



Taking heed to the doctrine

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“As to our good works” (2)

The nature of good works as works

Works occupy a prominent place in Scripture; in fact, Scripture is from beginning to end a book of works. Scripture attributes works to the triune God, Christ, angels—wicked and holy, and men—wicked and holy. We begin our examination of the good works of the believer by considering the *nature* of good works and noting five general characteristics of our good works *as works*.

A conscious, acting subject

First, works are those deeds consciously and volitionally performed by rational, moral beings. Strictly speaking, a creature like the sky is not capable of performing works. Psalm 19:1 teaches, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.” The visible expanse of the heavens above us gives glory to God; however, it is not an intelligent creature consciously and willingly producing “works” of praise unto God as holy men and holy angels can do. We men are different than the creatures in the heavens above and in the earth beneath and in the waters under the earth, for God created us as personal beings with an intellect and will so that we are able to live consciously before His face performing works of service in love for Him and our neighbor. In marriage, a husband and wife are called to love each other and show it in word and deed, but if a whole week has gone by and they have not consciously performed even one considerate act towards each other, living as intimately as two stars twinkling side by side in the heavens, something is dreadfully amiss. God created us, and in Jesus Christ has recreated us, as new creatures able to do good. Consciously! Willingly! Cheerfully! Lovingly!

Exerting ourselves with energy

Second, the doing of good works is *work*. It requires effort and energy. The New Testament Greek word for “work” is *ergon*, from which we get our English words “energy” and “energize.” The term *ergon* indicates that works, whether good or evil, do not automatically proceed from the doer, but in producing works the doer

must consciously *exert* himself. The apostle Paul said in I Corinthians 15:10, “...but I labored more abundantly than they all...,” and the word “labor” refers to exhausting toil. During his missionary labors in which he suffered afflictions, imprisonments, stripes, hunger, thirst, shipwreck, and slander, Paul’s loving service on behalf of the church took tremendous effort. Deep expressions of loving devotion did not automatically proceed from him simply because he was a believer. Likewise, a false apostle does not automatically slander Christ, scatter the flock, speak perverse things, and draw away disciples after him, by virtue of the fact that he is an unbeliever. His evil deeds are something he chooses to do and exerts himself toward with energy.

That a good work is *work* makes any doctrine of salvation by works terrifying. If good works are not fruits of thankfulness performed in gratitude to the saving God who by His Spirit works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure, but rather somehow contribute to salvation, then salvation comes by our exertion and energy. Good works as fruits of thankfulness are exhausting enough for us believing sinners who so often fail to do the good that we would, while we do the evil that we would not. But if we had to exert ourselves energetically unto the performance of good works in order to obtain salvation from God, the task would not only be impossible but would also bring us to spirit-crushing dismay. Working to earn is bondage.

What we do

Third, works are something we *do*. “Do” is the verb that the Holy Spirit of inspiration employs throughout Scripture to join together the believer as the conscious, acting subject and good works as the product of that believer’s activity. I *do* good works. You *do* good works. Believers *do* good works. We can understand *works* and *doings* as synonymous terms expressing the same idea.

Hear only a brief testimony of the Scriptures: “Six days shalt thou labor and *do* all thy *work*” (Ex. 20:9). “Moses said, hereby shall ye know that the LORD hath

sent me to *do* all these *works*, for I have not done them of mine own mind” (Num. 16:28). Jesus, the perfect doer of perfect works, said of His works, “My meat is to *do* the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work” (John 4:34), and “...for the *works* which the Father hath given me to finish, the same *works* that I *do*, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me” (John 5:36), and “...the *works* that I *do* in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me” (John 10:25), and “I have glorified thee on the earth, I have finished the *work* which thou gavest me to *do*” (John 17:4). Elsewhere Scripture exhorts the believer, saying, “Let him eschew evil, and *do good*, let him seek peace and pursue it” (I Pet. 3:11); and the rich are charged, “that they *do good*, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate” (I Tim. 6:18); and we are all taught, “whatsoever ye *do* in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:17). We receive the benediction that God “make you perfect in every *good work* to *do* his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ...” (Heb. 13:21).

In keeping with Scripture, the confessions use the same verb “do” in connection with good works. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, “Since then we are delivered from our misery, merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still *do good works*” (L.D. 32, Q&A 86)? Quoting Philippians 2:13 and Luke 17:10, Belgic Confession, Article 24 teaches:

Therefore we *do* good works, but not to merit by them, (for what can they merit?) nay, we are beholden to God for the good works we *do*, and not He to us, since it is He that worketh in us both to will and to *do* of His good pleasure. Let us therefore attend to what is written: 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*.” (emphasis added)

What further proves that good works are something we *do* is the demand of God’s law. God’s law of ten commandments is the standard according to which the believer does good works (Heid. Cat., LD 33, Q&A 91). The law says, “Do!” The law makes plain that if a man will live with God there is that which the man must *do*; he must *do* good works of obedience in love for God and the neighbor. When a chief expounder of the law came to Jesus tempting Him with a question about salvation by the law, saying, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life” (Luke 10:25), Jesus brought the man to agree that the law requires perfect love for God; and then Jesus sent that lawyer away with what he must know if he wants eternal life by the law: he must *do*:

“Thou hast answered right, this *do*, and thou shalt live” (Luke 10:28). The law declares, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to *do* them” (Gal. 3:10). God says to all Israel, “Therefore shall ye keep my commandments, and *do* them: I am the Lord” (Lev. 22:31). One who continues in the perfect law of liberty is not only a hearer “but a *doer* of the work” (James 1:25).

What it means “to do” is not only indicated by Scripture’s use of that verb in joining together the believer as subject with his works as an object, but by the lexical definition of the verb. The main OT Hebrew verb that is translated “do” is *asah*, which means “to do, make, produce, work, accomplish, or perform.” From this verb is derived the Hebrew noun *ma’aseh* which means “work” or “deed” as in Genesis 44:15, “...what *deed* is this that ye have done...?” The main NT Greek verb translated “do” is *poieo* which means “to do, make, labor, produce, or work.” When we *do* good works we are *doing* something, we are *producing* something, we are *working*. We are not merely willing or thinking or desiring internally in the soul but we are performing something through the instrumentality of the body. Again, I *do* good works. You *do* good works.

This verb “to do” that means “to work or perform” is not to be confused with the auxiliary verb “do” that simply serves to make the present tense of a main verb. For example, “Blessed are they which *do* hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled (they are not doing (*poieo*) hunger or performing (*poieo*) thirst, but they *are presently* hungering and thirsting),” (Matt. 5:6). Or, “Who by him do believe in God...” (I Pet. 1:21), which does not mean that we do or perform (*poieo*) belief but that we *are* believing.

That a good work is that which we *do* clearly distinguishes good works from faith. Neither faith as a bond nor faith as an activity is something we *do*, work, or perform. Good works proceed from faith, but faith itself is not a *doing*. We do not *do* faith, or *do* knowledge, or *do* trust, confidence, assurance or certainty. We do not *do* embracing, appropriating, or resting. While *doing* and *working* are two synonyms expressing the same idea, *doing* and *believing* are certainly not. *Doing* and *believing* are completely different concepts. Believing is one activity; doing or working is a completely different activity (Rom. 4:5). Commenting on Galatians 3:12, Prof. H. Hanko explains:

Faith is exactly the opposite of law. Faith does not operate on the principle of “doing” or “working.” Faith is exactly not a matter of working. There are those who claim that faith is a work of man, an activity of man’s own free will. In a subtle way they change

the correct statement “Man is saved by faith alone” to mean “man is saved by the work of believing.” This is an inexcusable corruption of biblical truth.”¹

To be sure, faith is an activity (“embrace” is a favorite verb of all three of our Reformed confessions). To be sure, faith is demanded by the gospel call. To be sure, it is necessary to address the hearer of the gospel with the imperative, “Believe!” To be sure, faith as a response to the gospel call is properly called obedience (Rom. 10:16). To be sure, *we* believe, not God. But faith (or, for that matter, repentance as a renouncing of and turning from our sinful works with a broken spirit and contrite heart in response to the gospel call “Repent!”) is not a *doing* or *working* or *performing*. Faith, the faith whereby we are justified, the faith by which we are saved in being brought into the conscious experience and assurance of the favor of God has no inherent efficacy in itself, but is an instrument whereby we embrace the meritorious doings of Jesus Christ. Faith in its activity of believing is not a doing whereby we accomplish something or perform something. While we *do* good works, we do not *do* faith. There is no activity like the activity of faith as the believer who is sovereignly grafted into Jesus Christ by an unbreakable, organic bond inclines his heart unto and rests in the almighty hand of God who through Jesus Christ accomplished everything for the elect sinner. It is exactly the nature of true faith to look away from all the doing that proceeds from it and to look unto all the perfect doings of the Savior revealed in the gospel.²

The distinction between the *activity* of faith and the *doing* of works can be illustrated by the distinction between our eye and our hand. Seeing with the eye is an activity but it is not a doing. The eye does not produce anything. The eye simply beholds a beautiful object and the heart fixes itself upon that object in admiration. So also faith is seeing, an activity whereby we behold the lovely Christ in the gospel and our heart fixes itself upon Him in complete trust. Faith is seeing (John 3:3), but faith is not a doing whereby we produce something. When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, the Israelites who looked and believed were saved (John 3:14-15). They were exercising their faith in beholding an object and embracing a promise con-

nected to it, but they were not doing or performing any work by their activity of seeing. However, the hand is different than the eye. It is an instrument for *doing*. We read in II Kings 22:5, “And let them deliver it into the hand of the doers of the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord: and let them give it to the doers of the work which is in the house of the Lord, to repair the breaches of the house.” Believers in the local church who work with their hands the things which are good are doers who do good deeds of loving service. Even as the physical eye and hand are distinct in their activities, so faith (eye activity) and the doing of good works (hand activity) are different. The believer never looks for salvation in the doings of his own hands or even in the worthiness of his own faith as the spiritual hand of his soul (which spiritual hand is different than his physical hand of doing that holds the bread and wine, Belgic Confession, Art. 35) but to the wondrous works that Jehovah’s hand has wrought in the crucified Jesus Christ.

The perfect test to determine whether or not faith is a doing is to hold faith up to God’s law. The law demands doing. It says, “Do this and live!” If we should take our faith and present it before the law, what would the law say? If the law accepts faith, then faith is a doing because the law only accepts doing. Faith fails the test. The law will not accept faith. The law is not of faith (Gal. 3:12). The law does not want faith. The law never commands a man to believe. The law will snarl at any man who tries to present it with faith. The law will roar in fury at any man who tries to trick it by presenting it with faith as if it were a doing. The law knows faith is not a doing and the law does not want faith. The law wants works, only works, perfect works, the performance or doing of works. When Jesus came to keep the law on our behalf, He did not give the law faith; He gave the law what the law demanded: the doing of perfect works. He said, “Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, to do thy will O God” (Heb. 10:7). He *did*. He *worked*. He *labored*. He *performed*. He *accomplished*. His whole life long He laid His perfect doings before God’s law, fulfilling every jot and tittle.

In light of the fact that good works are a doing and faith is not a doing, we must be careful never to confuse faith and works by turning faith into a work we must perform in order to be saved. Salvation is by faith alone. Our experience of salvation as justified believers who know God’s pardoning grace is not by our doings but by faith in Christ. If faith truly is something we must *do* to be saved, saved in any sense of the word, then faith is no more faith, grace is no more grace, the gospel is no more gospel, and—terrifyingly—salvation is impossible because salvation by works is utterly impossible for all men

1 Herman Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty* (Jenison MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 209.

2 For further reading on this distinction between faith and works, see Herman Hoeksema’s sermon on Romans 3:27, entitled “Boasting Excluded” as found in *Righteous By Faith Alone* (Grandville MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002), 133-140. The second point of the sermon is called “Excluded Because, according to the Law of Faith, Man Does Nothing” (emphasis H. Hoeksema’s).

whether they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit or not. It is one thing to command a man to *believe* (gospel), but it is another thing to command a man to *do* (law). When it is time for the gospel to issue its call, the gospel can frame to pronounce the words, “Repent and believe!” but the gospel cannot frame to pronounce the words “Do this and live!” Such a command is the gospel’s Shibboleth.

The gospel is soul-comforting good news to the trembling, guilt-stricken sinner because the gospel declares, “You do not have to *do* anything to be saved. The Lord Jesus Christ has done every deed for all whom the Father has given to Him. Believe! Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and His doings and thou shalt be saved! And if you do believe, understand it is only because the Father of lights, from whom comes every good and perfect gift, has united you to Jesus and worked your gift of faith into activity by His Word and Spirit so that you cannot but embrace Christ your righteousness!” Hearing and believing that gospel, the sinner goes forth gratefully doing good works.

Known to others

Fourth, works are visible to others. Even as the works of an artist are not the invisible concepts in his mind but the visible paintings in the gallery, so our works are visible and known. The believer’s good works are seen

by unbelievers, for we read in I Peter 2:12, “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.” The works of a believer must be seen or they fail in their function as witnesses to the ungodly, but also they fail in their demonstrative function justifying our claim that we have faith (James 2). Most importantly works are visible for the public vindication of the righteousness of God when in the day of the revelation of His righteous judgment He renders to every man according to His works (Rom. 2:5-11).

Good or evil

Finally, works bear a moral character before God and are either good or evil. Since God demands that even eating and drinking be done to His glory (I Cor. 10:31), all who perform works must consciously and willingly do everything to the glory of God. All will answer for what they have done “whether it be good or bad” (II Cor. 5:10).

In conclusion, my prayer is David’s, “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14).