

WCF 16: OF GOOD WORKS

Roman Catholicism and indeed practically all Christian cults and pagan religions place a lot of emphasis on good works. The reason for this emphasis is that man tends to be legalistic in his thinking by nature. Almost intuitively man assumes that he deserved to go to heaven rather than hell when his supposed good works outweigh his sinful deeds. Protestantism, in general, however, tends to de-emphasize good works in reaction to the legalism of Rome, and because of the emphasis on justification by grace through faith.

It is undeniable that the doctrine of Monergistic Regeneration and Justification by Grace through Faith are biblical. However, it is also undeniable that goods are important for the believer. Two verses from the Scripture would make this very clear.

First, the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10—

⁸ For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: ⁹ Not of works, lest any man should boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

By these words, Paul teaches us that in God's plan, we are saved in order that we might do good works! I believe that works done out of a legalistic notion of meriting salvation or even out of a mere sense of duty or fear of God's wrath are not acceptable to God. God saves us by His grace that we might do good works in grateful response and love towards him.

Secondly, James says in James 2:17:

...Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

By this statement and his extended treatment on the subject, James makes it clear to us that such as have saving faith will have good works. This is because saving faith is not something that is endowed as an independent gift to the elect. Rather, it is endowed as part of the package that comes with regeneration. With regeneration, the sinner not only finds Christ irresistible, but finds in his heart gratitude and love for God that will naturally overflow with good works. Faith that does not have good works is not true saving faith.

For this reason, our Confession of Faith has devoted a whole chapter to 'Good Works,' which is unique among all the Reformed Confessions.

On the Nature of Good Works

16.1 Good works are only such as God hath commanded in His holy Word,¹ and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.²

¹Mic 6:8; Rom 12:2; Heb 13:21; ²Mt 15:9; Isa 29:13; 1 Pet 1:18; Rom 10:2; Jn 16:2; 1 Sam 15:21–23.

- Our chapter begins by asking the question: "What, after all, are good works?" If we are going to talk about good works, we must have a good definition. The answer positively stated is that "Good works are only such as God hath commanded [whether explicitly or implicitly] in His holy Word."
- This doctrine is hinted in the Word of God. Paul says: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom 12:2). The author of Hebrews says: "Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever" (Heb 13:21). Both of these references refer to the 'will of God' as the principle on which we should conduct ourselves in a manner that pleases God. The will of God here referred to must be the revealed will, i.e., the Word of God.
- Negatively, whatever deeds are devised by men for whatever reason, including well-meaning intentions, that are not sanctioned in God's word may not be regarded as 'good works.' In other words, what is not commanded cannot be transformed into good works by the good intention of the doer, as Roman Catholicism teaches. The Prophet Samuel rebuked king Saul for thinking that he could please God by keeping some of the animals of the Amalekites to sacrifice to God: "Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than

sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22). This statement implies that good intention does not make an action good. Similarly, the Lord rebuked the Pharisees for their services which they invented with the notion that they would be pleasing to God: “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt 15:9).

- Note that this principle does not imply that we cannot do anything at all that is not commanded in the Word of God without sinning against God, otherwise, many of our day-to-day functions in the modern society cannot be engaged in without sinning against God. What it does teach is that only deeds that are commanded and sanctioned may be regarded as *good*. Other actions are either sinful or indifferent.
- This definition of good works must not be confused with the *Regulative Principle of Life* which states that “Whatever is not forbidden in the Word of God is allowed in day to day life.” What is allowed because it is not forbidden is not necessarily a good work. We should not, for example, claim to be doing good work if we participate in a marathon to raise funds to cut greenhouse emissions. It is of course permissible for us to participate in such an activity so long as it is not held on the Lord’s Day, but it is simply not ‘good work.’
- Neither must this definition of good works be confused with the *Regulative Principle of Worship* which states that “Whatever is not sanctioned in the Word of God forbidden in formal worship.” All acts of worship covered under the *Regulative Principle of Worship* are indeed good works, but not all good works are permitted in worship.
- Note also that whether a work,—which when considered abstractly as good,—is actually good in the sight of God will depend on several factors which are highlighted in *WCF* 16.7. These are: (a) Whether it is performed by a justified person; (b) Whether it is done with the right principle—faith working by love: “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing” (1 Cor 13:3); and (c) Whether it is directed to the right end—to glorify God (1 Cor 10:31).

16.2 These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith:¹ and by them believers manifest their thankfulness,² strengthen their assurance,³ edify their brethren,⁴ adorn the profession of the gospel,⁵ stop the mouths of the adversaries,⁶ and glorify God,⁷ whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto;⁸ that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end eternal life.⁹

¹Jas 2:18, 22; ²Ps 116:12–13; 1 Pet 2:9; ³1 Jn 2:3, 5; 2 Pet 1:5–10; ⁴2 Cor 9:2; Mt 5:16; ⁵Tit 2:5, 9–12; 1 Tim 6:1; ⁶1 Pet 2:15; ⁷1 Pet 2:12; Phil 1:11; Jn 15:8; ⁸Eph 2:10; ⁹Rom 6:22.

Good works done in obedience to God’s commandments serve:

- a. As fruit and evidence of true and lively faith. James is referring to the authenticating function of works when he says: “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (Jas 2:18). Thus good works, though not meritorious, are indispensable for admission to everlasting life: “But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life” (Rom 6:22).
- b. As suitable expression of gratitude to God: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9).
- c. To strengthen the assurance of believers: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 Jn 2:3).
- d. To edify fellow Christians. Thus Paul commended the Corinthians: “your zeal hath provoked very many” (2 Cor 9:2).
- e. To adorn the profession of the gospel. Thus Paul taught Titus to urge the servants to be obedient “that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Tit 2:10).
- f. To stop the mouth of adversaries: “For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet 2:15).
- g. To glorify God: “If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you” (Jn 15:18).

On the Ability to do Good Works

16.3 Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.¹ And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do of His good pleasure:² yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.³

¹Jn 15:4-6; Ezk 36:26-27; ²Phil 2:13; 4:13; 2 Cor 3:5; ³Phil 2:12; Heb 6:11-12; 2 Pet 1:3, 5, 10-11; Isa 64:7; 2 Tim 1:6; Acts 26:6-7; Jude 20-21.

- This paragraph teaches us that the ability of a believer to do good works is totally derived from the Spirit of Christ, *contra* Pelagians, Romanists and Arminians. This is proved in Scripture: (a) by the Lord's assertion: "without me ye can do nothing" (Jn 15:5b); (b) by Paul's testimony: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (2 Cor 3:5); and (c) by the recorded prayers of the saints for strength to do the will of God (e.g., Heb 13:20-21).
- This doctrine humbles us and makes us realise that we contribute nothing to our own salvation from beginning to end. Even our use of the means of grace which is necessary for our sanctification is possible because of the actual and continual operation of the Holy Spirit in our heart. This is why the apostle Paul says: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12), but immediately adds: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).
- This doctrine of absolute dependence of our soul upon the Spirit of Christ must, nevertheless, not be perverted into occasions of indolence, or to reduce, to any degree, a sense of personal obligation. No one, for example, should refuse to do good by giving the excuse that the Spirit has not roused him to action. We are responsible to obey all the commands of the Lord, including to 'work out our own salvation' (Phil 2:12). Inability does not nullify our responsibility. This is especially so in the matter of good works when an act for which the motive to begin with may be largely impure or legalistic (and therefore may not be a good work in the eyes of God) may result in the 'stirring up of the grace of God' in the heart of the believer, that the continuance of it is sustained by the power of the Spirit of Christ thereby rendering it good.

On the Value of Good Works

16.4 They who in their obedience attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.¹

¹Lk 17:10; Neh 13:22; Job 9:2-3; Gal 5:17.

- The Romish doctrine of supererogation teaches that extra good works not required for the salvation of the performer can be stored up for use by others who may pay for them by way of indulgences (See *C[R]CC*, §1477-8).
- This highly perverted doctrine is refuted in this section and is clearly anti-scriptural since we can never do anything more than what God already commands us to do. We are always doing less than our duty; and our work is never up to standard before the holy eyes of God. How then can we expect to earn any merit by our work, not to mention extra merit for others? Our Lord's instruction about service for the Lord brings this reality home very clearly:

"So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Lk 17:10).

16.5 We cannot, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins;¹ but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants;² and because, as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit;³ and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.⁴

¹Rom 3:20; 4:2, 4, 6; Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5-7; Rom 8:18; Ps 16:2; Job 22:2-3; 35:7-8; ²Lk 17:10; ³Gal 5:22-23; ⁴Isa 64:6; Gal 5:17; Rom 7:15, 18; Ps 143:2; 130:3.

- There are a few reasons we cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life by the hand of God.
- First of all, there is a “*great disproportion that is between [us] and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins.*” In other words, since we all fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), nothing we do can by our own strength can ever please God or be sufficient to pay for our sin.
- Secondly, it is impossible for us to do anything extra to win any merit because whatever we can possibly do in this life that may be regarded as good are really part of our duty towards God our Creator and Redeemer.
- Thirdly, all our works that may be regarded as good works proceed from the almighty agency of the Spirit of grace (Phil 2:13, cf. Zech 12:10).
- And fourthly, because of our corruption of nature, all that we do are always mingled with sin and therefore cannot be good enough to merit a payment or prize. Even if God rewards us for our labours, it is always by grace (cf. Jas 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8; Lk 10:27).
- Thus our good works bear no proportion to the inestimable blessing of eternal life: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor 4:17). Any reward we may receive is of grace and not merit or debt: “Now to him that worketh [for his own salvation] is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” (Rom 4:4; cf. Jude 21).

16.6 Yet notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in Him;¹ not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreproveable in God’s sight;² but that He, looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.³

¹Eph 1:6; ¹ Pet 2:5; ^{Ex} 28:38; ^{Gen} 4:4; ^{Heb} 11:4; ²Job 9:20; ^{Ps} 143:2; ³Heb 13:20–21; ² Cor 8:12; ^{Heb} 6:10; ^{Mt} 25:21, 23.

Good works are not meritorious for even our most righteous deeds are “*accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections*” and so are but filthy rags in the sight of God when considered by themselves. However, good works done in faith with an eye of gratitude and love unto Christ are accepted and graciously rewarded of God. Calvin puts it beautifully when he says:

“However defective the works of believer may be, they are nevertheless pleasing to God through the intervention of pardon... Whilst, therefore, they reach forward and strive, reward is given to their efforts although imperfect, exactly as if they had fully discharged their duty; for, since their deficiencies are put out of sight by faith, God honors with the title of reward what He gratuitously bestows upon them” (Comm. on Leviticus 26:3).

This is possible because: The believer is accepted as righteous in Christ (Eph 1:6), and therefore any work done out of love for Him is sprinkled, as it were, sprinkled with His blood and cleanse. Thus Abel’s sacrifice was acceptable to God because it was done by faith in Christ as he to whom the sacrifice pointed to. This contrasted with Cain’s bloodless offering with indicated faithlessness. So we are told: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that *he was righteous*, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh” (Heb 11:4). Thus the apostle Peter declares: “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, *acceptable to God by Jesus Christ*” (1 Pet 2:5).

Such being the case, the reward may be known as a grace reward, and is no cause for boasting, nor should it be the primary motivating factor for doing good works—which ought to be gratitude to the Lord (2 Cor 5:14).

On the Works of the Unregenerate

16.7 Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others;¹ yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith;² nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word;³ nor to a right end, the glory of God;⁴ they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God.⁵ And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing unto God.⁶

¹2 Kgs 10:30–31; 1 Kgs 21:27, 29; Phil 1:15–16, 18; ²Gen 4:5; Heb 11:4, 6; ³1 Cor 13:3; Isa 1:12; ⁴Mt 6:2, 5, 16; ⁵Hag 2:14; Tit 1:15; Amos 5:21–22; Hos 1:4; Rom 9:16; Tit 3:5; ⁶Ps 14:4; 36:3; Job 21:14–15; Mt 25:41–43, 45; 23:3.

Rome teaches that the work of the unregenerate can be so pure as to be free from all sins, and so may obtain merit of congruity from God. This section refutes this doctrine by insisting that while an action may be theoretically or materially good when considered by itself, it cannot in reality be actually good when performed by fallible man, much less unregenerate man,—because an action cannot be separated from the person performing it. An unregenerate man may read and hear the Word of God, give to the poor, and pray. These are commanded of God, and considered by themselves, these actions are good and commendable. But unless done by a person accepted in the Beloved, they are sinful actions. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov 15:8).

However, this does not mean that the wicked therefore should not read and hear sermons or pray. Neither does it mean that the wicked need not, in the final analysis, keep the laws of God. These are duties required of man, and the neglect of them incurs greater judgement. Moreover, as Jonathan Edwards was wont to say: “God usually give success to those who diligently, and constantly, and perseveringly seek conversion” (Sermon on Hosea 5.15, in *Works* 2.87b).