

11. Good works

WCF chapters 16 *Modern Language version – 1993 – OPC*

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

2. These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and living faith. By them believers show their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, build up their fellow believers, adorn the profession of the gospel, shut the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God. They are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, so that, bearing fruit unto holiness, they may attain the outcome, which is eternal life.

3. Their ability to do good works is not at all from themselves, but entirely from the Spirit of Christ. And—in order that they may be enabled to do these things—besides the graces believers have already received, there must also be an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit working in them both to will and to do God's good pleasure. This truth, however, should not cause believers to become negligent, as though they were not bound to perform any duty without a special moving of the Spirit; rather, they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

4. Those who attain the greatest heights of obedience possible in this life are so far from being able to go beyond duty and to do more than God requires, that they fall short of much that is their duty to do.

Moving from GOD's good work in our salvation... to OUR good works...

A definition of good works

Q: Where is the “will of God, what is good & acceptable & perfect”... “that which is pleasing in his sight”? (Rom. 12:2, Heb. 13:1)

A: Only what God has commanded in the Bible... about worship and church government... and the whole of life

A: Not the inventions of men, however zealous or well-intended (see Isa. 29:13, Matt. 15:9 and Rom. 10:2)

The value of good works (i.e. why obedience matters)

Fruit of true faith – John 15:8, James 2:18,22
We show our thankfulness – e.g. Ps. 116:12,13
Grow our assurance – see later ch on assurance
Edify other Christians – e.g. 2 Cor. 9:2
Make the Gospel look beautiful – Titus 2:5, 9-12
Shame non-believers – 1 Peter 2:15
Glorify God – John 15:8
Holy works are prepared by God... & lead to eternal life – Rom. 6:22

Depending on the Spirit

Apart from Christ we cannot bear good fruit – Jn. 15:4-5
Necessity of a new heart – Ezek. 36:26-27

NOT: 50/50... or God starts the ball rolling...

... But a work of the Spirit – Philippians 2:12-13

... And no passivity/laziness... but “stir up” (Heb. 6:11-12) and “work out” (Phil. 2:12) and “build yourselves up” (Jude 20)

The limits of a Christian's good works

We still fall short of God's glory – e.g. Neh. 13:22

We cannot do “more” than God requires (vs. Roman Catholic heresy of supererogation)

Further... see paragraph 5 →

5. We cannot, by our best works, merit forgiveness for sin or eternal life at the hand of God. This is true because of the great disproportion between our best works and the glory to come, and because of the infinite distance between us and God. We cannot benefit God by our best works nor render satisfaction for the debt of our former sins, for when we have done all we can, we have done merely our duty and are unprofitable servants. This is because, insofar as they are good, these deeds proceed from the Spirit; and, insofar as they are done by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.

6. Nevertheless, because believers are accepted through Christ, their good works are also accepted in him. They are accepted not because believers are in this life unblamable and unprovable in God's sight, but because he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, even though it is accompanied by many weaknesses and imperfections.

7. Although the works done by unregenerate men may in themselves be things which God commands and things which are useful to themselves and others, yet—because they do not come from a heart purified by faith, are not done in a right manner according to the Word, and are not done for the right purpose, which is to glorify God—they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God or make one suitable to receive his grace. Yet, neglecting them is even more sinful and displeasing to God.

Why we cannot merit eternal life

Good works cannot merit forgiveness – Rom 3:20

See the gulf between Christian works and...

- What we SHOULD be & WILL be – 1 John 3:2
- God's holy character and works

We cannot add to God, all goodness is in Him – Ps. 16:2, Luke 17:10

They are the Spirit's work or "fruits" – Gal 5:22,23

... and are mixed with sin (Rom. 7:15,19, Isa. 6:46). But...

The Lord accepts and takes pleasure in our works!

We are accepted through Christ: "in the beloved" – Eph. 1:6

... and in Him our works/sacrifices are "acceptable" and "pleasing" – 1 Pet. 2:5, Heb. 13:20-21

Praise Him! Our Father knows us... our weaknesses... yet loves us and is pleased by our imperfect works!

What about the good works of non-believers?

Thank God for his common grace:

- They may conform with Scripture & be useful (e.g. Jehu in 2 Kings 10:30-31, "have done well... did not turn from sins")

But they are sinful because they do not:

- Come from a purified heart...
- Seek to obey the Bible
- Seek the glory of God
- Please God, Rom. 8:8

Warning: 1 Cor. 13:3, "give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames", but...

Personal response: for what should we give thanks... confess... pray?