

Lesson 20: 2LCF Chapter 16: Of Good Works

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Titus 2:11-14

In this brief lesson, we will look at the Confession's chapter on good works. Though it is a brief lesson, it is a chapter worthy of further private study and consideration.

The Confession clearly spells out the importance of good works in the Christian life, and includes several helpful qualifications. Waldron has provided the following outline:

Outline

Paragraph 1

- I. The norm of good works
 - A. Positively stated
 - B. Negatively stated

Paragraph 2

- II. The importance of good works
 - A. Because of their testimony
 - B. Because of their results
 - C. Because of their role

Paragraph 3

- III. The cause of good works
 - A. Its emphatic assertion
 - B. Its common perversion

Paragraphs 4-5

- IV. The limitations of good works
 - A. Works of supererogation are impossible (paragraph 4)
 - B. Works to merit are impossible (paragraph 5)

Paragraphs 6-7

- V. The acceptance of good works
 - A. The good works of believers (paragraph 6)
 - B. The good works of unregenerate men (paragraph 7)²¹⁵

As part of this lesson, we will offer a brief words of commentary on each paragraph:

Paragraph 1.

Good works are only such as God has 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 intentions.

Mic. 6:8; Heb. 13:21; Matt. 15:9; Isa. 29:13

²¹⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 246.

Exposition

Paragraph one is helpful in providing an overview of the “norm” or “identity” of good works. Here the framers of the Confession make clear that only those good works that are commanded in God’s Holy Word may be rightly considered good. Meanwhile, those works that are carried out contrary to or in addition to God’s Word are neither good nor noble. Rather, they are works devised by men, carried out in blind zeal, no matter how well-intentioned they may be.

Positively: Scripture clearly spells out good works for us.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, *equipped for every good work*.

Negatively: Scripture also warns us against adding to the commands of God.

Matthew 15:9

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ”

Isaiah 29:13

And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men

It is absolutely necessary that believers seek to be equipped for every good work from the pages of Scripture, and not from the commandments of men or their zealous imaginations. In fact some of the most heinous acts in the history of the church that have been well-intentioned “good works” enthusiastically carried out without scriptural warrant—all in the name of Christ. Waldron notes:

The ironic thing is that the most critical and mean-spirited people on the face of the earth are often those who pride themselves on their conformity to a man-made checklist of good works. The spiritual blindness of many professing Christians is revealed in their violation of biblical duty in favour of that which they esteem to be a good work. How often Christian workers have justified prolonged absence from their families and failure to perform the most basic family or parental duties by the good work of being a missionary or an evangelist! How often women have violated the Scriptures in doing the good work of preaching and shepherding the church!²¹⁶

Paragraph 2.

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.

James 2:18,22; Ps. 116:12,13; 1 John 2:3,5; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; Matt. 5:16; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Pet. 2:15; Phil. 1:11; Eph. 2:10; Rom 6:22

²¹⁶ Ibid., 247.

Paragraph 3.

Their ability to do good works is not all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ; and that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is necessary an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them and to will and to do of his good pleasure; yet they are not bound to perform any duty, unless upon a special motion of the Spirit, but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

John 15:4,5; 2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 2:13; Phil. 2:12; Heb. 6:11,12; Isa. 64:7

Exposition

Paragraphs two and three describe the importance and cause of good works.

Good works are important, because they achieve the following:

- They serve as fruit and evidences of a truth and lively faith (James 2:18)
- In them, believers manifest their thankfulness to God (Psalm 116:12-13)
- They strengthen one's assurance (1 John 2:3-5)
- They edify the church (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:24-25)
- They adorn and commend the gospel (1 Peter 3:1)
- They silence opponents of Christ and the gospel (Titus 2:8; 1 Peter 3:16)
- They ultimately serve to glorify God (Matthew 5:16)

Meanwhile, every good work is carried out wholly by the power and work of Almighty God.

John 15:4-5

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Philippians 2:12-13

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Paragraph 4.

They who in their obedience attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.

Job 9:2, 3; Gal. 5:17; Luke 17:10

Paragraph 5.

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because they are good they proceed from his Spirit, and as they are wrought by us they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's punishment.

Rom. 3:20; Eph. 2:8,9; Rom. 4:6; Gal. 5:22,23; Isa. 64:6; Ps. 43:2

Exposition

Paragraphs four and five deal with the limitations of good works and specify that “works of supererogation” (paragraph 4) and “works to merit” (paragraph 5) are impossible.

The encyclopedic definition of works of supererogation is as follows:

Virtuous acts surpassing what is required by duty or obligation... The term—based on the Latin term *erogare*, to pay out or to expend—is found in the [Latin] Vulgate version of the Bible. In the parable, the Good Samaritan tells the innkeeper, “Whatever thou dost spend besides ...,” *quodcumque supererogaveris* (Lk 10.35). The generosity of Zacchaeus in giving half his possessions to the poor and in quadrupling whatever he owed in restitution (Lk 19.8, 9) and the work of St. Paul in supporting himself as a tentmaker (Acts 20.34; 1 Thess. 3.8, 9) are seen as examples of supererogation.²¹⁷

While the Latin term “*supererogaveris*” may appear in Scripture, it is impossible for any scripturally-informed person to believe that the fictional Samaritan, Zacchaeus, or the Apostle Paul had any merit that exceeded that which God expected. This is an untenable position when one compares the words of Paul: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” (Philippians 3:8-9)

Waldron has rightly pointed out that works of supererogation are impossible for two reasons: 1) Works of merit or supererogation demand perfection, but no one is perfect. 2) The norm of good works is nothing else than God’s Word alone; therefore good works are man’s duty and can constitute nothing more.²¹⁸

Paragraph 6.

Yet 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 unreprovable 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 imperfection.
Eph. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:5; Matt. 25:21,23; Heb. 6:10

Paragraph 7.

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and to others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, nor make a man meet to receive the grace from God, and yet their neglect for them is more sinful and displeasing to God.
2 Kings 10:30; 1 Kings 21:27,29; Gen. 4:5; Heb. 11:4,6; 1 Cor. 13:1; Matt. 6:2,5; Amos 5:21,22; Rom. 9:16; Titus 3:5; Job 21:14,15; Matt. 25:41-43

²¹⁷ This encyclopedia article credits Thomas Aquinas: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae, 108.2 ad 3; 2a2ae, 62.3 ad 2. Retrieved from: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/supererogation-works>.

²¹⁸ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 250.

Exposition

Paragraphs six and seven deal outline God's interactions with the works of believers and the unregenerate.

Here the Confession demonstrates that God is graciously pleased and both accepts and rewards the sincere but imperfect good works of his children. Meanwhile, even the "good works" of the unregenerate are but noble sins before God. Here the words of Thomas Watson ring true. In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, he writes: "Till the heart be pure, all our holy things are polluted. They are 'splendid sins'."²¹⁹

Is this fair? Or is this unnecessarily harsh on God's part?

Andrew Fuller provides a helpful illustration to put things into perspective:

Imagine a ship's company that has risen in mutiny against their rightful captain. They take command of the ship themselves and they leave the captain on some deserted island. Then they sail to a distant port, intending to dispose of their cargo and to divide the profits among themselves, and then to continue using the ship in a career of merchant shipping. Now this group of mutineers, for the sake of self-preservation and tranquility on the ship, establish several good laws. There's no lying or stealing on the ship. There's no fighting, no killing. They're very impartial and very fair in the distribution of their profits. They're all very courageous men in the face of danger. They're hard workers and they share with one another and take care of one another if someone gets sick or has a need. They do many things that, in one sense, are good. But, you see, there's something fundamentally wrong with all their supposed goodness, isn't there? All of that goodness is not truly good, because it's all part of a life of rebellion against their rightful captain. It's all just so many expedients by which they enable themselves to continue on in their mutinous lives with peace and tranquility. Therefore, none of their supposed goodness is truly good, it's evil.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Thomas Watson, *A Description of Heart-Purity*. Retrieved from CCEL (Christian Classics Ethereal Library): <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/watson/beatitudes.xviii.html>.

²²⁰ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, Vol. 3 (Revised by Joseph Belcher, American Baptist Publication Society, 1845; reprint, Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 673.