It is interesting to note that the word “faith” appears over two hundred times in the New Testament, and only *once* is it coupled with the word “alone.” And this one time that the two words appear together, the doctrine is actually rejected outright:

“You see that a person is justified by his works and not by faith alone.” (James 2:24)

Indeed, the passage in its entirety seems to negate the doctrine of “faith alone”. We read in James, 2:14-18:

14. “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

15. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.

16. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

17. In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” (James 2:14-18)

Even Satan had the belief in God, yet he did not back this up with his oath of allegiance nor with his works. The Bible continues:

19. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

21. Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

22. You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

23. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.

24. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

24. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:19-26)

Some Christians claim that it is enough to declare Jesus as one’s savior and God, after which a person is “re-born.” They believe that this one-time experience—of declaring Jesus as one’s savior—is enough for one to be reassured entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet, such a concept is rejected by the Bible itself; verse 7:21 of Matthew tells us that merely declaring one’s Lord as Jesus is not enough, but rather one has to obey God’s Commands to reach Salvation:

“Not everyone who says to me: “Lord, Lord”, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

God will give to each man commensurate to whatever he has earned with his own two hands (i.e. works). Eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven can only be achieved by persistence in doing good deeds; we read from the Bible:

“God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give Eternal Life.” (Romans 2:6-7)

Therefore, Eternal Life is *contingent* upon doing good. The Bible says that those who do good (i.e. good deeds) will reach Heaven, and those who do evil (i.e. evil deeds) will enter Hell:

“...Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” (John 5:29)

Salvation is not achieved overnight as some Christians believe, but rather it is something which must be worked for throughout life, as the Bible says:

“...Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling...” (Philippians 2:12)

The Bible says further:

“But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.” (Matthew 24:13)

In the Bible, Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, is reported to have said that in order to enter the Heavenly Life, one must obey God’s Commandments. This is a clear indication that faith alone is not enough to attain Salvation, but rather entrance into the Heavenly Life is dependent on obeying God’s Commandments. The Bible says:

Jesus replied: "...If you want to enter Life, obey the Commandments!" (Matthew 19:17)

The Danger of "Faith Alone" Doctrine

There is a great danger in preaching a doctrine which trivializes the importance of deeds. Oftentimes, many Christians think that because Jesus absolved them of their sins, there is thus no need to stay away from sinful lifestyles. In other words, Jesus has given them a "free pass" to sin. And that is why we find that many Christians will sin throughout the week and come to church only on Sundays, content in the idea that they have been saved no matter what. The doctrine of "once saved, always saved" leads to negligence in one's duties to God. A religion which preaches such a belief is only causing its followers to stray from righteousness. The religion of Islam, meanwhile, warns its followers that God's Grace is reached by belief **and** good deeds, and that one must strive to attain Paradise. This is why Muslims pray five times a day, so that they can attain God's Grace and Salvation; it is a constant struggle towards righteousness over the course of one's entire life, not merely a one-time event.

The doctrine of faith alone is blasphemous because it was not taught to us by God Almighty; "faith alone" is not found in the Quran. For that matter, the doctrine cannot even be found in the Bible. It is not proper to follow a belief which finds no scriptural basis whatsoever.

Conclusion

Salvation is reached by attaining the Grace of God, and this is done by both inner faith and good deeds. This is a belief which finds support both in the Quran and the Bible. God's Promise is that Grace is attained through "inner faith" and "good deeds", in contrast to "faith alone".

Some people may believe that they are promised Heaven by "faith alone", yet does this mean that they will *actually* enter

Heaven? Merely believing in something does not make it into a reality. How often do we turn on the television and listen to televangelists claiming that we can be saved simply by pronouncing Jesus as our Lord? Often we can flip the channel only to see someone else promising us that we can lose fifty pounds in one month simply by strapping some exercise belt to the belly. Is this promise any less doubtful than the televangelist's promise of Heaven?

How foolish would a person be to buy one of those exercise belts and to rely solely on it, without worrying about one's own works (i.e. diet, exercise, etc)? Such a person—if he becomes careless with his diet and exercise—would eventually clog his arteries with fat and die of a heart attack, regardless of his inner belief that he was to lose fifty pounds. The Islamic belief is that sins are black specks on the spiritual heart; with enough sins, the entire heart will be covered in blackness and will die. Sins clog the spiritual heart like fat clogs the arteries of the physical heart. The one who presents a blackened heart to God will not enter Heaven, regardless of his belief in the concept of “faith alone”. A person who relies on this belief is like the one who puts his trust in the exercise belt: for a time, such people will feel deluded and content in the promise, but, eventually, reality will bare its ugly head, and all men will be held accountable for their works.

A magical exercise belt causes people to become negligent towards diet and exercise, because they believe that the belt will more than compensate for their lack. Likewise, the concept of “faith alone” causes people to be negligent towards works. When such people die, they will be upset that they did not spend their lives accruing good deeds in order to gain God's Grace. People should spend their lives doing good deeds, instead of buying into the promise of an effortless ride into Paradise on unfulfilled intentions.

The Quran confirms the truth, instead of contenting us with fallacies: men must work hard in order to attain Paradise. It is

common sense that such a great reward should demand great effort. God Almighty says:

“And strive hard in the Way of God, such a striving as is due to Him!” (Quran 22:78)

And God says:

“And those who strive hard in Our Cause, We will certainly guide them to our Ways: For verily God is with those who do right.” (Quran 61:11)

We must strive to seek God’s Pleasure by not only believing in our hearts but by showing it with our actions. Nothing is more important than belief in the heart, yet this does not negate the importance of actions of the limbs. Works without faith is insincere; faith without works is hypocrisy.