

GOD'S WORKMANSHIP

Ephesians 2:10

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For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

One of the areas of greatest confusion and controversy in Christian theology is the place of works in our salvation. Despite the clear Bible teaching on this matter, many Christians err on one side or the other.

One error is to make works a condition of salvation. This is the error of the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that we must be justified by a combination of faith and works. Their formula is faith + works = justification. They say that faith is like the band of a ring, and works are like the jewel it holds and which gives its value. The whole purpose of faith, therefore, is to present works for salvation.

The Protestant Reformation made its principal quarrel with Rome over this very issue. The problem with salvation by faith and works is that you can never have peace. You can never know that you are saved, because you never know that your works are enough. Indeed, according to the apostle Paul, your works never can be good enough to justify you. "No one does good," he insists, "no not one" (Rom. 3:12). Therefore, he taught in Ephesians 2:8-9, "By grace you have been saved through faith... not as a result of works." Faith is the ring, we proclaim, that presents not our works but the jewel of Christ and his work for us.

The error on the other side of works is held by many evangelicals. This is the error that says since salvation is not by works, then works

don't matter at all. So long as I believe on Jesus, so long as I once made a decision for Christ or walked down an aisle at the minister's invitation, then whatever else I do has no impact on my salvation. This is called the *antinomian* view, *nomos*, being the word for law, and *anti* meaning opposed to.

In recent years, some have insisted that so long as you profess faith in Jesus Christ, your salvation is assured even if you never bear any spiritual fruit and if you continue in a lifestyle of sin all the rest of your life.¹ Nothing could be more in conflict with the Bible's teaching. As Paul asked in Romans 6:1-2, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it!" I fear that many who hold to such a view, while filling our churches, will hear at the end the dreadful words from our Lord, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Mt. 6:23), that is, "you Antinomians!"

THE NECESSITY OF WORKS

The first thing Ephesians 2:10 teaches us, then, is the necessity of good works. Works do not cause salvation, but salvation invariably causes good works. Having been saved from sin by grace through faith, we are saved to a life of good works as part of the on-going process of growth in grace and holiness that we call sanctification. "For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Charles Spurgeon points out that if we were to auction off the pieces of salvation, the bidding for forgiveness would go very high but few would offer much for holiness. He writes, "Suppose I took sanctification, the giving up of all sin, a thorough change of heart, leaving off drunkenness and swearing; many would say, 'I don't want that; I should like to go to heaven, but I do not want that holiness.'" But God is not auctioning off mere portions of salvation; you must have all or none. You must have Christ as Savior and Lord or not at all. Spurgeon concludes, "God will never divide the gospel. He will

¹ See for instance, Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Redencion Viva, 1992) and Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1997).

not give justification to that man, and sanctification to another – pardon to one, and holiness to another. No, it all goes together. Whom he calls, them he justifies; whom he justifies, them he sanctifies.”²

Just as light and heat are inseparably joined to the rays of the sun, likewise justification and sanctification, forgiveness and a life transformed to do good works, are inseparable parts of the gospel. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith never is alone. It always produces the good works that God desires.

This was Paul’s teaching all through his many letters. In Titus 2:14 he wrote that Jesus died “to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” In 2 Corinthians 9:8, he writes that God provides for all our needs, “so that... you may abound in every good work.”

It is especially Jesus’ teaching that we think of when it comes to the need for good works. In John 15:8, he taught, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:8). The fruit of good works does not make us disciples, but it glorifies God and proves that we are Christ’s followers.

All this proves that good works are necessary to salvation, necessary not as a *condition* or as a *cause* but as a *consequence*. Without good works there is no reason to believe you are a disciple of Christ, and there is much reason to doubt that you are. 1 John 2:5-6 says, “By this we may be sure that we are in [Christ]: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk the same way in which he walked.”

A good way to assess your spiritual state is how you respond to teaching like this. Do you resent being told that salvation involves good works and a changed life? Would you prefer a salvation that delivers you from the penalty of sin but not from sin itself? What is your attitude towards holiness? Do you want a purer, more godly, more loving heart, or are you happy with the one you have? The salvation that Jesus gives is one that involves a desire for a transformed life, and an increasing realization of that desire.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1883), 1:81.

THE SOURCE OF WORKS

Whenever the Bible talks about the necessity of good works, people begin to get nervous and uncertain about themselves. That is because Christians know all too well the power of our sin. But Paul reminds us in this verse not only of the necessity of good works but also their source. He says, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” This means that the source of our good works is God’s own work in us. We are saved by grace and grace is also the cause of our growth in holiness, so that our sanctification and works do not rely on our strength but on God’s.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul said that God came to us when we were spiritually dead, when we had not the slightest desire to serve him, nor the smallest bit of spiritual life. Paul described our salvation as a spiritual resurrection (Eph. 2:4-5). It was God who breathed spiritual life into our hearts in the first place, and it is God who will continue to supply us the strength we need to bear the fruit of good deeds.

I find that many Christians lack hope for godliness and strength for leading a changed life because they think they have to do so in their own power. But Paul says that we are God’s workmanship. That means it is his work in us that will change us. I think the best statement of this is found in Philippians 2:12-13. Paul writes, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” That means that we are to apply our faith to every area of our lives, changing our approach to work, play, the way we treat people, sexuality, money, career ambitions, life goals, and daily habits. But, lest we despair of so difficult a task, Paul adds, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Yes, you have to work it out, but only as God is first working it into you. We change our approach because God changes our attitudes, changing our minds, hearts and desires to match his own.

This especially happens through the ordinary means of grace God has provided: God’s Word, prayer, and the sacraments. It is impossible to overstate the importance of coming to church each week, worshipping God, and hearing his Word faithfully taught. The same is true about personal Bible study and prayer. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17,

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

Paul specifies that we were created for good works “in Christ Jesus.” If you are born again and have a living faith, it was so that you would become more and more like Jesus, and so that Jesus himself would work in you powerfully through the Holy Spirit he sends.

This is what transforms our Christianity from a weak defeatism to a mighty boldness to do God’s will. How can I dare to shine brightly for God? Because I was created anew in Christ for this very purpose and it is God’s work in me to do this very thing! How can I ever leave behind former sins? Because God is giving me new pleasures that rise far above the old. How can I be willing to sacrifice for others and stop living for myself? Because I know a power working in me, a heavenly spring of life from which I am now able to drink, the cup of faith having been placed into my hand by God himself.

This is far more than merely asking, “What Would Jesus Do?” as if he supplies only an example, leaving us to supply our own power. It is asking instead, “What will Jesus do as I trust him, as I call upon him for strength, as I renew my mind and heart through his Word?” Christianity is not a human effort to imitate Christ. Rather, it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27), or, as Paul says elsewhere, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

Jesus is not like a mountain guide who merely climbs up before us and then calls down commands. Instead, he lets down a strong rope – which we might compare to his Holy Spirit – and for every feeble step we take upward he pulls mightily upon that rope so that far sooner than we imagine we have climbed far higher than we ever thought we would. God’s work, in Christ, by the Spirit, is the source of the new and glorious life we begin to lead as his cherished people.

A PLAN FOR GOOD WORKS

The third thing Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:10 is the most amazing of all. He writes of the necessity of works, and the source of works, and then goes so far as to speak of a plan for works that God has for each of our lives.

Sometime ago I saw a humorous bumper-sticker that read: “God sent me into this world with work that I was to do. I’m so far behind that I will never die!” According to the apostle Paul, the second part of that may not be true, although it feels like it, but the first part most certainly is true. He describes our good works as those “which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

What this means is that God’s plan for each of us includes specific good works that he has foreordained for us to do. This does not mean merely that God has designed that we would do good works in general. The Greek word means not merely to intend but to prepare in advance. Not only were we created for good works, but good works were created for us. Our job, Paul says, is to “walk in them.” God has laid down a path of situations and good works for us, and we are to walk down that path seeking to do his will.

What good works has God ordained? First, God has revealed his law. Believers need to know and study the Ten Commandments; we will find that they provide us a path of life. David said in Psalm 19, “The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:18).

In every situation we enter, we are to obey God’s law – worshiping him only, reverencing God’s name, keeping holy the Sabbath, honoring those in authority, not doing violence but promoting others’ well-being, guarding against lust, respecting others’ property, speaking the truth in love, and cultivating godliness with contentment. The Ten Commandments are enormously practical. The shame is that so few believers even know what they are, much less do they use them as a guide for good works. As you go to work, as you start a day at school or in the home, you should say to God, “I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11).

Second, God has given each of us particular gifts, abilities and opportunities. We are to be faithful stewards of them, serving God’s kingdom, promoting God’s glory, imparting practical blessings. Some of us have the gift of teaching, so we are to teach. Others are empowered for exhortation and encouragement, others are gifted in helps, or in administration, or in comfort. Each of us is given a role to

play and a way to serve, and it is important that we do our part as God predestined for us to do.

I find that a common problem in life is envy and discontentment. Everyone wants the gifts somebody else has, especially if they lead to praise and notoriety. Everyone wants to be in someone else's situation. People in the north dream of Florida; Southerners dream of snow. But you are where you are and who you are because God wanted you to be this way. He has good to be done in your life that no one else can do. He wants your life to provide a particular lens on his glory that none other can. You just have to be yourself, and do the good works God prepared in advance for you to do.

Third, there are good works that all Christians are to embrace as a willing duty. We are all different in many ways, but we are all called to pray, to spread the gospel, to worship with God's people and to support God's work through generous giving. This is God's plan for us, and he has made full provision for our blessing through obedience.

If we will take just these three categories seriously – obeying God's law, using our gifts, fulfilling the duties that Christians all share – our lives will be utterly transformed to the praise of God. We and others will see what Paul was so excited about in the teaching of this chapter. He began chapter 2 by describing a life, a walk, under the power of the world, the devil and the flesh. But now we walk in the power of God, leading a life that is energized by grace and life and light. What an exciting change!

One thing this means is that your life matters. There are things you can do that nobody else can do. Although you do not know what lies around the next corner, you know that, whatever it is, you can do God's will in it because God created it for you and you for it. G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "If I can once accept this teaching and rest upon it I shall take my way into every new circumstance knowing these two things absolutely: first, God has prepared me in Christ Jesus for whatever the day has in store for me, and, secondly, all that to which I come, step by step as the veil recedes or the mists melt,

though unknown to me, is not unknown to Him. Good works are afore prepared, afore ordained for us that we should walk in them.”³

Then, when it comes time for you to die, you can have the satisfaction of knowing that all your work is done. In the Spring of 2000, the famous Bible teacher, James Montgomery Boice, learned that he had only weeks to live because of an aggressive cancer. He began working furiously, harnessing his rapidly fading strength to finish important projects and order the affairs of his far-flung ministries. Before he got very far, however, it became clear that he would never get it done. Was he frustrated? Angry? I was often with him during those days, and I will never forget the peace and the satisfied joy on his face when said to me, “My work is now finished. I have done all I can, and therefore all that God intended for me to do in this life.” Not able to tie up all the loose ends, he simply put them into God’s hand. He then experienced what the voice from heaven stated in the Book of Revelation, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord... They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them” (Rev. 14:13).

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In the great words that begin verse 10, Paul sums up all he has been teaching about salvation: “We are his workmanship.” The Greek word is *poiema*, from which comes our word *poem*. It is a general term for a work of art. This means that our salvation is God’s work and relies on his almighty power and sovereign will. It also means that of all God’s great creations, the redeemed sinner who believes and lives for God is the greatest of all his masterworks.

“The heavens declare the glory of God,” says Psalm 19:1. Look out at night and see the splashing of lights from distant galaxies, and you know something of the grandeur of God’s creation. Yet as marvelous as that all is, the cosmos is not God’s masterwork. Go find the most perfect shoreline. Watch as the sunset dances on the waters. Or stand beneath the purple mountains bathed in snow, pillars of granite thrusting skyward. The beauty of nature is overwhelming, and yet these things are not God’s highest work of art.

³ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 1:245.

Psalm 8 reminds us that the tiny cry of a baby displays the glory of God. Surely this is the apex of the natural creation, a newborn baby, so complex and yet simple, eyes open, arms reaching for life. It is a physical marvel, its mind a dazzling computer recording everything it experiences. Its eyes focus light on the retina, simultaneously stimulating 125 million nerve endings. In a millisecond, that data is processed by the brain into a single image.⁴ What a display of God's wisdom and power!

But there is something more magnificent than even that, says our verse. God's highest masterpiece is the man or woman long dead in sin, who God raised from spiritual death, and now is saved to do good works in his name. God is spirit, and here is the great marvel of the spiritual realm, where Christ is enthroned. "If anyone is in Christ," Paul wrote, "he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). That is God's master work of art, accomplished by the blood of Christ and the breath of the Holy Spirit.

That is the work taking place in your life if you are in Christ. It means that whatever God is calling you to do, he will ensure that you are able to do it. Knowing this, Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). It means that whatever trials or sufferings you are enduring, they have a purpose in God's plan for your life. You are his workmanship, and he is equipping you for good works to come. It means that what really matters is not where you are in God's plan for your life, but that you are in Christ, that you are born again, and that you therefore are a masterpiece of God's grace. And what God has begun by grace, he will complete and perfect in glory.

Let me conclude with just a few questions. Do you have experience with what Paul is saying here? Are you aware of the gentle but unrelenting pressure of God's loving hands upon the clay of your life? Do you desire for more of God, more of his Word, more of his Spirit? Do you yearn for holiness? Are you doing works you never thought you would do, acting in ways that can only be accounted for by God?

⁴ Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 82-83.

If you know nothing of this, it is a warning that things are not well with your soul. Especially if you want only to be forgiven but not to be changed, then you completely misunderstand the salvation God is offering you. Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly asserts: “There is no value in a profession of Christianity unless it is accompanied by a desire to be like Christ, a desire to be rid of sin, a desire after positive holiness.”⁵

Until this has happened to you, then put aside all thoughts of work because you cannot do them. What you need is to be born again, to be saved by grace through faith. But if you have that desire not only to be forgiven but to be changed, to be rid of sin, and to be holy, then take heart. Rejoice! For that can only be because you are in Christ and God is working into you what he wants you to start working out. Press on to do good works in his power and to the glory of his name. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 151.