

Sermon 64: Romans 8:7-8: Part Two: Can a Christian Please God?

OUTLINE

Evidence for good works
Definition of good works
Necessity of good works
Source of good works
Incentives to good works

INTRODUCTION

How does God see you, the Christian, on a daily basis as you are serving Him? Is He constantly frowning upon Christians because in our efforts to serve Him nothing we do is perfect? Or is He perpetually smiling upon us because there is no difference between the good and the bad that we do because all comes to Him through Christ? The issue I would like us to consider this morning as we continue with the thinking we began last week is this one, can a Christian perform good works? We stated last week that the unbeliever is incapable of doing good. We stressed the total inability of the unbeliever to submit to God's will or please God in any way because they are dead in their sins. However, Paul's train of thought from Verse 4 is that the Christian has been saved with a view to fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law. We have argued that the unbeliever cannot do this but we have yet to answer the question, to what extent is a Christian now able to do a good work? Are we now able to fulfil the law and please God or not, is this something we will only be able to do in heaven? Are we to live with the conception that God is constantly disappointed with us or is there more to consider?

I hope I have peaked your interest in this topic, because if you have ever had a father that nothing you ever do is good enough, or a spouse, or a boss, or a teacher, at some point you become so discouraged that you stop trying. Are we resigned to endlessly disappoint before God knowing that nothing we ever do is acceptable to Him? I hope to show you that in the case of the Christian, not the unbeliever, this is not the case. In seeking to prove this point and motivate you in your holiness, I want to show you the various verses that talk about deeds that are good and acceptable; work out a definition of good works for the Christian; show the necessity, the source and finally our incentives for doing good deeds.

Evidence for good works

Here are some of the scriptures that indicate that Christians are able to render good works to God.

Hebrews 11:5-6, 'By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.'

Hebrews 13:20-21, 'Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:16, 'Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.'

Colossians 1:9-10, 'And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.'

2 Timothy 3:16-17, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.'

Titus 2:11-14, 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.'

Ephesians 2:10, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.'

Acts 9:36, 'Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity.'

1 Timothy 5:9-10, 'Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10 and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.'

1 Peter 2:12, 'Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.'

This is just a sampling of the Bible's teaching on the Christian doing good works. We see that we are saved to good works, prayed for to perform good works, equipped for good works, urged to good works, and glorify God by good works.

Definition of good works

We see that God is pleased by faith, and accepts good deeds from Christians but we need to make some important qualifications and a clear definition by what we do and do not mean by good works.

In order not to be misunderstood we will start with a negative. This is what we do not mean by good works in the life of the Christian.

We are not talking about meritorious acts by which we put God in our debt, by which we earn heaven, righteousness or any other aspect of our salvation. Every 'good' deed that the believer does will still fall immeasurably short of God's holiness, so that it could never be offered to justify anyone.

We also reject the three types of good works that the Roman Catholic Church has taught. They teach a doctrine of congruent merit which believes the unregenerate person can offer a lower grade good work which it is not perfect but good enough for God to reward with grace. Paul teaching in Romans 8:7-8 soundly puts that notion to bed, the unbeliever is incapable of pleasing God in any way. Secondly, they teach the doctrine of condign merit where they teach that the Christian can perform such good works by the grace of God that they contribute to their eternal life, earning it by their grace enabled deeds. We believe that the grounds of our righteousness will never be native to ourselves, enabled or otherwise. Our justifying righteousness comes to us from outside ourselves not from within. Christ is the grounds of our justification not our own enabled works. Thirdly, they teach about works of supererogation. These are works that go above and beyond what God has required of us, in other words, deeds that are holier than God's requirements of us. These deeds are so good they can be stored up and used to help others get out of purgatory. The trouble with this teaching is that there is no deed better than what God asks of us. If God has not commanded us to perform the highest good, a good based on His law, and one that asks us to be holy as He is holy then there exists something better than Him that we can achieve. And this is foolishness indeed.

Likewise we reject the perfectionistic teaching on good works. Ironically perfectionistic teaching lowers God's standards to accommodate our imperfection, and this we are not doing to call a work good as a Christian. Wesley redefined sin to be any known sin, but this redefining of sin is not what we are seeking to do as we seek to show that Christians can do good and please God.

That is what a good deed is not, but what then is a good deed?

The good deeds of a Christian have four characteristics:

Firstly, the Christians good deeds flow from a regenerated heart. This is a heart refitted for obedience that has a new allegiance and purpose. This means that the Spirit's work of regeneration and ongoing influence is the source from which all our good works flow. Our good deeds are different to the unbelievers in that it is Spirit which is giving birth to spiritual life no longer a case of flesh giving birth to flesh.

Secondly, all the Christians good deeds are now done with a new motive and goal—the glory of God. Every good deed done by the Christian is a deed done for God's glory. This is something that the unbeliever cannot do. The unbeliever cannot love God and seek His glory. The unbeliever can only ever use God and not serve Him. The unbeliever is only capable of self-serving uses for God because he/she is in the grip of sin and unable to free themselves from being a willing slave to self.

Thirdly, the believer does their good deeds in conformity to the will of God. God's will is defined by the law, but not only an external keeping of the law but an internal keeping of the law as well. The believer on account of God's regenerating work is now able to put heart into his obedience. The unbeliever can play religion, they can do lots of things, but they do so with a dead heart. But the believer has had his eyes opened to the truth and has been taught to despise sin and live God, and seeks to serve Him for His own sake and not out of self-interest. The believer is now able by the Spirit to do God's law, not perfectly but in ways that the unbeliever is not able. So a good deed is defined by the love that the Spirit enables that fulfils the law.

Fourthly, every good deed is imperfect and comes to God in Christ. This is important to stress because we are not teaching a form of perfectionism by acknowledging that there is such a thing as Christian good works. We readily admit that our very best, even when it is enabled by the Spirit is far short of the mark of Christ's perfection. Motives will be mixed, zeal will be lagging, good intentions will falter, self-interest will dog all our doing. We are not denying that there is any mixture in our deeds, they are still imperfect. However, we are now able to offer obedience that is real though imperfect, love that is real though imperfect, we have a desire for God's glory though it is imperfect, we can do these any other things that the unbeliever is unable to do. There is a very real difference between the good deeds of the Christians and the unbeliever. We cannot automatically associate all good deeds as equal in God's sight. It is true that they are all equally incapable of saving but we need to do justice to the reality of a new heart and ability that God has given us. So we add that a Christian's imperfect deeds come to the Father through Christ. They are offered not as a way of earning salvation but an offering of love from a sincere heart, and Christ's righteousness covers all its imperfections that when it reaches the Father it is well received, acceptable and good.

It is important to stress that our good deeds are not offered to God for salvation but because we are saved, and they are not received and scrutinized to determine our eternity, they are received in the same fashion that we receive gifts from our own children. Our children make cards and gifts and meals on our birthdays or father's and mother's day. We are not expecting works of art or factory quality gifts but things that indicate their love and thought however imperfectly it is rendered. Your Father delights to receive your imperfect gifts, not for their imperfections but for the sincerity in them. This is how Paul speaks about the financial gifts that the Philippians gave to him in Phil. 4:18, 'I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.' Paul tells the Corinthian church about the Philippians sacrificial giving in 2 Cor 8:1-5, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints--- 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.' This

sacrificial giving where they wanted to share in the work of the Gospel is considered pleasing to God. Now if we pulled out our magnifying glasses, and we could open up the hearts of the Philippians would it be possible to detect some self in their gift, some superiority, some pride, some complacency, some reserve, yes we could find all of these for anywhere sinners are you will find sin. However, Paul is not judging the deeds of the Philippians as works that need to be absolutely perfect in order to qualify them for heaven but as sincere attempts at obedience. And from this perspective they are good deeds. Not saving, not perfect, but pleasing to God as they are offered in Christ.

As Christians we fail to offer good gifts not when they are imperfect but when we deliberately render the least that we can; when we do our good to be seen by others; when we do good without our hearts being in it but out of mere ritual; when we do it as a way of self-promotion; when we do it forgetting that God is our strength in all we do; and there are many other ways in which we scuttle our good deeds. But let it be known that there is in the Bible a type of good deed that when not offered for salvation, and which is done for God, in a godly manner, with as sincere a heart as a sinner can muster, in dependence upon God, then we should expect that Paul would call these deeds 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.' By stressing this point I am not asking you to turn a blind eye to your sins, to make no more effort in purifying your heart and the way you serve Him. I am not asking you to stop scrutinizing all you do and being content with how far you have attained. No, I present these truths to you so that you will not be so discouraged by a false notion of a God who can never be pleased that you feel no incentive to serve our gracious Father.

Necessity of good works

It is important for us to stress the necessity of good works in the life of the believer. We know that we are not justified by works, our righteousness is not grounded in our works but the work of Christ on our behalf. That said there is no such thing as a Christian who does not do good deeds. In fact the bible teaches that no one goes to heaven except on the road of holiness, 'Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.' (Hebrews 12:14). We are not saved by good works, but we are saved to good works. In fact the bible teaches that those who do not produce the fruit of good works do not have true faith that is the instrument by which we receive righteousness from God. All true faith that looks alone to Christ for righteousness is always accompanied by repentance and followed by a life of holiness in sanctification. James puts it like this, 'For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.' (James 2:26). Any person that does not do good deeds proves that their confession of faith is a false one and that they have never been born again, John puts it like this, 'And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.' (1 John 2:3-4). Good works are not the gate to salvation, we come through the gate when we are justified by faith; however good works is the way along which every Christian will inevitably walk.

Source of good works

Some sensitive souls might feel a little disheartened at the thought that the Christian life is one of holy working. Not because they do not desire to do what God wants, their hearts gladly agree with God's holy requirements, but they feel themselves inadequate to the task. Let me just say, you are inadequate. And that is why God has in His mercy supplied us with power by the Spirit to aid us in our holiness. God supplies where He commands. Paul prays that the Ephesians would perceive this power at work within them, Ephesians 1:17-19, '17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.' Likewise he indicates this power in Ephesians 3:20-21, 'Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.'

It is this power of God that gave us our hearts of flesh in the place of hearts of stone. It is the Spirit who convicts us of sin, who grows us by instructing us from the word, who renews us from glory to glory in our inner man as we perceive Christ. It is the Spirit who is the catalyst who prompts our hearts, the power that sustains our efforts, and the blessing that blesses our working. Paul puts it this way to the Philippians, 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' Here we see that we are to work but we do so with the confidence that God is prompting and working. It is not a case of either God or us doing our parts, but both working together. As we move to respond in obedience to God's commands we can know that we do it from the heart He gave us, by the prompting of the Spirit He has put within us, and we will be sustained in the doing, and the fruit will be by His hand as well. The word work indicates sweat and effort, but it is enabled, sustained and blessed sweat, sweat and effort the unbeliever who is dead in sin can never perform. A few quick illustrations to bring this point home. A young boy runs up to his father who is painting a fence and asks to paint too, the father puts the brush in his sons hand, but puts his hand over, guiding, slowing, straightening every stroke. When the fence is painted the boy runs to his mother and says, 'Mommy I painted the fence.' A father pulls into his driveway stops the car and puts his son on his knee to steer the car home up the last 100 hundred metres. The father puts his hands over the sons correcting any over steer, putting pressure on the sons hands to show him how to steer. It is the Father who changes gears, puts his foot the accelerator and who brings the car to a stop in the garage. The boy runs to his mother shouting, 'Mom I drove the car home.' And so it is with our good works.

Incentives to good works

I began stressing the point that I want us to feel encouraged and enabled to do good works. I feel this is a necessary and pastoral point to make in the midst of all the talk we have been

doing about the unbeliever being incapable of pleasing God. It is my job to edify you and enable you for good works. One of the barriers I have been hoping to break down this morning is the one that a Christian can never please God. I hope I have convinced you that your good deeds are accepted by your father as a gift from a child, that our feeble efforts when done sincerely in Christ are pleasing to Him and He delights in them. I hope you feel encouraged to know that as God calls you to be Holy that He is the Father who is aiding you in your obedience. I want to end then by motivating you to go and do as many good deeds as you sincerely but feebly can.

The legalists in us usually resort to fear of punishment as the main feed for our motivation. And yes, there is a measure of fear in the Christians life. We do not toy with God, He is Holy, and He is a Father who chastens His children. Although He will not unadopt you for sin, His discipline can be very painful as David will bear witness. So let me not fail to mention the reality of discipline for those who do not pursue good works like they should.

However, as I scan the pages of the NT I find more often that we are to be motivated by gratitude. How much should we be willing to do for the one who gave His Son for us? Is there any deed that is too big? Is He a bad God who is not worth our obedience or is He an immeasurably gracious a compassionate God who has seen our weaknesses and rushed to heal and strengthen us? Paul puts it like this, Ephesians 5:1-2, 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' Serve as children who are secure in their Father's love, and love like you have been loved. This is gratitude motivating us to do good.

Another incentive is the new possibility that is ours through dying and being resurrected through Christ so that the power of sin is broken and we are now able by the Spirit to do good. This is Paul's argument in Romans 6 as he argues against the argument that the gospel abuses grace and encourages sin. The gospel makes new creatures out of us who are now free from the power of sin and able to obey. This new reality inevitably bears fruit in good deeds and we need to reckon ourselves as dead and now able to obey.

A subject I had great joy in revisiting in preparation for this message was the teaching about the Christian's rewards in heaven. There are several verses which speak about a Christian's rewards, here are a few:

Matthew 10:41, 'The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.'

Matthew 25:21, 'His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'

1 Corinthians 3:11-15, 'For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--- 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a

reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.'

As we see these verses we need to be clear that on judgement day when God rewards His children, we will not be stealing His glory for all our good works are enabled, sustained and blessed by Him. We will throw our crowns at His feet and He will be further magnified by any good we have done. Secondly, the rewards we will receive will not be in proportion to what we have put in. Our rewards are not rewards according to merit but according to gracious promise. We do not put God in our debt by our weak deeds, rather He has promised to graciously reward our weak efforts, and so it is by grace that we are ultimately rewarded. This is incentive indeed, for if God is glorified by our good deeds, and we are blessed according to grace, this should encourage us all the more to work for God.

Finally, our good deeds glorify our gracious God, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' Matt. 5:14-16.

1 Peter 2:12, 'Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.'

Do you want to glorify this gracious precious Father? Then let us work as He works in us both to will and do for His good pleasure.