

The Scriptures and Good Works

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The Scriptures and Good Works

Dangers in the Perversion of Truth

The Truth of God may well be likened to a narrow path skirted on either side by a dangerous and destructive precipice: in other words, it lies between two gulfs of error. The aptness of this figure may be seen in our proneness to sway from one extreme to another. Only the Holy Spirit's enabling can cause us to preserve the balance—failure to do which inevitably leads to a fall into error, for “error” is not so much the denial of Truth as the perversion of Truth, the pitting of one part of it against another. The history of theology forcibly and solemnly illustrates this fact. One generation of men have rightly and earnestly contended for that aspect of Truth which was most needed in their day. The next generation, instead of walking therein and moving forward, warred for it, intellectually, as the distinguishing mark of *their* party,¹ and usually, in their defense of what was assaulted, have refused to listen to the balancing Truth which often their opponents were insisting upon; the result being that they lost their sense of perspective and emphasized what they believed *out of its scriptural proportions*. Consequently, in the next generation, the true servant of God is called on almost to ignore what was so valuable in their eyes, and emphasize that which they had, if not altogether denied, almost completely lost sight of.

It has been said: “Rays of light, whether they proceed from the sun, star, or candle, move in perfect straight lines; yet so inferior are our works to God's that the steadiest hand cannot draw a perfectly straight line; nor, with all his skill, has man ever been able to invent an instrument capable of doing a thing apparently so simple” (T. Guthrie, 1867). Be this so or not, certain it is that men, left to themselves, have ever found it impossible to keep the even line of Truth between what appear to be conflicting doctrines: such as the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man; election by grace and the universal proclamation of the Gospel; the justifying faith of Paul and the justifying works of James. Only too often, where the absolute sovereignty of God has been insisted upon, it has been to the ignoring of man's accountability; and where unconditional election has been held fast, the unfettered preaching of the Gospel to the unsaved has been let slip. So, on the other hand, where human accountability has been upheld and an evangelical ministry been sustained, the sovereignty of God and the truth of election have generally been whittled down or completely ignored.

Dangers in Confusing Faith and Good Works

Many of our readers have witnessed examples which illustrate the truth of what has been said above, but few seem to realize that exactly the same difficulty is experienced when an attempt is made to show the precise relation between faith and good works. If, on the one hand, some have erred in attributing to good works a place which Scripture does not warrant, certain it is that, on the other hand, some have failed to give to good works the province which Scripture assigns them. If, on the one side, it be serious error to ascribe our justification before God to any performances of ours, on the other side they are equally guilty who deny that good works are *necessary* in order to our reaching heaven, and allow nothing more than that they are merely evidences or fruits of our justification. We are well aware that we are now (shall we say) treading on thin ice, and running a serious risk of ourselves being charged with heresy: nevertheless we deem it expedient to seek Divine aid in grappling with this difficulty, and then commit the issues thereof to God Himself.

In some quarters the claims of faith, though not wholly denied, have been disparaged because of a zeal to magnify good works. In other circles, reputed as orthodox (and they are what we now have chiefly in mind), only too rarely are good works assigned their proper place. Far too infrequently are professing Christians urged with apostolic earnestness to maintain them. No doubt this is due at times to a fear of undervaluing faith, and

¹ *party* – faction, group which holds a common belief.

encouraging sinners in the fatal error of trusting to their own doings rather than to and in the righteousness of Christ. But no such apprehensions should hinder a preacher from declaring “all the counsel of God.” If his theme be faith in Christ as the Saviour of the lost, let him fully set forth that truth without any modification, giving to this grace the place which the apostle gave it in his reply to the Philippian jailer (Act 16:31). But if his subject be good works, let him be no less faithful in keeping back nothing which Scripture says therein; let him not forget that Divine command, “affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works” (Tit 3:8).

The last quoted Scripture is the most pertinent one for these days of looseness and laxity, of worthless profession, and empty boasting. This expression “good works” is found in the New Testament in the singular or plural number no less than thirty times; yet, from the rarity with which many preachers, who are esteemed sound in the faith, use, emphasize, and enlarge upon them, many of their hearers would conclude that those words occur but once or twice in all the Bible. Speaking to the Jews on another subject the Lord said: “What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mar 10:9). Now in Ephesians 2:8-10, God has joined two most vital and blessed things together which ought never to be separated in our hearts and minds, yet they are most frequently parted in the modern pulpit. How many sermons are preached from the first two of these verses, which so clearly declare salvation to be by grace through faith and not of works. Yet how seldom are we reminded that the sentence begun in them is only completed in verse 10, where we are told, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

We began this series of articles by pointing out that the Word of God may be taken up from various motives and read with different designs, but that 2 Timothy 3:16-17, makes known for what these Scriptures are really profitable, namely “for doctrine [or teaching], for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,” and all of these that “the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” Having dwelt upon its teaching about God and Christ, its reproofs and corrections for sin, its instruction in connection with prayer, let us now consider how these furnish us unto “all good works.” Here is another vital criterion by which an honest soul, with the help of the Holy Spirit, may ascertain whether or not his reading and study of the Word is really benefiting him.

1. The Place of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are thereby taught the *true place of good works*. “Many persons, in their eagerness to support orthodoxy as a system, speak of salvation by grace and faith in such a manner as to undervalue holiness and a life devoted to God. But there is no ground for this in the Holy Scriptures. The same Gospel that declares salvation to be freely by the grace of God through faith in the blood of Christ (Rom 3:25), and asserts, in the strongest terms, that sinners are justified by the righteousness of the Saviour imputed to them on their believing in Him (Rom 4:22-24), without any respect to works of law (Eph 2:8,9), also assures us, that without holiness no man shall see God (Heb 12:14); that believers are cleansed by the blood of atonement (1Jo 1:7); that their hearts are purified by faith (Heb 10:22), which works by love, and overcomes the world (1Jo 4:4); and that the grace that brings salvation to all men, teaches those who receive it, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world (Tit 2:12). Any fear that the doctrine of grace will suffer from the most strenuous inculcation of good works on a spiritual foundation, betrays an inadequate and greatly defective acquaintance with Divine truth, and any tampering with the Scriptures in order to silence their testimony in favour of the fruits of righteousness, as *absolutely necessary* in the Christian, is a perversion and forgery with respect to the Word of God” (A. Carson).

But what force (ask some) has this ordination or command of God unto goods works, when, notwithstanding it, though we fail to apply ourselves diligently unto obedience, we shall nevertheless be justified by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, and so may be saved without them? Such a senseless objection proceeds from utter ignorance of the believer’s present state and relation unto God. To suppose that the hearts of the regenerate are not as much and as effectually influenced with the authority and commands of God unto obedience as they were given in order unto their justification, is to ignore what true faith is, and what are the arguments and motives whereby the minds of Christians are principally affected and constrained. Moreover it is to lose sight of the inseparable connection which God has made between our justification and our sanctification: to suppose that

one of these may be without the other is to overthrow the whole Gospel. The apostle deals with this very objection in Romans 6:1-3.

2. The Necessity of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are thereby taught the *absolute necessity of good works*. If it be written that “without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb 9:22) and “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Heb 11:6), the Scripture of Truth also declares, “Follow peace with all men, and *holiness*, without which no man may see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). The life lived by the saints in heaven is but the completion and consummation of that life which, after regeneration, they live here on earth. The difference between the two is not one of kind, but of degree. “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day” (Pro 4:18). If there has been no walking with God down here there will be no dwelling with God up there. If there has been no real communion with Him in time, there will be none with Him in eternity. Death effects no vital change to the heart. True, at death the reminders of sin are for ever left behind by the saint, but no new nature is then imparted. If then he did not hate sin and love holiness before death, he certainly will not do so afterwards.

No one really desires to go to hell, though there are few indeed who are willing to forsake that broad road which inevitably leads there. All would like to go to heaven, but who among the multitudes of professing Christians are really willing and determined to walk that narrow way which alone leads thereto? It is at *this* point that we may discern the precise place which good works have in connection with salvation. They do not merit it, yet they are inseparable from it. They do not procure a title to heaven, yet they are among the *means* which God has appointed for His people’s getting there. In no sense are good works the procuring cause of eternal life, but they are part of the means (as are the Spirit’s work within us and repentance, faith and obedience by us) conducing to it. God has appointed the way wherein we must walk in order to our arriving at the inheritance purchased for us by Christ. A life of daily obedience to God is that which alone gives actual *admission* to the enjoyment of what Christ has purchased for His people—admission now by faith, admission at death or His return in full actuality.

3. The Design of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are taught thereby the *design of good works*. This is clearly made known in Matthew 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” It is worthy of our notice that this is the *first* occurrence of the expression, and, as is generally the case, the initial mention of a thing in Scripture intimates its consequent scope and usage. Here we learn that the disciples of Christ are to authenticate their Christian profession by the silent but vocal testimony of their lives (for “light” makes no noise in its “shining”), that men may see (not hear boasting about) their good works, and this that their Father in heaven may be glorified. Here, then, is their fundamental design: for the honour of God.

As the contents of Matthew 5:16 are so generally misunderstood and perverted, we add a further thought thereon. Only too commonly the “good works” are confounded with the “light” itself, yet they are quite distinct, though inseparably connected. The “light” is our *testimony* for Christ, but of what value is this unless the life itself exemplifies it? The “good works” are not for the directing attention to ourselves, but to Him who has wrought them in us. They are to be of such a character and quality that even the ungodly will know they proceed from some higher source than fallen human nature. Supernatural fruit requires a supernatural root, and as this is recognized the Husbandman is glorified thereby. Equally significant is the *last* reference to “good works” in Scripture: “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1Pe 2:12). Thus the first and final allusions emphasize their design: to glorify God because of His works through His people in the world.

4. The Nature of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are taught thereby the *true nature of good works*. This is something concerning which the unregenerate are in entire ignorance. Judging merely from the external, estimating things only by human standards, they are quite incompetent to determine what works are good in God’s esteem and what are not. Supposing that what men regard as good works God will approve of too, they remain in the darkness of their sin-blinded understandings; nor can any convince them of their error, till the Holy Spirit quickens them

into newness of life, bringing them out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Then it will appear that only those are good works which are done in obedience to the will of God (Rom 6:16), from a principle of love to Him (Heb 10:24), in the name of Christ (Col 3:17), and to the glory of God by Him (1Co 10:31).

The true nature of "good works" was perfectly exemplified by the Lord Jesus. All that He did was done out of obedience to His Father. He "pleased not Himself" (Rom 15:3), but ever performed the bidding of the One who had sent Him (Joh 6:38). He could say, "I do always those things that please Him" (Joh 8:29). There were no limits to Christ's subjection to the Father's will: He "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phi 2:8). So too all that He did proceeded from the love to the Father and love to His neighbour. Love is the fulfilling of the Law; without love, compliance with the Law is naught but servile subjection, and that cannot be acceptable to Him who is Love. Proof that all Christ's obedience flowed from love is found in His words, "I *delight* to do Thy will, O my God" (Psa 40:8). So also all that Christ had in view was the glory of the Father; "Father, glorify *Thy* name" (Joh 12:28) revealed the object constantly before Him.

5. The True Source of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are taught thereby the *true source of good works*. Unregenerate men are capable of performing works which in a natural and civil sense, though not in the spiritual sense, are good. They may do those things which, externally, as to matter and substance of them, are good, such as reading the Bible, attending the ministry of the Word, giving alms to the poor; yet the mainspring of such actions, their lack of godly motive, renders them as filthy rags in the sight of the thrice holy One (Isa 64:6). The unregenerate have no power to perform works in a *spiritual* manner, and therefore it is written, "there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom 3:12). Nor are they able to: they are "not subject to the law of God neither indeed can be" (Rom 8:7). Hence, even the ploughing of the wicked is sin (Pro 21:4). Nor are believers able to think a good thought or perform a good work of themselves (2Co 3:5): it is God who works in them "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phi 2:13).

When the Ethiopian can change his skin, and the leopard his spots, then may they also do good that are accustomed to do evil (Jer 13:23). Men may as soon expect to gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles, as good fruit to grow upon or good works to be performed by the unregenerate. We have first to be "created in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:10), have His Spirit put within us (Gal 4:6), and His grace implanted in our hearts (Eph 4:7; 1Co 15:10), before there is any capacity for good works. Even then we can do nothing apart from Christ (Joh 1:5). Often we have a will to do that which is good, yet how to perform it we know not (Rom 7:18). This drives us to our knees, begging God to make us "perfect in every good work," *working in us* "that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ" (Heb 13:21). Thus we are emptied of self-sufficiency, and brought to realize that all our springs are in God (Psa 87:7). And thus we discover that we can do all things through Christ strengthening us (Phi 4:13).

6. The Great Importance of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are taught thereby the *great importance of good works*. Condensing as far as possible: "good works" are of great importance because by them God is glorified (Mat 5:16), by them the mouths of those who speak against us are closed (1Pe 2:12), by them we evidence the genuineness of our profession of faith (Jam 2:13-17). It is highly expedient that we "*adorn* the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things" (Tit 2:10). Nothing brings more honour to Christ than those who bear His name *living* constantly (by his enablement) in a Christ-like way and spirit. It was not without reason that the same Spirit who caused the apostle to preface his statement concerning Christ's coming into this world to save sinners with "This is a faithful saying," etc., also moved him to write, "This is a faithful saying...that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (Tit 3:8). May we indeed be "zealous of good works" (Tit 2:14).

7. The True Scope of Good Works

We profit from the Word when we are taught thereby the *true scope of good works*. This is so comprehensive as to include the discharge of our duties in every relationship in which God has placed us. It is interesting and instructive to note the first "good works" in Holy Writ, namely the anointing of the Saviour by Mary of Bethany (Mat 26:10; Mar 14:6). Indifferent either to the blame or praise of men, with eyes only for the "Chiefest among ten thousand" (Song 5:10), she lavished upon Him her precious ointment. Another woman, Dorcas (Act

9:36), is also mentioned as “full of good works;” after worship comes service, glorifying God among men and benefiting others.

Application

“That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work” (Col 1:10). The bringing up (not “dragging” up!) of children, lodging (spiritual) strangers, washing the saints’ feet (ministering to their temporal comforts), and relieving the afflicted (1Ti 5:10) are spoken of as “good works.” Unless our reading and study of the Scriptures is making us better soldiers of Jesus Christ, better citizens of the country in which we sojourn, better members of our earthly homes (kinder, gentler, more unselfish), “thoroughly furnished unto *all* good works,” it is profiting us little or nothing.

