

What Our Lord Teaches Us About Good Works: A Sermon Study on Ephesians 2:8–10

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[This is the fourth in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The historical background which led to the inclusion of Article IV in the Formula of Concord is given on pages 112 and the following in the *Concordia Triglotta*. A review of this bit of history will be valuable to those who plan to preach on the articles of the Formula of Concord in connection with the Synod-wide observance of the 400th anniversary of the Book of Concord. The preacher will need to be careful, however, that he does not try to incorporate in his sermon so much of what he has read that the sermon becomes more of a historical lecture than an interpretation and application of his text.

It came as a considerable surprise to me to find that it was Melancthon who first advocated the proposition, at least in Lutheran circles: "Good works are necessary for salvation." I had been under the impression that the proposition was exclusive property of the Roman Catholic Church and that Lutherans from the outset had been united in their opposition to it. (This becomes a good reason for not relying upon memory solely, but for checking sources.) Under pressure Melancthon abandoned the form, if not the substance, of the proposition. But it was vigorously championed by George Major and others. The reason why Major urged his proposition was that the "greater number" of those who claimed to be good evangelical Christians "imagine that they believe, and imagine and fabricate a faith which may exist without good works, though this is just as impossible as that the sun should not emit brightness and splendor" (p 117). We can sympathize with his motives, but not with his method. The fact is that whenever the Word speaks of salvation, it excludes works altogether. When it speaks to those who through faith in the saving grace of their Lord have salvation, it encourages them to be active in performing good works.

Ephesians 2:8–10 was chosen as the text for a review of our confession concerning good works because this double aspect of good works in Scripture clearly appears. It has the other advantage of being a familiar text, well suited to aid hearers in their review and application of the truths which our confessions set forth. We shall begin with a cursory exegesis and follow it with suggestions for homiletical use.

The text is a concluding summary of all that the apostle had written since 1:3. Hence he begins verse 8 by using the definite article before the word grace. He is speaking of the grace to which he had referred repeatedly in the foregoing. God elected us "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (1:6). We have redemption through the Savior's blood "according to the riches of his grace" (1:7). When he credited faith to the working of God (1:11–14, 19), he described grace in action. When he earlier in chapter two detailed how utterly powerless human beings are to do anything toward being saved by calling them dead and then made the transition by saying "but God" (2:4), he again gave all credit for our believing to God and joyously wrote: "by grace are ye saved" (2:8), words which he again picks up in our text. He presents no abstract definition of grace but rather shows us grace in action, the work being totally the Lord's and the motivation for it coming entirely from Him without any stimulation for it on the part of sinful human beings.

"Ye are saved" with its perfect refers to an accomplished fact in the past, the effects of which continue into the present. The word "saved" implies rescue and is a drastic term implying not an effortless act but rather force and speed, something akin to "snatch." That from which we were rescued he had previously mentioned: sin (1:7), death (2:1), wrath (2:3). The resultant state after such rescue is security. He had previously mentioned some details of this salvation: adoption (1:5), redemption from sin (1:7), the ultimate redemption at the end of the world (1:14), hope and an eternal inheritance (1:18; 2:7). The picture that comes to mind is that of one who

by a benefactor is snatched from the swirling waters of a whirlpool which threatened to suck him down to certain death and is drawn into a fair land of sunshine, peace, and satisfaction.

“By faith.” He had referred to faith several times, again without going into an abstract definition of the term (1:1,13,15). But the entire context had shown that faith is confidence in the Savior who redeemed us with His blood, and in the Father who adopted us as His children; that faith is the certainty of attaining to the heavenly inheritance.

“And that not of yourselves.” The “that” is a good translation, for the *τοῦτο* does not refer only to one term in the preceding, but to the entire concept: “by grace are ye saved through faith.” The “not of yourselves” is the antithesis to this truth. It emphasizes the fact that we contribute nothing to our being saved, nothing to our becoming believers. And so it becomes a refutation of the position which is also refuted in Article IV of the Formula of Concord: “Good works are necessary for salvation.” For good works are something which we do, while the text says that God does it all.

That is emphasized by the next words: “it is the gift of God.” Here we are reminded of how the apostle in Romans 4:1–4 shows that the term “grace” rules out any possibility of merit or cooperation on the part of man: “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” (v 4). In our text the apostle has already stated that the giving of the gift was motivated by grace.

He emphasizes his point: “not of works, lest any man should boast.” Here in plain words we have the refutation of the principle: “Good works are necessary for salvation.” If salvation is a gift and an accomplished fact, a truth emphasized by the use of the perfect tense, then good works cannot be a factor in determining who is going to be saved. “Lest any man should boast” underlines this truth: there is no contribution on the part of the one who is saved, no cooperation, nothing on the basis of which he may claim a scintilla of credit. All credit belongs to God.

One more remark rules out the idea of man’s cooperation or merit in the matter of becoming one who is saved by grace through faith: “We are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus.” The word “workmanship” tells us that He made us what we are just as the vase which is fashioned by the potter becomes what it is only through the efforts of the potter and can do nothing to merit the process or assist in it. This truth is underlined when the apostle modifies “workmanship” with “created in Christ Jesus.” The classical definition of create is: to produce something out of nothing. So we were nothings until God saved us by grace through faith. That this involves not only a use of omnipotence but above all the saving work of Jesus is shown by the addition of the words “in Christ Jesus.” By connecting us to Christ Jesus by creating faith in Him in our hearts God saved us. This is the worship aspect, expressing the believer’s joy in Jesus. The doctrinal aspect is that both the terms “workmanship” and “created” eliminate any possibility of a contribution on man’s part in the process of being saved. God is the only cause and source of our salvation.

The remark: “We are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus” is transitional. At this point an application would be in order. Some reference will have to be made to the issue at the time of the writing of the Formula of Concord. But we do not want to give the impression that the problem faced in our text is only one of historical interest. The local situation will determine to what degree polemics are called for. There may be competition or problems caused by those who operate entirely with the *opinio legis*, lodgery, Scouting, certainly the type of religious thinking promulgated by the media. There may be Rome or liberal Protestants who attempt to combine the goodness of God and the goodness of man as cooperating factors in man’s salvation. There may be those who represent a subtle synergism, on the one hand glorifying Jesus as the only Savior, but on the other, giving credit to man for his being saved because he made a decision for Christ. We cannot cover the whole scope of error, but shall restrict ourselves to those errors which more immediately threaten our members. But we dare not overlook the fact that the *opinio legis* is deep-seated in the Old Adam of our members and shall need to point that fact out to them lest they settle into smugness because they are members of an orthodox church. We can quote some of the comments which we may have encountered: “I’m sure that I’ll get to heaven because I have always led an upright life.” “If you want to get to heaven you’ve got to be good.” Our corrupted logic poses a constant threat to all of us. If we can lose salvation by living in sin, must it not follow that if we

strive to do good we shall be saved? Such reasoning, logical though it may sound, can be silenced only by setting over against it the truths of our text.

While the primary aim of the gracious work of God is salvation, it has another goal also: “created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” This brings us to the second part of the text, the thought that good works are necessary on the part of those who have salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. This second aim of God is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture also. There are the words of Jesus to His disciples (and us): “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit” (Jn 15:16). Paul puts it this way when he speaks of our Savior Jesus Christ: “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Tit 2:14).

What is meant by good works? The apostle presents no abstract definition. But the definition is implied. They are works done by those who by faith in Jesus are saved. Unfortunately we are not able to say that everything that a believer does is a good work, for he still has his sinful flesh which produces the opposite of good works. But when a believer acts as what he really is, when his new man acts, he does produce good works. Since God made him a believer that he might do good works, good works are works of which God approves. Since we still have the problem of our sinful flesh, we might easily become confused as to whether what we propose to do is good or evil. But God has in His law given us an objective standard by which we can determine the quality of a work. There are two adjectives which are translated “good” in reference to works: *καλόν* and *ἀγαθόν*. The Titus passage quoted above uses the former, our text the latter. The distinction between the two is so fine that the words are often used interchangeably. If any distinction is to be made, *καλόν* might be taken to emphasize more the pleasing character of the work, *ἀγαθόν* its beneficial character.

Of our good works the apostle says in conclusion: “which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” There are two ways of interpreting these words. We have already mentioned that in His law God has given us a standard by which we can determine the quality of our works. Some suppose that the apostle is here reminding us that in His law God has in advance set down the guide for our conduct and made us believers so that we might be able to follow this guide. That the law is a guide for Christian conduct is correct. The Formula of Concord speaks of this use of the law in detail when it discusses the third use of the law.

What gives us pause in considering this the intended meaning of our text, however, is the term “before ordained.” The thought in the original is “prepared in advance.” Before I ever do a good work, my life has been so shaped by God that the opportunity to do a given work at a given time would be set before me. I shall still need to evaluate the work which I have the opportunity to do in the light of God’s law. Someone might be at the bedside of a person who has terminal cancer and see on the table beside his bed a bottle containing enough sleeping pills for a lethal dose. He might consider this an opportunity to do a good work by giving the sufferer the pills to end his misery. But the Fifth Commandment would remind him that he has no authority to end a human life and that to do so could not be a good work. But given an opportunity to do a good work and assured by God’s law that the work would be God-pleasing, one thing remains and that is to act, to “walk” in every such opportunity and not to sit still or pass by on the other side.

This interpretation of our text is exhilarating. It means that the believer can wake up in the morning with the confidence that the new day is going to be a day of opportunity for doing good works because God has so planned his life that there will be those opportunities. It provides an antidote for the feeling of frustration on the part of those who are in humble circumstances and feel that if they were a missionary in a foreign field or a nurse they would have opportunities for doing good works, but bound as they are to household obligations or a menial job they have no such opportunities. Luther saw this long ago when he said that the Christian maid scrubbing a floor is doing a good work, better by far than the self-chosen works of those who take monastic vows. This also involves the comfort that if the Lord has a particular good work in mind for us, He will get us to the right place at the right time no matter how much of our schedule or of our plans has to be upset. The former interpretation looks more at the believer as he determines to guide his conduct by the standard which God has supplied beforehand in His law. The latter looks more at the providence of the Lord in arranging the life of a believer in such a manner that the opportunity to do good works is constantly going to be set before him.

What, then, is going to motivate the believer to do good works? It is the knowledge that God wants him to do them. Why will that motivate him? He is thankful for the grace which God has shown him by working saving faith in his heart. It lies in the very nature of the believer to do good works; God made him that way. The more he considers what the Lord has done for him, the more eagerly will he seize every opportunity for doing good works which is set before him. Thus the gospel creates people who are “zealous of good works.”

Here is where Major made his mistake. He was rightly disturbed by the false security of those who argued that since they were saved by faith alone they did not have to bother about good works but could live and do as they pleased. Employing the false logic to which we referred before, he reasoned that if a man can lose salvation by living in sin, if he is to be saved he must do good works, good works are necessary for salvation. But God’s Word never says that. In spite of his professed love for the gospel, Major resorted to the law to produce results which only the gospel can produce. But the end does not justify the means, and Article IV of the Formula of Concord firmly refutes his error. The old man needs to be warned about the consequences of disobedience, and Scripture is full of such warnings. But the problems which he causes are not to be solved by dragging good works into the matter of salvation.

Homiletical Suggestions

If this sermon is to be one of a series, a brief reference to the previous sermon or the purpose of the series might serve as the introduction. Otherwise one possibility would be to ask: Are good works necessary for salvation? This question is answered in different ways. Let’s see how God answers it.

The basic outline could look like this:

What Our Lord Teaches Us About Good Works

- I. They play no part in our salvation.**
- II. They will follow in the life of those who are saved.**

The following expanded outline will suggest one way of utilizing the contents of the text:

- I. They play no part in our salvation.
 - A. Salvation was needed.
 1. Sin.
 2. The curse.
 - B. Salvation was bestowed.
 1. The fact. The text speaks of people who have been saved. Saved means rescued from sin and the curse. The result: the saved stand before God without sin and as heirs of eternal life. This will be a brief explanation of the term. Details follow in 3.
 2. The motive—grace. It stresses the fact that the love in which God saved men arises solely in God with nothing on the part of those to whom it is shown to elicit it or assist it in its efforts.
 3. The method.
 - a. Objective justification. Man was guilty of sin and under the curse. To save him God provided a Savior (Mt 1:21). He is God’s Son become true man. He became man to take our place under the law (Ga 4:4). His perfect obedience credited to us (Ro 5:19). He assumed our guilt and suffered its penalty so that we might be free from guilt (Eph 1:7) and punishment (Ga 3:13).
 - b. Subjective justification. Christ’s active and passive obedience were rendered for all. But it does not benefit those who in ignorance or deliberate opposition do not accept it as having been rendered for them (Jn 8:24). Hence: ye are saved by faith.
 - 1) The nature of faith: not historical only, but trust.

- 2) Such faith is the work of God.
 - a) Man's corrupt nature leaves him dead, unable to trust in his Savior.
 - b) Quickening is necessary, and that is God's work (1:19–20).
 - c) The means (1:13).
 - d) This faith makes us the saved ones. Grace gave us a Savior, grace worked faith. Hence: by grace are ye saved through faith.
 - c. Because salvation is by God's grace it is sure. If it depended upon us in any way, it would not be. Therefore we can be thankful that by the next words we are assured that our salvation in no way depends upon us.
- C. Salvation is not of works.
1. The fact: 9a. What this excludes:
 - a. The inherent legalism (*opinio legis*) which ascribes all credit to works, cf. Pharisaism, lodgery, liberal theology.
 - b. The attempt to make works a contributing factor: you must believe but also do good works, which ultimately makes works decisive, cf. Rome, sects, Major's proposition, our own danger.
 2. The aim—no boasting. Rules out everything, even our act of believing, as something to which we can point and claim credit.
 3. Ergo: good works are not necessary for salvation, the truth confessed in Article IV.
- Transition: But our text does point out that after we have salvation works are necessary.
- II. They will follow in the life of those who are saved.
- A. The saved will do good works.
 1. By saving them God created them to do good works (Ga 5:6).
 2. Through His gospel He continually motivates them to show their love for Jesus by doing good works.
 - B. God provides the opportunity for good works.
 1. His law directs love into the proper channels. We do not have to invent good works: traditions of men (Mt 15), monasticism, compulsory tithing. It also prevents us from considering something a good work when it is not: active euthanasia, divorce to end bickering, white lies.
 2. He sets opportunities to put the law into action as He shapes our lives: to tell others about our Savior, to help our neighbor in need, to admonish and comfort our brethren.
 - C. Believers are encouraged to do good works: "that we should walk in them." This is a reminder to keep our eyes and ears open to notice the opportunities to do good works which our Lord sets before us and then not to pass by on the other side, but to let our lives be marked by our walking from one opportunity to the next as, having made use of one opportunity, we look for the next (Ga 6:9a).
- Conclusion: Thank God that we are saved by grace through faith and that good works on our part are not necessary before He will bestow upon us the blessings of salvation. Then let us be eager to show our thanks by doing good works.