

Fundamentals, Study 16: Good Works (Eph 2:4-10)

by BS Poh

o Good works should characterise those who have true faith.

1. Good works are acts of devotion to God¹ or compassion for man², arising from faith in Christ³. How may we characterise such good works? Firstly, they must be works that are commanded by God in the Bible.⁴ Anything that does not find its warrant (or authority) in the Bible is not regarded as a good work, even if it is done with great zeal and sincerity, e.g. going on pilgrimages, confessing sins to priests, erecting religious images, etc. Secondly, they must be done out of a heart of obedience to God.⁵ Only those who have a true and living faith can obey God joyfully and out of love for Him. Thirdly, they must be done with the ultimate aim of glorifying God.⁶ Anything done merely to please men or to gain the praise of men is not a good work.

(1. Mic. 6:8; Matt. 6:1, 5, 16; Luke 2:37; 1 Tim. 2:1; James 5:14, 16; 2. Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Acts 11:29-30; Gal. 2:10; 3. Eph. 2:10; Tit. 3:8, 14; James 2:20; 4. Mic. 6:8; Heb. 13:21; 5. Rom. 6:17-18; Eph. 2:10; Heb. 11:6; 6. 1 Cor. 10:31; Matt. 6:2-5; Phil. 1:11)

2. It is obvious that the ability to do these good works does not come from the Christian himself, but from the Holy Spirit.⁷ When first converted, the believer is enabled by the Holy Spirit to repent of sins and trust in Christ. After conversion, the believer continues to need the power of the Holy Spirit to live to please God. This does not mean that the believer may remain passive until moved by the Holy Spirit to do what is right. Rather, he has a duty to diligently stir up the grace of God that is in him.⁸ The church should be involved in good works without compromising the gospel.⁹ (7. John 15:4-5; 2 Cor 3:5; 8. Phil 2:12-13; Heb 6:11-12; 9. Tit 3:8, 14; Matt 5:13, 14, 16; 6:3; Gal 2:10)

3. We must guard against two errors. *Firstly*, we must not think that any Christian can do more good works than is required to satisfy God.¹⁰ The most obedient Christian still falls far short of his duty to God. It is therefore not possible for any of his excess merits to be transferred to other people, for he has none. The Roman Catholic Church, however, teaches that some exceptional Christians have been able to do that. *Secondly*, we must not think that our good works have earned pardon of sin or eternal life from God.¹¹ That is simply impossible because of the following: (i) Our best works are greatly inferior to the glory of heaven and will never be able to make up for our sins against the infinitely holy God; (ii) When we have done our very best, we have only done our duty, and are still unworthy servants of God; (iii) We cannot claim any credit for whatever good works because they originate from the Holy Spirit; (iv) Even then, the good works are so defiled by weakness and imperfection that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgement. (10. Gal 5:17; 11. Luke 17:10; Rom 3:20; 4:6; Isa 64:6; Psalm 143:2)

4. Despite weaknesses and imperfections, good works will be accepted by God for Jesus Christ's sake, and He will reward the sincere believer accordingly.¹² This is not the case with an unconverted person. His works may happen to be commanded in the Bible, but they are not done out of a heart of faith nor for the glory of God, and therefore cannot be acceptable to God.¹³ On the other hand, it cannot be argued that he might as well not do any of those works, because that would

be even more sinful and displeasing to God.¹⁴ He owes obedience to God, who is his Creator. What he must do is to humble himself and trust in Christ alone for salvation. (12. Eph 1:6; 1 Pet 2:5; Matt 25:40; Heb 6:10; 13. Gen 4:5; Heb 11:4-6; 14. Job 21:14-15; Matt 25:41-43)

= Do not trust in your self-righteousness. Turn to Christ and be saved!

Review Questions

1. State the three characteristics of good works.
2. Give some examples of works that are not good works in God's sight.
3. Where does the ability to do good works come from?
4. What is the believer's duty concerning God's grace in him?
5. What error does the Roman Catholic Church teach concerning excess merits from good works?
6. What second error about good works must we avoid?
7. Why must believers continue to do good works even though these are defiled by weaknesses and imperfections?
8. State the two reasons why the works of an unconverted person cannot be accepted by God although they happen to be commanded in the Bible.
9. Why mustn't we argue that the unconverted person might as well not do the works commanded in the Bible?
10. Why does the unconverted person owe obedience to God?

Assignment/Discussion

How do good works help in evangelism and missions? How may we avoid preaching "a social gospel"?

Memory Passage (James 2:19-20)

19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

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