

Understanding Good Works

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For the longest time I used to believe that what separated Christians from nonbelievers was the degree and quality of the good works that were produced. I naively believed that Christians did really good works and nonbelievers did poor to average works. However, as time passed, my theory on good works was demolished by an agnostic woman, we will call her Susan. Susan, was a self-proclaimed agnostic who had been married for 20 years, didn't abuse alcohol, was generous with financial gifts, didn't cuss and lavished love on everybody she met. Frankly, her good works were far supreme to that of the greatest of saints that I had met in the church. Needless to say, Susan destroyed and undercut my theory and theology of good works.

So what does one do with Susan and the doctrine of good works? Let's take a moment and explore the doctrine of good works to shed further light on this subject.

What Are Good Works?

According to John Mueller, "Good works, according to Holy Scripture, are the fruits of justifying faith..."¹² In other words, good works flow out of and from the saving identity of who we are in

¹ John T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing, 1934), 403.

² See the following verses for definition support: 1 John 5:4; Galatians 2:20; Hebrews 11:4-39.

Christ. These works are to be found in the realm of sanctification. Just as an apple tree produces apples naturally, so the Christian clothed in Christ brings forth the spiritual fruit of good works. Keep in mind though that these works are not prescriptive for salvation but are descriptive of salvation.

How Can We Identity Good Work?

Now, that we understand that good works are a natural outpouring (i.e. fruit) of our justification, what do these good works look like? Too often what can happen is that mankind begins to judge what actions are good works and what actions are not good works. We become fruit inspectors, where we judge other people's fruit to see if it meets up to our quality control expectations and whether or not the fruit that is coming forth is actually acceptable. The problem here is not with the inspection but the standard that is used. Often what happens is that a false standard develops where good works are judged and promoted within the church on the basis of manmade opinions. What makes a good work good is not that it meets the social norms of a particular group, nor if it is deemed good by the opinion of man; rather a good work is good when it conforms to the standard of God's Law. This is why many statements of faith say that the Word is the sole source and guide for faith and conduct. Quenstedt states, "The directing norm according to which good

works are to be done and judged is the word of the divine Law, which offers an absolutely perfect rule of righteousness and divine holiness and prescribes both what should be done, and what should be omitted.”³

What this means is that the standard of what makes a good work good is not dependent on the collective opinion and feelings of a local church body, it is contingent upon God’s Word.

Furthermore, this also means that a person’s good intentions behind the work or the societal benefit of the work does not make it good, for that would be again resorting to man’s standard. Simply put, a good work is good when the Bible says that it is good.

What Makes A Good Work Good?

More specifically, what makes a good work good? We learned that a good work can be identified by God’s Law Words. So does this mean that good works find their source in the Law? For the Christian, true good works are not sourced in the Law but fruits of the Spirit.⁴ The Formula of Concord⁵ correctly teaches that all good works of the Christian flow from: a free spirit, a grateful responsive outpouring of God’s grace and from love towards God.⁶

³ Quenstedt quoted in John Muller’s *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing, 1934), 404.

⁴ *Ibid*, 406.

⁵ See Article IV of the Formula of Concord.

⁶ See the following verses: Psalm 110:3, 54:6; Romans 6:18, 7:22-ff; 2 Corinthians 9:7.

Good works for the Christian proceed from faith, faith that receives the gospel. Therefore, we can conclude that what makes a good work truly good is that it flows from faith, “for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”⁷

Can Non-Christians Do Good Works?

This now brings us back to the opening section of our conversation. Can a non-Christian do good works? Yes and no.

Yes:

In the early portions of the epistle of Romans the Apostle Paul shows us that the divine Law of God has been inscribed on mankind’s heart, Christians and non-Christians.⁸ This is what we can commonly refer to as, “mankind’s conscience.” When mankind does good works to appease and satisfy the Law inscribed on the heart we would say that a good work has been done. Good works happen when the poor are fed, when a child is taken care of, and when justice is conducted. Thus this is the reason why many non-Christians surpass the good works of Christians; they do works in accordance to the Law inscribed on the heart.

What this means is that externally the works of unbelievers and believers will look the same. In the words of Mueller, they are “one of kind.”⁹

⁷ See Romans 15:23

⁸ Romans 1:32, 2:15.

⁹ Mueller, 409.

No:

Just because the works of believers and unbelievers are one of kind does not mean that they are in the same category. It has commonly been said that the good works of believers and unbelievers are the same outwardly speaking but inwardly they are different. The reason why they are different inwardly speaking is that the motive or one could say that the source of the works are different.

Let's take a closer look at the motive and source of good works for unbelievers. According to Mueller, some of the motives for performing good works flow from the ambition of fame, the need for praise, fear of punishment and the desire to earn salvation. In other words, the motive for good works and the source of good works are simply the love of self. There are also other times that the natural love for others is also the source and motive for good works; natural love being demonstrated in one's love for family, friends, country, etc... Both the love for self and the love for others have their root and motive flowing into and out of a source other than God (i.e. mankind), thus showing that they cannot be classified truly as spiritual good works. Even though natural love seems nobler than love for self and this natural love is giving to one's neighbor, it is in the same classification as love for self insofar both natural love and love for self are not

rooted and sourced in love for and from God.¹⁰

Do Christian Do Good Works?

Finally, this brings us to the Christian. We have already learned that unbelievers do good works externally but cannot do these good works spiritually or inwardly speaking.¹¹ However, what about the Christian? Does the Christian do good works? No and Yes.

No:

Because the Christian still possesses the sinful nature after conversion the Christian will always be plagued by sinful motives and works that proceed from the flesh. Christians will also attempt to do good works with their motive and source located in self and natural love for others. Thus, the Christian will exhibit an imperfect life of sanctification and imperfect good works rooted in things under the sun.

Yes:

On the other hand, the Christian will do truly good works. The Christian will do good works that are sourced in God with motives flowing out of the context of grateful faith. The Christian will do good works that are prepared in advance for them to do.¹²¹³ The Christian will not be

¹⁰ Ibid, 407.

¹¹ Reminder that what makes a good work essentially good is that it is done in faith; it is done in connection to fear and love for God. Keep in mind 1 John 4:19 too.

able to take credit for the good works for God created them for the Christian to do; works that are a fruit of one's justification. Hollaz defines the good works of a Christian as, "free acts of justified persons, performed through the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit according to the prescription of the divine Law, true faith in Christ preceding, to the honor of God and the edification of men."¹⁴ The good works of the Christian will flow outward to their neighbor. These good works will externally look like natural love, however, these good works are rooted and sourced in faith, faith that is connected to the Gospel. Thus the good works of a Christian proceeding from faith out towards their neighbor are not classified as natural love but truly good works flowing from a divine love, for we love because He first loved us.¹⁵

Quenstedt declares,

The works of the regenerate, in themselves considered, are not perfectly good, but are rendered sordid and polluted by the stain of sin; but in Christ they are perfectly good, and in such a sense that what is not done in them is pardoned through and on account of Christ, and what they lack in perfection is

¹² Ephesians 2:10

¹³ More on this subject of Ephesians 2:10 will be addressed in the conclusion portion of this paper.

¹⁴ Hollaz (Doctr. Theol., page 493) quoted in John Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing, 1934), 408.

¹⁵ See 1 John 4:19.

compensated for by imputation of the most perfect obedience of Christ.¹⁶

Conclusion:

As we have learned above, what makes a good work good is whether or not God calls it good. Furthermore, we have also learned that the motive of the work and its source are important to assess. In other words, we have learned that good works done out of impure motives or works that are done out of a source other than God cannot be classified as truly good. It is as if there are two dimensions of good works: a horizontal one dimensional view where works are done for the sake of self and done for reasons pertaining to this life¹⁷; a horizontal-vertical two dimensional view where works are done in this life in view of one's vertical relationship with God.¹⁸ One dimensional works, though externally good, cannot be classified as truly good, whereas, the two dimensional works are truly good because they are sourced in and driven by God. Keep in mind that it isn't the Christian's motive that makes the good work good but that the Christian is rooted in God who prepared the good

¹⁶ Quenstedt (Doctr. Theol. Page 493.) quoted in John Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing, 1934), 408.

¹⁷ Works in the one dimensional realm are done for the purpose of things in the horizontal realm and are done in view of things under the sun.

¹⁸ Works in the two dimensional realm are done in the context of a divine relationship in the vertical realm and done in view of God's mercy.

works in advance for him/her to do.¹⁹ It is most helpful for us to focus less on the goodness of the work, and more on the eyes of the one who declares the work to be good. Good works carried forth horizontally towards one's neighbor are viewed vertically, by God, and horizontally, by mankind's opinion. What makes a work truly God has more to do with God's opinion rather than mankind's opinion or mankind's pious motive. In other words, a person's ill motives poison the goodness of the work but a person's pious motives do not make a work anymore good for the good works were prepared and made ready long in advance by God. R.C.H. Lenski comments on Ephesians 2:10 and this subject by saying, "All the ways of holiness and righteousness are God's design and preparation. We need not puzzle about and search for what may please God, he has long ago mapped out the entire course. What Paul says is not that God prepared us that we should walk in good works, but that he prepared the good works."²⁰ The works are produced by the Holy Spirit and done by the Christian out of love for God, and their neighbor.²¹ The

prepared good works, "spring forth from faith and are done unto Christ."²²

We love because He first loved us. 1 John 4:19

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¹⁹ See Ephesians 2:10.

²⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: Ephesians* (Hendrickson Publishing, 2001), 427.

²¹ Warren Olsen & David Rinden. *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism, Question 235* (Faith and Fellowship Press, 1988)

²² Lenski, 427.

