

Of Good Works (Part 3)

Tit 3:1-11; WCF 16.5

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 9 February 2020, 16:30

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

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

When there is a shipwreck at sea, there's wreckage everywhere in the water! And in the olden days when ships were mostly made from wood, there were planks drifting all around the shipwrecked people floundering clumsily in the water! And those people would certainly have drowned if it were not for a good piece of plank from the ship which they could hold onto.

Well, the Roman Catholic church designed a "second-plank" doctrine – the doctrine of penance!

You see, by this doctrine they teach that people who have made "shipwreck" of their souls, could have a second chance of being right with God.

Yes, according to this doctrine, penance is designed for those who have already been saved by grace through faith in Christ, but who have then committed a so-called "mortal sin," a sin by which they have lost the righteousness they once had in Christ (as if that were possible)!

So, now, according to this doctrine of penance, such sinners must *do something* to make *amends* for their sins: they must '*make satisfaction for*' or '*expiate*' their sins² – how sad!!

And a priest must choose the exact act of penance, because it must be an act equal in weight to the mortal sin committed. So, as said in my sermon on WCF 11.1, acts of penance can vary from *easier ones* (like spending more time in prayer or in reading the Bible or reading other spiritual books), to *harder acts of penance* like fasting or continence or abstaining from alcohol or tobacco, or the wearing of a cilice (/ˈsɪlɪs/), which is a garment or undergarment made of coarse cloth or animal hair worn close to the skin. But, if that's not punishment enough, then the sinner could still do self-flagellation (self-whipping with whatever whip is decided upon).

Well, this doctrine of penance (this "second plank" of salvation) is shockingly unbiblical, for the Bible tells us in many of its verses, that 1) once Christ has saved us, we'll always be saved; and 2) that we are not saved by our good works, but by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

I mean, there's e.g. the very well-known 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.***"³

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 Cf.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacraments_of_the_Catholic_Church#Penance_and_Reconciliation_\(Confession\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacraments_of_the_Catholic_Church#Penance_and_Reconciliation_(Confession))

³ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Eph 2:8–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Then there's our New-Testament passage (Tit 3:1-11) which says (in vv. 4-7), "***But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.***"⁴

My brother & sister, there are many more verses teaching *salvation by grace alone through faith alone* – Rm 4:2-6 is one of these. But there's no need to pile up more verses for you, because the evidence is clear!

But here's a question: Seeing that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, what does that say about the power of your/my law-keeping?

Well, that no matter how good our law-keeping might be, law-keeping can never make us right with God!

And the Bible even says it clearly (in Rm 3:20), "...***no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law...***"⁵

Perhaps someone will say, "Pastor, we get it! Yes, we already know that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But tell us, why, in the first place, are our good works (our observance of the Law) so powerless to earn for us forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation with God? Why?"

Well, the Bible gives the following three reasons, which form the three points of our sermon...

- No Match
- Just Our Duty
- The Holy Spirit's Credit

No Match

The first reason why our good/best works cannot earn for us forgiveness of sins, neither eternal life, is: our good works are no match against God's perfect standards!⁶

After all, is there not an infinite distance between God and us?

He is eternal. We, in this life, are temporal (short-lived)!

God is perfectly holy.⁷ We are sin-infected and sin-marred.

So, indeed, there's a great chasm – not just between God and us,⁸ but also between His *works* and our *works*!

In God all goodness dwells. But that's not true of us!

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Tt 3:4–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

⁵ Rm 3:20, "***Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin***" (NIV84).

⁶ Cf. Mt 5:48 ***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***

⁷ Cf. 1 Pt 1:15-16 ***But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."***

⁸ Cf. Lk 16:26 ***And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.*** (This chasm is indeed between heaven and hell. Nevertheless, also between man's best moral deeds and God's holiness, there's an infinite distance.)

What's more, all *God's* goodness profit us. Look, is this not what Ps 16:2 says, "***I said to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good besides You"***"?⁹

So, all *God's* goodness profit us, but can *we* add anything good to God? Can we make God any better than He already is? He is most holy and most content in Himself. Can we, with our best works, make Him more content?

My brother & sister, remember what one of Job's friends, Eliphaz, said in this regard?

This is what he said (in Job 22:2-3), "***Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless?***"¹⁰

In other words, "How could your/my good works ever benefit God?"

Indeed, God is so holy and in Himself so complete/content that He does not need our good works (righteousness) to add to His contentment!

This is also expressed by the words of another friend of Job – a man called Elihu (in Jb 35:7-8), "***If you are righteous, what do you give to him, or what does he receive from your hand? Your wickedness affects only a man like yourself, and your righteousness only the sons of men.***"¹¹

So, yes, you & I might, by our sinful nature, look at our own good works and then quietly & sinfully cherish feelings of pride against one another, but never ever can we boast before God about our works – let alone about boast about our salvation!

So, because even our best works cannot add to God's joy and contentment, they cannot save us – cannot make us right with Him! The distance (chasm) between God and human beings is far too great!

Someone once illustrated this distance (and the inability of our best works) with people trying to jump to the moon in their own strength!

Now, in this regard, how wonderful that the world record in high jump is 2.45m (just over 8ft), set already in 1993 by Javier Sotomayor of Cuba.¹²

Well, imagine the instructions were that, for any human being to be saved, he had to get to the moon without the use of any space craft or any other external power – just on his own steam!

Well, if that were so, what would it help if even this high-jump record holder would then look at an unfit & plump man who can jump only about 20cm high and then boast, "Hahaha, look at you! Your best jump is no match to mine"?

My brother & sister, what would such boasting help!?! You see, looking at the distance between the earth and the moon, even the best effort of this record holder would be no different to the 20cm jump of the unfit & plump man!

So, here's the point: Our best works can never earn for us forgiveness with God – let alone procure salvation for us – because they simply don't match up with God's perfectly holy standard!

Here's the second reason why our best works can't earn forgiveness for us with God...

⁹ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Ps 16:2). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Job 22:2–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Job 35:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹² Spanish pronunciation: [xa'βjer sotoma'jor]; born October 13, 1967 (cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Javier_Sotomayor)

Just Our Duty

In Lk 17:10, our Lord Jesus ends His parable of the unworthy servant in this way: “*So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’*”¹³

How does this relate to man’s sinful desire to earn forgiveness with God by doing good works?

Well, that if God owes us anything, He owes it not because of any good thing we have done, but solely because, by His promises which He has made to His elect (loved ones), He has made Himself a debtor to His own honour!

And so, if we want to plead with God for forgiveness of our sins, we can only plead with our Heavenly Father to act with us, His loved ones, according to the promises He has graciously bound Himself to!¹⁴

After all, every good work you & I are doing is only a work that was expected of us! Thus, none of our good work is a work of *supererogation*!

My brother & sister, remember what we said last week about the word *supererogation*!? *Supererogation* is good work that is above and beyond the call of duty!

You see, according to Roman Catholic teaching, there have been a few saints (believers) who 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, from where the Pope can then supposedly transfer these to the “accounts” of others who did not do so well!

What a shockingly false teaching!

But, according to our Lord Jesus’ parable, whatever we do for Him, even though it might perhaps be more than some others do, yet it is no more than just our duty.

Well, that was the second reason why our best works can’t earn forgiveness or salvation for us?

What’s the third reason?

Well, that brings us to the last point...

The Holy Spirit’s Credit

My brother & sister, the Scriptures tell us that, if we have any good works at all – works that will glorify the Name of our Lord before the world and God’s people, then it’s only the Holy Spirit who is to receive credit for these.

So, is there any good work in the life of the born-again person? Yes, is there any “love, joy, peace,” or “patience” coming out of you? Are you seeing “kindness, goodness” and “faithfulness” in him/her who lives with you under the same roof? Have you spotted any “gentleness and self-control” in your Christian friends or in your children? If so, the Bible

¹³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Lk 17:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁴ Or to say it Matthew Henry style (cf. his commentary on Lk 17:10): “No good works of ours can merit any thing at the hand of God. We expect God’s favour, not because we have by our services made him a debtor to us, but because he has by his promises made himself a debtor to his own honour, and this we may plead with him, but cannot sue for a *quantum meruit*—according to merit” (Henry, M. (1994). [Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume](#) (pp. 1886–1887). Peabody: Hendrickson).

(in Gal 5:22-23) tells you who is at work – the Holy Spirit whose fruit became visible! Yes, *He* must be given all the credit!¹⁵

Now, although some people might not like to hear this message, it is nevertheless a true assessment of our behaviour. The good in us comes from the Holy Spirit who moves us from the heart so that we perform good works with our mouths, hands and feet!

Thus, as someone has said so well: “That which comes from us (man) alone can be ‘good’ only in the most pedestrian (dull) sense of the word.”¹⁶

My brother & sister, although you and I thank one another even for this most general sense of goodness, we should still remember that, before God, our best works are contaminated with so much weakness, imperfection, confused intentions and mixed motives.

You see, is this not explained in Gal 5:17, “*For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want*”?¹⁷

And does not Rm 7:15 say the same: “*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do*”?¹⁸

Indeed, our best deeds are contaminated by imperfect motives.

No wonder Is 64:6 says, “*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...*”¹⁹

My brother & sister, the only way in which an ordinary human being’s good works will not just pass the approval of a good friend, but be also that of God, is when a human being’s good works come as fruit produced in him/her by the Holy Spirit – i.e. good works of the born-from above person!²⁰

But the best works of man can never endure the severity of God’s judgement, let alone win us salvation! After all, does not God’s Word say (in Ps 130:3), “*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*”²¹

Well, we’ve come to the end of the sermon! And we’ve been reminded of many things regarding our good works!

But here is my prayer for you & me and all our loved ones: that you & I will be born from above – yes, born-again – by the Holy Spirit, for so – and only so – will we be right with God! And so – only so – will our good works be God-pleasing: i.e. fruits of the Holy Spirit flowing out from us!

AMEN (2,180 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁵ My adaptation of the wonderful way in which Van Dixhoorn (ibid:212) has shifted the viewpoint of the onlooker of the fruits of the Spirit.

¹⁶ Van Dixhoorn (ibid:212) (Parentheses mine)

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ga 5:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ro 7:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Is 64:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁰ For an elaboration on this teaching, cf. WCF 16.6

²¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ps 130:3). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.