

The Teachings of Christianity

Good Works

Introduction:

It is wrong to say that good works are necessary for salvation. It is also wrong to say that they are harmful for salvation. Just as wrong, however, is to avoid the discussion of good works altogether. Perhaps the best analogy for good works—and a biblical one at that—is to think of them as fruit on a tree (Matthew 7:17). A living tree bears fruit. A dead tree bears no fruit. A person who is alive through faith in Christ will do good works. On the other hand, a person who is spiritually dead, that is, without faith in Christ, may perform certain outward actions, but they are not good works. While good works play no role in our salvation, they are very much part of our lives as God’s children. Good works in the Christian life do not result from our fearing God’s punishment. Rather, they result from God loving us. God’s perfect love in Christ drives out all fear and replaces it with a heart, soul, and mind that love Him and serve our neighbor (CTLIC. McCain, p. 482).

Formula of Concord – Article IV – Good Works

The Controversy (See also *The Controversy Over Good Works* p.466):

¹ Concerning the doctrine of good works two divisions have arisen in some churches:

² 1. First, some theologians have become divided because of the following expressions. One side wrote, **“Good works are necessary for salvation. It is impossible to be saved without good works.”** They also wrote, **“No one has ever been saved without good works.”** But the other side, on the contrary, wrote, **“Good works are harmful to salvation.”**

³ 2. Afterward, a schism arose between some theologians because of the two words necessary and free. The one side argued that the word necessary should not be used about the new obedience, which, they say, does not flow from necessity and coercion, but from a voluntary spirit. The other side insisted on the word necessary. They say obedience is not our option, but regenerate people are obliged to render this obedience.

⁴ From this dispute about the terms, a controversy arose afterward about the subject itself. For the one side contended that among Christians the Law should not be presented at all, but people should be encouraged to do good works from the Holy Gospel alone. The other side contradicted this (CTLIC, p. 482).

Epitome

⁶ 1. Good works certainly and without doubt follow true faith—if it is not a dead, but a living faith—just as fruit grows on a good tree [**Matthew 7:17**].

⁷ 2. We believe, teach, and confess that good works should be entirely excluded from the question about salvation, just as they are excluded from the article of justification before God. The apostle testifies with clear words when he writes as follows, “Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ... ‘Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin’” (**Romans 4:6–8**). And again, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (**Ephesians 2:8–9**).

⁸ 3. We also believe, teach, and confess that all people, but especially those who are born again and renewed by the Holy Spirit, are obligated to do good works [**Ephesians 2:10**].

⁹ 4. In this sense the words necessary, shall, and must are used correctly and in a Christian way to describe the regenerate, and are in no way contrary to the form of sound words and speech.

¹¹ 6. We also believe, teach, and confess that when it is said, “The regenerate do good works from a free spirit,” this is not to be understood as though it were an option for the regenerate person to do or not to do good when he wants, as though a person can still retain faith if he intentionally perseveres in sins [**1 John 2:5–9**].

Solid Declaration

Affirmative Statements:

Truly good works are not those that everyone does himself from a good intention, or which are done according to human traditions, but those that God Himself has prescribed and commanded in His Word. Also, truly good works are done not by our own natural powers, but in this way: when a person is reconciled with God through faith and renewed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:10)

*There are works that apply to maintaining of external discipline. These are also done by, and required of, the unbelieving and unconverted. These works are commendable before the world and rewarded by God in this world with temporal blessings. Nevertheless, they do not come from true faith. Therefore, in God's sight they are sins, that is, stained with sin, and are regarded by God as sins and impure because of the corrupt nature and because the person is not reconciled with God. "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit" as it is also written, "for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin". A person must first be accepted by God, for the sake of Christ alone, if that person's works are to please Him. ⁹ **Faith must be the mother and source of works that are truly good and well pleasing to God, which God will reward in this world and in the world to come.***

- *O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. ¹¹ It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them and is constantly doing them (LW. Luther, vol 35, p. 370-371).*
- **Matthew 7:18; Romans 14:23**

Preservation in Faith:

- Some imagine that faith, and the righteousness and salvation that they have received, cannot be lost through sins or wicked deeds, not even through willful and intentional ones. They imagine that a Christian retains faith, God's grace, righteousness, and salvation even though he indulges his wicked lusts without fear and shame, resists the Holy Spirit, and purposely engages in sins against conscience.
 - **1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Rom 8:13**
- ³³ The Apology provides an excellent model that shows how and when exhortations to good works can be made without darkening the doctrine of faith and of the article of justification. In Article XX (90), on the passage **2 Peter 1:10**, "Be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure," it says: Peter speaks of works following the forgiveness of sins and teaches why they should be done. They should be done so that the calling may be sure, that is, should they fall from their calling if they sin again. Do good works in order that you may persevere in your calling, in order that you do not lose the gifts of your calling. They were given to you before, and not because of works that follow, and which now are kept through faith. Faith does not remain in those who lose the Holy Spirit and reject repentance.
- ³⁴ On the other hand, this does not mean that faith lays hold of righteousness and salvation only in the beginning and then resigns its office to works as though they had to sustain faith, the righteousness received, and salvation. It means that the promise, not only of receiving, but also of retaining righteousness and salvation, is firm and sure to us. St. Paul (**Romans 5:2**) ascribes to faith not only the entrance to grace but says that we stand in grace and boast of the future glory. In other words, he credits the beginning, middle, and end to faith alone.
- ³⁵ It is clear from God's Word that faith is the proper and only means through which righteousness and salvation are not only received, but also preserved by God.

In Christ: *"In Christ" refers to an important concept in the letters of Paul, as seen both from the frequency of "in Christ" or equivalent phrases, such as "in him" or "in whom," referring to Christ (by one count some 170 times in the thirteen letters by Paul) and from the near absence of "in Christ" throughout the rest of the NT.*

- **Romans 6:3; Gal 3:26-27; Eph 1:13; 3:6; Col 2:11-13**