

Grace, Faith and Works (part 1 of 4): The Components of Faith

Description: The relationship between inner faith and good works in Islam. Part One: The Islamic concept of "faith" and its relation to inner belief and good works.

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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.

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