

A study of Jesus Christ

This week we conclude our study of good works and study question five: Why Good Works are to be done and why they are necessary. This question was divided into three reasons, 1) for the sake of God, 2) for our sakes, and 3) for the sake of our neighbor. We already dealt with reason one.

2. Good works are to be done for our sake.

a. Our good works testify that we have faith and it assures us of its existence in us by the fruits that we produce in our lives.

Mat 7:16 - 18 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

Php 1:9 - 11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Jas 2:17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

It is by our good works, therefore, that we know that we possess true faith, because the effect, works, is not without its own proper cause, faith. Works are always known by their cause, so that if we are destitute of good works and new obedience, we are hypocrites and have an evil conscience instead of true faith.

True faith is only capable of producing good works, obedience and repentance and is never wanting in the production of these fruits, like a tree bearing fruit in abundance. These fruits set true faith apart from a merely historical and temporary faith and from hypocrisy itself.

b. That we may be assured of the fact that we have obtained the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and that we are justified for His sake. The benefits justification and regeneration are connected and knit together in such a way that they can never be separated

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from each other. Christ obtained both for us at the same time, namely, the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, who through faith excites in us the desire of good works and new obedience.

- c. That we may be assured of our election and salvation.

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. (II Peter 1:10)

Peter doesn't speak to the certainty of our calling and election as if our election is somehow on shaky ground and our works would make it more secure, but rather that we would become more convinced of the surety and certainty of our election by the good works we perform for the glory of God, because no one can produce good works for the sole purpose of glorifying God than those who have been predestined, called, justified and glorified.

Rom 8:28-30 ...We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰And those He predestined, he also called; those he called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.

We can, then, safely trace the cause of our good works to God's eternal decree, having predestined that this would happen as it does.

We are, therefore, assured that our names have echoed in God's throne room before the world was created; and that God has architected a manner in which we can be absolutely assured of things that happened in the infinite, have come to pass in the finite.

- d. That our faith may be exercised, nourished, strengthened and increased by good works. We cannot indulge in unclean lusts and desires against our consciences and claim to have faith.

Those who continually practice these deeds are destitute of a good conscience and of confidence in God as reconciled and gracious,

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for it is only by faith that we obtain a sense of the divine favor towards us and a good conscience.

Rom 8:12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- ¹³for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

2 Tim 1:6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God...

- e. That we may adorn and commend our profession, life and calling by our good works.

Eph 4:1 - 6 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

- f. That we may escape temporal and eternal punishment.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt 7:19)

For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die. (Rom 8:13)

You rebuke and discipline men for their sin. (Ps 39:11)

Do these passages warn that we may lose our salvation if we do not perform good works? No they don't. If we are without salvation we are not able to perform good works. Believers who lack good works are wanting in their faith and need to repent and learn obedience, without which their faith is in question; without which they might be hypocrites having never been believers.

Those who do not perform good works may be of the elect still caught up in unbelief and disobedience. The apostle Paul was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent aggressor

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against the church but was shown mercy because he acted (did not perform good works) in ignorance and unbelief. (Phil 3:6; 1Ti 1:13).

So, when we witness someone performing works that are in and of themselves good, but without faith (without glorifying God) we ought to admonish them and minister the faith and love of Jesus Christ to them (1Tim 1:14) because we don't know if we are addressing someone of the elect still wandering in ignorance and unbelief. We may never conclude that someone who does not perform good works for the glory of God is reprobate, but rather that they are still unregenerate.

- g. That we may obtain from God those temporal and spiritual rewards which, according to the divine promise, accompany good works both in this and in a future life.

...godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. (I Tim 4:8)

In Scripture we read in many places of reward and punishment with respect to works, but these should not be considered the moving causes of good works. The moving cause of good works is always God himself and we honor, praise and worship Him as a consequence of the merits of Christ, which causes obedience of the Commandment that we should love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves.

We will be more accurate to understand that our love for our Father in heaven moves us to perform good works and that the rewards and punishments associated with good works are sentries that stand guard preventing us from straying from our love for God and neighbor.

- 3. Good works are to be done for the sake of our neighbor.
 - a. That we may be profitable to our neighbor and edify him by our example and godly conversation.

II Cor 4:15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

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Phil 1:23, 24 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

- b. That we may not be the occasion of offences and scandal to the cause of the Christ.

Matt 18:7 Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!

Rom 2:24 God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

II Sam 12:14 But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.

- c. That we may win the unbelieving to Christ.

Luke 22:32 But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

We have briefly touched on our salvation in respect to good works. It may be appropriate to deal a bit further with this especially in the light of this point, that we should do good works so that we may win the unbelieving to Christ.

There two principal trains of thought: Works are necessary to salvation; and works are harmful to salvation.

Both thoughts are ambiguous and inappropriate, especially the latter. It seems not only to condemn confidence, but also the desire of performing good works, a desire that is founded in the love for the Father by the merits of Christ through faith. It is, therefore, to be rejected.

The former expression must be explained in this way: good works are necessary to salvation, not as a cause of an effect, or as if works merited a reward, but as a part of salvation itself, as salvation would be meaningless without sanctification, or as a means without which we cannot obtain the end.

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In the same way we may also say, that good works are necessary to righteousness or justification, or in them that are to be justified, namely, as a consequence of justification, with which regeneration is inseparably connected.

Our correct understanding of good works and their relationship to salvation, regeneration, and sanctification will remove ambiguousness and would prevent the breeding of contentiousness giving our enemies room for faultfinding.

Good works cannot occur before justification and neither can they occur without the Holy Spirit, faith in Christ and regeneration. Good works follow justification and regeneration, just as faith does, being the instrument by which we apply all these to ourselves.

VI. Do our good works merit anything in the sight of God?

This question is related to the preceding one.

When we say that we obtain rewards from God by our good works, some conclude that our good works must merit something at the hands of God.

When we say that our good works are necessary and that they are to be done for the rewards that flow from them, it never implies that they deserve anything from God, not even the smallest particle of spiritual or temporal blessings. The reasons for this are the following ten reasons:

1. Our works are imperfect, both in respect to their parts and degrees.

As it respects the parts of our works, they are imperfect because we omit many good things, which the law prescribes, and do many evil things which the law prohibits. We always mingle evil with the good we do, as both Scripture and experience testify.

Gal 5:16 - 18 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

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Works that are imperfect not only merit nothing, they are condemned in the judgment of God.

Deut 27:26 'Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

Our works are also imperfect in degree, because the best works of the saints are unclean and defiled in the sight of God, not being performed by those who are perfectly regenerated, nor with that love to God and our neighbor that the law requires.

The prophet Isaiah declares in reference to our good works that our righteous acts are as filthy rags.

Isa 64:6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

The apostle Paul passes the same judgment in regard to his own works, saying that he considers them rubbish so that he may gain Christ.

Php 3:8 - 11 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

It is in this way that Scripture speaks and judges our own righteousness, good works and merits.

2. No creature, performing even the best works, can merit anything at the hand of God, or bind Him to give anything as though it were due from Him.

Rom 11:35 Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?

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Matt 20:15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

We deserve our preservation no more than we did our creation. God was not bound to create us nor is He bound to preserve those whom He has created. But He did, and does, both of His own free will and good pleasure. God receives no benefit from us, nor can we confer anything upon our Creator. Now, where there is no benefit, there is no merit, for merit presupposes some benefit received.

3. Our works are all due to God. All creatures are bound to render worship and gratitude to the Creator so that if we were even never to sin, we could not render unto God the worship and gratitude, which is due from us.

Luk 17:10 So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'

4. If we do any works which are good, these works are not ours, but God's who produces them in us by his Holy Spirit.

Phil. 2:13 For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

I Cor 4:7 What do you have that you did not receive?

Eph 2:1 - 3 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Mat 7:18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.

Eph 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Hence, if we perform anything that is good, it is the gift of God and not any merit on our part.

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5. There is no proportion between our works, which are altogether imperfect and those exceedingly great benefits, which the Father freely grants to us in his Son.

I Cor 1:31 Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.

If our good works had any merit towards the remission of our sins, we would have something in which we may boast. If this were to be the case, we should not attribute our salvation to God, but to ourselves.

Rom 4:2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.

6. We are justified before we perform good works.

Rom 9:11-16 Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: Not by works but by him who calls--she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

We are, therefore, not justified before God at the time when we do good works, but we perform good works after we are justified.

7. The conceited notion that merit and justification earned by our good works is calculated to shake true Christian consolation, to disturb the conscience and lead men to doubt and despair in reference to their salvation. For when they hear the denunciation of the law and consider their own imperfection, their conscience tells them that they can never perform all these things and they are continually tempted to harbor doubt and live in dread of the curse of the law.

Faith, however, imparts sure and solid comfort to the conscience because it grounds itself in the promise of God, which cannot disappoint the soul.

Rom 4:16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

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8. If we were to obtain righteousness by our own works, the promise would then be rendered powerless and Christ would have died in vain.
9. If the conceited notion concerning the merit of good works is admitted, then there would more than one method of salvation.

Abraham and the thief on the cross would have been justified differently than the rest of us. But there is only one way of salvation, namely, Jesus Christ.

John 14:6 I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

1 Tim 2:5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Eph 4:5-6 There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- One Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Heb 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

10. Christ would not have accomplished the whole of our salvation and thus would not be a perfect Savior. If our works have added anything to our righteousness, the same value would have to be subtracted from Christ's merit, which is absurd.

But Christ is our perfect Savior as the Scriptures sufficiently testify.

Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

Eph 2:8,9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- Not by works, so that no one can boast.

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

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If God calls those good things, which He promises, rewards, can we not assume that these rewards are due to meritorious works if good works presupposes merit?

No we cannot. It may hold true among men, but never with God because no creature can merit anything at the hands of God, seeing that He is indebted to no one. They are called the rewards of our good works in respect to God because He, out of his mere grace, rewards them. This reward, however, is not due to us for we can add nothing to God, neither does He stand in need of our works. Instead, something is added unto us by our good works; we benefit from our good works because they conform us to God and not God to us.

God commands us to perform good works and promises a gracious reward to those who do them, just as a father lovingly promises rewards to his children.