Does Ephesians 2:10 Teach Sanctification Or Not?

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Some are questioning the NIV's translation of Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

The arguments brought against, this translation are usually these: 1) The context that precedes end follows deals with what Christ has done for us, not what we do in thanks to him; and 2) The preposition ἐπί does not express purpose, but the basis on which something is done, so the translation "to do good works" is wrong. It should be translated, "We are created in Christ Jesus on the basis of [his] good works."

Let's address the second point first. It is true that ἐπί does basically mean "on, upon." But its meaning is not limited to this translation. As lexicons (e.g. BAGD,II, b, ε) and grammars (e.g. Moulton III, p 272) show by usage, this preposition with the dative also expresses purpose. Several examples are: Matthew 3:7, τὸ βάπτισμα = Pharisees and Sadducees came "for baptism" (NASB, Jerusalem Bible, NEB, RSV, Phillips) or "to *be* baptized" (TEV, Living Bible); 1 Thessalonians 4:7, ἐπί ἀκαθαρσίᾳ = God did not call us *to be* impure (Living Bible, Phillips, RSV, NEB, Jerusalem, NIV, TEV, NASB); also 2 Timothy 2:14 and Philippians 3:12. So the NIV translation "to do good works" for ἐπί ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς cannot be faulted as giving ἐπί a meaning it can not have.

Nor is it true that the context demands that this verse is speaking of what Christ did, rather than what God wants us to do. It is a basic rule of hermeneutics that the immediate context of a word or clause is determinative for meaning rather than any wider context. While the verses that precede and follow Ephesians 2:10 speak of what Christ did for us, it is equally clear that the internal context of this verse itself is speaking of what we do. Proper hermeneutics tells us that the meaning of this verse is determined by the words of this verse itself rather than by what the surrounding verses say.

The words in this verse which make it clear that Paul is talking about sanctification are the words ἐν αὐτοῖς περιπατήσωμεν. When Paul uses the verb περιπατέω, he is always speaking about how a person lives his life. The meaning of the word elsewhere in the NT is simply "to walk," but BAGD indicates that the meaning "walk of life" is decidedly Pauline. Using a computer search of the Pauline epistles or consulting a concordance reveals that Paul uses this verb over 30 times with this meaning (seven times in Ephesians, including this verse). The verb περιπατέω —used as it is in this verse with a first person plural subject and speaking about good works—can't possibly be speaking of anything but sanctification.

This last part of the verse, which clearly speaks of sanctification, is what governs the meaning of the first part of the verse, rather than the verses which precede verse 10. The meaning of ἐπί, therefore, is "for the purpose of," not "on, upon." The whole verse speaks of what God wants believers to do, not what Christ has done for believers. That this is the way Luther understood this verse is also clear from his translation which is almost exactly the same as that of the NIV: *Denn wir sind sein Werk, geschaffen in Christo Jesu zu guten Werken, zu welchen Gott uns zuvor bereitet hat, dasz wir darinnen wandeln sollen.*

One additional thought: Does Paul ever inject a thought dealing with sanctification into the middle of a discussion of what Christ has done for us? At least one other place comes to mind immediately, Philippians 3:10. In the middle of his discussion of Christ's righteousness becoming his own by faith, Paul says he wants to know "the fellowship of sharing in his [Christ's] suffering." Paul obviously is not saying that he wants to add his sufferings to those of Christ as contributing to his salvation. Rather he is speaking of his willingness to suffer for Christ. So Paul's brief tangent in Ephesians 2:10 in a context in which he is speaking about what Christ did for us is not unique.