

THE GOSPEL LESSON 23

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 5

Good Works, Assurance, and the Verdict

Titus 3:8 – *This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.*

WHERE WE ARE

The last lesson reviewed the four texts Reformed Theology presses hardest: James 2:14–26, Matthew 7:15–23, Matthew 13, and Hebrews 12:14. Read in their settings, none of them asks how a person receives eternal life, and none of them makes a believer's works the test of whether he has it.

With works removed from the gospel and from assurance, the place of works in the believer's life has to be stated plainly in Scripture. Believers are commanded to do good and to turn from evil, and they are given reasons. This lesson sets out what good works are, why a believer does them, and where assurance rests. It then answers the question that has governed these five lessons: whether Reformed Theology is a disagreement in theology among those who hold the same gospel, or another gospel.

I. GOOD WORKS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Westminster gives a full chapter to good works. The first section defines them:

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. (WCF 16.1)

That sentence is true. God defines what is good, and no tradition or good intention adds to what He has said.

The second section states what good works are for:

These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life. (WCF 16.2)

What is affirmed. Most of that sentence is Scripture's own teaching. Believers do good in thankfulness (Romans 12:1), to build up the brethren (Romans 15:2), to adorn the doctrine of God (Titus 2:10), to silence those who slander (1 Peter 2:12, 15), and to glorify God. Westminster also teaches that God is pleased "to accept and reward that which is sincere" in the believer's works (WCF 16.6). Reformed Theology does not lack biblical motives for a godly life.

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What is separated. Three phrases in WCF 16.2 carry something more. Good works are “the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.” By them, believers “strengthen their assurance.” And they are done “that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.” The first phrase makes works the proof that a man believed. The second makes works a ground for knowing he is saved. The third places works on the road to eternal life. Those three phrases are the fifth petal, stated inside the chapter on good works.

The three phrases also change the motives beside them. A man who must find evidence of salvation in his works cannot do them only out of thankfulness or only for his brother’s good. Each work also counts for or against his own standing. Scripture gives the believer reasons for doing right that leave his standing out of the question, because his standing is settled.

II. WHAT GOOD WORKS ARE

Westminster’s words, “whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto,” come from Ephesians 2:10, and that verse follows the plainest statement of grace in the New Testament:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8–10)

Works are named twice. In verse 9, works are excluded as the source of salvation. In verse 10, works are stated as its purpose. Scripture never reverses that order.

We are His workmanship. The noun is ποίημα *poiēma*, that which is made, and the verb “we are” stands in the present indicative. The clause states what believers are, not what believers do.

For good works. The preposition is ἐπί *epi* with the dative, and it states purpose. Galatians 5:13 has the same construction: “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” The Galatians were called for freedom, and the next clause warns them against misusing it. A purpose can be stated by God and neglected by the believer.

Which God prepared beforehand. What God prepared is the works. The verse does not say that God determined believers would do them. God determined what good works are, so that believers are not left to decide for themselves what pleases Him.

So that we would walk in them. The clause states purpose. The verb is περιπατέω *peripateō*, to walk about, and the same verb describes the old life in 2:2: “in which you formerly walked.” A walk is the sphere in which a life is lived. Ephesians then spends three chapters commanding that walk, beginning with “I... implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been

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called” (4:1). If good works were automatic based upon the Holy Spirit or genuine faith, then there is no reason to command or implore believers to do good works.

What counts as a good work. Where Scripture names good works, they are done for the benefit of someone else. “Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification” (Romans 15:2). The believer shares with the one who has need and speaks the word that builds up (Ephesians 4:28–29). “Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14). Good deeds are learned. Believers who do not learn them are unfruitful, and Titus still calls them “our people.”

Avoiding sin is never called a good work. Scripture commands both in different words: the believer is to put off the old man and put on the new (Ephesians 4:22–24), to turn from evil and to do good.

III. WHY A BELIEVER DOES WHAT IS RIGHT (PROPER MOTIVATION)

With eternal life settled, Scripture gives the believer four reasons to do good and to forgo evil.

1. Grace. “For the saving grace of God has appeared to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12). We have seen that the grace that saved is the reason for the life described and the motivation to live it. Romans makes the same appeal: “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). The urging rests on mercies already given, and on what the believer now is: “consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11), and “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead” (6:13). The believer is called to live in line with what God has made him.

Grace does not create a debt. What must be repaid was not a gift (Romans 4:4, 11:6). The believer responds to grace. He does not pay for it.

2. Natural consequences. Grace removes condemnation. Grace does not remove the results of sin in this life. “Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler” (1 Peter 4:15). The governing authority “does not bear the sword for nothing” (Romans 13:4), and it does not ask whether the offender is a believer. Sin damages bodies, marriages, reputations, and assemblies, and the believer who sins bears those results as anyone else does.

3. The Father’s discipline. “It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons” (Hebrews 12:7). The word is παιδεία *paideia*, the training of a child. It is instruction and not punishment, because the punishment for sin was borne by Christ. Hebrews introduces the subject as “the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons” (12:5), which is a word from Scripture. The same noun names what Scripture is for: “training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The verb, παιδεύω

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paideuō, is the one Titus 2:12 uses of grace “instructing us.” In this age, the Father trains His children chiefly through His Word, taught and applied in the assembly.

The hardship in Hebrews 12 is hostility from sinners (12:3–4), and Hebrews teaches the readers to endure that hostility as training. Scripture does not teach a believer to read an illness, an injury, or a loss as a message about a particular sin. Sonship is assumed in the training (12:7–8). Sonship is not tested by it.

4. The evaluation. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). There is an evaluation.

Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:9–10)

The *judgment seat* is the βῆμα *bēma*. Everyone who stands there is a believer, and the question of eternal life is not raised: the believer “does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). What is weighed is what the believer has done. The word translated “bad” is φαῦλος *phaulos*, and means worthless. The evaluation tests the worth of the work.

1 Corinthians 3 describes the test. The passage speaks first of those who build up the church, and it states the principle of “each man’s work”:

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The Lord “will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts” (1 Corinthians 4:5). What is rewarded is the right thing done for the right reason.

This includes the believer under temptation: “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life” (James 1:12). Resisting sin with the right attitude and with motivation drawn from God is rewardable.

A reward is μισθός *misthos*, something earned, and for that reason, eternal life is never called a reward. “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due” (Romans 4:4). Scripture keeps the gift and the reward apart. The gift is received by believing. The reward is earned by faithful service. Westminster’s phrase “that they may have the end, eternal life” joins them and turns the gift into a reward.

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What the four reasons share. Each reason is addressed to a believer who may fail to act on it. Grace can be received in vain (2 Corinthians 6:1). Consequences fall on believers who ignore them. The Father's training can be regarded lightly (Hebrews 12:5). Reward can be unrealized. None of the four says that a believer who fails was never a believer, and loss of reward has no meaning if failure proves there was no salvation to begin with. Under the doctrine of Reformed Theology, the man of 1 Corinthians 3:15 cannot exist. In Scripture he is saved.

IV. THE SCRIPTURAL CONFUSION

Westminster rests the added phrases on two passages. *These good works ... are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers ... strengthen their assurance, ... having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.*

Romans 6:22. The closing words of WCF 16.2 are taken from this verse: "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life." Westminster reads a sequence in it. The believer's holiness is the road, and eternal life is reached at the end of the road.

The verse states what believers have. "Freed" and "enslaved" are aorist passive participles: both were done to the believer, and both are finished. The main verb is ἔχω *echō* in the present indicative, "you have." The sanctification, ἁγιασμός *hagiasmos*, is the set-apartness that belongs to those whom God freed and took as His own. As in Hebrews 12:14, the noun names a standing and not a record of conduct. Verse 19 commands believers to present their members in keeping with that standing, and what is commanded can be disobeyed.

Verse 23 gives the reason, and it settles how the outcome is reached: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Death is a wage, ὀψώνιον *opsōnion*. Eternal life is a gift, χάρισμα *charisma*. The verse that explains the outcome of 6:22 removes eternal life from the things earned or reached by conduct.

2 Peter 1:5–11. Westminster draws its rule for assurance from this passage: "it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure" (WCF 18.3). On that reading a believer grows in these qualities, and by that growth he becomes sure that he is among the elect. Four things in the passage stand against the reading.

The qualities are commanded. "Applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence" (1:5). The verb is ἐπιχορηγέω *epichorēgeō* in the aorist imperative. Believers are told to add these qualities to their faith. What must be added by command is not supplied by faith itself.

The man who lacks them was cleansed. "For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins" (1:9). 2 Peter does not say this man was

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never purified. 2 Peter says he has forgotten it. His problem is sight, and the remedy is to look again at what Christ did.

The results named are not assurance of salvation. “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you” (1:10–11). The readers are “brethren,” and the calling and choosing are already theirs. The adjective is βέβαιος *bebaios*, firm. Two results follow from diligence: a walk that does not stumble, and an entrance richly supplied. The verb of verse 11 is the verb of verse 5. The believer supplies, and the rich entrance is supplied to him. That is reward. The passage does not say that by these qualities a person learns whether he is saved.

The chapter says where certainty is found. Eight verses later the same word returns: “So we have the prophetic word made more sure” (1:19). The prophetic word is set above what the apostles saw and heard on the mountain (1:16–18). In 2 Peter 1, the firmer thing is what God has said, not what a man has experienced.

Where assurance rests. Assurance rests on the promise and on the One who made it. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). Abraham was “fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform” (Romans 4:21). The promise reads the same on the day a believer walks well and on the day he fails.

2 Corinthians 13:5 is often quoted against this: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” The Corinthians were “seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me” (13:3), and the answer turns their demand around. They are to look at themselves, because they believed through Paul’s ministry and are themselves the proof of it. The expected answer is that Christ is in them. The verse is not an instruction to search one’s works for evidence of salvation.

V. THE VERDICT

One question has governed these five lessons. Lesson 19 set the test from Galatians 1:6–8, where a message that added one condition to the gospel of Christ is called “a different gospel.” A doctrine is a disagreement in theology if it leaves the gospel a message heard, believed, and sealed (Ephesians 1:13). It is another gospel if it adds anything to that sequence, at the front or at the back.

The first four petals. Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, and Irresistible Grace make claims about God: His decree, His choice, the extent of the provision, and the manner of His grace. Lesson 19 found that they misstate His character, because the God of Scripture loves the very ones He will judge. They add no condition to hearing, believing, and sealing. By the test of

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Galatians 1 they are a disagreement in theology. Reformed Theology is also owed its credit: against Rome it recovered the truth that a sinner is justified by grace through faith apart from works.

The fifth petal. Perseverance of the Saints is different in kind. Reformed Theology teaches that the believer's life must show the works, and that those works are necessary for final salvation. That requirement in the words of Westminster, Dort, Grudem, and Piper, found it inside the Reformed definitions of faith, grace, and the Spirit, and this lesson has found it in Westminster's chapter on good works. A result that must appear for the promise to hold is a condition, and a condition added after faith is the Galatian error: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). On that point Reformed Theology is another gospel.

Lordship Salvation. Lordship Salvation is this theology carried to its conclusion. Reformed Theology says the works must follow faith. Lordship Salvation moves the same requirement to the front and places it inside faith, so that to believe is to surrender, to turn from sin, and to commit to obey. If works are certain to follow true faith, it is a short step to say that faith without that commitment was never true faith. We answered that teaching, and it stands under the same verdict as a false gospel for the same reason.

The scope of the verdict. The verdict falls on the doctrine. Reformed Theology by their own definition states all points stand or fall together. However, it is not a judgment of any person's standing before God. Everyone who heard the promise of eternal life in Christ and believed it was sealed, and nothing he was later taught about perseverance removes the seal. The verdict concerns the message. A gospel that makes eternal life wait on the believer's record is not the message of Ephesians 1:13, and it is not to be preached as though it were.

VI. GOOD WORKS IN SCRIPTURE

Scripture commands good works and never places them ahead of the gift. Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). The offering of Isaac came years later (Genesis 22). Titus states the order for the church: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy" (Titus 3:5), and only then, "those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds" (3:8). Care is required of those who have believed, and care can be withheld.

The believer does what is right because of grace, because sin has consequences, because his Father trains him, and because his Lord will evaluate his service and reward it. He does not do what is right to obtain eternal life, to keep it, or to find out whether he has it. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).