

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

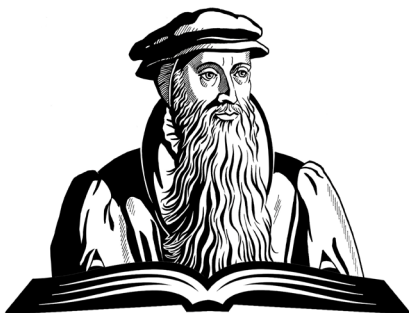
Module 5:

SOTERIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Lecture 9

THE DOCTRINE OF GOOD WORKS



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 5 ~ Lecture 9

The Doctrine of Good Works

How do you distinguish between different types of fruit trees? Well, that's a pretty simple question. You look at the tree to see what kind of fruit is growing on the branches. Either bananas, or mangos, or papaya, or some other fruit. Well then, how can you guarantee that when you plant a fruit tree, you will be sure to eventually get the fruit you want—mangos, for example? Well, the answer is that you must be sure that you have the right kind of roots. You would not plant a small tree with papaya roots, and expect mangos to grow on it. The root determines the fruit. Jesus makes this point in Matthew 7, verses 16 to 20. He says, “Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit....Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” Those with an evil heart of unbelief will bring forth evil fruit unto disobedience, whereas those with faith, rooted in Christ, will bring forth fruit by the Holy Spirit, unto holiness and good works. You cannot sever the connection between the root and the corresponding fruit. The works of men, whether good or evil, bear evidence to where they are rooted.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual believer. Building on the previous lecture, which addressed Sanctification, we'll consider in this present lecture the doctrine of Good Works. And first of all, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Good Works.

We read, in Ephesians 2, verses 8 to 10, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Well, Paul explains where good works belong, and where they don't belong. He says that the believer is saved by grace. Grace is God giving to us what we don't deserve. It is not us giving to him. So he says, “faith;...is the gift of God.” You may recall from the previous lecture that faith receives what God provides in Christ. This is why he says salvation is “not of yourselves,” and “not of works.” We do not earn, pay, or merit salvation by bringing and contributing something to God in exchange for his saving mercies. The believer is justified by faith alone, receiving the imputed righteousness of Christ, and thereby granting us acceptance and access to God. Man has nothing in which he can boast. Since all comes from God, all glory must go to God alone.

Secondly, the believer is incapable of producing good works. We saw this in a previous mod-

ule, that the natural man, in his sinful depravity, is dead, and blind, and ignorant. He has no ability to do anything good. As Paul says, in Romans 3, verse 12: “There is none that doeth good, no, not one.” So this rules out the possibility of man earning salvation through good works.

But we also have to ask the question, does that mean there is no place at all for good works? Well, not at all. Paul goes on to say, in these words in Ephesians 2, that those who are saved by grace through faith are God’s workmanship. God does something with them, through them, and in them. Through his saving mercies, he brings alive those who were dead in sin—as you see in verse 1—and enables them, by this grace, to bear the fruit of Good Works.

Well, this could only take place by being in Christ, as Paul says—being brought into saving union with Jesus Christ. Those united to Christ are created in him unto good works. God’s design for them is to bear the fruit of good works for his glory. He not only enables them, he has before ordained that we should walk in good works. God’s plan of salvation, and more specifically the work of sanctification, includes this purpose—God’s purpose, to produce the good works of Christ’s likeness in his people. Good works, therefore, are an indispensable necessity in the Christian life. You can think of good works in terms of a mathematical formula. It is not faith plus good works equals salvation, but rather, it is faith equals salvation plus good works, or salvation accompanied by good works.

Well, this introduces us to the doctrine of Good Works. But we need to further open up the details and clarify some important distinctions. So, in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach us about the place of Good Works within the doctrines of Salvation.

And that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of Good Works. And there’ll be a half dozen or so points under this doctrinal exposition. First of all, we need to highlight the importance of Good Works in Sanctification. So you should note that the chapter on Good Works is one of the longest chapters in the whole Westminster Confession of Faith, demonstrating the importance of this doctrine. Paul himself reinforces the importance in Titus 3, both verse 8 and verse 14, where he says, “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.” And then, in verse 14, he says, “And let ours also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful.” So we see it’s important.

Secondly, we need a definition. What do we mean by “good works”? The Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 1, helps us by saying, “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.” So we must limit the scope of good works to what God prescribes in the Bible alone. They’re not defined by what a person thinks is a godly idea, whether by adding or subtracting from the Word. You know, people can create their own rules of holiness. No, we’re limited to what God has commanded. Nor are men to base good works merely on good motives. So just because a person means well, does not qualify something as a good work, if it’s not derived from Scripture. Remember the words of Isaiah 8, verse 20: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” These good works include both internal graces—things like love, and joy, and peace, and sorrow for sin—and external actions—practical obedience to God’s commands, and service to the Lord Jesus Christ. So that’s a definition—kind of the scope of good works.

Thirdly, we need to consider the relationship of faith and its fruit. Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 2, says, “These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.” So the fruits flow from saving faith in Christ.

That means that without true faith, there can be no true good works. But it also means that wherever there is a lively faith, there will be fruits that follow. In other words, if there is no fruit in a person's life, there is no faith. As we read in Hebrews 12, verse 14, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." Good works are necessary. Hebrews 12 is saying, "If there's no holiness, there will be no heaven." Why? Because if there is no fruit of holiness, there is no root of saving faith.

Fourthly, the ability to do good works comes from God himself. We saw in Ephesians 2 that the believer is "God's workmanship." Again, Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 3 says, "Their ability to do good works is not all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ." Remember Jesus saying, in John 15, verses 4 and 5, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." So the believer is absolutely dependent upon Christ. All spiritual fruit, including good works, come from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Remember Galatians 5, which lists some of the fruit of the Spirit—the Spirit is producing these fruits.

Well, does that mean that the believer is passive in the pursuit of good works? The answer is, no. The Bible does not teach that we are to "Let go, and let God." Rather, we are to engage in diligent pursuit of good works, in dependence upon the Lord. So faith draws on the resources in Christ for obedience and growth in grace. God provides promises, for example, in the Word, to direct and strengthen our faith in Christ. So faith lays hold on Christ in the promises, and in dependence upon his grace, pursues obedience.

So, for example, God promises, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness"—2 Corinthians 12:9. And he promises, "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it"—1 Corinthians 10, verse 13. Well, the Christian responds to these promises with absolute confidence, in faith. We can say, "Thy grace is sufficient. Thy strength is made perfect in weakness. Thou art faithful. Thou wilt enable me to escape temptation." And in the strength of the Lord, the believer resists temptation, depending on his grace, and confident that God will do as he promised.

Fifthly, even the believer's best good works fall short—far short of our duty to God. None of them can add to God's saving grace. Remember Jesus' words, in Luke 17, verse 10: "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do." Even our best obedience is tainted with sin, and needs the blood of Christ to cleanse and purify.

Well, sixthly, does that mean the believer's good works are ultimately worthless, because they're tainted with sin? No, far from it. Why? Because there's a connection between their persons being accepted in Christ, and their good works being accepted in Christ. Westminster Confession, chapter 16, paragraph 6, says: "Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprouvable in God's sight, 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." So we see the fruit of faith in good works are truly good, through Christ, and in God's sight. God accepts and rewards what is sincere. It's sincere faith, despite the imperfections. Well, this is really amazing, because it means that grace is rewarded with grace. God enables his children to please him, and then he rewards them for it.

You'll notice that the New Testament has a great deal to say about heavenly rewards for God's people. And the anticipation of reward is one of many proper motivations in pursuing obedience. In fact, the Bible teaches us the reward is commensurate with the work. So the more good works or fruit, the greater the reward. All men are not equal—both in hell and in heaven. There are various degrees of punishment in the damnation of hell—not everyone will be precisely equal. And likewise, in heaven, not all will be equal in terms of the reward that is received. Jonathan Edwards had a very graphic way of illustrating this. Jonathan Edwards was a godly minister from the 1700s. He said, "In heaven, picture every believer as a cup." He says, "In heaven, every cup will be filled to the brim and overflowing." Every believer will be filled with joy and blessing, and overflowing with it. "But," he said, "there will be different sized cups." He's describing the differences in terms of rewards that correspond to the fruitfulness of God's people.

Seventhly, the end, or goal, or aim of good works is glorifying God, which, of course, is man's chief end. The more spiritual fruitfulness a believer has, the more glory is brought to God. In John 15, verse 8, Jesus says, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." This is why God ordains for his people to walk in good works. He intends to gather great glory to his own name. When his people are made more and more Christ-like, they show forth more and more of Christ's glory. Godliness, after all, is God-likeness. So he displays his glory in vessels of mercy, for his own praise.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically. We can fall into a ditch on two sides. The Westminster Assembly—the godly men who wrote the Westminster Confession—had to deal with two extremes. On one side, there was legalism—the idea that we're saved by works in Justification (we've dealt with that in a previous lecture). But on the other side, the ditch on the other side was what was called antinomianism. And that error taught that there was no necessity of good works in Sanctification. So, as we've learned, the Bible rejects both of these errors. We must remain watchful against both of them. On the one hand, we have legalism—adding works to faith, or whatever else, to God's grace. Adding works in Justification destroys the gospel. Rather than Salvation being God coming to us, and us being accepted by him, in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, man makes a contribution, and he, in part, takes credit for the salvation that he enjoys. This is terrible. This is against everything the Bible teaches. And so, that error of adding works to Justification is serious. But on the other side, we need to be careful about the idea of there being no necessity of good works in Sanctification. Because eliminating the fruit of faith and good works in Sanctification also destroys the gospel. Some insist that a person can accept Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and then continue to live in sin, however they please, with no thought of personal holiness. As we've seen, if there's no fruit, there is no root of faith. And this would undermine the design of Christ's saving work. Remember Romans 8, verse 29, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." The purpose of God bringing the gospel is to take a hell-deserving, sinful, and polluted people, and to save and redeem them, in order that he might recreate them after the likeness of his own Son, thereby showing forth his glory. This undermines the gospel. So we need to be aware of these two ditches on either side, both of which are errors.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves. And first of all, we can think about motivation—the motivation for pursuing good works in Sanctification. And one of the great motivations is love and gratitude for saving mercies. So the believer, who has done nothing, has earned nothing, but has received freely, by God's grace, the salvation of their soul, they look upon all that God has undertaken, and upon Christ and his willingness to humble himself, and to

offer himself as a sacrifice for sin, to stand as a substitute in the place of God's elect people, and to bear the wrath of God, and to satisfy divine justice, and all that Christ has accomplished. And the believer's heart swells with a sense of deep gratitude for all that the Lord has freely bestowed upon them. It intensifies love for the Lord. And it's that love and gratitude that are chief among the motivations that prompt us to desire to please him and to glorify him. We know that he's glorified through us bearing much fruit and bringing forth good works, and so the believer is in earnest about that. We depend upon the Lord to enable us to glorify him in pursuing these good works. The Sum of Saving Knowledge which was a document often printed with the Westminster Confession of Faith, says this: "The obedience to the law must flow from love, and love from a pure heart, and a pure heart from a good conscience, and a good conscience from sincere faith. This, he makes the only right channel of good works." Jesus says, If you love me, you'll keep my commandments.

Secondly, we could think about some of the benefits of good works, very briefly. One thing that good works do is that they strengthen the believer's assurance. They see the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in their soul, and bringing about fruitfulness, and the good works are being born, it's one component—not the only, but one component—that further strengthens and deepens their assurance that they are in a state of grace. Assurance that they have true saving faith, and are therefore persuaded of God's love toward them, and of their salvation.

Another benefit is that good works adorn the believer's profession of faith. So they beautify, they show forth the handiwork of God in their life and in their soul. Another thing, another benefit, is that it edifies others, so other people, other believers are built up and strengthened in their own faith, and in their own pursuits of holiness, through our good works, and our service to Christ and to them, and the life example of holiness, and so on.

Furthermore, it has the benefit of being a witness to unbelievers. Jesus says this, "They will see your good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven." And so it's a testimony to the grace of God to those who are unbelieving, which accompanies the preaching of the gospel. And as we noted, the greatest benefit of all, in terms of good works, is that it glorifies God.

Thirdly, we need to make a thorough use of the promises, to exercise faith in dependence upon Christ. What I mean is, as you are reading through the Bible, you should ransack all of the promises that God's given, and by faith, to lay hold of those promises, to believe them, to trust and put the weight of your soul upon them, and thereby to quicken your faith, to then go forward in the Lord's strength, in dependence upon him, to seek his glory. So for example, you're reading in the prophets, and you come to Hosea, and you come to the last chapter, in chapter 14, verse 5, God promises: "I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon." Well, faith puts the weight of our soul on the certainty of God's promise, saying, "Lord, thou wilt be as dew to me. I'm confident in that." He's going to water us and refresh us, and strengthen us. "And thou art the one who will make me to grow in fruitfulness." And then trusting the Lord that he will do as he promised, we venture out in dependence upon him, to walk in holiness, and in gospel fruitfulness, in the production of good works, to his glory. And so, we need to exercising our souls in the work of Sanctification, and asking the Lord to bring about the fruit of good works.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about good works. We've noticed that while good works are excluded from Justification, they serve as the necessary fruit of faith in Sanctification. God glorifies himself through the abundant fruit of his Spirit produced in the lives of his people. But does God's work of grace in the believer continue over the whole span of the believer's life? Well, in the next lecture, we will consider that question, with the Lord's help, in addressing the doctrine of Perseverance.