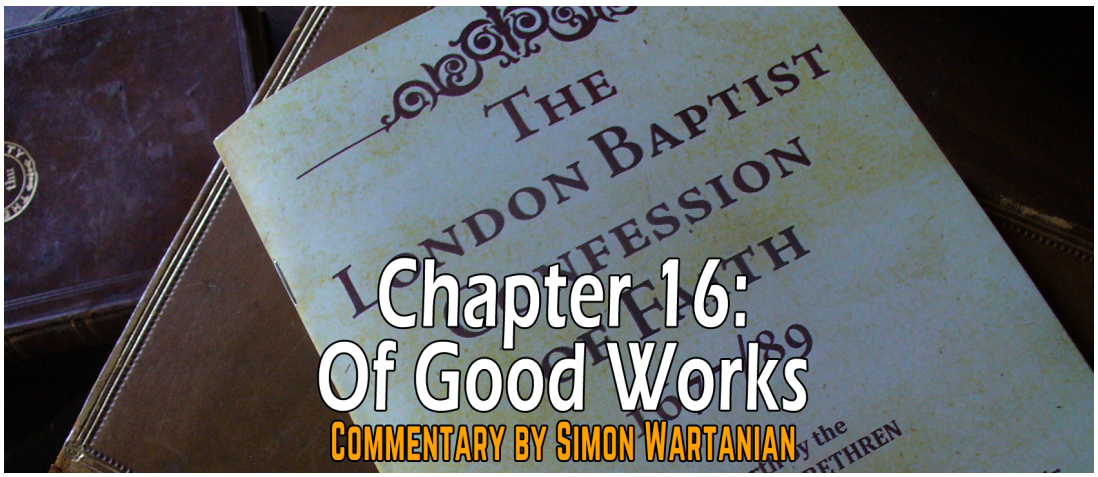
1689 Baptist Confession Chapter 16: Of Good Works - Commentary

Published: Thursday 5th of March 2015 18:58 by Simon Wartanian
URL: https://www.thecalvinist.net/post/1689-Baptist-Confession-Chapter-16:-Of-Good-Works-Commentary



Chapter 16: Of Good Works

What is a "good work"? In our world of today, many would call that which is against the Word "good." What does "good" mean and what is the standard to measure "good" by?

§1 Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his Holy Word

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 pretence of good intentions. **2**
    1. Micah 6:8; Rom. 12:2; Heb. 13:21; Col. 2:3; 2 Tim. 3:16-17[1]
    2. Matt. 15:9 with Isa. 29:13; 1 Peter 1:18; Rom. 10:2; John 16:2; 1 Sam. 15:21-23; 1 Cor. 7:23; Gal. 5:1; Col. 2:8, 16-23

Good works are those which **God hath commanded in His Holy Word** and those derived from it by necessary and good consequence. Those are no good works which have no **warrant** from the Word and devised **by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intentions** (Matt. 15:9; 1 Peter 1:18; Rom. 10:2). God is to be worshiped and obeyed in the way that *He* has commanded and prescribed in His Word.

The Criteria For Good Works

We don't simply invent for ourselves what good works are and declare that they are good, but rather it is God Who lays down the criteria for good works in Holy Writ. This does not mean that if a particular action is not mentioned in the Bible that it is therefore bad, but we look at the particular deed in light of all Scripture. We don't demand an explicit text for everything. For example, helping an old lady cross the street is a good deed, but it is not mentioned in the Bible. Does that mean that it is therefore bad if it is not mentioned? No, not really. Because we know from the Bible that we should love our neighbor, and helping an old lady cross the street is such an expression of love and respect.

Commanded By God

Only what is commanded by God and what may be deduced from Holy Writ is binding upon the consciousness of men.

Throughout history, various churches and religions have added to the commandments of God in such a way as binding the consciences of man. The Lord Jesus quotes the words of Isaiah approvingly when he says, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'" (Matt. 15:8-9 from Isa. 29:13). From this passage, we learn that whenever we add things to the Lord's commandments and teach them as if they were the Lord's, we dishonor Him and worship Him falsely. Therefore, the Confession is explicit that "Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his Holy Word", so that only God would be the Lord of the conscience (see also **chapter 21** on the liberty of the conscious).

It is God Who teaches us through His will "what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). And it is God Who is and determines the criteria of what good works constitute. It is His holy character as revealed in His Word. It is also God Who works in us His good works. We cannot really do any good works which are pleasing in His sight without His will and direction. That's why Paul tells us that "...it is God Who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). The Holy Spirit in Hebrews 13:21 tells us that it is God Who "equip[s] you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight". The glory of the New Covenant is the fact that we have God's Law on our hearts and given the ability by the Spirit to obey God from the heart (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27). In fact, God has created us believers and predestined us from all eternity that we should walk in good works (Eph. 2:10).

Therefore, good works, first of all, are commanded by God and derived from **His Law**, and moreover, they are brought forth by God in us. It is God Who is the measure of what is good. Whatever reflects His holy character is good, and whatever does not, is evil. He is the standard. It is written, "...the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed" (1 Sam. 2:3).

> 2 Tim. 3:6-17 **All Scripture** is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, **equipped for every good work.**

Performed In Faith

For works to be truly "good" in God's sight, they have to be done in faith. Romans 14:23 tells us "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For **whatever does not proceed from faith is sin**." Therefore, anything that is not done in and through faith in Jesus Christ the Lord, is sin and not really a "good work" in the sight of God. Even if a billionaire would donate all his money and give it to the poor, strictly in God's eyes that would not be a good work because it lacked a crucial component, namely, good works are to be performed through faith in Jesus Christ.

We perform our works in thankfulness to God for our identity in Christ and that we are able through faith to please God (Heb. 11:6). We don't perform them thinking that we are better than others, or that God will love us more, but we perform them to the glory of God and to display His goodness to us. If our faith is really living, then it will inevitably produce good works. Paul speaks of the Thessalonians' "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:3). They did good *while* believing and hoping in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their works came as a result and were supported by their living faith. In his second letter Paul says:

> 2 Thess. 1:11-12 To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for **good and every work of faith by his power**, 12 so that **the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you**, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We see again that Paul connects works and faith here, not as a means of salvation, but that a living faith will produce works through which God will be glorified. Furthermore, we see that it is God Who equips us and enables us to do those things which are pleasing in His sight and which are for His glory. The only thing that counts is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6).

We also know of James' discussion of faith and works in James 2. There James argues that a faith that does not produce works is dead and it cannot justify. A true faith will produce works that will display and confirm the person's justification. See **here** for our discussion of this passage as it relates to the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone.

Performed To The Glory Of God

The purpose of all good works should be to display the glory of God. As image-bearers, we should seek to be witnesses of His goodness and kindness toward all. Numerous are the commands to do good works for God's glory. The Lord Jesus teaches us the purpose of good works in Matthew 5:

> Matt. 5:13-16 "**You are the salt of the earth**, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no

longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 "**You are the light of the world.** A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and **it gives light to all in the house.** 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your **good works and give glory to your Father** who is in heaven.

The Lord Jesus begins by telling us that we are the salt of the earth. That means that the believers have a preserving and savoring effect on the world as salt does to earthly things. The eminent Bible commentator John Gill writes the following on this phrase:

> **Ye are the salt of the earth**,.... This is to be understood of the disciples and apostles of Christ; who might be compared to "salt", because of the savoury doctrines they preached; as all such are, which are agreeable to the Scriptures, and are of the evangelic kind, which are full of Christ, serve to exalt him, and to magnify the grace of God; and are suitable to the experiences of the saints, and are according to godliness, and tend to promote it: also because of their savoury lives and conversations; whereby they recommended, and gave sanction to the doctrines they preached, were examples to the saints, and checks upon wicked men.[2]

We are not only the salt of the earth but also the light of the world. The believers have an important task in the world, indeed as some have said, the world stands for the sake of the elect. But what we also learn from v. 15 is that others benefit from the light, meaning other people than us should benefit from our works. Our light, which is our character, deeds and walk in the Lord, should move others to seek God and see God in us. Therefore, it is undoubtedly true that all good works should be done to the glory of God and that thereby the glory of God may be manifested to others.

The apostle Paul also says:

> 1 Cor. 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, **do all to the glory of God.**

Anything that we do in life should be done to the glory of God, whether it be good works or studying, or eating and drinking. We should do all things with thankfulness to God and to His honor and glory. In a passage mentioned above, we see again that good works brought forth through faith are to be for Christ's glory (1 Thess. 1:11-12). The God Who works in us to do His pleasure and equips us to be able to carry out His holy will, is also the God Who works all things according to His purpose and therefore to His glory (Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:20-21; Eph. 1:11; 2:10).

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§2 These good works...are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith

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**, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, **7** that having their fruit unto holiness they may have the end eternal life. **8**
    1. James 2:18, 22; Gal. 5:6; 1 Tim. 1:5
    2. Ps. 116:12-14; 1 Peter 2:9, 12; Luke 7:36-50 with Matt. 26:1-11
    3. 1 John 2:3, 5; 3:18-19; 2 Peter 1:5-11
    4. 2 Cor. 9:2; Matt. 5:16
    5. Matt. 5:16; Titus 2:5, 9-12; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Peter 2:12
    6. 1 Peter 2:12, 15; Titus 2:5; 1 Tim. 6:1
    7. Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:11; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Peter 2:12; Matt. 5:16
    8. Rom. 6:22; Matt. 7:13-14, 21-23

These good works performed by redeemed are **the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith** (James 2:18, 22). They demonstrate that our faith is true, but are not the cause or the basis for our faith and salvation. Through our good works and obedience, we **manifest** our **thankfulness** unto God. We **strengthen** our **assurance** when we see the fruits of the Spirit and obedience at work in us (2 Peter 1:5-11). We **edify the brethren** by being examples and also by them being

affected by our good works. We **adorn the profession of the gospel** and **stop the mouths of the adversaries** (1 Peter 2:12; 3:14-16) so that they would not be able to accuse us or shame us because of the way we live for God. We **glorify God** by our good works and show to the world what a wonderful God we serve (Matt. 5:16). The Bible teaches that we are God's **workmanship** and that we are **created in Christ Jesus** for good works (Eph. 2:10). God, in regenerating us and even in electing us, has prepared for us good works in which we should walk and do. We have not been re-created *because* of our good works, but we have been re-created *for* good works. This **fruit** of our good works will lead us to **holiness** and sanctification and finally, we will have the end and goal of holiness and sanctification, **eternal life** (Rom. 6:22).

Good Works Are Fruits Of Our Faith

Good works are not the cause of our salvation, but they are the effects of our salvation. We do not become saved because we perform good works and have faith because we have been justified apart from works. The Bible declares that our good works are actually "filthy rags" in the sight of God (Isa. 64:6 KJV). We cannot please God with our own works. Our works do not cause or merit our salvation, rather they *manifest* or *declare* our salvation. The Lord Jesus taught us that His elect will bear fruit saying "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should **go and bear fruit** and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16). In Ephesians 2:10 the apostle teaches that good works were prepared for us from all eternity that we should walk in them. The Lord Jesus also taught us that we will know who is true and who is false by their fruits (Matt. 7:16). The fruits are their deeds and their walk of life. The Bible teaches that it will be possible to see that a person is saved or not according to the way they live and their deeds. If you are wondering how James 2:14-26 fits in this, then I would direct you to my discussion of this passage as it relates to Sola Fide here.

They Manifest Our Thankfulness

Good works manifest our thankfulness to the work of God in our lives in changing our heart of stone into a heart of flesh that loves Him. We want to testify to the world about His amazing and unfathomable love and grace toward us. We know the account of the sinful adulteress woman in Luke 7:36ff. The woman knew her sin and knew that the Lord Jesus was somewhere in a house. She goes in search of Him and finds him in Simon the Pharisee's house and displayed a great act of love toward our Lord:

> Luke 7:37-38 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a **sinner**, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to **wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair** of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

It is obvious that this woman was loving the Lord Jesus very much and showing great thankfulness to Him. Other people would have rejected her and thrown her out of the house, but the Lord Jesus receives her in love. Then the Lord Jesus tells a parable to illustrate what those, who are forgiven much, do:

> Luke 7:41-50 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, **her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much**. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "**Your faith has saved you**; go in peace."

The woman displayed great faith by coming to the Lord Jesus and in this way, asking Him to forgive her for her sinful past. She has been forgiven much and therefore, displayed much love, just like those who were in debt toward their master. When we realize who we are and what a great salvation we possess, we cannot but seek to show our thankfulness to God through obedience to His Law. We don't become more loveable to God because we obey. The elect are the objects of His love solely by grace and for the sake of the Lord Jesus. But we want to obey so that others may benefit from our works. We want to obey so that God may be glorified. We want to obey so that we may display our thankfulness for this great salvation. We

want to obey so that we may be like Christ Who always obeyed and honored the Father.

They Strengthen Our Assurance

Through the works that we bring forth by faith, we assure ourselves of our salvation. When we see the fruits of salvation in us, or even better—when others see the fruits of salvation in us, we are assured that we, in fact, are saved and belong to the Lord. A faith that produces no works is useless and cannot justify. The Gospel of John and the letters of John lay a great emphasis on grace, love, obedience to God's commandments without thinking that through our works we earn God's favor or salvation. John writes:

> 1 John 2:3-6 And by this we know that we have come to know him, **if we keep his commandments.** 4 Whoever says "I know him" but **does not keep his commandments is a liar**, and the truth is not in him, 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: 6 whoever says he abides in him **ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.**

The test of knowing if we truly are in Christ is to look at our lives and see if we can find Christ in our walk. We should test ourselves and see if we are in the faith. According to this passage, there is no true believer who knows God and seeks to *not* obey God. Rather, all true believers will seek to obey God and walk in the same blameless way as the Lord Jesus did. We know that we fall, we repent and stand up again. But we do not walk our lives in disobedience, for if we continually do that, then it will be manifest that we know Him not. By obeying the Lord in deed and truth, we do not think of ourselves as self-righteous, because we know whatever good comes from our works is the result of God's sovereign will which moves us to do those things (e.g. Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 13:20-21; Eph. 2:10). But rather we acknowledge that God is at work in us to do His pleasure and give glory alone to the One to Whom glory belongs.

In chapter 3 we read:

> 1 John 3:18-20 Little children, let us not **love** in word or talk but **in deed and in truth**. 19 By this we shall **know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart** before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

Again, the same idea is present as in the previous passage. We are called to love in deed and truth. We are to display love by speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), but also in doing deeds of love. Through these deeds, the Lord by grace assures us that we belong to Him, as we are bearing fruits in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:9; Acts 26:20) and walking in His commandments. But even if we feel condemned, God is greater than our hearts and it is He Who truly and faithfully weighs our works (1 Sam. 2:3). See also 2 Peter 1:5-11 where Peter lays our fruits which confirm and make sure our calling and election (see more on this passage **here**). We don't get called and elected because of them, but they testify to the fact that we have been elected and called.

They Edify Our Brethren

Good works edify our brothers and sisters in Christ. They help them in need and they move them to glorify our common Lord and Savior for the fruits He brings in our lives. We look back at Matthew 5:16 which we wrote about earlier. There, we read about people who will glorify our God because of our works. Certainly, some of those will be believers. But also in v. 15, when the Lord speaks about the lamp which signifies our good works, there at the end of the verse He says that the lamp "gives light to all in the house." That means that more people are affected by our good works, than us alone. We affect also our environment. As Martin Luther somewhere has said, God does not need our good works, but our neighbors do.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul speaks about the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to each individual Christian and notes that the goal of all the gifts is to build and edify the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:3, 5, 6, 12, 26). Therefore, everything that is done in the Church should be done with the goal to build and not tear down. I believe one important example of works helping and edifying the brethren is Philemon's works described by Paul:

> Phlm. 1:4-7 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of **your love and of the faith that you have** toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6 and I pray that the **sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing** that is in us for the sake of Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because **the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.**

God is rightly to be thanked for every good thing He works in us, because “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas. 1:17). Paul thanks God above all for His work in Philemon because His love for the Lord and for the saints is manifest to everyone who knows him. His faith is a living faith working in love. Paul prays that His faith may increase and may become more manifest and effective to more people. Paul himself has seen and been affected by his love, but also that the saints “have been refreshed through you.” The saints have been at rest, their hearts refreshed and edified because of Philemon’s good works done in faith. This is why good works are crucial for the believer, for through our good works God ministers to others. Everyone who names the name of the Lord should know that God’s purpose was “to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are **zealous for good works**” (Titus 2:14).

They Adorn The Profession Of The Gospel

Good reputation and good works strengthen the proclamation of the gospel. People see God in us and see that we have been greatly touched by Him. They do not see us merely talking the talk but also walking the walk which definitely gives them a better picture of Christianity. The sad fact is that Christianity has generally had a bad picture in Western culture because a lot of people who profess to be Christians, do not walk in the footsteps of Christ, therefore, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles” (Rom 2:24) because of them. That is a deeply sad thing.

It is an obvious thing that good works adorn and confirm the proclamation of the gospel. Imagine a person who proclaims to the unbeliever that we should not lie, we should not take the Lord’s name in vain, that we should not steal and that we should not lust, but does all these things. Obviously, when people see that, they write him off. But what is worse is that Christians, in general, will get such a bad picture because of this terrible testimony. What about a person who truly seeks to live His life in obedience to the Lord and struggles with sin? Obviously, when such a person who has a good testimony before believers and unbelievers alike proclaims the gospel, his proclamation will be taken more seriously than someone who preaches but does not practice what he preaches.

In 1 Timothy 6:1 and Titus 2:9-12, Paul speaks about bondservants and their duty to obey their masters. Paul teaches us that bondservants, or in the modern sense—employees, should love their masters and demonstrate that love through obedience, so that the employer may have no excuse to blame God, but rather be moved to know why Christian conduct themselves differently and may seek to know more about our Master. When we have the opportunity to proclaim the gospel to them, then the gospel will be proclaimed with our good behavior in mind.

They Stop The Mouth Of The Adversaries

Good works not only adorn and strengthen the proclamation of the gospel, but they also stop and refute opposition. Peter alludes to Matthew 5:16 in 1 Peter 2:12 when he tells us, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” When people speak evil about Christians, our testimony and walk of life should be so strong, that even (other) unbelievers will come to our defense and see God working in us, leading to their salvation. In chapter 3, he says:

> 1 Pet. 3:14-16 But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, **always being prepared to make a defense** to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, **those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.**

We are to defend the truth of God and we are to do that, first of all, by honoring Christ as Lord in our hearts. But also in the way in which we make that defense, namely, “with gentleness and respect”. We don’t get all angry and start fighting, but we show gentleness and respect even to those who are not gentle nor respectful toward us. Why? So that we may have a good conscience knowing that this is how the Lord wants us to behave, that even if they are not convinced of our defense, the enemies of the gospel would be put to shame because of our good behavior. Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel is strengthened by the testimony of our lives.

In Titus 2:5 Paul speaks of women who are to be “self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands”, but why? The answer is “that the word of God may not be reviled.” That the women may not send bad signals to the world around them and may not give a negative picture to the world about their conduct. In 1 Peter 3:1-2, the apostle speaks about husbands who “may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.”

They Glorify God

The purpose of every good work should be the glory of God. Paul prays that the believers be "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11). He prays that God may fill us with the fruit of righteousness, which certainly includes good works that spring from good conduct and a good heart, so that God may be praised and glorified. Albert Barnes, on Matthew 5:16, comments that:

> We learn here:
>
> 1. that religion, if it exists, cannot be concealed.
> 2. that where it is not manifest in the life, it does not exist.
> 3. that "professors" of religion, who live like other people, give evidence that they have never been truly converted.
> 4. that to attempt to conceal or hide our Christian knowledge or experience is to betray our trust, injure the cause of piety, and to render our lives useless. And,
> 5. that good actions will be seen, and will lead people to honor God. If we have no other way of doing good - if we are poor, and unlearned, and unknown yet we may do good by our lives. No sincere and humble Christian lives in vain. The feeblest light at midnight is of use.[3]

For more, **see above**.

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§3 Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ

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 necessary **an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit,** to work in them to will and to do of his good pleasure; **1** yet **they are 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. **2**
    1. Ezek. 36:26-27; John 15:4-6; 2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 2:12-13; Eph. 2:10
    2. Isaiah 64:7; Rom. 8:14; John 3:8; Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Peter 1:10; Heb. 6:12; 2 Tim. 1:6; Jude 20-21

The willingness and **ability to do good works is not at all of** us, but it is **wholly from the Spirit of Christ**, Who works in us God's good pleasure (Ezek. 36:27; Heb. 13:20-21). We are helpless and can do no good without the all-powerful **Spirit of Christ**. It is He Who enables us to do these things. It is **necessary** that the Spirit do these, otherwise, we will not be able to do them. Therefore, we need **an actual influence** or work **of the same Holy Spirit**. It is He Who works in us both the **will** and the **do**ing of these good works (Phil. 2:12-13). Nonetheless, this does not mean that we are **to grow negligent** and sit doing nothing. We are to stir **the grace of God that is** in us (Heb. 10:24). We are to pray to the Spirit to work in us His good pleasure and grant us the grace to obey God. We are never to be **negligent** or inactive, all the way knowing that we need the **influence** and work of the Spirit do to that which is pleasing in God's sight.

Good Works Are God's Good Works In Us

I've written in multiple chapters (**chapter 7**, **chapter 9**, **chapter 10**, **chapter 13**) about crucial passages as Ezekiel 36:25-27 and Philippians 2:12-13 on the fact that it is God Who works in us His pleasure. It is through His Spirit that we are made able to obey and perform good works. Therefore, I will not discuss the passages related to this point in any considerable length.

According to Ezekiel 36:26-27, it is God Who through His abiding Spirit will cause us to walk in His statutes and obey His rules. This will be the result of a changed nature. The depraved will be made able by faith to please the Lord. Furthermore, we are assured when we work out (not work *for*) our salvation, that it is, in fact, God Who is at work in us for His pleasure. It is God Who causes us to obey and perform works pleasing in His sight (Phil. 2:12-13). These works which He brings forth in

us, God pleases, by grace, to reward us for them. Not only that, but it was God's purpose from the before the foundation of the earth that we should walk in good works which He prepared for us (Eph. 2:10). Instead of leaving us to remain walking in sin and in disobedience as children of wrath (Eph. 2:2-3), it has pleased God to ordain that we should rather walk in good works. Lastly, it is God Who equips us with everything necessary to carry out His will. He equips us with the faith, the love, the patience, the will, and the strength to do that which is pleasing in His sight, to His own glory (Heb. 13:20-21).

The Call To Do Good Works

The fact that it is God Who works in us His good pleasure, does not put us in an inactive mode, but rather we are encouraged that our work is not in vain and that it has eternal significance. That the Bible calls us to perform good works is undisputed and seen in our commentary on paragraph 1 above. The Bible says:

> Heb. 10:24-25 And let us consider how to **stir up one another to love and good works**, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

We are commanded not only to do good works but to stir and encourage each other in doing good works. When we do that we see the fruit of righteousness in both of us. We see God working in us to do His pleasure and are also edified by the good works of each other. Most of all, we are moved to praise and glorify our God for His work in us.

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§4 Even the best of us fall short of much which in duty we are bound to do

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**
    1. 1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chron. 6:36; Ps. 130:3; 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 3:9, 23; 7:14f.; Gal. 5:17; 1 John 1:6-10; Luke 17:10

Even they who come to **the greatest hight** of sanctification **which is possible in this life**, still **fall short** of the glory of God (Isa. 64:6; Luke 17:10). No man is able to **supererogate**, meaning, **do more than God requires**. This is written against the Roman Catholic concept of works of supererogation. These are works performed by the saints beyond what God required of them and they form the *treasury of merit* from which other believers may benefit. The Confession rejects this concept and declares that even the best works performed by those most far in their sanctification fall short of God's standard and their duty.

Even the best of believers will testify that they fall short of God's glory and doing His will perfectly. Paul the apostle said:

> Phil. 3:12 Not that I have already obtained this [the resurrection of the dead, v. 11] or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

The apostle Paul knows that he still falls short and is not perfect. The apostle John is no different. He says that "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). There is no doubt that they were obedience to the Lord from the heart, but we also know that they were not perfect, i.e., they did not obey the Lord 100% at all times and those are some of the holiest men who walked the earth, how much more we? All our good works are mixed with sin and thus never truly good, but even the best Christian's good works are not above, but below God's demanded standard. This is what the word *supererogate* means, "To do more than is required, ordered, or expected." All our good works are tainted with sin and thus are far from perfect, but God by grace and through the blood of Christ, God receives them as good works and rewards us based on His grace.

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§5 We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life

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, **1** 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; 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 punishment. **4**
    1. Rom. 8:18
    2. Job 22:3; 35:7; Luke 17:10; Rom. 4:3; 11:3
    3. Gal. 5:22-23
    4. 1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chron. 6:36; Ps. 130:3; 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20; Isa 64:4; Rom. 3:9, 23; 7:14f.; Gal. 5:17; 1 John 1:6-10

Pardon of sin does not come **by our best works** (e.g., Gal. 2:16; see **chapter 11:3**). This is due to the **great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come**. Our best works are 'filthy rags' and we will be in eternity we will truly see how much even **our best works** fell short of God's glory and standard. The second reason is because of **the infinite distance that is between us and God**. Here is the classic Creator/creature distinction. We are unable to **profit** or gain forgiveness, nor **satisfy for the debt of our former sins**. Even if we **do all we can** or even all that God commands, we will merely be doing our **duty** (Luke 17:10). God has not promised to grant us forgiveness if we do our best or if we obey His commands. After we do all that we are commanded, we are still **unprofitable servants**, i.e., we do not deserve God's rewards. The goodness of our works **proceed from His Spirit** and whatever **weakness and imperfection** are there in our works, they come from us. Our works are always **defiled and mixed**, but they are not like the works of unregenerate men, which are all sinful (Rom. 14:23). Even our good works done through the Spirit **cannot endure the severity of God's punishment** and are, therefore, rewarded by grace and are cleansed by Christ's blood.

Good Works Do Not Merit Pardon Of Sin

Even when brought through the Holy Spirit, they are wrought by us and thus are defiled and mixed with sin and lose their perfection. Even our best works do not earn salvation, nor merit forgiveness for us, but they display the fact that we *have* salvation and not that we will *attain* salvation through works. Obviously, this is directly against the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that works play a significant role in our salvation and forgiveness. That our good works play *no* role in our salvation is seen in multiple passages where works are denied and grace or/and faith are affirmed: Galatians 2:16; 3:10-12; 5:4; Romans 3:20, 27-28; 4:2-3; Philippians 3:9. For more see **chapter 11 on Justification**.

We Are Unworthy Servants

The example of the servants and master encourages us to obey God commandments in strange, but a way that I actually love. In Luke 17, we read:

> Luke 17:7-10 "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? 8 Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? 9 Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 10 So you also, **when you have done all that you were commanded**, say, '**We are unworthy servants**; **we have only done what was our duty**.'"

From this example, we learn the obvious fact that the purpose and job of servants or slaves is to serve their masters. What the Lord Jesus does is to apply this master-slave relationship to His disciples. He applies this master-slave relationship in the matter of obedience to every and all believers. When we obey God we should not think that we've done God a favor, but "we have only done what was our duty." We have done what was required of us. There is no need for us to be thanked or for us to feel that we're better than others. Ecclesiastes 12:13 says, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." It is our duty to obey God, it is only by sovereign and covenantal grace that He rewards us. When we have done all that God has commanded, we should think of ourselves as unworthy

slaves. We are unworthy of any praise because we have done merely what was our duty. The HCSB says “We are good-for-nothing slaves”, the KJV “We are unprofitable servants”, the NET “We are slaves undeserving of special praise” which I believe gets the meaning of the passage. Charles Ellicott explains:

> **Say, We are unprofitable servants.**—There is something very suggestive in the use of the same word as that which meets us in the parable of the Talents (Mat. 25:30). God, we are taught, may recognise and reward the varying use which men make of gifts and opportunities. But all boasting is excluded; and in relation to God the man who has gained the ten talents has to own that he has nothing that he has not received, and to confess that he stands, as it were, on a level with the “unprofitable servant.” Any personal claim on the ground of merit falls to the ground before such a declaration, and still more any speculative theory of works of supererogation, and of the transfer of the merits gained by them from one man to his fellow-servants and fellow-sinners.[4]

Notice that the Lord says “when you have done all that you were commanded”. It is impossible for a man in this world to obey God perfectly, but says the Lord Jesus, even if that were possible, still we will be unworthy slaves because God owes us nothing and is not in need of us to accomplish His purposes. We are happy and thankful that it has pleased God to use us as instruments in His mighty hand to do His pleasure. But the amazing thing is that God often in this world and assuredly in the next world will reward us, for our good works and fruits which He works in us. It is truly amazing grace, in the beginning, middle and end. Grace and grace all the way.

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§6 The good works of Christians are accepted in Christ

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 unblameable and unreprovable 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**
    1. Exod. 28:38; Eph. 1:6-7; 1 Peter 2:5
    2. 1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chron. 6:36; Ps. 130:3; 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Eccl. 7:20; Rom. 3:9, 23; 7:14f.; Gal. 5:17; 1 John 1:6-10
    3. Heb. 6:10; Matt. 25:21, 23

As the **persons of believers** are **accepted through Christ**, so likewise, **their good works**, which are performed by the grace of the Spirit, **also are accepted in Him** (1 Peter 2:5). Our works are not **wholly unblameable and unreprovable**, they are always “defiled and mixed” (paragraph 5). The reason that they are **accepted in Him** is because they are being looked at **in His Son** and thanks to His work on behalf of the elect. Both the **persons** and the **good works** performed by these persons are accepted in and because of Christ. God both **accept**s and **reward**s our good works, even though they are **accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections**. Such is the amazing grace of God that He works in us His good pleasure and rewards us for that which He works in us and forgiving our shortcomings!

The infinite grace of God that he even accepts our defiled “good works” and not only accepts them but even rewards them! All because of His beloved Son and what he did on the cross. God looks on us as He looks upon Jesus because He imputed Jesus’ perfect righteousness to us. It is wrong to say that the works of the regenerate are also “filthy rags” or are worthless before God. Rather, they are wrought by God in us and defiled when performed by us, but they are not “filthy rags”, rather they are good works that are defiled and mixed with sin by us. They are not wholly sinful as with the works of the unregenerate. God’s grace is so amazing that He even rewards us for the gifts that He Himself has given us! It is God ultimately Who moves us to perform works pleasing in His sight by His sovereign grace (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12-13; Heb. 13:20-21), yet it is also God Who will reward and glorify us for our works. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is unfathomable and unexplainable! Although even our best works are mixed with sin and thus are not perfect, yet it pleases God to look to our works through the work of Jesus Christ, cleanse them in His blood, accept and reward them by grace. Thank You, Lord, we are undeserving of such an unfathomable love. SDG!

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§7 Works done by unregenerate men...proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the Word

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 a 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**, they are therefore **sinful, and cannot please God,** **4** nor make a man meet to receive grace from God, **5** and yet **their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing to God**. **6**
    1. 1 Kings 21:27-29; 2 Kings 10:30-31; Rom. 2:14; Phil. 1:15-18
    2. Gen. 4:5 with Heb. 11:4-6; 1 Tim. 1:5; Rom. 14:23; Gal. 5:6
    3. 1 Cor. 13:3; Isa. 1:12
    4. Matt. 6:2, 5-6; 1 Cor. 10:31
    5. Rom. 9:16; Titus 1:15; 3:5
    6. 1 Kings 21:27-29; 2 Kings 10:30-31; Ps. 14:4; 36:3

Good **works done by unregenerate men** are not good because 1) they **do not proceed...from a heart purified by faith** (Rom. 14:23), 2) **nor are done in a right manner according to the word** (paragraph 1), 3) **nor to a right end, the glory of God**. They do not meet the criteria for good works as defined by God and therefore, are not good in God's sight even if they may be good in our sight. Even if they **may be things which God commands** like helping the poor, even if they are **of good use to themselves and others**, they are not truly good. As long as they do not meet the three criteria given, they are not good works but are **sinful, and cannot please God** (Heb. 11:6; Rom. 14:23). Nonetheless, it is better for the unregenerate to perform them than **neglect** them because that would be more **sinful and displeasing to God**.

The Works Of The Unregenerate Are Not Good

We see a lot of good people performing good works in our daily life. But this is purely non-theological and non-biblical reflection. We see people doing things that are good and we see people behaving in a way that is decent although they do not profess faith in the Lord Christ. How can this be?

The problem is with our conception of "good" or what we mean by "good." I believe that the Bible sometimes is very specific with what it means by "good." For example, the Lord Jesus says that "No one is good except God alone" (Luke 18:19), He, in this passage, connects "goodness" with God. God is good, but good is not God. Goodness reflects God's moral character. To say that something is good we, therefore, have to judge it according to the standard of goodness, the Triune God of Scripture. When we understand this, we understand what Paul means when he says that "None is righteous, no, not one...no one does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10, 12). Here, Paul is quoting from Psalm 14 and affirming its reality and truth. No one does that which reflects the spotless and perfect character of God. Even Christians performing good works are not *good* in the highest sense but are stained with sin (see paragraphs **4** and **6**). So, there are two senses in which the word "good" is used. The first one is the usual and non-theological everyday sense whereby we judge that a person or a deed is good outwardly because it conforms to our sense of good or is not evil. The second is the one which is most used in the Bible and means perfection as it reflects God's good character. In this sense, we can call nothing and no one "good" (Rom. 3:10, 12).

We learned in paragraph 1 what the criteria are for good works and now we get a negative description of the works performed by unbelievers and thereby excluding them from being called "good works" because they are not performed as Scripture commands. The unbeliever giving money to feed starving children, run a marathon for charity or doing anything which is generally seen as good, is not doing it to glorify and honor God. They reject the God of Scripture. For whatever reason they're doing "good", they're not doing it because they seek to follow God's commands or seek to glorify and honor Him. The glory of God is the goal for all good works, but if a "good work" does not have the purpose of glorifying God, how can it then be a "good" work? It can't. The apostle Paul teaches that anything done without faith is, in fact, sin (Rom. 14:23). Therefore, anything that an unbeliever does, even though in the eyes of man it may be good and glorious, in the sight of God it is abominable and sinful because it is not done in faith.

Neglect Of Their "Good Works" Is Even Worse

Yet we understand that even if these "good works" do not glorify, nor honor God, it is better that they be performed and sovereignly used by God than totally neglected. That people donate money to a particular organization to help the needy, or that someone volunteers to help an old lady or whatsoever kind of good work which is pleasing in the sight of God (when

performed according to His ways), and not do these things according to God's way is a sad fact. Yet we understand that through common grace, God sovereignly works good even through unbelievers. Therefore, it is a greater sin to entirely neglect the doing of "good works" outwardly, than not to perform them at all. God ministers to His people even through the works of the godless.

> ...our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.
>
> (Titus 2:13-14)

Footnotes

1. ^ *Many Scriptural references have been supplied by Samuel Waldron's Modern Exposition of 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith which was apparently supplied by the Westminster Confession of Faith 1646.*
2. ^ *John Gill. Exposition of the Entire Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
3. ^ *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
4. ^ *Charles J. Ellicott. Commentary For English Readers. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*