

The Subtle Compromise: Soft Lordship Salvation Examined

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Introduction

Labels can be useful. They help us quickly identify where someone stands on a theological issue. But labels also come with limitations. This is especially true when we paint with too broad a brush.

Take *Calvinism* and *Arminianism*, for example. Many people assume those are the only two options when it comes to understanding salvation. But I don't fit neatly into either category. When I tell some people that neither label describes what I believe, they look at me like I'm from another planet. Even within Calvinism, there's a wide spectrum which ranges from five-point extreme Calvinism to softer, more moderate Calvinists. It's certainly not a one-size-fits-all system.

The same is true for *Free Grace theology*. When some people hear the term "free grace," they automatically associate it with "hyper-grace" teachings, or with the particular emphases of the Grace Evangelical Society (GES). But again, I don't fall into either of those camps. I would describe my position as *Traditional Free Grace* which is a view more in line with what was taught by Charles Ryrie, Robert Lightner, and other dispensational scholars who held firmly to salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

I believe the same kind of argument applies to the label "Lordship Salvation." Too often, there's a tendency to lump all forms of Lordship teaching into one broad category without recognizing meaningful distinctions. But not everyone who uses the term means the same thing by it. Some are more rigid, emphasizing radical self-denial and full surrender as prerequisites for salvation. Others take a softer tone, focusing more on submission and obedience as the expected outcome of true faith. In both cases, however, the label can be misleading unless we take the time to understand the nuances behind the terms.

The Problem of Pigeon-Holing

In today's theological conversations, it's easy to oversimplify complex views by placing them into tidy categories—what some call "pigeon-holing." But theology doesn't always fit neatly into labeled boxes. When it comes to soteriology, especially, many Christians don't realize how nuanced their views are until someone else tries to define them.

This is particularly true when discussing Lordship Salvation. For years, critics and defenders have volleyed around the term without always recognizing that there are variations within the view. Some adhere to what might be called "Hard Lordship Salvation," exemplified by teachers like John MacArthur, who insist that submission to Christ's lordship is an essential *part* of saving faith. Others take a milder approach, avoiding hardline language but still suggesting that true faith must eventually show itself through works. This more moderate, less defined view is what has some refer to as "Soft Lordship Salvation."

The problem is that Soft Lordship Salvation isn't a formal system with a list of doctrinal bullet points. It's more of a theological tendency that blends elements of grace and works in subtle ways—especially when it comes to salvation and discipleship. As a result, it can be harder to identify, harder to define, and harder to critique. But that doesn't make it any less important to address.

While labels can help us get our bearings in a conversation, they should never substitute for careful listening or clear definitions. When we rely too much on pigeon-holing, we risk misunderstanding not only what others believe, but we also risk misunderstanding the dangers that some of those beliefs might pose to the clarity of the gospel.

The Origin of Soft Lordship Salvation

The precise origin of the term Soft Lordship Salvation is difficult to pinpoint. It does not appear to have been coined by a major theologian or academic. Rather, it seems to have developed as a descriptive term to differentiate between those who embrace John MacArthur's Hard Lordship Salvation and those who take a softer approach but still move in the same direction theologically.

The earliest published usage of the term Soft Lordship Salvation appears to come from Zane Hodges in a *Grace in Focus* article entitled *Assurance and Works*.¹ Hodges describes conversations with Darrell Bock in which Bock self-identified his view using that label. This reference, dating to the early 1990s, shows that the terminology originated as a way to describe a more moderate but still problematic form of Lordship teaching.

That exchange reveals how the term most likely came into being. Some professors and pastors do not necessarily preach MacArthur's rigorous demands for self-denial and obedience as prerequisites for salvation. However, they often suggest that if a professing believer does not eventually produce good works, then their faith may not be "real." This may soften the tone of Hard Lordship Salvation, but it retains the underlying assumption that works are required to validate faith.

Defining Soft Lordship Salvation

We could define Soft Lordship Salvation as referring to a theological position that *claims* to uphold salvation by grace through faith alone, but in *practice* blurs the line between justification and sanctification by requiring visible evidence (such as good works, spiritual growth, or perseverance) as a necessary validation of "true"² saving faith.

In contrast, Hard Lordship Salvation openly declares that a person must submit to Christ's lordship, forsake sin, and commit to obedience in order to be saved. Soft Lordship takes a more subtle route. It doesn't necessarily *demand* these things at the front end of salvation. However, it insists that they must appear eventually, or else a person was never truly saved to begin with.

Hard Lordship Salvation clearly frontloads the gospel with works. It redefines saving faith to include a willingness to obey, turn from sin, and follow Christ as Master. But it doesn't stop there—it also backloads the gospel with works by teaching that continued obedience and perseverance are necessary to confirm or prove that one's faith was real.

In contrast, Soft Lordship Salvation typically *rejects* the frontloading of the gospel with works. It affirms that one is saved at the moment of faith in Christ alone—without requiring prior

¹ Hodges, Zane. "Assurance and Works: An Evangelical Trainwreck." GES.
<https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/assurance-and-works/>

² In reality, there is no such thing as "true" or "genuine" saving faith. As Dave Breese explains in his two articles, "Saving Faith" and "The Heresy Is in the Adjectives," adding qualifiers to faith distorts the simplicity of the gospel.

commitment or behavior change. However, it still backloads the gospel with works, insisting that good works, spiritual growth, or moral transformation *must* follow in order for faith to be considered “genuine.” If these expected evidences are lacking, the believer is left to question whether their faith was ever real in the first place.

In doing so, Soft Lordship Salvation creates a troubling paradox: it professes faith alone, but it denies assurance unless that faith can be externally verified by performance. This shifts the ground of assurance away from the finished work of Christ and the promises of God, and relocates it onto the unstable ground of subjective experience and human behavior. The result is a doctrine that undermines the freeness of the gospel—not by changing the terms of salvation outright, but by redefining what saving faith *must produce* in order to be considered valid.

Key Traits of Soft Lordship Salvation:

- Faith is redefined as a “living” or “genuine” faith that necessarily results in good works.
- Assurance is made contingent on the presence of works, not on the promises of God alone (cf. John 5:24; 1 John 5:13).
- Justification and sanctification are closely tethered so that a failure to grow is seen as a possible sign that justification never occurred.
- Fruitfulness is expected as a test of conversion rather than a call to discipleship.

Soft Lordship proponents may reject legalism and affirm justification by faith alone *in principle*, but their theological framework often results in introspective doubt, where believers are told to “examine their fruit” to determine whether they are truly saved.

While this view may sound balanced to some, it poses a serious threat to biblical assurance. It leads to a works-conscious Christian life, where grace is no longer the foundation of one’s identity in Christ, but merely the starting point—eclipsed by an ongoing need to validate one’s salvation through performance.

Comparing the Two: What They Share and Where They Differ

When comparing Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation, it’s important to recognize that while both are problematic, they are not equally so—nor are the dangers they present exactly the same.

Hard Lordship Salvation distorts the gospel itself. It frontloads faith with works by requiring surrender, obedience, or commitment as conditions for salvation. In doing so, it presents a different gospel than the one preached by Paul—a gospel that, by Paul’s own standard, falls under the *anathema* of Galatians 1:6–9. Paul was crystal clear: any gospel that adds to the free offer of eternal life through faith in Christ alone is accursed. Hard Lordship Salvation shifts the object of faith from Christ and His finished work to the sinner’s willingness to obey. That is not just an error in emphasis—it is a gospel of a different kind.

Soft Lordship Salvation, by contrast, often avoids these front-end errors. Many proponents clearly preach salvation by grace through faith alone, apart from works, when addressing unbelievers. In that sense, they may preserve the purity of the saving message. However, they often undermine that same message on the *back end* by requiring good works, fruit, or spiritual progress to validate that salvation truly occurred. This blurs the line between justification and sanctification, leaving believers confused about assurance, insecure in their standing, and focused on self-evaluation rather than resting in Christ.

So, in practical terms:

- Hard Lordship Salvation confuses the lost about how to get saved.
- Soft Lordship Salvation confuses the saved about how to grow.

While Soft Lordship Salvation may not rise to the level of Galatians 1's "different gospel," it still represents a serious theological and pastoral problem. It subtly conditions assurance on behavior and leads many believers into unnecessary doubt, spiritual introspection, and bondage to performance-based Christianity. In that way, Soft Lordship Salvation may be more deceptive, but Hard Lordship Salvation is more deadly—because it misdirects the lost at the most critical moment.

In the end, both systems spring from the same root issue: the failure to maintain the biblical distinction between justification (a once-for-all act based solely on faith in Christ) and sanctification (an ongoing process empowered by grace, not law). Whether at the front door or the back door, adding works to faith always robs the gospel of its clarity and the believer of their confidence.

Biblical Problems with Soft Lordship Salvation

Though Soft Lordship Salvation often avoids the frontloading errors of Hard Lordship Salvation, it still presents significant biblical problems.

1. It Blurs the Line Between Justification and Sanctification

One of the clearest biblical distinctions is that justification is a one-time act, received by faith alone, apart from works (Rom. 4:4–5; Titus 3:5), while sanctification is the lifelong process of spiritual growth that follows regeneration. Soft Lordship Salvation often treats sanctification as the proof or validation of justification. This undermines the unconditional nature of salvation by making good works a required after-the-fact verification of faith.

Paul strongly rebuked this kind of confusion in Galatians 3:3:

“Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?”

The Galatians were not frontloading the gospel—they had believed correctly. But they were now trying to *maintain* or *prove* their standing with God through works. Paul called this foolishness, not faithfulness.

2. It Redefines Faith with Unbiblical Qualifiers

The Bible never divides faith into categories like “true,” “genuine,” or “saving” faith versus “false” faith. These adjectives are often used in Soft Lordship Salvation circles to explain why someone who professes Christ but fails to grow must not really be saved. But Scripture simply presents faith in Christ as the sole condition for receiving eternal life (John 5:24; 6:47; Acts 16:31). Adding adjectives to faith (e.g., “real,” “living,” “transforming”) imports concepts foreign to the biblical gospel.

As Dave Breese rightly argued in *The Heresy Is in the Adjectives*, the moment we require qualifiers to make faith “count,” we’ve abandoned the plain promise of God.

3. It Misuses “Fruit” as a Test of Eternal Life

Soft Lordship Salvation frequently appeals to the idea that “true believers will bear fruit,” citing verses like Matthew 7:16–20, 1 John 3:9, or James 2:17. But these passages are misapplied:

- Matthew 7 is about false prophets, not struggling believers.
- 1 John deals with fellowship, not the condition for entering eternal life (see 1 John 1:3–7).
- James 2 is concerned with *useful* or *profitable* faith, not salvific faith before God (Jas. 2:14–26).

None of these passages teach that a lack of good works invalidates one’s salvation. Rather, they warn against hypocrisy, promote spiritual growth, or encourage believers to live out their faith in visible ways.

4. It Undermines Biblical Assurance

The most serious pastoral consequence of Soft Lordship Salvation is that it robs believers of assurance. Instead of pointing them to the finished work of Christ and the reliability of God’s promise (John 3:16; John 10:28–29; 1 John 5:13), it urges them to evaluate their behavior to determine whether they’re truly saved.

This not only fosters insecurity and introspection, but it subtly teaches that Christ’s Word is not enough—that His promise of eternal life to the believer must be supplemented by visible fruit before a person can know they are saved.

Some may wonder whether those who have only ever believed a hard or soft Lordship Salvation message—without ever believing the gospel of grace—are saved or lost. The biblical answer is clear—only faith in Christ alone for eternal life saves (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8–9). However, addressing this question must be handled with grace and care, because pressing people to re-analyze the exact content of their past belief can unintentionally undermine assurance in those who truly have believed.

A Word of Caution About “Belief Inspection”

In the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24–30), Jesus warned of the danger of trying to pull up the tares before the harvest, because doing so could damage the wheat. Lordship Salvation often functions like a premature weeding project, inspecting the “fruit” of professing believers to decide who is really saved. In the process, they frequently harm genuine believers, planting doubt where Christ intended assurance. The same danger can exist on the doctrinal side when well-meaning Free Grace believers become “belief inspectors.” While it is true that anyone who has never believed in Christ alone for eternal life remains unsaved, the solution is not to interrogate someone’s conversion memory or speculate about their past faith. Memory is fallible, and theological clarity often develops after conversion. If there is concern that a person has misunderstood the gospel, the safest course is simply to present the gospel clearly again, as an open invitation to believe and have assurance now—rather than risk damaging the wheat while trying to uproot the tares.

Final Thoughts: Grace That Is Truly Free

At the heart of the gospel is the simple and stunning reality that eternal life is a free gift—freely offered and freely received (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8–9). Any teaching—no matter how sincere or well-intentioned—that adds performance, perseverance, or post-conversion fruit as a test of whether someone is truly saved distorts the nature of that gift.

Hard Lordship Salvation undermines grace by redefining faith itself to include surrender, commitment, and obedience. Soft Lordship Salvation is subtler. It may affirm salvation by faith

alone, but it redefines assurance, conditions spiritual growth, and pressures believers to look to themselves rather than to Christ and His finished work (Heb. 12:2).

Free Grace theology—particularly in its traditional form—holds fast to the biblical distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification is instantaneous, complete, and based solely on faith in Christ (John 5:24). Sanctification is a lifelong process that involves choices, discipline, and growth—but it is not guaranteed, automatic, or essential to prove one’s salvation.

True grace does not need adjectives. As Dave Breese rightly warned, “*The heresy is in the adjectives.*” There is no “genuine grace,” “true faith,” or “real Christian life” that can be measured by external fruit. Grace is either free, or it is not grace (Rom. 11:6).

Let us, then, preach a gospel that is clear to the lost and comforting to the saved—a message that magnifies Christ, not the convert; His cross, not our commitment.