

CHAPTER 16

OF GOOD WORKS

Definition of good works

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

It is possible to be mistaken about what God considers as good works (Matt 15:9; John 16:2; Rom 10:2). Even though someone might be sincere, he may still be sinning against God even while he thinks he is pleasing God, as King Saul did (1 Sam 15:21-23).

The best way to know we are doing good works is to follow the instructions in the Bible (Josh 1:7-8).

The blessings of good works

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

Our good works are the results of our faith (Jas 2:18, 22), and this faith is the result of God’s work in our hearts. Therefore, our works actually come from God (Eph 2:10).

According to our Confession, Christians’ good works have the following good benefits:

- Manifest our thankfulness (1 Pet 2:9)
- Strengthen our assurance (1 John 2:3-5)
- Edify the brethren (2 Cor 9:2)
- Enhance the reputation of the gospel (1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:5, 9-12)
- Silence adversaries (1 Pet 2:15)

- Glorify God (John 15:8; Phil 1:11)

Since our good works originate in the work of God in us, our Christian lives are described as “God’s workmanship.” Part of God’s purpose in regenerating saving us was that we would perform these good works (Eph 2:8-11; Gal 2:20).

Good works mark the life of the saved person, and thus lead to the goal of personal holiness, persevering to the end, when we will be perfected in holiness forever (Rom 6:22).

The source of good works

“3. Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, besides 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: 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.”

This section explains two truths: our good works come from the Holy Spirit, and we are still to exert ourselves to do them.

First, these works come from the Holy Spirit. They spring from our new heart given to us by the Holy Spirit when we were converted (Ezek 36:26-27). And in addition the Holy Spirit sustains us and urges us every time we do a good work (Gal 2:20; Phil 2:13).

Second, we should not be lax, assuming the Holy Spirit will do all the work. We must be diligent to strive to do good works, realizing that the Holy Spirit uses our minds and wills as he leads us to do good works (Phil 2:12; Heb 6:11-12; 2 Pet 1:3, 5, 10-11).

The rewards for good works

The final four sections of this chapter discuss the results or rewards of good works for both Christians and non-Christians.

No works of supererogation

“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, that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.”

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the great saints of the past have lived such good lives that they had more good works than they needed to enter heaven. These good works are

put in a pool (the “treasury of merit”) from which the pope can draw and assign to others as indulgences. This false doctrine opposes much in the Scripture and has led to the most abominable excesses, and, humanly speaking, is responsible for countless souls perishing in hell.

The Bible plainly teaches that the best Christians fall far short of the ideal obedience that we should render to God (Matt 22:36-40; Luke 17:10).

Good works insufficient for salvation

“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; but, when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit, 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.”

Our Confession notes that our good works by themselves could never attain salvation, for these reasons:

1. They are not nearly good enough to earn the great glory and reward of heaven.
2. We are too small and our works are too poor to influence the great God of the universe.
3. No work we do can be of profit to God; he is not helped by it.
4. No amount of good works could make up for our sins and rebellion against God, on the part of both Adam and ourselves.

Our good works cannot help us at the judgment throne, because whatever good we do proceeds from the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), and because whatever comes from ourselves is mixed with sin, and cannot stand on its own before God (Ps 130:3; 143:2; Isa 64:6).

Therefore, good works can never save us or bring us to heaven (Rom 3:20; Titus 3:5).

Rewards for the good works of Christians

“6. Yet notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him, not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprovable in God’s sight; 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.”

Although the good works even of Christians are not worthy of notice from God, he is pleased to reward them much more than they deserve with heavenly rewards (Matt 25:21, 23; 2 Cor 8:12; Heb 6:10). He rewards us because he sees us in Christ. He forgives and cleanses us from our sins, thereby purifying our works for him from the dross of false motives and partial obedience. Thus, in actuality, we do not even earn our rewards; they too are given by God's grace.

Good works of the unsaved

“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; yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing to God.”

God cannot accept the works of the unsaved because they are done without faith (Heb 11:4, 6), in the wrong manner (1 Cor 13:3), with the wrong motive (Matt 6:2, 5, 16), and with a wrong heart (Amos 5:21-22; Titus 1:15). Even “the plowing of the wicked is sin” (Prov 21:4). Yet, the unsaved should do good works, so their punishment in hell will be less and so that they may carry out at least some of their responsibilities as creatures of God (Eccl 12:13-14; Rev 20:11-13).