**Working out what God has worked in**

Text: Philippians 2:12-13

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**Scriptures:** John 15:1-9; Philippians 1:1-3; 2:12-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 439, 51b, 349, 501, 531+532

**Series:** Belgic Confession (Article 24)

**Theme:** Good works are a necessary result of true faith in Christ

**Proposition:** There are good reasons to be godly!

**Introduction**

What must I **do** to be saved? Would you like it if the non-Christians on your street asked you that? This is the question which the Jailer asked Paul and Silas who had been praying and singing hymns to God in the inner prison in Philippi with their feet fastened in stocks (Acts 16:24-25). A great earthquake shook the prison foundations causing all the doors to open and unfastening the bonds that bound all the prisoners. This was no ‘ordinary’ seismic event, like the Christchurch earthquakes, but a miraculous work of God. The Jailer in Philippi had been ordered by the city magistrates to keep Paul and Silas safely (Acts 16:23). But when he was woken by the earthquake and saw all the prison doors open, he was about to kill himself because he knew that he would likely be executed if his prisoners escaped (cf. Acts 12:19).

When Paul and Silas assured the fearful, trembling, Jailer that they had not fled he asked them the question ‘What must I do to be saved?’ We don’t know how much this jailer knew of the gospel. Paul and Silas had already been in the city for a few days before. His question may well have been focussed on his impending fate under the Roman authorities rather than on his eternal salvation. Whatever the case, the Lord used this traumatic experience to reveal His glory and grace in saving the lost. Paul and Silas answered him “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*”. Then they explained the gospel to the Jailer and all who were in his house. He came to faith in Christ Jesus and ‘*he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God*’. (Acts 16:34)

He and his household would have been amongst the saints to whom Paul later wrote in his letter to the Philippians (1:1) explaining that there was good work for them to do because God was working out in them the faith that He had first worked in. This is what Paul wrote in our text: “*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, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:12-13).

Working out your own salvation is the topic of Belgic Confession Article 24 where the author Guido de Bres wrote down a pattern of sound words in 1561. When the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit regenerates a person, he or she becomes a new creation in Christ, no longer spiritual dead, but alive in Him (Eph 2:5) through the gift of faith. This faith must necessarily find expression in works, as James writes: “*So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*” (James 2:17). Yet those works themselves in no way make us right with God: it is true faith in Christ, counted by God as righteousness which ‘*justifies the ungodly*’ (Rom 4:5). We’re going to look in more detail at ‘our sanctification and good works’, following the pattern of Belgic Confession Article 24, we’ll look at ‘good works’ in three parts:

1. Good works are impossible without faith
2. Good works do not merit salvation
3. Good works are inevitable with faith
4. **Good works are impossible without faith**

If you asked most people if they had done something good recently, they would likely answer ‘yes’ and be able to give some examples. Perhaps a kind word to someone, a gift to a person in need, volunteering to help out in a community organisation, or giving money to a charity. Are these not ‘good works’? Well, not when measured against God’s perfect standard of good.

Guido de Bres wrote the truth in these words “*We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment*”. This is the reality revealed by the prophet Isaiah: “*For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment*” (Isaiah 64:6).

This is the experience of everyone who knows themselves as they truly are with the light which God’s Word shines into the heart. The Apostle Paul wrote “*So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand*” (Rom 7:21). We are naturally incapable of doing anything which is perfectly holy are thereby acceptable to God who is of ‘*purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong*’ (Hab 1:13).

Apart from the gracious intervention of God our situation is hopeless. Because He is perfectly good and only ever does good, if we are to do good works, they **must** have their origin in Him and not in us. This is the profound reality that the Apostle Paul reveals in our text: “I*t is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13). There is therefore a real sense in which good works that we do are not really our own works at all! They are the works that the Holy Spirit produces in us as we willingly co-operate with His gracious guidance in our lives.

This is part of the process of becoming progressively more holy – our sanctification. Apart from Jesus we cannot do good works because without Him we have no spiritual life in us with which to exert ourselves to do them. The spiritual life of a believer begins when the Holy Spirit regenerates them so that that become alive together with Christ (Eph 2:5). This is what Christ explainsin these words "*I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit,* ***for apart from Me you can do nothing.*** (John 15:5).

Clearly non-Christians do things, including helping other people, being generous with their time and resources and striving to relieve suffering in the world. These works, whilst certainly of some value, are not the result of a living union with Christ. They are not done for the glory of God. They are not enabled by the power of God. They are not the result of God working out the faith that He has first worked in.

Nothing which is good in the sight of God can be done apart from Christ. Good works are only good in the eyes of God if He (who is infinitely and perfectly good) first works them in us. We are saved for good works – which are impossible without faith. As Guido de Bres wrote: “*without {faith} no one would do anything out of love for God, but only out of self-love or fear of being condemned*”. It is in the motive behind what we do that we see whether or not our works are the fruit of faith. Whether they are the outworking of what God has worked in us, or whether their origin lies in us alone, apart from the Lord.

We can fool others with works that look good, but do not come from faith. We can fool ourselves and fail to see the things we do that are not good because they do not result from our faith. This is why it is wise to pray the prayer which the Lord reveals in Psalm 139 through the petition of David: “*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*” (Psalm 139:23-24). Good works are impossible without faith and they do not merit salvation, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Good works do not merit salvation**

The idea that we can do things ourselves to become more acceptable to God and to earn favour from Him is deeply ingrained in our fallen human nature. The idea that ‘good people’ get to go to heaven is very common amongst those who believe that there is a God. Like the young man who had great possessions and thought that good works could merit him salvation. He asked Jesus "*Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?*" (Matt 19:16). This is really the same question as that of the Philippian Jailer: “*What must I do to be saved?*”. This young man understood the Old Testament law and saw himself as a law-keeper “*All these I have kept, what do I still lack?*’ he asked. He likely thought that obedience to the law was the way to be saved.

The words of Christ cut to the heart of his problem: "*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*". (Matt 19:21). Do you think that if he had just sold everything he would have been saved? Would this good deed have been sufficient to ‘get him over the line’? Clearly his material wealth was a barrier for him. If he was willing to abandon it all then this would demonstrate a greater desire for Christ. Yet not even this would have been enough. There was more. Jesus added ‘*and come, follow me*’. To follow Jesus requires faith because we do not know where He will lead us in this life when we follow Him. What we do know about following Jesus is that it is not an easy pathway. Jesus had told his disciples: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matt 16:24).

Brothers and sisters, it is not the works that we do as a result of following Christ by faith that gain us favour with God, but rather the perfectly good works which He has done on our behalf. Guido de Bres expresses it in these words “*These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by his grace. Nevertheless, they do not count toward our justification. For through faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do any good works*”

The truth that good works do not merit salvation is clearly demonstrated in the life and faith of one of the criminals who was crucified alongside Christ. His only ‘good work’ (that we know about) was a confession of trust in Jesus just before he died: “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42). His faith saved him, with little or no time for any works to follow. Jesus confirmed His salvation by faith alone with the words “*truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise*” (Luke 23:43). Was the criminal’s confession of faith a good work? Yes, in a sense it was. Yet even this was a result of God ‘*working in him both to will and to work for his good pleasure*’ (Phil 2:13).

Brothers and sisters, not even our confession of faith itself can merit us salvation, because our experience of coming to trust in Christ alone follows on from the prior regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s work not ours. Jesus said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*” (John 6:44). Guido de Bres asks the question “what could we merit?” by our good works, replying “We are indebted to God, rather than he to us, for the good works we do”. Brother and sisters, God is the source of our sanctification (1 Cor 1:30). “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*” (1 Cor 1:30).

In Christ, good works are inevitable and a cause for thanksgiving to the Lord and personal assurance of the genuineness of faith. Which brings us to our third point:

1. **Good Works are inevitable with faith**

You don’t need to have an in-depth knowledge of fruit trees to tell the difference between an apple, a pear and an orange tree. The simplest way to distinguish between them is to observe them when they have fruit on their branches. This principle was no different 2000 years ago in Israel: Our Lord Jesus Christ says twice in Matt 7:16 “*You will know them by their fruits*”. If the tree is not producing valuable fruit, it is no use for fruit production. You can tell whether it is “good tree” by the fruit.

That is what our Lord Jesus says in Mat 7:16, 18: “*You will recognise them by their fruits. So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit*”. The Lord Jesus Christ makes clear that apart from God we cannot bear good fruit: To produce good fruit, we must have been grafted into Christ, Therefore, if we do produce such fruit, we must first have been renewed by God. Good works are therefore a way by which our faith is made visible in life.

Jesus said: “*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples*” (John 15:8). The way we live, the priorities we display in our lives, the words which we speak all give an indication of what is inside us. At times we can mask this, but often under pressure or when we are caught off guard, what is inside us comes to the outside. The reverse is true when good works coming out from a changed heart give testimony to God’s transformation grace and demonstrate a measurable progress in Christ-like character. When we do good works, our neighbours (those who live their lives around us) see something different about us. We produce a different kind of fruit to the unbelieving world because we are a different kind of ‘tree’.

When we become a living testimony, Christ describes us as lights that bring glory to God (Matt 5:14-16). These works also show our thankfulness to Him for all that He has done for us in uniting us to Christ in a living, productive relationship like that of a vine and its healthy fruitful branches. In addition, rightly understood they provide us with a source of comfort, peace and assurance. All our ‘good works’ are less than perfect. If we believe that these works will save us and we are honest with ourselves about how we live, then in the words of Guido de Bres: “*We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented*”.

If we, and/or others, observe that we willingly and readily serve the Lord in ways that we would not do if we did not truly love Him, then we can detect evidences of the Holy Spirit’s work in our life. If we see an increase over time in some or all of the following: “*moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love*”, then this is evidence of our election by God to salvation. This is what Peter explains when he writes “*Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you, for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble*” (2 Peter 1:10)

The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of the ‘fruits of assurance’ with these words: *It is the duty of everyone to be very diligent in making certain that God has called and chosen him. By such diligence, his heart may grow in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties which obedience of God requires – the proper fruits of assurance*” (WCF 18.3).

Our good works, the inevitable result of the saving faith which God wills to produce in His people, do not merit our salvation, but they do give us every reason to be thankful, they enable us to glorify God and to grow in our personal assurance of our faith.

AMEN.