



Lesson 4

Good Works

Worship

Psalm 119:33-40 (spoken responsively by half-verse)

Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.

Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.

Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.

Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.

Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.

Fulfill your promise to your servant,
so that you may be feared.

Take away the disgrace I dread,
for your laws are good.

How I long for your precepts!
In your righteousness preserve my life.

Prayer: Lord God, your righteous decrees are indeed our delight. But our lives on this earth are lives of struggle. By your Spirit give us the peace of forgiveness and a clean conscience. Give us strength to fight against the temptations that assault us. In your righteousness preserve our lives and help us to reflect your love in all we say and do. Amen.

Introduction

One of Luther's chief battles was against the pervasive teaching of work-righteousness—that people's works somehow merited God's favor. Work-righteous teaching is a rational, or logical, approach to salvation. By nature (and conscience) we know only, though imperfectly, the moral will of God. The Old Testament emphasis on the laws of Moses *appeared* to lend support to work-righteous



theology. But that was a misunderstanding of the Mosaic covenant, which was given to keep the people of Israel disciplined and focused until the Messiah would come. (See also Lesson 3 in this series for Luther’s insights into “How the Christian Should Regard Moses.”) Scripture teaches throughout that salvation always has been by faith alone. The law was never able to save, because its demands for perfection were beyond the ability of human beings. But the God-man Jesus did fulfill all righteousness. Faith in Jesus alone justifies.

Luther’s strong emphasis on “justification by grace through faith alone” made some (even many) people anxious about its effect. Would this teaching, which clearly stated that “good works” had no part in justification, eventually lead to immoral, irresponsible behavior? Would gospel “freedom” eventually lead to a license to sin? Was justification by grace simply too easy?

In his 1520 treatise titled *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther addressed the issue of good works. He directed people especially to the writings of St. Paul for an explanation of how faith works. There the Christian discovers the true connection between faith and works. Set free from condemnation by Christ, believers desire to follow the will of the God who loves them. Luther was not against good works—he strongly encouraged pious lives of faith—but he did not want people to think that they were part of any “salvation equation.” With faith in Christ as the focus, good works would naturally follow.

The Power of the Word in the Early Church

Romans 5:20–6:18

^{5:20} The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

^{6:1} What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. ¹⁸ You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

1. St. Paul anticipated challenges to the preaching of full and free forgiveness in Jesus Christ. In groups of three to four people (or on your own if you prefer), compose at least two objections someone might offer to the teaching of justification by grace alone. Using passages from the section of Romans above, counter each of these arguments.

2. Baptism is a “washing of rebirth and renewal” that offers and grants saving faith. Paul considers the implications of Baptism for the life of a Christian. Finish this sentence: Baptism energizes the Christian’s life of faith by . . . (Give at least three responses).

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3. Read Matthew 25:31-40. Jesus' account of the judgment does not contradict what Paul says in his letter to the Romans. Use Paul's explanation in Romans chapter 6 to clarify Jesus' words about the judgment.

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The Power of the Word in the Reformation

Excerpt from *On the Freedom of the Christian* (1520) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 327-372.

The following statements are therefore true: "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works." Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, "A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" [Matt. 7:18]. It is clear that the fruits do not bear the tree and that the tree does not grow on the fruits, also that, on the contrary, the trees bear the fruits and the fruits grow on the trees. As it is necessary, therefore, that the trees exist before their fruits and the fruits do not make trees either good or bad, but rather as the trees are, so are the fruits they bear; so a man must first be good or wicked before he does a good or wicked work, and his works do not make him good or wicked, but he himself makes his works either good or wicked.

Illustrations of the same truth can be seen in all trades. A good or a bad house does not make a good or a bad builder; but a good or a bad builder makes a good or a bad house. And in general, the work never makes the workman like itself, but the workman makes the work like himself. So it is with the works of man. As the man is, whether believer or unbeliever, so also is his work—good if it was done in faith, wicked if it was done in unbelief. But the converse is not true, that the work makes the man either a believer or an unbeliever. As works do not make a man a believer, so also they do not make him righteous. But as faith makes a man a believer and righteous, so faith does good works. Since, then, works justify no one, and a man must be righteous before he does a good work, it is very evident that it is faith alone which, because of the pure mercy of God through Christ and in his Word, worthily and sufficiently justifies and saves the person. A Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely. He seeks neither benefit nor salvation since he already abounds in all things and is saved through the grace of God because in his faith he now seeks only to please God.

Furthermore, no good work helps justify or save an unbeliever. On the other hand, no evil work makes him wicked or damns him; but the unbelief which makes the person and the tree evil does the evil and damnable works. Hence when a man is good or evil, this is effected not by the works, but by faith or unbelief. . . . Paul says in Heb. 11 [:6], "For whoever would draw near to God must believe. . . ." And Christ says the same: "Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad" [Matt. 12:33], as if he would say, "Let him who wishes to have good fruit begin by planting a good tree." So let him who wishes to do good works begin not with the doing of works, but with believing, which makes the person good, for nothing makes a man good except faith, or evil except unbelief.

Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works. Faith redeems, corrects, and preserves our consciences so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works, although works neither can nor ought to be wanting; just as we cannot be without food and drink and all the works of this mortal body, yet our righteousness is not in them, but in faith; and yet those works of the body are not to be despised or neglected on that account. In this world we are bound by the needs of our bodily life, but we are not righteous because of them. "My kingship is not of this world" [John 18:36], says Christ. He does not, however, say, "My kingship is not here, that is, in this world." And Paul says, "Though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war" [2 Cor. 10:3], and in Gal. 2 [:20], "The life I now live, in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Thus what we do, live, and are, in works and ceremonies, we do because of the necessities of this life and of the effort to rule our body. Nevertheless we are righteous, not in these, but in the faith of the Son of God.

4. Summarize how the illustrations of the tree and the builder help to explain the Bible's teaching about "good works."

5. Kayla says, "You Lutherans don't teach enough about good works." How would you respond to her statement?

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6. The letter of James says that “faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26). Answer someone who says that there is a contradiction between Paul (and Luther) and James.

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The Power of the Word Today

“But the law works,” said a sincere Christian who was responding to his pastor who made the comment, “We must encourage good works by the gospel, not the law.” This is a natural way to think. Laws can guide behavior—tell people what or what not to do. Disobedience to law results in punishment. It seems, therefore, that telling people to do this or that—or else such-and-such will happen—should motivate them to behave in a more moral way. But God’s perfect law of love can be a real burden, especially since it demands perfect obedience from imperfect people. We are left with guilt and shame. Laws may guide obedience, but they do not change the heart. That kind of change in attitude comes only from a heart that is freed from guilt and punishment. This is the work of the gospel.

7. Ephesians 2:8-10 captures well this lesson on good works. It says: *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Why is it important to add verse 10 to the often-memorized sentence in verses 8 and 9?

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8. Imagine that your congregation’s offerings are less than what you anticipated receiving to carry out your ministry plan. How will you encourage the “good work” of giving?

9. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today's study?

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Summary

It has been said that there are really only two religions: the religion of works and the religion of grace. Because human nature will gravitate toward a teaching of works, it is critical that the proper gospel-focused teaching of grace dominate in our churches and schools. Rather than separate faith and works, it is better to communicate the biblical sense that "faith works."

At Home

Memorize Ephesians 2:8-10, verses of Scripture that help explain the relation of faith to good works.

Sometime this week thank a fellow Christian who performed a good work that made your life easier.

Additional Reading

Read the confessional statements on "Good Works."

- Augsburg Confession—Article XX
- Apology (Defense) of the Augsburg Confession—Article XX
- Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article XIII
- Formula of Concord, Article IV

Read *Treatise on Good Works* (1520) – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 44, pp. 15-114.

Closing Prayer

Hymn: “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (CW 377:1,3,4,10)

1. Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,
With exultation springing,
And, with united heart and voice
And holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done,
How his right arm the victory won.
How dearly it has cost him.
3. My own good works availed me naught,
No merit they attaining;
My will against God’s judgment fought,
No hope for me remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair
Left naught but death to be my share
And hell to be my sentence.
4. But God beheld my wretched state
Before the world’s foundation,
And, mindful of his mercies great,
He planned my soul’s salvation.
A Father’s heart he turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently;
He gave his dearest treasure.
10. “What I on earth have lived and taught
Be all your life and teaching;
So shall my kingdom’s work be wrought
And honored in your preaching.
Take care that no one’s man-made laws
Should e’er destroy the gospel’s cause.
This final word I leave you.”