

Of Good Works (Part 4)

Rv 22:6-21; WCF 16.6-16.7

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 16 February 2020, 16:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

As Reformed Christians, you and I know by now that it is by grace we have been saved through faith and *not because of any good works we might have done!*

Anyway, in last Sunday afternoon's sermon, we were reminded that, because of our sinful & sin-marred state, even our good works are contaminated with unholiness!

Thus, in & of themselves, even our good works could never be acceptable in the sight of an absolutely holy and sinless God!

And we quoted e.g. the well-known verse from Is 64:6, "***All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...***"²

Well, thankfully, that's not the last word there is to say about our good works!

You see, here is point 1 (1 of 2) regarding our good works...

Believers' Good Works Are Ultimately His Works!

My brother & sister, here's a question: If even people's good works are still like filthy rags before our sinless and holy God, how is it then that God expects of us to live obedient lives? I mean, does living obedient lives before God then not presuppose doing good/pleasing deeds for God?

Yes, if our Lord Jesus says, "If you love Me you will obey My commandments," why would we then obey His commandments if even our obedience will be like filthy rags?

Well, in short, the answer is that God *does* accept our good works as beautiful, but only *through Jesus Christ our Mediator!*

After all, is it not so that Paul says (in Eph 1:6), that God accepts ***us in the Beloved?***³

Now, surely, if God accepts *us* in His beloved Son,

does it then not follow that He will, through His Son, also accept the good which we seek to do?

Yes, it does!

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). (Is 64:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

³ Cf. Eph 1:5-6, ***He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved*** (NASB; emphasis mine).

Look, is that not what the Apostle Peter means when he says (in 1 Pt 2:5) that Christians are offering up *spiritual sacrifices* (good works) *acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*?⁴

You see, the picture which Peter sketches here is that of our Lord Jesus who is interceding for us like a high priest – Jesus beautifies the good works you & I offer up to God!

Well, remember in this regard what God instructed Aaron, the high priest, in Moses' times to do.

God told Aaron to wear a turban on his head. On this turban, above Aaron's forehead, there was to be a small plate/diadem made of pure gold. On this golden plate/diadem Aaron had to have the following words engraved: "Holy to the LORD!"⁵

Why?

Well, so that when the people of Israel brought their offerings to Aaron to give these to God, the guilt/impurity which came even with their best offerings, would be upon Aaron their high priest – guilt which God, then, in His grace would remove from those offerings and from Aaron, so that God would *regard* those impure offerings to be pure – as pure as the golden plate/diadem which said, "Holy to the LORD!"

My brother & sister, this is how God looks at the heartfelt believer's good works – good works which we present to Him through our Lord Jesus!

Again, we have to emphasise that it is not as if even the heartfelt believer's best works are without the stain of hidden motives or imperfection. After all, Job was a very godly man. Yet, even he had to admit, "*If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: If I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse.*"⁶

Well, if that was true of Job, then the Psalmist was right in saying (in Ps 143:2) that *...no one living is righteous before God.*⁷

But how wonderful the news that in spite of the many dark stains on all of our best works, God looks upon them in His Son!

Look, is this not also what Heb 13:20-21 says, "*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*"⁸

⁴ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (1 Pt 2:5). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

⁵ Cf. Ex 28:36-38, "*Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: holy to the Lord. ³⁷ Fasten a blue cord to it to attach it to the turban; it is to be on the front of the turban. ³⁸ It will be on Aaron's forehead, and he will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate, whatever their gifts may be. It will be on Aaron's forehead continually so that they will be acceptable to the Lord...*" (NIV84; emphasis mine).

⁶ [The Holy Bible: King James Version](#). (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Job 9:20). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁷ Ps 143:2 *Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you* (NIV84).

⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Heb 13:20–21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

Well, here is further comfort, i.e. that our Father understands us, and that He knows our limitations as sinful human beings. And so, at the very least, God judges our gifts based on what we *can* do – not on what we *cannot* do.

You see, the Apostle Paul once exhorted the Corinthian church to give generously and with gratitude when they give their offering. And he told them to give according to their means (according to what they *have*) – not according to what they did *not* have. Yes, Paul said: **“...if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have!”**⁹

My brother & sister, does our Lord Jesus’ parable of the talents not give the same message – i.e. that God will judge us according to how He has talented us – *and how we, in Christ, have laboured with those talents*; not according to the talents He has *not* given us!?

After all, is this not how a Father receives the gifts of a child – even his disobedient children?

Yes, our works have no merit which could earn God’s mercy for us. But in accepting us in His precious Son (our High Priest & Saviour Jesus Christ), our Father also accepts all our good works.

And the author of Hebrews has said it well: ***“God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.”***¹⁰

Now here’s another beautiful thing! You see, it *is* true that all who are in Christ will on the Day of Christ say, “We have been unworthy servants; we have only done our duty at the best of times.”¹¹ But how wonderful if our Lord will say to also you & me, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”***¹²

Well, that day is the day on which Christ’s words of our NT passage (of Rv 22:12), will be fulfilled: ***“...My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.”***¹³

Is it so? Will we get according to what we have done?

Yes, we will!

But we should remember: what we have done will not earn salvation for us – for *that* we received by grace through faith in Christ!¹⁴

Nevertheless, our good works will bring other rewards to us – rewards which have not yet been fully spelled out!

⁹ 2 Cor 8:10-12, ***“And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have”*** (NIV84; emphasis mine).

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Heb 6:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ Cf. Lk 17:10 ***“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.’”***

¹² [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Mt 25:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Re 22:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. Eph 2:8-9

Perhaps you say, “But if I have done anything good and God-pleasing – even so, it was only by God’s enabling grace!”

Well, if that’s how you see your good works, then you will be in good company, for also Augustine used to say the same thing!

You see, Augustine taught that when God gives rewards to His people in Christ Jesus, He is crowning His own gifts!¹⁵

Well so far re Point 1: **“Believers’ Good Works Are Ultimately His Works!”**

Here is the last point...

Unbelievers’ Good Works – Useful but Unacceptable

Sadly, many people in this world – in fact, it seems most people in this world – do not believe in Christ. They do not trust Him to be the Saviour of all who, by God’s grace, receive Him as their Saviour and Lord!

What about such people’s good works? After all, it is possible that even those who don’t believe in Christ could at times even do certain things which God commands!

So, even the works of unbelievers may be good in some sense – good for themselves and good for others. For example, let’s take the idol-worshiping king Jehu. You see, Jehu did well in the sense that he was less evil than the kings before him. And God even told Jehu that he *did well*, but Jehu’s good deeds did not make Jehu a God-fearer, for we read that *Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit.*¹⁶

And what about King Ahab?

Well, hear what the Bible says about how ungodly he was (1 Ki 21:25-26), *“There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. ²⁶ He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel.”*¹⁷

So, Ahab was ungodly!

Yet he did one good thing. You see, when God, through the prophet Elijah, pronounced great judgement over Ahab and his house, Ahab did humble himself before God. So, that was a good thing which Ahab did – and God even acknowledged that! Therefore, God, in

¹⁵ Cf. Augustine (apud Sproul, *ibid*:194), but also cf. *“The Lord, he says, will award me a crown, being a just judge. So he owes me what he will award; so the just judge will award; having inspected the work, after all, he can’t deny the reward ... But with the reward you do nothing; with the work, you don’t act alone. The crown simply comes to you from him; the work on the other hand comes from you, but only with him helping ... To Paul fighting the good fight, completing the course, keeping the faith, he paid back good things. But for what good things? For ones he himself had given. Or wasn’t it by his gift that you were able to fight the good fight? ... The only things of yours that we know were prepared for you by yourself are evil. So when God crowns your merits, he is not crowning anything but his own gifts”* (Augustine, (s.)Sermons, trans. Edmund Hill, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, part 3, vols. 1–11 (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), s. 333.2,5).

¹⁶ Cf. 2 Ki 10:30-31, *The Lord said to Jehu, “Because you have done well in accomplishing what is right in my eyes and have done to the house of Ahab all I had in mind to do, your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation.”*³¹ *Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit.* (Emphasis mine).

¹⁷ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Ki 21:25–26). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

His mercy, rewarded Ahab for that in that God promised Ahab that most of the suffering that would come upon his household, would only come after Ahab's lifetime.¹⁸

And so, you & I can be comfortable in saying that unbelievers can do well. We can be comfortable about that, because *God's Word* indicates that they can do good things.

I mean, also the Apostle Paul admitted that, as he was sitting in prison in Rome, some people preached Christ out of envy and rivalry. But Paul still rejoiced, because the good thing was that, at least, the Gospel was talked about!¹⁹

So, you & I can be glad about the good things that unregenerate people can do. And we can thank them for that, too!

But we should be clear that God knows that these deeds do not come from a heart purified by faith in Christ!

And this makes a big difference, for, you see, on the surface, Cain & Abel's sacrifices both looked good! However, in God's sight there was a big difference in the sense that Abel was a man of faith!²⁰

And what does God's Word say re good deeds (even deeds of worship) done *without* faith? Well, it says (in Heb 11:6), "***And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.***"²¹

Yes, what are works done without love – love for God?

Paul says in 1 Cor 13:3, "***If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.***"²²

So, how do you & I bring good deeds to God?

You see, if we don't love God in & through Jesus Christ, then, even about our worship, God will one day say to us what He once said to the people of Isaiah's day (Is 1:12-13), "***When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? ¹³Stop bringing meaningless offerings...!***"

My brother & sister, works – even good works like worshiping God – performed without a heart of faith in (and love for) God – such works are sinful in God's sight – and is it not *God's* sight which ultimately matters?

Now, having said that, let us continue to pray for our own good works and also for the good works of unbelievers so that even unbelievers will not neglect whatever good they do, for look, does not Scripture teach us that the abandonment of doing good is even more sinful and displeasing to God.

¹⁸ 1 Ki 21:27-29, ***When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.***

²⁸ ***Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹“Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.”***

¹⁹ Cf. Phil 1:15-18, "***It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice***" (NIV 84).

²⁰ Cf. Heb 11:4 ***By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.***

²¹ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Heb 11:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²² [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (1 Co 13:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Ps 36:1-3

An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. ² For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. ³ The words of his mouth are wicked and deceitful; he has ceased to be wise and to do good.

What a disaster when the wicked cease to do good – even just good deeds done with unbelieving hearts!

Well, I pray – and let us all continue to pray – for ourselves, our children, our family and church family to believe in Jesus Christ, and to love Him; to be in awe of God Triune and what He *has* done, *is* doing and *has promised* to do; and that we will not stop to do good & God-pleasing works with thankful hearts to Him who gave so generously to us!

But let us never stop to pray even further – i.e. for unbelievers to come to faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in Him and not just in their works, which, in God's eyes, are woefully lacking!

AMEN (2,140 words excluding footnotes)