

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: GOOD WORKS

The Works God Calls Good

1. *Only the works that God has commanded in His holy Word are to be accounted good works. Such works as men have invented out of blind zeal or upon the mere pretence of good intentions, are not good, for they lack the sanction of Holy Scripture.*

The standard of our faith is always and only the Word of God. It is not enough to say that the Bible does not condemn something. We must only offer to God as a necessary religious duty what He has commanded. The Pharisees had a tradition of ‘corban’ (Mark 7:6-13), which in itself seemed a good thing. But as with all human traditions, it resulted in the putting aside the commandment of God concerning parents. How often the Word of God brings us back to those works that God has commanded us to do (1 Samuel 15:22, Micah 6:6-8). For example: many people think it is necessary to be in church on Christmas Day, which God has not commanded, yet they are not concerned to be there every Sunday, which God has commanded.

Good Works are the Fruit and Evidence of Faith

2. *Works that are truly good, and which are done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and living faith. By means of them believers make known their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance of salvation, edify their brethren, adorn their Christian witness, and deprive their opponents of arguments against the gospel. In sum, they glorify God who has made them what they are, namely, new creatures in Christ; and as such they yield fruit that evidences holiness, eternal life being the outcome of all.*

(a) The **evidence** of faith. Only a faith which produces works in a living and saving faith; anything else the Bible calls “dead” faith (James 2:14-26).

(b) The **fruit** of faith. Works are the evidence of faith, because the only way to produce works is by faith (Galatians 5:6). This is why the unbeliever cannot produce any good works; without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Works pleasing to God can only be done in the power of the Spirit, who is only given to believers (so “the fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23).

(c) The **purpose** of good works.

1. The way by which we show our thankfulness to God for salvation – so the woman who anointed Jesus (Luke 7:36-50)
2. Our assurance of salvation is strengthened – because good works are the evidence of a true faith (1 John 2:3,5, 2 Peter 1:5-11).
3. The brethren are edified – encouraged to do the same good works, and benefit from the good work themselves (2 Corinthians 9:2).
4. Our Christian witness is made more attractive – people not only hear the words we say, but see the gospel in practice in our lives (Titus 2:10).
5. The opponents of the gospel are deprived of arguments – because they love to accuse Christians of being hypocrites (Titus 2:5, 1 Timothy 6:1).
6. God is glorified – God’s wonderful character is seen in our lives, at least faintly, which leads to His praise (Matthew 5:16, 1 Peter 2:12).

The Ability to do Good Works

3. *The ability of believers to do good works does not spring in any way from themselves, but is derived from the Spirit of Christ alone. But besides the graces which they receive from Him in the first instance, they need His further actual influence to give them the will and ability to perform the works that please Him. Yet this does not mean that, without that special influence, they are liberty to grow careless of duty, for they must be diligent in stirring into activity the grace of God that is in them.*

(a) From the initial “graces” of the “Spirit of Christ”. These are put within us in regeneration (the new birth). “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6), that is, the person who is born of the Spirit is able to produce spiritual fruit. Think of it as a new car in the showrooms, able to perform perfectly, but without any fuel. Therefore, a second ability is needed.

(b) The “further actual influence” of the Spirit. Daily the Spirit gives us the power “to will and to do” God’s good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). We are constantly dependent upon the indwelling Spirit. This is one reason why we must pray at all times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18).

(c) Because we are dependent upon the Spirit of God, we have the responsibility to “be diligent in stirring into activity the grace of God” in us. We do not wait carelessly for the Spirit to give us certain feelings, but we seek to do the will of God as revealed in Scripture (note especially Philippians 2:12-13).

The Limitation of Good Works

4. *In rendering obedience to God, those believers who attain to the greatest heights possible in this life are so far from performing works of supererogation (that is, beyond what God requires) that they fall short of much which, as their duty, they are bound to do.*

5. *We cannot, even by our best works, merit either the pardon of sin or the granting of eternal life at the hand of God, for those works are out of all proportion to the glory to come. And furthermore, there is an infinite distance between us and God, and no works of ours can yield Him profit or act as payment for the debt of our former sins. Indeed, when we have done all that we can, we have done but our duty and remain unprofitable servants. We also remember that, so far as our works are good, they are produced by His Spirit. As far as they are our work they are marred, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they fail utterly to meet the searching requirement of God's standards.*

(a) Works of **supererogation** are impossible (section 4). This is against Catholic teaching that it is possible to do more than God requires. But such works are impossible because all we do in this life is stained with sin (1 John 1:8-10). Nor can we think of any good work that God does not require; if He does not require something, then it is not a good work (see section 1). There is no higher standard than to love God with all our hearts, and our neighbour as ourselves – it includes everything we do.

(b) Works of **merit** are impossible (section 5). We must never think of adding our works to Christ's works as a reason why God should bring us into glory. The righteousness of Christ imputed to us in justification is fully sufficient. Four reasons are given why our works have no merit:

1. Our works "are out of all proportion to the glory to come". The glory to come is indescribably great – no matter how hard we work and how holy we become we could never say that our works deserve that glory as a reward.
2. Our works cannot "yield Him any profit or act as payment for the debt of our former sins". When we have done our duty we are still unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10). There is such a great distance between us, for God is so great and we are but creatures totally dependent upon Him.
3. Our good works "are produced by His Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). If we cannot do anything good without His power at work within us (Philippians 2:12-13), then we can gain no merit by doing them – all the glory is due to the Lord.
4. Our works are all "mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they utterly fail to meet the searching requirements of God's standards". How humbling this is! Even our very best is just not good enough. It does not meet the perfect standard of God's holiness. Think of that great work of worship, but how often our minds wander, we do not even know the words we have sung, and the Word of God we have heard makes no difference to our lives.

The Acceptance of Good Works

6. *Nevertheless, since believers as to their persons are accepted by God through Christ, their works are also accepted as being wrought in Christ. Not as though they were, during this life, beyond reproach and unprovable in the sight of God, but that, as He looks upon them in His Son, He is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, even though it is accompanied by many weaknesses and imperfections.*

7. *As for works done by unregenerate men, even though God may have commanded them, and they may be highly useful both to themselves and others, yet they remain sinful works for the following reasons: they do not originate in a heart purified by faith; they are not done in the right manner prescribed in Scripture; and they are not directed to the glory of God as the only right end. Hence they cannot please God, nor can they make a man fit for the reception of grace. Yet the neglect of such works is more sinful and more displeasing to God than is the performance of them.*

(a) The good works of **believers** (section 6). Although our good works fall far short of what God requires, they are accepted because we have first been accepted in Christ. This is why a Christian has to do everything in the name of Christ (Ephesians 2:18, Colossians 3:17, 1 Peter 2:5). Our works are not only accepted but also “rewarded” (Matthew 16:27, 1 Corinthians 3:8). It is a reward in the sense that it is what God promised to us in His covenant, not because it is actually what we deserve according to what we have done.

(b) The good works of **unbelievers** (section 7). These can never be accepted even though they may be outwardly what God has commanded (e.g. telling the truth), or of benefit to themselves and others (e.g. giving to someone in need). This again is against the Catholic teaching that it is possible for unbelievers to do things acceptable to God, which is plainly contradicted in the Scriptures (Romans 8:7-8). Three reasons are given why even the best works of unbelievers are sinful and unacceptable to God. Here we see what is really necessary for a work to be good in God’s sight:

1. It must originate from “a heart purified by faith”. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). God accepts nothing except it comes from the heart (as opposed to just the outside), and from a heart that trusts the Lord. Everything else is hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Whatsoever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). For example, our worship is acceptable only if we worship with our hearts and not our lips alone (Matthew 15:8), and if we believe that it is acceptable to God through the merits of Christ (see also Proverbs 15:8, 21:4).
2. It must be done in “the right manner prescribed in Scripture”. We must do our works exactly as God has prescribed, not turning to the right hand or left. For example, Uzzah was seeking to do a seemingly good thing in protecting the ark from falling, but because God had forbidden that the ark should be touched, he was slain. David had done the right thing in the wrong way – he ought to have brought up the ark, not on a cart drawn by oxen, but carried with poles by the Levites (see 1 Chronicles 13:9-12, 15:11-15)
3. It must be done for “the glory of God as the only right end”. Read Matthew 6:2,5-6, 1 Corinthians 10:31.
4. To this must be added that the work itself must be something that God has commanded (see section 1).

These are not reasons for unbelievers to give up doing what God commands, for to neglect such works is even more displeasing. We must teach our children to pray, and worship, even if they are not converted.