

Good Works are not necessary as a cause of salvation, but they are necessary

All thanks and praise to God every moment of our lives that our salvation is not caused - no, not in the least part - by our good works! For if it were, every moment of our lives would carry over it the verdict of *guilty* and the sentence of death and hell. No, our salvation is - and we cannot say it too often or too emphatically - entirely the work of Christ on the cross, just as the faith that embraces Christ's work for us is a miracle created in us by God through the Gospel.

Nevertheless, that doesn't mean that we have been saved to sin or that the struggle to live lives that flow from the love of Christ is optional. Good works are not necessary as a cause of salvation, but they are necessary. The good work of hearing God's Word commanded in the Third Commandment is so vital and necessary because our faith cannot survive without it, and good works that serve our neighbours (the Fourth through Tenth Commandments) are necessary because they need them and because God has commanded them.

It is just as Jesus said: Ours must be lives lived under the cross, not just lives that could be, should be, might be, or sometimes are under the cross. A life under the cross, a life of self-denial for the sake of Jesus and His Word, is a life in which 1. I struggle against the inborn and deeply rooted inclination of my sinful flesh to put self first; 2. I seek to put the Word of God and the best interest of those I am able to serve before my own wants and self-interest, whether that's convenient or not, easy or not; 3. I struggle against the tendency in my own heart to the self-righteous notion that I am good enough the way I am and need not struggle anymore against my favourite sins or the favourite sin of putting myself first; 4. I struggle even against the opposite tendency to despair when I discover how far away I still am from the kind of life God wants me to live. It is a life in which I battle against despair of His love and mercy when I suffer pain and loss in life, either because of my own sins or the sins of others. In such despair one turns his back on the Word of God and the saving merit of Christ just as much as that one does who trusts in whole or in part on his own works to gain salvation.

All of that is part and parcel of the Christian life, of living under the cross. And again, it is not optional. To refuse the cross is to refuse Christ, who both calls us to it and sends it in order to keep us ever mindful of the fundamental truth that He alone is Saviour. For how can we look at even a moment of our lives and imagine that we have done it all and are already good enough to gain heaven? Paul, as his life was drawing to a close, confessed that he had not yet gotten to that point and knew he wouldn't until he went from the cross to the crown in heaven (Philippians 3:12-14).

It is with this very difficulty and the pain of living under the cross in mind that Jesus calls us to Himself to give us both comfort and aid as we follow after Him under the cross. He speaks to us so tenderly: "*Come to Me, all you who are working hard and carrying a heavy burden; and I shall give you rest!*"²⁹ *Take My yoke on you and learn from Me! For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*"³⁰ *For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light,"* (Matthew 11:28-30).

How well Jesus understands us! We focus on *our* pain and *our* difficulty. He brings us to focus on *Him* and *His* Word. The sinful flesh will complain that it's all too hard and that it is about time that someone served *me*. However, Jesus gives the new man - the Christian nature that comes from gospel-created faith - strength and courage in His Word. The 'rest' of which Jesus speaks is the rest that comes to the struggling soul aware of its imperfections and failures; it is the rest of forgiveness in the Gospel. It is the rest that renews and reinvigorates us for renewed struggle. Likewise, it is the assurance from the Gospel that one day the struggle will end in the victory that Christ has won for us by His struggle, His cross, His suffering and death for us and for our salvation. The assurance of both kinds of rest, the rest of forgiveness now and the rest assured at the end of this short life's battle, make His yoke easy for us and His burden light. After all, He has not left us alone. By His presence with us in His Word and sacrament He carries our cross with us. Indeed, He permits nothing heavier than what we can bear and nothing more than what is intended for our good and our strengthening. What athlete does not strain and sweat in order to gain strength and become better at his sport? Even a tree gains strength from being buffeted by the wind. Just so, Jesus assures us that the struggle is itself a blessing. For if we had no struggle we would quickly forget our need of His constant aid. Had we no regrets and nothing to repent of, we would soon forget the greatness of His love in bringing us salvation at so great a cost to Himself, the cost of His own cross.

So then, in love to Him, in response to His love for us, we strive to live lives that are pleasing to Him, lives that are rich in good works.

What then is a good work? God does not leave us in doubt on the definition of works that are good in His eyes. For a work to be good in the eyes of God, 1. The work must first be done in accord with the Law of God and not contrary to it. 2. It will be done in grateful thanksgiving to God for the gift of salvation - not to earn or merit that which only God can give as a gift of grace on account of the merit of Christ. 3. Generally speaking, and this is most evident in the Second Table of the Law (the Fourth through Tenth Commandments), the work will be done for the benefit of others, not just for what I can get in return. 4. It will be done in the joyful expectation that God accepts it and is pleased with it. That expectation is justified even though none of our works are in themselves ever perfect, because they are done in connection with Christ; that is, whatever stains them - and us - is covered by the blood of our Saviour who forgives even the unintentional stains on our good works.