

Lesson 78: Chapter 16: of Good Works

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial matters in Christianity is the issue of good works. It was controversial in Israel when Jesus had to rebuke the man-made laws of Israel; expose her hypocritical obedience to God's law; the selective obedience that neglected love; and strip away the self-confidence of those who thought they were not sinful so that they would humble themselves and receive grace from God for salvation instead of trying to give their good deeds to God for righteousness. In the early church we see the apostle Paul endlessly having to refute those who want to mix works with faith for salvation. The battle around good works continues throughout the church as battles around antinomianism; legalism; and man-made laws resurface again and again. The topic of good works was a major dispute between the Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation. The 1689 highlights some of the major concerns around works at this time. The Catholic church taught that the worshipper could do preparatory works in order to receive God's grace; that their works of obedience also contributed to their justification; that there was such a thing called works of supererogation where you could do more obedience than God's law required, and this obedience could be stored up in a treasury of merit to be distributed to other believers. These and other concerns are addressed in this chapter. No other chapter in this section dealing with the doctrine of salvation gets so many paragraphs, 7 in all.

Why are good works so controversial? Why do they lie at the heart of all of our discussions around salvation? There is a good reason why. When Adam was originally created he was placed in a Covenant of Works. He was sinless and fully able to render perfect obedience to God in the Garden of Eden. If Adam, who was under probation, obeyed all the laws of God he would have won access to the tree of life and entered into God's promised rest. Works lay at the core of Adam's original purpose. God wrote that law upon Adam's heart, he had every good inclination fitting him to do the will of God and fulfil this purpose. The natural instinct of Adam's heart was to do and live. This law is still written on every human heart. This is why in every religious context, Christian or non-Christian you will find works as central. It is the Bible that we need to teach us that we are sinful and condemned in Adam and cannot fulfil the law; it is must be revealed by God that salvation is a free gift not an earning work. Our hearts, if we follow them in this matter will push us to works to obtain life; the Bible has to set us straight that it is hopeless. Sadly, even those with the Bible do not pay attention to its message that salvation is by grace and not by works. The confession helps us to put good works into biblical perspective. I have five points.

Definition of works

Para. 1, 'Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his Holy Word, and not such as without the warrant thereof are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intentions.' As always, we should begin with a definition, what is a good work? Out the gate this paragraph is working on the principle of Sola Scriptura, that the Bible alone is our authority for all we believe and do. God's word not man's word is the ultimate authority on defining what is a good work. One of the prooftexts is from Matt. 15 where Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees because they made laws which enabled them to disobey God's law. The 5th commandments says honour your parents with the implication of looking after them financially, but the Jews made rules that if you dedicated your thing to God in a vow you were no longer obligated to help your parents. Jesus says, v6b-9, 'So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: " 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' " The Puritans would have had all sorts of things in their crosshairs like penance; pilgrimages; alms for the dead; mass for the dead; all the things that were added to the worship and consciences of God's people in the name of worship like the veneration of saints, their relics, Mary, the angels. The observation of Lent; saint days and other unrequired holy days. Nearly the whole system of the Roman Catholic Church was a mess of man made additions. The point to be made here is that God does not need our good ideas, we should only pursue that which He calls good. This is very challenging, there are things that we have added to God's laws as good deeds and good ideas that are not. Sam Waldron suggests that those who go to do the good work of missions while disobeying the duty to love their wives and children is an example of thinking you are doing good while not. Or what about women doing the good deed of pastoring when the Bible forbids a woman to teach or have authority over a man. In society today many call evil good and good evil. We are seeing transgender rights as a good, as a basic human right. Freedom is a so called good that gives one the right to break all the laws of God. God defines good not us, and the word of God is where He makes it plain.

Purpose of good works

Para. 2, 'These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith; and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that having their fruit unto holiness they may have the end eternal life.' The confession goes on to make a positive statement about what good works are for, their purpose. Paragraphs 4-5 will look at the limitations of good works and what they cannot do. Several points are made. Firstly, these good deeds done in obedience to God's word are fruits of saving faith. In other words they are not saving works, but evidence of the faith by which we are justified. As James makes clear, 2:18, 'But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' The confession adds 6 more purposes for good works.

To manifest their thankfulness, our good deeds are a response to His grace not us trying to buy His grace. They are done from the gladness of knowing ourselves saved, not fear in order to be saved.

Good works strengthen our assurance, our good works cannot save us, however they do demonstrate to us the reality of the change and salvation God has

wrought. The evidence of God's grace in our lives in our works assures us of His work in us. 1 John 2:3, 'And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.' 3:19, 'By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.'

To edify their brethren, 1 John is full of the teaching that those who are truly born again manifest it in love to benefit their needy brethren. Luther said that God does not need our good deeds, but our neighbour does. Our good deeds have a primary horizontal not vertical focus.

To adorn the profession of the gospel. Matt. 5:16, '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.'

Stop the mouths of adversaries, 1 Pet. 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.'

And all this to the glory of God.

We can see plainly that there is enough purpose in our good works without having to make them work for our salvation as well.

This road of good works, is the path but not the gate to salvation.

Source of good works

Para. 3, 'Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ; and that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is necessary an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do of his good pleasure; yet they are not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty, unless upon a special motion of the Spirit, but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.' This paragraph is pushing back at Pelagius who taught that we have no sinful nature and that we have the capacity to obey the commands of God without the help of the Holy Spirit. This would have ramifications for Arminian and Catholic notions as well. The Arminian did not want to see an intimate connection between the Spirit and our good deeds because of their concern that it violates free will; and the Catholic believed that we could do some good to prepare ourselves to receive the grace of God. The confession is clear, all the good deeds of a believer are from the Spirit of Christ. He took our heart of stone and turned it into a heart of flesh and causes us to walk in His ways according to the promise of the New Covenant, Ezek. 36: 26-27. The indwelling Holy Spirit having regenerated us now works in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure Phil. 2:12-13, without His influence we would not do good deeds, for without Him we can do nothing, John 15:4-6.

Now this might lead some to conclude that this would lead to antinomianism and neglect, that some would think that it is all God and they need do nothing. The confession is clear to refute this point. The confession holds to the doctrine of concurrence, that when it comes to areas of human responsibility, where God has commanded us to do anything, yes it is God working as a catalysing power to enable us to act, but act we must. We must repent, we must do our own believing, and we must will and do, striving with all that is within us. And lest we think we are the reason why any fruit comes about we say with Paul, 1 Cor. 15:10, 'But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.'

This paragraph is also clear to refute what are Quietist practices. Some have wrongly believed that we can get ahead of God, that we need to do every action in response to an inner leading of the Spirit, that any work done not in response to such a leading is disobeying God or a work of the flesh. No, the confession recognizes that we have the duty to stir up the grace of God within us and not sit in a passive stance of constant waiting.

Limitations of works

Para. 4, 'They who in their obedience attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.' This paragraph begins to explain the limitations of our good works. It denies the Catholic teaching of works of supererogation. That any believer can over obey any command of God and have an excess of merit that can then be stored up and used by others who lack merit. For example Mary's or the other saint's excess merit being used to help believer's shorten their loved one's time in purgatory.

Para. 5, 'We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because as they are good they proceed from his Spirit, and as they are wrought by us they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's punishment.' This paragraph goes on to show what good works are not. Firstly, our good works cannot merit pardon for sin. Forgiveness for sin cannot be won by how good we are, good deeds do not wipe out the guilt of our bad deeds. Secondly, they also cannot earn eternal life. Adam was in a CoW and was in an arrangement where he could earn access to the tree of life, we are cannot. Where we stand now our deeds are insufficient from every perspective. Our good deeds cannot earn glory, that is like trying to buy gold with dust. The Creator-creature divide cannot put God in our debt through anything that we do. On top of that when we do good, we are only doing what we should have done, what we are commanded to do. As believers any good in us would be attributed to the Spirit and not to us. And on top of that anything we do, because we are sinners would be tainted; and would only be worthy of judgement on the last day.

Acceptance of good works

Para. 6, 'Yet notwithstanding the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprovable in God's sight, but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.' The last paragraph made it sound like there is nothing we can do to please God. These leaves us with a number of questions about how God accepts the good works of a believer that paragraph 6 answers. Our good deeds are accepted by God but only because they are in Christ and not in themselves. It is not because our good deeds are perfect, they cannot be, but will be filled with imperfections and weaknesses. There will always be blame that can be found in them when examined by God's perfection; and there is always something reprobable,

rebukable about them. But because God looks upon our works, as He looks upon us in His Son, they please God. He delights in them. He even rewards them. If our deeds are sincere, not perfect, in Christ they are accepted and rewarded. There is great grace here. God forgets our sins and remembers our imperfect good works. He takes the punishment for the bad deeds we have done; but He gives us rewards for the good works we do. There is a deep asymmetry in God's grace where He takes all the curse and we gain all the blessing. Heb. 6:10 is a proof-text showing that God approves our good deeds. Matt. 25 where in the parable of the sheep and the goats, God sees our deeds.

Para. 7, 'Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the word, nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, nor make a man meet to receive grace from God, and yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God.' What about the works of unbelievers? The confession goes on showing the unbeliever cannot do good works. Even though outwardly their works even look like obedience to God's commands, they cannot be good works in God's eyes. So not taking God's name in vain; keeping the Sabbath like the Jews; keeping the Passover, if done by an unbeliever are not seen as good. Even if the good deeds benefit others, like something obeying the command to be generous to the poor. If someone is not in Christ, these are not good works in God's eyes. As Paul says, Gal. 5:6, 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.' We recognise them as civil goods, philanthropists might even receive awards from men for their generosity, but in God's eyes they are filthy rags. The confession states that unless a deed is done from a heart purified by faith it is not acceptable; or if it is not done in accordance with the word of God, it is not acceptable; and if it is not done to the right end, that is the glory of God, it is not acceptable. Those whose hearts are not regenerate cannot will not and cannot please God, they are in the grip of sin and do all things from a heart of rebellion; according to their own will and for their own purposes. Thomas Aquinas in his teaching on the 10 commandments talks about motives for obeying God's revealed law. He talks about how some do it to avoid punishment and not for love of God. He says this, 'Although someone who avoids sin because of fear is not yet just, nevertheless his justification begins there.'¹ The confession denies that there can be a beginning in a work of grace for we are dead in sin. This paragraph ends insisting that they cannot save, but it is worse if we do not pursue them.

In conclusion, we can see that works are very important, but in their proper place, from salvation not for salvation. We must insist as Jesus did, as Paul did that anything that is called good works be done from a justified heart, in accordance with God's word, for the glory of God and not for salvation. I think we can sum up all the emphasis of this chapter in Eph. 2:8-10, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.'

¹ <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/TenCommandments.htm#0> accessed 3/20/2026