

Of Good Works (Part 1)

James 2:14-26; WCF 16.1-16.2

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 19 January 2020, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,
This sermon is about good works – the good works performed by the believer to honour God Triune – the only true God and Saviour!

Question: In the order of our salvation, where do proper good works come in – *before* or *after* we have been born again by the Holy Spirit?

Well, *after* we have been born again (saved)!

Look, is this not why Eph 2:8-10 mentions our good works *after* it has described our salvation!?

Here is 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—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

See how verses 8-9 describe our salvation by grace through faith!?
So, look, now comes v.10 describing our good works:

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

Indeed, good works that are God-pleasing, are works that come from hearts that have been moved by God's mind-bending act of saving us through the painful crushing of His Son!

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life* (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Eph 2:8–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The Bible has put it in this order (first salvation, then good works)! And that's also why the WCF puts it in this order; yes, that's why the WCF discusses good works only *now*, in chapter 16, after it has discussed salvation (in ch.14) and our repentance (in ch.15).

Well, what exactly are good works? And of what value/use are they?

Let's see how the Bible answers these two questions – firstly what good works are and, secondly, of what value/use they are.

What Good Works Are

My brother & sister, a work is good because *God* says it's good, not because *we* say it's good!

And so, good works that are in sync with what *God* has described in His Law – only *such* works are good.

But what's *not* good is what the Pharisees have added to God's Law – also not what we, in Pharisee fashion (and in zeal or over-piousness) have added. You see, many of us know all too well what kinds of petty human laws with their “good works” some over-pious/zealous churchgoers have laid upon the shoulders of people – e.g. things like: forbidding needlework or sewing on Sundays; no bike-riding; no swimming; and no alcohol at all – never ever; and also no make-up for the ladies.

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that (as Rm 10:2 says), with lack of *sound knowledge* of God's Word (and its doctrines), even zealous, well-meaning churchgoers can make laws that are not in agreement with *God's* Law and with God's heart/will!

And the scary reality is that such over-zealous, lacking-in-knowledge people can even go so far as *killing* to enforce their laws upon others. And history has shown us that sort of behaviour, e.g. when Christ-loving Protestants, who were following sound Biblical teaching, were hunted down and killed by church people! But our Lord Jesus did forewarn that such things would come about when He said (in Jn 16:2), “***They will put you out of the***

*synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”*³

How terrible! That’s over-zealous people who make laws without sound knowledge.

But look, it’s not just over-zealous/pious human beings who can make laws that don’t agree with God’s Law; no, also secular and humanist people – they, too, can make laws that are not in sync with God’s will/Law, so for example, the law-makers of a secular/humanist country with their laws on e.g. abortion, prostitution, gay marriages, euthanasia, and even some financial laws/regulations! Yes, you see, I’m no businessman myself or accountant, but having listened to what some businessmen in our churches have experienced and seen, it is often possible to act perfectly within the financial laws of the country while, at the same time, act unethically/unbiblically! The same regarding abortion, prostitution, and gay marriages.

So, the only works that are good, are works in sync with *God’s* Law and its stipulations!

But you know what?

There’s *still* a danger!

Why?

Because even *good* works, *prescribed by God*, can be done in a God-dishonouring way!

After all, remember the rich young ruler of Mt 19:16-23?

You see, this man *thought* that he had perfectly kept all of God’s laws!

But what did he, in reality, do?

He obeyed God’s laws *coldly* and *obligatorily* – not with a heart that loves God!

How do we know that?

Well, because, when Christ tested this man’s heart – to see whether he loves God (yes, whether he has kept the very first commandment of having no idols) – he became sad, for he loved his wealth more than God!

See?

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Jn 16:2). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

If our good works conform only *outwardly* to God's Law, then even *such* works are no good works in God's sight! God does not want us to merely *behave* according to His Law (coldly/obligatorily), but that our good works will *flow from right hearts* – hearts that love God for all His goodness to us – not least His goodness in Christ Jesus, His Son!

Here's another scary reality...

I mean, did you realise that even a good work, such as *worshiping God*, can be no good work after all?

You see, in Is 29:13, God says about His people Israel, "***These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.***"⁴

Seven-hundred years later our Lord Jesus applied these same words to the Pharisees and Scribes who, with their man-made rules about worship (and honouring God), became an abomination in His sight!⁵

My brother & sister, God hates good works done with the wrong heart – with a heart that does not love Him!

Indeed, if God's people obey Him with cold hearts – yes, even if God's people do good works in sync with the Law of God, but they do these out of mere cold duty/obligation – then they are no different to pagans who do not even know God and yet are doing the things required by God's Law.

In fact, that's exactly what God's Word says in Rm 2:14-15...

⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Is 29:13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ Cf. Mt 15:1ff. *Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"*

³ *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ⁵ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' ⁶ he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus, you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:*

⁸ *"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

⁹ *They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men"* (NIV84).

Also remember the incident described in 1 Sm 15:21-23.

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.⁶

My brother & sister, this is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible.

You see, people read it and then think that this verse means that pagans can earn their salvation by, without knowing it, living good lives!

But that's not what this verse is teaching!

No! What this passage means is simply that the cold & indifferent heart by which the Jews kept God's good Law is no different to the ignorant heart by which Gentiles keep the things contained in God's Law. And so, just as little as the Gentiles can make themselves right with God by mere law-keeping, so can't the Jews either!

So, to recap: We see that works are only good works on two grounds:

- 1) when they have been described as good works by God's Word and...
- 2) when they flow from hearts that love Jesus Christ! After all, my brother & sister, is God Triune not to be *loved* for what He has done for us? I mean, consider the words of 1 Pt 1:18&19, "***For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.***"⁷

And so, works that are really good and God-honouring, are works flowing out of real faith in (and love for) God Triune!

⁶ NIV84

⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pe 1:18–19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

See why our New Testament passage says (in Js 2:26), “*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead*”?⁸ What else does this mean that a faith that bears the fruit of good works, is a faith that is alive!!?

See, why Martin Luther has described saving faith as *fides viva*,⁹ i.e. a living faith (or *a faith that is alive*)?

Well, so far regarding point 1 “What Good Works Are.”
Here is the second (and last) point...

The Value of Good Works

Some people might ask, “But of what use are good works?”

Well, from the Bible we see at least the following six good uses/functions of good works...

Firstly: By our good works we show our thankfulness to God.

My brother & sister, a professor in theology has often said, “The essence of theology is grace, and the essence of Christian ethics is gratitude.”¹⁰

In other words, at the heart of Christian good behaviour is gratitude/thankfulness to God!

And, indeed, it could not be otherwise!

After all, is it not so that when you & I have received the full pardon of God – and *that* based strictly on the free mercy that God has given us, undeserved and unearned – is it not so that the godly response to such favour can only be obedience; an obedience not driven by my desire to get into heaven, but by my sheer delight, joy, and thankfulness!?

RC Sproul talks of a prisoner who received the Gospel and said afterwards that he was so grateful for God’s forgiveness of his sins that he would crawl across America on glass, in order to tell other people about it!¹¹

⁸ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Jas 2:26). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

⁹ Cf. apud Sproul (ibid:173)

¹⁰ Dr. Berkhouwer (apud Sproul, ibid:174)

¹¹ Sproul (ibid:174)

Well, in Romans 1:21, Paul describes the fundamental sin of fallen humanity as twofold – 1) as *refusing to honour God as God*; and 2) as *un-thankfulness*!

And the Bible gives us an example of such unthankful hearts – in the account of Jesus’ healing of ten lepers of which nine were too much in a hurry to go enjoy their healed state – yes, in too much of a hurry to come say, “Thank you, Lord!”¹²

And indeed, despite the fact that we all live and move and have our being in God,¹³ yet, by nature, we live our lives as ungrateful people! I’m sure some people have gone through their whole life of 80 or 90 years and have never given God one word of thanks!

Well, that’s the first good use of good works.

Here’s the **second**: When we see good works in our lives, we receive assurance of our salvation!

My brother & sister, think with me! What in your & my life robs us from assurance of our salvation?

Look, is it not the presence of sin in our lives?

I mean, who of us has not discovered a particular sin in his/her life and then went, “How can I be a Christian?” “I *say* that I’m a Christian; yes, I *say* that I believe, and that I love God Triune, but look at what I have done/thought!”

Well, I know that such thoughts can be put to good use if, by God’s Spirit, they prompt us to repent of our sin and turn afresh to Christ! But, at times, such thoughts – if they’re terribly strong – might well come from satan who accuses God’s loved ones. After all, the meaning of the Hebrew word *sāṭan* means *to accuse* or *act as adversary*!¹⁴

¹² Cf. Lk 17:11-19

Well, here is that verse from Romans 1 (verse 21), “*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*”

¹³ Cf. Acts 17:28, ‘*For in him we live and move and have our being.*’ *As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’* (NIV84).

¹⁴ Cf. *sāṭan* (שָׂטָן) be/act as adversary. Also cf. the related word *siṭṭānāh* (שִׁטְטָנָה) (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 966). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

But if I, as one who believes in Jesus Christ my Saviour, sees good works in my life, then it's a joyful thing!

Why?

Well, because good works in my life remind me of the words of my Lord, "***If you love Me, you will obey My commandments!***" (Jn 14:15).¹⁵

Indeed, it is good works, as fruit in the life of the Christian, that (as 2 Pt 1:10 says), "Make the Christian's calling and election sure!"¹⁶

Well, that was the second value/use of good works.

Here's the **third**: As believer, my good works edify (build up) my brothers & sisters – as, of course, theirs do to me!

The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians (whose city was in the province of Achaia – Western Greece)¹⁷ and he tells them how their good work of *giving to the needy* can stir up more zeal in the hearts of the Macedonians. Here is what Paul says (in 2 Cor 9:2), "***For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.***"¹⁸

That's what Paul, in the Holy Spirit, said!

But here are the words of our Lord Jesus who said the same thing (in Mt 5:16), "***...let your light shine before men, that***

¹⁵ Also cf. 1 Jn 2:3, 5a ***By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments... whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected*** (NIV84).

¹⁶ Cf. 2 Pt 1:5-11 (especially v.10a), ***For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.***

¹⁰ ***Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*** (NIV84; Emphasis mine).

¹⁷ Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achaea>

¹⁸ ***The Holy Bible: New International Version***. (1984). (2 Co 9:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”¹⁹

Well, your/my good works do not only have the power to edify and stir up our fellow believers in their faith in (and love for) the Lord. No, our good works also have the function to beautify and adorn the words we profess – which leads us to...

the **fourth** use of our good works: adornment!

You see, Paul tells Titus (in Tit 2) that if we live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives, then the teaching of God our Saviour will be *adorned*²⁰ (decorated and made attractive).²¹ (How vital is that – especially for the early church as they were heralding this new faith!)

Paul also tells Timothy that good works are necessary if the Gospel is not to be slandered (blasphemed).²²

Well, here’s the **fifth** use of our good works: They shut the mouths of our adversaries...

¹⁹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Mt 5:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁰ The Greek word in Tit 2:10 is *kosmōsin* (κοσμῶσιν), a Present Active Subjunctive 3rd Person Plural of *kosméō* (κοσμέω): “...to cause something to be beautiful by decorating—‘to beautify, to adorn, to decorate, adornment, adorning.’

κοσμέω: λίθοις καλοῖς καὶ ἀναθήμασιν κεκόσμηται ‘it was decorated with beautiful stones and offerings’ Lk 21:5; οὕτως γὰρ ποτε καὶ αἱ ἅγιοι γυναῖκες ... ἐκόσμου ἐαυτάς ‘for the devout women of the past ... used to adorn themselves in this way’ 1 Pe 3:5” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 694). New York: United Bible Societies).

²¹ Tit 2:1-10 (especially verses 5, 9-12), “*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴ Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.*

⁶ *Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. ⁷ In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness ⁸ and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.*

⁹ *Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, ¹⁰ and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive”* (NIV84; Emphasis mine).

²² Cf. 1 Tim 6:1, “*All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God’s name and our teaching may not be slandered”* (NIV84).

My brother & sister, each one of us will have seen/experienced incidents where action spoke louder than words!

Peter says, “*For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.*”²³

And he says again, “*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*”²⁴

Well, here’s a **sixth** (and ultimate) purpose of all our good works – i.e. to glorify God...

Paul tells the Philippians that they (and we) must be *filled with the fruit of righteousness ... to the glory and praise of God.*²⁵

Our Lord Jesus Himself tells His disciples (and us), “*This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit...*”²⁶

So, here’s my prayer for each & everyone of us: that each of us will truly be God’s child in Christ Jesus – yes, truly born from above, for you know what?

Then – and only then – will we bear the kind of fruit that we have just heard about!

AMEN (2,506 words excluding footnotes)

²³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pe 2:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pe 2:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁵ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Php 1:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

²⁶ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jn 15:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.