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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 12.5 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

The Christian's Desire to Do Good Works

Because of the work of the Holy Spirit, every Christian desires to do truly good works because of their faith in Christ, love for God, and gratitude for all of God's blessings. David wrote concerning the Messiah in Psalm 110:3: **"Your people shall be volunteers in the day of Your power."** In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes His disciples as children of God who imitate their heavenly Father by loving their enemies, blessing those who curse them, doing good to those who hate them, and praying for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:43-48). Paul writes: **"Be imitators of God as dear children"** (Ephesians 5:1).

The Holy Spirit creates this desire to do good when He creates a new heart within us (Ezekiel 36:26), when He creates a new man that is renewed in the image of God (Colossians 3:10). The Holy Spirit strengthens this desire within us to do good by reminding us of the mercies of God, that is, the blessings of the Gospel. Paul introduced his encouragement to Christians to bring forth good fruit in chapter 12-16 of his letter with a reminder of God's mercies, which he presented in the first 11 chapters. Paul wrote: **"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service"** (Romans 12:1). Thus, the Holy Spirit moves Christians to please God in their lives with their attitude and behavior. The first fruit of the Spirit is love. So Paul writes: **"Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments ... are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law"** (Romans 13:8-10).

The good works that God desires that Christians do come from willing hearts, hearts that are happy because of God's blessings. Because of the grace of God, the congregations in Macedonia were happy to contribute to the fund for the poverty-stricken Christians in Jerusalem, even though they themselves were very poor. The apostle Paul testified concerning these Christians: **"According to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints"** (2 Corinthians 8:3-4). It is not the size of the gift or its value that counts, but the willingness with which the gift is given or the work is done. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth: **"If there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have"** (2 Corinthians 8:12). **"God loves a cheerful giver"** (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The good works of Christians are a good advertisement for the Gospel of Christ and its power to change lives. The apostle Peter told the Christians in his care: Have **"your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation"** (1 Peter 2:12). Thus, the good works of a Christian may even lead to the conversion of unbelievers. Peter says: **"This is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men"** (1 Peter 2:15).

When Christians respond to the evils that are done to them by doing good it really makes an impression on others; in doing this, a believer follows the example of Christ, **"who, when He was reviled, did not revile again; when He suffered, He did not threaten"** (1 Peter 2:21-23). As Jesus made it the aim in His life to do the will of His loving Father, so also those who believe in Jesus wish to do those things

that please their Father. Jesus said: **“My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work”** (John 4:34).

The works that please God may not be magnificent or spectacular in the eyes of the world. They include doing the humble duties of one’s station in life. For example, the apostle Paul lists the duties of wives, husbands, children, parents, masters, and servants in his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, and his assistant Titus (Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9; Colossians 3:18 – 4:1; Titus 2:1-10). When John the Baptist was asked what kind of fruits they should bear that were worthy of repentance, he responded by saying they should share their good things with others, they should not cheat others, and they should be satisfied with their pay (Luke 3:8-14).

The only one who can determine whether a work is good or not is God Himself. But we are not left in the dark as to what works God considers good. God has given us His Word in the Bible to help us determine which works please Him. When a lawyer asked Jesus: **“Which is the great commandment in the law?”**, Jesus responded: **“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”** (Matthew 22:36-40).

The first three of the Ten Commandments given by God through Moses summarize how we show our love for God: by worshiping Him, by using His name rightly, and by listening to His Word. The last seven of the Ten Commandments show us how we show love to our neighbor: by honoring our parents, by helping (not hurting) our fellowman, by sexual purity, by honesty, by truthful words, and by being satisfied with what God has given us and how He is treating us. The details are spelled out for us in particular by the admonitions of the apostles in large sections of their letters, for example: Romans 12 – 15; Galatians 5 – 6; Ephesians 4:17 – 6:9; Colossians 3:5 – 4:6. A careful reading and study of these passages in Scripture will give us a very good idea of what God considers to be good works.

Not all the Law God gave to Moses in the Old Testament tells us what is right and what is wrong for us today. Many of the commandments and regulations God gave to His people through Moses were intended only for the Israelites, as we learn from a careful study of the Scriptures. God gave other commands to certain individuals at certain times, such as when Jesus told the rich young man to sell all he had and give to the poor (Mark 10:17-22). This command was certainly not meant for all Christians of all times, but only for this young man. Only Scripture can reveal to us which commandments in Scripture were only temporary precepts, and which are binding on all human beings, at all times and in all places.

For example, the external regulations in the Third Commandment that talk about the Sabbath Day are no longer binding for us. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Colosse: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ”** (Colossians 2:16-17). That is why Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism* concerning the Third Commandment: *“According to its outward meaning this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 397).

While many of the laws in the Old Testament were address only to the Israelites, the New Testament is addressed to all believers. One good work that is stressed in the New Testament is obedience to the authorities that God has placed over us in the government, in our work, and in our homes. Paul says: **“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God”** (Romans 13:1). The apostle Peter taught the very same thing: **“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good”** (1 Peter 2:13-14). Such obedience is the will of God for us,

except when these authorities forbid us from obeying God or command us to do something that is clearly contrary to God's will. In such cases we follow the example of Peter and the other apostles and say: **"We ought to obey God rather than men"** (Acts 5:29).

Because of our sinful flesh it often happens that professing Christians think they know better than God which works are really good. In the Old Testament the Lord told the people through Moses that they should **"remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them"** so that they would **"not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined"** (Numbers 15:39). The days of the judges were especially ungodly because **"everyone did what was right in his own eyes"** (Judges 17:6; Judges 21:25).

God commanded King Saul to attack the Amalekites and told him: **"Utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"** (1 Samuel 15:3). To our human point of view this seems extreme, and King Saul thought he knew better than God. And so **"Saul and the people spared Agag (the king of the Amalekites) and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them"** (1 Samuel 15:9). When Saul tried to defend his actions and say that he saved the animals for sacrifice, God's prophet Samuel bluntly told him: **"To obey is better than sacrifice, ... for rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king"** (1 Samuel 15:22-23). To do what God commands is always a good work; to disobey God is always evil.

When the united kingdom split into two parts after the death of Solomon, Israel (the northern kingdom) was ruled by King Jeroboam I. But Jerusalem, the place where God commanded the people to worship Him, was in Judah (the southern kingdom). Since Jeroboam did not want his subjects to go to Jerusalem in the south to worship God, he set up two other places for worship at Bethel and Dan. He claimed he was still worshiping the same God, but his worship was self-chosen worship, not the worship God had commanded. His sin was called **"the sin of Jeroboam"** (2 Kings 13:2 and many other verses), and all the kings of Israel continued in this same sin. But self-chosen worship is not obedience to God.

As the years went by, the Jewish elders added many rules and regulations to God's laws, and eventually their own laws were considered more important than what God had said. The Pharisees in Jesus' time accused Him of sinning because He did not follow the tradition of the elders. Jesus replied to their accusations with an accusation of His own: **"Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ... You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'"** (Matthew 15:3-9).

The Christians in Colosse were being misled by teachers who were burdening them with all kinds of regulations about food and drink and the Sabbath, as well as with new doctrines like the worship of angels. The apostle Paul wrote to them: **"Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths. ... Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels. ... Why do you subject yourselves to regulations – 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh"** (Colossians 2:16-23). To the Corinthians Paul wrote: **"You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men"** (1 Corinthians 7:23).

So too today there are professing Christians who make up their own rules, and there are religious groups, organizations, and individual leaders who make rules for others to follow and claim that these rules must be followed in order to please God. The Roman Catholic pope claims to have the authority

to tell all Christians everywhere how they must worship God. He claims to have the authority to determine for his people which works are good and which works are not good, implying that his rules must be obeyed if people want to please God.

There are religious groups that prohibit the eating of certain foods and prohibit all drinking of alcoholic beverages. There are groups that forbid Christians from participating in civil affairs or from serving as soldiers. There are those who call for revolution against government to correct injustice. There are those who promote abortion, homosexual behavior, sexual immorality and same-sex marriage – all things that are contrary to the clear Word of God. There are religious groups like the Muslims who believe that the persecution of non-Muslims is approved by God. But God's prophet Isaiah says: **"Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil! ... Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!"** (Isaiah 5:20-21).

There are some Lutherans also who have been influenced by pietism, so that they regard certain activities as sinful in themselves that God has not forbidden in His Word. For example, some of the pietists have condemned such activities as playing games, playing cards, any kind of dancing, taking walks for recreation, telling jokes, going to plays or movies, or enjoying a festive banquet. But Christians should not adopt rules of behavior that go beyond God's Word. Nor should we go in the other direction and approve of behavior or activities that are plainly contrary to God's Word, such as allowing women to become pastors or church leaders, or allowing parents to kill their unborn children. All our doctrines and rules of behavior must come from God's Word. Since our God wants us to be **"zealous for good works"** (Titus 2:14), we must permit God to tell us which works are good works. For that purpose, He has given us His Word in holy Scripture. **"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (breathed out by God), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work"** (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Questions

1. Who are the only ones who can do good works in the sight of God?
2. What is a good work in the sight of God?
3. How can we determine which works are good, and which are not good?
4. What would be a very bad reason for trying to do good works?
5. What should motivate Christians to do good works?
6. How can Christian good works contribute to the spread of the Gospel?
7. How can we imitate Jesus when we are persecuted by Christ's enemies?
8. Why is it not necessary for us to keep all the laws of Moses?
9. Give some examples of self-chosen worship of God.
10. What is the Christian's duty to government authorities?
11. When should a Christian disobey government authorities?
12. Who is the final authority on what is right and what is wrong?
13. Give examples of religious groups that make laws for behavior that go beyond the Scriptures.
14. Which are the groups in your locale that make rules for worship and behavior that do not agree with Bible teaching?