



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 12.9 – The Doctrine of Sanctification

The Value and Necessity of Good Works

When we talk about good works, we must distinguish between genuine good works that are pleasing to God, and those works that are externally good because they benefit society. The so-called good works of unbelievers are simply acts of civic righteousness. For example, the unbelieving natives of Malta did a “good” thing for the apostle Paul and those with him when their ship was destroyed. We read: **“And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold”** (Acts 28:2). Jesus Himself pointed out that unbelievers love those who love them and are kind and helpful to their friends (Matthew 5:46-47). Unbelieving rulers do good for their people when they punish evildoers and reward the law-abiding citizens (Romans 13:1-7). Such works are certainly preferable to crime and vice as far as this life is concerned. In fact, sometimes the outwardly good deeds done by unbelievers may seem to surpass in quantity and quality the genuinely good works of Christians.

But only Christians can do truly good works that please God. God looks at the heart and at the motivation of a person. For example, both Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to God, but God was only pleased with Abel’s offering; He was not pleased with Cain’s offering (Genesis 4:3-5). The difference between these sacrifices was that Abel brought his sacrifice **“by faith”** (Hebrews 11:4), that is, Abel brought his offering as a believer in God’s promise of a Savior. **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (Hebrews 11:6). Unbelievers, however, remain **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1) and are **“without Christ”** and are those **“having no hope and without God in the world”** (Ephesians 2:12). On the other hand, God is pleased with the sacrifices of those who believe in Him, for it is written: **“By Him (Christ) let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased”** (Hebrews 13:15-16).

Genuinely God-pleasing good works are valuable for many reasons. They agree with God’s will, they are works of God in Christians, they bring glory to God, and they provide evidence of saving faith in Christ. The author of the letter to the Hebrews concluded his letter with this prayer: **“May the God of peace ... make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen”** (Hebrews 13:20-21). The apostle Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus: **“We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”** (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus said to His believers: **“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”** (Matthew 5:16). James says: **“I will show you my faith by my works”** (James 2:18). So also on the last day Jesus will publicize the good works of His sheep as evidence of their faith in Him (Matthew 25:34-40).

Our good works are never good enough to merit any reward from God, for every good work of every Christian is still tainted with sin because of their sinful flesh. Nevertheless, God in His grace promises to give us rewards of grace – rewards that we don’t merit or deserve – to encourage us to persevere in His service as long as we live. Jesus describes His believers as **“blessed”** even though they are poor mourners who are persecuted; He tells them: **“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven”** (Matthew 5:3-12). Even good works that appear outwardly small or insignificant

will be rewarded, for Jesus says: “**He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward, And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward**” (Matthew 10:41-42).

We receive these rewards of grace both in this life and in the life to come. Jesus said to His disciples: “**There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions – and in the age to come, eternal life**” (Mark 10:29-30). Likewise the apostle Paul wrote: “**Bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come**” (1 Timothy 4:8).

Since the Christian life is difficult and there are many obstacles and temptations, the promise of these rewards of grace encourages us to remain faithful to the end. “**Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal**” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). “**For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us**” (Romans 8:18).

Since Christ alone is our Savior, and we are saved alone by faith in Him, we should never think of any good works we do as being necessary for salvation. We have full salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and His work of redemption before and apart from any good works we may do. Paul says that the Gospel (the Good News of Christ) “**is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes**” (Romans 1:16). We need to always remember what Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus: “**By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast**” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But even though we are saved alone by faith in Christ, and not by our good works, we dare not think or say to ourselves: “I am saved by faith in Christ, and not by my works. Therefore, I will strive to believe in Jesus and that’s all I am concerned about. I don’t need to please God by good works, and so I can do pretty much anything I want as long as I believe in Jesus.” Those who believe in Jesus appreciate what He has done for them, and therefore they want to do those things that please Him. Their good works flow naturally from their faith. They are not coerced by threats or coaxed by promises. Paul writes: “**Now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter**” (Romans 7:6). With joyful hearts Christians show their love for their Savior by doing the things that please Him. In this sense good works are not optional. They are necessary because God has commanded them. Faith in Christ cannot and does not coexist with a stubborn spirit that refuses to do God’s will. John wrote that the good things we do as believers give evidence to others as well as to ourselves that our faith is genuine. “**We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren**” (1 John 3:14). Faith in Christ always produces brotherly love. “**This is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another**” (1 John 3:23).

We do not preserve our faith in Christ by doing good works. God preserves our faith by reminding us of the good things He has done for us in saving us from our sins. We “**are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time**” (1 Peter 1:5). Evil works, however, destroy faith. For example, Paul says of Hymenaeus and Alexander that they “**have suffered shipwreck**” with respect to their faith (1 Timothy 1:19-20). Those who fall away from the faith, live according to the flesh, and so bring forth in their lives the works of the flesh “**will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (Galatians 5:21). “**If you live according to the flesh you will die**” (Romans 8:13).

Good works are harmful for our Christian faith and life only if we put our trust in them instead of Christ as our Savior. After the apostle Paul knew that Christ was his Savior, rather than his own obedience to God's law, he regarded his former "good works" as rubbish (garbage). Listen to his words: **"If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is of the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith"** (Philippians 3:4-9).

Questions

1. In what sense can unbelievers do good works?
2. Why is God is not pleased with these works?
3. What was the difference between the sacrifices of Cain and Abel?
4. Which are some of the sacrifices or good works that do please God?
5. How do we know which good works are according to God's will?
6. What is the proper relationship between faith in Christ and good works?
7. Why do we say that the good works of believers are the works of God?
8. What is the difference between a reward of merit and a reward of grace?
9. Why is it wrong to say that good works are necessary for salvation?
10. Why is it wrong to say that good works are optional?
11. Why did Paul call the works he did before he came to faith "rubbish"?