

## Of Good Works (Part 2)

John 15:1-17; WCF 16.3-16.4

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 2 February 2020, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)<sup>1</sup>

### Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

What we are about to hear this afternoon is the second of four sermons on good works!

In sermon one (which we heard two weeks ago), we were reminded of what good works are, i.e.

- that they are only good if they have been given by God as good works; and not by human beings who, like Pharisees and legalists, have invented their own good works on top of what God has given!
- But we were also reminded that even the good works given by *God* for man to do – like the good works prescribed in the Ten Commandments – may be no good works at all if they're performed coldly (obligatorily) by hearts that don't love God!
- Lastly, we were also reminded of the *value* of having good works, i.e. that our good works 1) give thanks to God; 2) that they assure us that we have indeed been born from above; 3) that our good works can build our brothers/sisters up in their faith (as theirs also do to us); 4) that our good works decorate/adorn the Gospel message; 5) that they shut the mouths of our adversaries; and 6) that they glorify God!

Well, this afternoon, we want to hear what God's Word says about our *ability* to do good works and about the *limitations* of our good works.

So, here are the three points of this sermon:

- The Holy Spirit's Work

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

- My Work (My Diligence)
- The Limitations of Good Works

## The Holy Spirit's Work

Here's a question: Good works by human beings (good works that please God) – where do they come from?

Well, throughout history there have been many people who have claimed that we human beings can, in/of ourselves, do good works that are pleasing to God!

One such person was Pelagius who lived around 400 A.D.<sup>2</sup> He preached that Adam & Eve's sin affected only themselves; and that human beings who came after Adam and Eve are born in a state of innocence, i.e. without sin. So, Pelagius goes on to say that human beings have the power to not only live *good* lives, but *perfect* lives. In other words, according to Pelagius' teachings, human beings can by their own will and power perform good works that are totally God-pleasing!

Is that right?

Is that what the Bible teaches?

Not at all!

I mean, does not the Apostle Paul tell us clearly (in Rm 3:10-12),<sup>3</sup> ***“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they***

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<sup>2</sup> “Pelagius was born about 354-360. He is said by his contemporaries, such as Augustine of Hippo, Prosper of Aquitaine, Marius Mercator, and Paul Orosius, to have been of British origin. Jerome apparently thought that Pelagius was Irish, suggesting that he was "stuffed with Irish porridge" (Scotorum pultibus praegravatus). He was tall in stature and portly in appearance. Pelagius was also highly educated, he spoke and wrote Latin and Greek with great fluency and was well versed in theology. His name has traditionally been understood as a Graecized form (from pélagos, "sea") of the Welsh name Morgan ("sea-born"), or another Celtic equivalent.

Pelagius became better known around 380 when he moved to Rome. There he enjoyed a reputation of austerity; he also corresponded with St. Paulinus of Nola. Pelagius became concerned about the moral laxity of society. He blamed this laxity on the theology of divine grace preached by Augustine, among others. He began to teach a very strict, rigid moralism, emphasizing a natural, innate human ability to attain salvation.

When Alaric sacked Rome in 410, Pelagius and his follower Caelestius fled to Carthage, where he continued his work. He was in Jerusalem by 415” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelagius> ).

<sup>3</sup> Quoting Ps 14:1-3

***have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one***?<sup>4</sup>

See? No one does good, not even one!!

This is what the Reformers have called man's "moral inability." The Canon's of Dort call it, "Total depravity."

My brother & sister, St Augustine who lived at the same time as Pelagius, has interpreted Romans 3 correctly. You see, this great man of God taught that we cannot incline ourselves to do any good works unless we have first been quickened by the Holy Spirit – yes, unless we have first been born from above and the disposition of our hearts have been changed to love Jesus Christ, our Saviour & Lord!

Well, at this point, someone might say, "O come on, preacher, what about all the people who are not professing Christians, and yet do all kinds of virtuous deeds in which they show great care and selflessness (altruism)?"

My brother & sister, there's a big difference between superficial goodness (which is simply *external* conformity to the Law of God), and *internal* conformity to God's Law which is motivated by a love for Him!

You see, God looks not only at the *actual outward* action, but also by the *motivation/heart* behind it.

I mean, is this not clear from David's prayer of Ps 51:16-17) "***You do not delight in sacrifice*** (in other words, God does not delight in mere outwardly done good works), ***or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*** <sup>17</sup>***The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*** <sup>5</sup>

See? For a work to be truly good, the Christian must be moved in his/her heart to love and please God for who God is and what He has done, is doing and will do!

Jonathan Edwards described the good works done by unbelievers as works done with *enlightened self-interest*!<sup>6</sup> John Calvin called such good works *civic virtue*.<sup>7</sup>

These are works done in interaction between people.

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<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ro 3:10–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 51:16–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup> Apud Sproul (ibid:183)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. apud Sproul (ibid:183)

For example, non-Christian mothers are kind to their children, and non-Christian men can be honest in business dealings.

So, indeed, even though someone has not been born from above, he/she can (and, in fact, *does*) do good works. However, as far as concerns the things of God – the things that accompany salvation (i.e. the things that are the fruit of salvation) – such a person is spiritually dead.

So, again, what must first happen?

Well, the Holy Spirit must first regenerate my heart (give new birth to me) by working faith in my heart for/in Jesus Christ.

Then? What then?

Well, then the beautiful state of John 15 arises – that state in which I am like a branch of the vine – the vine which is my Lord Jesus Christ!

Remember what our Lord said in Jn 15:5, “***I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.***”<sup>8</sup>

And, look, does the Apostle Paul not say the same thing in Phil 4:13, “***I can do all things through Him who strengthens me***”<sup>9</sup> (– and only through Him)?

My brother & sister, perhaps there’s still someone who doesn’t get it – someone who still says, “I can do God-pleasing works without being a Christian – without being born from above!”

Well, let such a person now hear what Paul says in 2 Cor 3:5, “***Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.***”<sup>10</sup>

See? Our sufficiency comes from God!

But there’s more to say! And *that* is that it’s not as if God only sets the ball rolling and then the rest is up to us to do by our own initiative and in our own power!

No!

Phil 2:13 clearly tells us that *it is God who works in the Christian, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jn 15:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>9</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Php 4:13). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>10</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (2 Co 3:5). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>11</sup> Phil 2:13, “***...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure***” (ESV).

So, it's clear: we need God Himself to *continue* working in us, making us *willing* to do good works, as well as then to *actually do* what pleases God!

Well, so far re point 1: "The Holy Spirit's Work"  
Here is point 2...

### **My Work (My Diligence)**

The fact that it is the Holy Spirit who moves us (works in us) to do good & God-pleasing works, does not mean that you & I can now sit back & relax!

Indeed, people have no right to say, "I didn't do any good work because the Spirit didn't lead/move me to do it!"

No!

Our responsibilities cannot be passed off to God! We cannot blame God for our inaction!

People who do nothing in the line of good works, because they claim that the Holy Spirit has not moved them to do these, are guilty of *quietism* (i.e. *quiet* with the ending *-ism*)!<sup>12</sup>

And the slogan of quietism is "Let go and let God!"

Please don't get me wrong: with *quietism* I don't mean *quiet*. After all, there are times when the Christian needs to be quiet and leave his/her anxiety at the foot of the cross and say, "Lord, I am clinging to You, and I am depending on – and relying on – Your help and Your grace, and not just on my own efforts!" That's *being-quiet* before the Lord in the sense that, for those trials/hardships about which I cannot do anything, I will trust my Lord! (cf. Ps 46:10, "***Be still, and know that I am God...!***").

But that's not *quietism*! Yes, that's not *being inactive* as far as *doing-good-works* is concerned!

No!

You see, the Christian needs to stir up (rouse) what is sluggish in him/her! Look, is this not what Heb 6:11-12 says, "***We want each of you to show this same diligence*** (Good work!!) ***to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.*** <sup>12</sup> ***We do not want you to become lazy***

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<sup>12</sup> For more on quietism cf. e.g. Sproul (ibid:185)

(Good work!!), ***but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised***?<sup>13</sup>

What about Phil 2:13?

My brother & sister, even though Phil 2:13 says that it is *God* who *works in us to will and to do* good works, just the verse before (v.12) urges *you & me* to *work out our salvation with fear and trembling!*

How hard are you & I supposed to work?

Well, when God's Word tells us to work out our salvation *with fear & trembling*, that means that, in absolute awe of who God is and what He has done, you & I will be moved to work as hard as we possibly can! However, not as if we wish to, without the help of the Holy Spirit, earn our own righteousness, for if we did that, we would be guilty of another *-ism*, i.e. *activism!*

My brother & sister, also the second-last book in Bible (Jude) tells us to actively do good works. Here is what it says in v.20-21, "***But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.***"<sup>14</sup>

See our active input in living godly lives?

Paul gives the same message to Timothy when he says (in 2 Tim 1:6), "***I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.***"<sup>15</sup>

If these verses are not clear enough, then hear what Peter says (in 2 Pt 1:5-8 ), "***...make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;*** <sup>6</sup> ***and to knowledge, self-control; and to***

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<sup>13</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Heb 6:11–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. Also cf. Is 64:7, ***There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities*** (ESV).

<sup>14</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jud 20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>15</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Ti 1:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

*self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;<sup>7</sup> and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”<sup>16</sup>*

See our active input in living godly lives?

So, what do we see?

Well, don't we see that your/my good works are done by God *and* by us – what theologians call “synergism” (working together)?

How does this “working together” work?

Well, not so that the Christian does his good works in his own initiative and strength – apart from any inworking of God!

No, the good works of him/her who has been born from above by the Holy Spirit, always happen by God who works in us to will and to do these good works!

Again, we have to use our Lord's own illustration of the vine and the branches (Jn 15:4), “...***No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.***”<sup>17</sup>

You ask, “But if the Christian is like a branch that gets its fruit-bearing power from Christ, the vine, then he/she will by that very closeness with Christ do good works!” “So, why do we need to urge/exhort the Christian to do good works?”

Well, our Lord Himself gives the answer, when He says (in Jn 15:2), “***I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener... every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.***”<sup>18</sup>

My brother & sister, insofar as you & I are in Christ, we are branches that bear the fruit of good works! And the Father will prune us so that we will do even more good works!

How does God prune us to do more good works?

Well, by the means of grace! You see, they're like pruning scissors!

What are the means of grace?

In sum, they are every exposure to the Word of God, which means...

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<sup>16</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Pe 1:5–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jn 15:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>18</sup> [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jn 15:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

- that I will regularly hold my own Bible study (See? Pruning scissors!);
- that I will be regular in church attendance and Christian fellowship (See again? Pruning scissors!);
- that I will participate in the sacraments (Pruning scissors in my Father’s hands!);
- and that I will engage in outreach!

Perhaps someone says, “But, Pastor, I can’t remember all the points from every sermon – I cannot even remember the things from the previous sermon!” “So, Pastor, does church attendance help?”

Well, here’s the good news, i.e. that *for the 20 or 30 minutes you hear the sermon (or parts of it), it is getting into your head. And, at that moment, God does use sermons from His Word to strengthen and develop our souls. Even if you/I will not pass an exam on what we heard, just hearing the Word regularly will have a cumulative effect on our soul! And, yes, even though the preacher might have learned good preaching techniques and eloquence, it’s ultimately not the preacher’s eloquence which moves our heart & soul, but it is the power of the Word, enhanced by the Holy Spirit!*<sup>19</sup>

My brother & sister, that’s what’s happening even now. Yes, right at this very moment when you & I hear the Word of God, the Father (our Heavenly “Gardener”) is “pruning” you & me (the “branches”) who are in Christ (the “Vine”), to do more good works!

Well, so far re point 2: “My Diligence.”  
Here’s the last point...

### **The Limitation of Good Works**

I’m sure that after all that you & I have heard thus far in the sermon, we will be convinced that there’s no such thing as *supererogation*! What’s *supererogation*?

Well, *supererogation* is good works that are above and beyond the call of duty!

You see, according to Roman Catholic teaching, there have been a few saints (believers) who have lived lives of such a high level of

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<sup>19</sup> My adaptation of the well-said words of Sproul (ibid:187-188).

righteousness (they have done so many – and such high quality of – good works), that they accumulated more merit than they themselves needed in order to gain direct entrance into heaven! So, their excess merit was then supposedly deposited into something like a bank – a treasury of merit, where it is available to others who did not do so well!

My brother & sister, the Old-Testament leader, Nehemiah, was a faithful man who did a lot of good works in God’s service.

In fact, Nehemiah was able to shamelessly list off a whole number of his achievements to God (in Neh 13:22-30). And, now and then through that list, he even said to God, “***Remember me with favor, O my God.***”<sup>20</sup>

Yet, hear how even this man of God pray at the end of his book (Neh 13:22): “...***spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love...***”<sup>21</sup>

That’s the limitation of our good works! Even Nehemiah knew that he could not trust that his own good works would earn for him a righteousness with God!

And that’s why our Lord Jesus said that you & I should be like unworthy servants who, at the end of a whole life of service to God, will say, “...***We have only done what was our duty***” (Lk 17:10)!

Here’s a final question: Who has produced good work – good work that has been so perfect that it earned enough merits to save thousands of sinners?

Only *One* – our Lord Jesus Christ!

You see, He did not just *die* for you & me!

No, He also lived a perfectly obedient life for you & me!

Do you believe in Him?

Do you spend enough time in His Word and in prayer?

Are you/I moved by who He is and what He has done for us?

You see, that’s the only way to salvation! And that’s the only way in which our good works will be God-honouring!

AMEN (2651 words excluding footnotes).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Neh 13:22b and 30b, “***Remember me for this ... Remember me with favor, O my God.***”

<sup>21</sup> ESV