

Good, But Not THAT Good, #2

Breaking the Bonds of Legalism

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I am very grateful to God for the privilege that is mine to preach the word of God to an earnest congregation that wants to hear his word, that wants to take his word in, to apply it to your hearts, to apply it to your lives, to have it transform your thinking, and as your thinking is transformed, to have it transform your life. That's a great blessing and a privilege for me to be able to do what I do.

This morning we come to a theme that has the potential to radically change the entire way that you think about life and the way that you premise your relationship with God and your sanctification and your walk with God and the way that you think in relation to God. We're in the middle of a series that we've loosely titled "Breaking the Bonds of Legalism." We realize that legalism is a terrible trap for people to fall into, either people make up rules of their own that are not found in Scripture, they think they keep those rules and it leads them to a sense of pride and overbearing arrogance. I'm sure we've all met people like that, that look down on others because they don't keep the rules like this other person does and Scripture condemns all of that out of hand. There is also a sense of legalism that we've talked about from the other perspective that tenderhearted, overly sensitive people, you might say, overly introspective people see the failures of their lives, they see their sin, they see their inadequacy, they recognize ways that they have failed or wronged others in the past and they can't fix it now, there are no reparations to be made and they feel the weight of that and walk with a perpetual sense of lingering gloom and doom in their lives and, "You know, I wish I could've done more." There is the same, as we've said for the past few weeks, there is a common root to both of those extremes and it's a mindset that thinks that we relate to God on the basis of our works and the basis of what we do and God either accepts us more or less depending on how our behavior compares to whatever external standard we have made up in our minds or that others have imposed upon us, and it's with great sympathy for those that are caught in legalistic churches and under the influence of hyper-fundamentalist pastors in part that I preach these series of messages, even though that's not a major sense of influence I believe within the body of Truth Community Church.

Look, let's just get some very basic things straight. Let's remember some very simple principles of basic Bible teaching about salvation. Jesus Christ did not save you because you were good. He saved you because you were sinful. He came as a doctor, a physician of souls and came to you when you were desperately sick and brought the healing

medicine, speaking metaphorically, of his cleansing blood and applied it to your souls so that you could be reconciled to a holy God. That is why you were saved. It was never because you had somehow performed in a way that was good enough for him to take notice of you. We are all dead in trespasses and sins without Christ. We are separated from God and in danger of judgment and so Christ never saved you because you were good and once you were saved, he didn't suddenly flip the script and then suddenly become a God who related to you on the basis of your performance. God was full of love, grace, kindness, mercy and patience towards you before your salvation and when you came into union with his Son by faith in Christ, his character didn't change. He is the same loving, gracious, patient, merciful God after your salvation that he was before. His character didn't change and the fact that you could not be saved by works beforehand should give us a sense of understanding of the principle upon which we now grow in Christ now that we are saved. It points us in that direction.

Now, I believe this is something like the fourth or fifth message that I've done on this series. I'm going to do one more next week and I can only say this: these series of messages are like a single woven cloth together. You need the totality of it because otherwise to view one message in isolation, it's easy for people to draw wrong conclusions. We have been teaching on this for a number of weeks. If you are visiting with us, we are so glad that you are, understand that there is a broader context to the things that I am saying here this morning. One of the things that we said is that while we are not saved by works, we are not justified by works that we do, we are justified by faith in Christ alone, one of the things that we said just by way of context is that Christ saves you in part to change you. He changes us so that we become obedient. Part of the work of grace is that it changes our disposition toward God whereas formally we were hostile and engaged in evil deeds, our heart has been changed so that we are tender toward his word; we love his word and we find our delight in obeying him.

So obedience has a place in the Christian life but it cannot save you. What we said last week was that good works, just to define and redefine our terms, good works are those acts which are done in faith by Christians in obedience to God's word that are motivated by love for God and the desire to seek Christ glorified. What you see in that definition is this, is that the aspect of true Christian good works are not simply a matter of external behavior or external conformity. True good works come from a heart that has been transformed by grace that now loves Christ and has a desire to please him. To attempt external behavior divorced from feelings and motivations and affections for Christ are no good works at all, even if it looks like the same external behavior being done by the same people. We have to examine our hearts in this. Do I love Christ or not? Am I motivated in this by my love for Christ?

So that's what we've covered in the days gone by and what we said is this, is that it's very crucial for us all to keep these things in perspective and to keep them in balance. You need two wings on either side of the fuselage of the plane for it to fly properly and that's true of what we're talking about here. If we keep these things in perspective, it will keep us from falling into that sense of legalistic pride that boasts in what we do and in our life and develops in us kind of a simmering sense of entitlement, "Look how good my life is.

God owes me." No, he doesn't. He doesn't and it is foolish for us to think our behavior somehow puts God in our debt to give us what we want. That's not the grounds, that's not the terms upon which we come to Christ. On the other end we said a right view of good works will protect the tender heart from a sense of despair and that oppressive sense of guilt that says, "I know I don't measure up." Yes. Yes. Yes, the thoughtful believer, the understanding believer is sensitive toward sin in his life. Yes, there is a sense in which we recognize our spiritual bankruptcy and when we sin against God, we feel it, we mourn over it, but a proper sense of this idea of good works helps us on that end as well. When we recognize our sin and we're trying to live for Christ, we recognize something very important. We realize that our works may be good in a comparative sense but they are not that good. They are not so good that they pay for our sins. They are not so good that they earn us anything with God. So the thoughtful believer who recognizes the work of Christ on his behalf says, can say freely, "Do you know what? I realize that my life is not perfect. I realize that what I do does not meet God's perfect standard. I realize that what I do is tainted with sin but that does not cast me into despair; that does not cast me into a sucking cycle of despair and guilt because I understand that my ground of acceptance with God is found in someone outside of me. It is found in the shed blood of Christ. It is found in his righteousness. It is because Christ has loved me and given himself up for me that God accepts me at all and my total ground, my complete and exclusive ground of acceptance with God is found in Christ alone."

That understanding, that fundamental principle changes everything and it helps us to recognize that while we may do good works, so-called, as Christians, they are not that good and here's what we mean by that. I'm going to give you four things, one by way of review of what we said last time. When we say that our good works as Christians are good but they are not that good, here's what we mean by this given in four points here this morning. Let me just preface this by saying this as I look forward to what is ahead. Understand that where these things will lead you is this: it will bring you to a place of informed humility about your life and your position before God, it will bring you to that position of humility but it will also bring you to a place of great joy. Humility and joy can coexist, indeed they should coexist in the life of a Christian, and what we start to see and what the key to this is, is seeing how high and lofty and exalted God is and how low and humble we are by comparison. When you recognize that fundamental point, you will understand that your legalistic rules could never possibly earn you favor with God and, therefore, you can give it up for the sake of something far better and something that is actually true, resting in the revealed love of Christ at the cross, resting in his finished work, resting in his abiding care for us so that it's not life by man-centered rules but rather life by Christ-centered faith. That's where all of this is going and when you put these things together and when you lay it out on the table, what you're going to find by the time we're done here today, I promise you is this, you're going to see it could not be any other way. This is utterly undeniable when we think rightly and when we think through what Scripture has to say and just think in terms of basic proper theology, you can come out in no other place. So for those who will embrace what God's word has to say today, there is great liberty, great joy, great peace just on the other side, and for someone, for a Christian to walk out with a legalistic mindset today could only be as a result of the refusal to bow and a refusal to surrender a sense of pride in performance.

Listen, you don't want to be proud of your life, proud of your life in the presence of God can only bring you heartache in the end because it's leading you away from what is true and what is real.

So let's get into this, shall we? Point 1 which we mentioned last time, I'm just going to mention it by way of context: your good works do not merit pardon of sin. Your good works do not merit pardon of sin and what we mean by that is this: your good works as a Christian do not offset any sins that you commit as a Christian. Your good works do not bring God into your debt as if suddenly he owes you. Looking at it from God's perspective, "Oh, now that he's done that, I have to forgive his sins." It's not like that. Beloved, as we've said so very many times and we'll say so many more times if God gives us breath, the only ground for the forgiveness of your sins is found in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and that blood is of infinite value. That blood is the blood of Incarnate God. That blood is the blood that Christ voluntarily shed in love to save you because you could not save yourself and the blood finds its merit in the person who shed it, in the perfect life that led up to its spilling.

Think with me, beloved, just think with me. Have a right and proper view of Christ, a right and proper view of that which motivated him to lay down his life for you. Recognize the infinite value of his person, the infinite wonder of his life, and that that blood was the price of your redemption according to an eternal plan by which Christ was slain before the foundation of the world in the mind of God. Understand from that high and lofty perspective and realize in comparison to that, there is nothing that I could do that could pay for one of my sins let alone the endless multiplicity of them that I've committed. Your works may be good but they are not that good. Nothing that you do could possibly compare to the infinite merit of the blood of Christ which alone is the payment for sin, for sinners of all times in all places. So your good works do not compare to that. That shed blood is the price of the pardon of your sin and the best of what we do in this earthly life as Christians doesn't compare in value to that precious blood and, therefore, you have it in your mind, "Oh, my good works could not be the basis upon which God accepts me. It could never be that way because my good works are done in the presence of something of greatly infinite value by comparison. There is no comparison so my good works do not merit any pardon of sin. They don't earn me any kind of forgiveness whatsoever."

Secondly now as we move into new material. That was all from last week. I spent an hour last week saying what I just said in five minutes. How does that work? I don't know. Secondly, beloved, speaking to you as Christians, we're speaking about the good works of Christians. Just by way of reminder, we have long established that the good works, so-called good works of unbelievers do nothing for them. You cannot be saved by good works. You cannot enter into a relationship with God. You cannot have your sins forgiven by anything that you do and so when we talk about good works, good works from God's perspective can only be done by his people because only his people offer their lives and offer their obedience and offer their behavior from a heart that loves him. His enemies cannot do good works in his presence because they are utterly foul by the fact that they are hostile to God in their hearts. You must first be reconciled to God through

Christ before you can do any good work at all. So when we talk about good works, we're talking about the lives of Christians here, alright? That's very important.

Secondly, the second point for this morning is this and this one stings a bit but it's just the truth: your good works are stained with sin. Your good works are stained with sin. When we talk about doing good works as Christians, we should realize fundamentally in humility that our good works are still not without blemish. Psalm 130:3 says,

3 If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

We've quoted from Isaiah 64, "all of our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment." Many commentators have pointed out that the word used there is the same word used for a woman's menstrual cloth. These are not so intrinsically pure and pristine and perfect that they somehow qualify in the presence of God. The New Testament says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us," 1 John 1:8. And James 3:2 says, "We all stumble in many ways." Beloved, you know that by experience even if you sometimes have a disconnect between your sense of your good works and your sin. One of the reasons that Jesus commands us in the Lord's prayer to confess our sins is because we as his disciples need that as an ongoing part of our lives.

Now, if the good works that we do are mingled with this kind of sin, what can we say except that they are blemished? That they are not absolutely pure? Even the Apostle Paul lamented his own spiritual struggle. Look at Romans 7 with me. Turn there in your Bibles with me, if you will. Romans 7 in verse 21. Let's go back to verse 18. Paul says,

18 ... I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh

He's writing and using the present tense here in contrast to past tense forms he was using earlier in the chapter indicating that he was describing the present reality of his life as a mature believer, writing as an apostle. He said

18 ... I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

What does he conclude from this inward struggle that he describes?

21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

He says, "I see this conflict in me. Even as a Christian, I find this battle going on between the remnants of sin in my life and the desire that I have as a new creation in Christ to obey God and to glorify him with my life. There is a conflict going on. There is a battle within me." And if that is the case, beloved, then here's what we need to think and what we need to realize. Think about it from the perspective of our Lord Jesus Christ: he never had that battle internally. Oh, he was tempted in all ways as we are but Scripture says he was without sin. He did not know a principle of evil within him that was motivating him to evil like we do which we know by revelation and by experience.

So if as we are offering our good works, we are doing so from the mixture of evil that is within us, what can we say except this, whatever else we say about our good works as a Christian, whatever else we say about them, we can at the very least say this in humility in the presence of Christ: the best of what we do as Christians in this life are not equal to the glory of Christ. The best of what we do is not equal to his glory, and if they are not equal to his glory, then we can say this: there may be good works in our lives but they are not that good. When Christ is at the center of your thinking, at the center of your mindset, at the center of your affections, you realize by comparison that, "My life however much I might try to live it to his glory, it's not equal to his. I still fall short of the glory of God." At the very least, beloved, wouldn't it be true to say that in your good works, they are stained at least some of the time with impure thoughts, with impure motives, with a sense of external compliance but your heart is cold and not invested in what you're doing? Isn't that true? Don't you come to church like that sometimes, maybe today? You know, it's good for us to continue on, to persevere in those things, but the point here today is simply this, is to recognize that we need to view the good works of our lives with a measure of humility that says, "They may be good but they are not that good, and if I had not been saved to begin with, I never would have been doing them in the first place. If Christ had not saved me personally, Don Green, several years ago, I would not be preaching his word." I take no credit for this. My preaching is flawed. I do it to the glory of Christ but I realize that compared to Christ this is nothing. If Christ were here to preach, we would see that clearly by comparison. He would preach with a unique power, a unique purity, a unique clarity from an undivided heart, utterly indifferent, completely indifferent to the fear of man or the desire for the praise of men.

I say that simply to illustrate that we must think Christ-centered thoughts as we're thinking about our good works, and when we see him in his glory, we realize he was without sin and then we look at what we do and we say, "Do you know what? It may be good but it ain't that good." And that helps us to see that since God requires absolute perfection, it could not be my obedience which is the premise and final foundation in my relationship with him, and we remember what 1 Samuel 17:9 says, man looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart, and we realize even as believers that there is a mixture, there is impurity mixed with what I do so that, so that I don't make claims in the presence of God that he owes me for what I've done. He could not possibly from his position of perfect holiness, he could not possibly be relating to me on the basis of what I do because what I do does not measure up inside or outside. So our thought in this context is this: we know that we owe our obedience to Christ from his word, we gladly give that obedience. It is the greatest privilege of our life to live in obedience to

Christ but we recognize that it comes with pock marks at best. It comes with flaws. It comes with defects. It comes mixed with remnants of sin. So that we have a right perspective, "Lord, I offer this to you, yes. I offer it to you gladly, yes, but I offer it to you in the recognition that it is not all that it could be or should be because the best of my good works are stained with sin."

Now thirdly, these things get even more compelling as you go along. Thirdly, some fundamental theology here. Thirdly: your good works do not add anything to God. Your good works do not add anything to God and here you need some very basic foundational theology to inform your thinking so that you are thinking rightly about these things. Look, we've studied this in our series in systematic theology over the years. God is independent. God is self-existent. God had no point of origin. He is perfect in wisdom, perfect in knowledge, perfect in power. God has no need whatsoever and I want to show you a couple of passages of Scripture to ground your thought in this and then we can draw out right implications from it.

Psalm 50. Turn to Psalm 50 with me, if you would, another passage that we've looked at in the past on Tuesday nights. Psalm 50 says this in verse 10, God is the speaker here and he says,

10 "... every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know every bird of the mountains, And everything that moves in the field is Mine. 12 If I were hungry I would not tell you, For the world is Mine, and all it contains."

All of creation belongs to God because he is the Creator and he created it according to his own wisdom without consultation from anyone outside of himself. Creation is his, it belongs to him because he made it. Creation is his because he sustains it. Creation is his because he is the owner of it all and it is all made ultimately to reflect back to his glory. Sun and moon and stars and their courses above to his glory because he put them there. The earth and all it contains belonging to him. He knows the birds by name. He rules over when a sparrow falls. He knows the number of hairs on your head. Beloved, in light of that aspect of the transcendent nature of who God is, what could you or I possibly do that adds anything to that when he already owns it all? When everything already is designed for his glory? Anything that we do is within an ecosystem that is already completely his.

Look at Acts 17:24,

24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find

Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'"

Beloved, the world is God's and it all belongs to him. He is the one who gives life to every creature on earth. Every creature on earth is dependent upon him for their life and being, including us as Christians. He needs nothing from us. He already has it all. He already has a perfect essence which makes him utterly independent of anything else and he has nothing that he needs from outside to contribute to his continued existence. That's how great and how transcendent he is. Nothing we do adds to his being. Our good works as Christians don't give him something that he didn't already have. Our good works do not give him something that he is lacking because he lacks nothing.

Look at Job 38, prior to the book of Psalms. Job 38. You will recall that Job was wrestling with questions related to his profound suffering. He wanted to argue with God. He wanted to state his case before God. He knew he was blameless. God himself testified to that in the first two chapters of the book. Out of this blameless life, great suffering came. God now speaks to Job to clarify their relative positions in the order of the universe and in Job 38:1, Scripture says this,

1 ... the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, 2 "Who is this that darkens counsel By words without knowledge? 3 Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me! 4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, 5 Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? 6 On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, 7 When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy? 8 Or who enclosed the sea with doors When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; 9 When I made a cloud its garment And thick darkness its swaddling band, 10 And I placed boundaries on it And set a bolt and doors, 11 And I said, "Thus far you shall come, but no farther; And here shall your proud waves stop?"

And he goes on in the rest of 38 and 39 and 40 and 41 declaring his great transcendence in a way that leaves Job utterly humbled. He says, "I have spoken without knowledge. I did not realize just how great you were," he says in chapter 42.

What does that mean for our topic here today? Beloved, there is nothing that you or I could teach that would add to the wisdom of God. There is nothing that you and I could do or produce that would add to his possessions. There is nothing that you or I could do that would add to his inherent intrinsic glory because it's already perfect. If somehow you and I could add to that, we would be making God better, and if he was better, it would mean that he was not perfect beforehand. You see, theology really matters. The way that we think about God really affects the way that we think and live and here's where we go with this, beloved: you cannot fathom the depths of the wisdom of God. You cannot

begin to appreciate the greatness of his judgments. You cannot contribute anything that adds to his intrinsic being.

Beloved, beloved, this is so essential. This is fundamental. There is an infinite distance between God and you in essence. He is a holy uncreated Creator. You are a sinful created creature. He transcends us all by infinite orders of geometric magnitude. When Isaiah saw a glimpse of his glory, he was undone. "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips!" Peter saw the Lord Jesus display a portion of his power in the calming of the sea and said, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man! I can't be in the presence of this great holiness on my own!"

There is an infinite distance between God and us in his essence, in his wisdom, in his righteousness and in his understanding. Do you understand, therefore, what that means for our good works? It is folly to think that we could merit reward from him from our low and humbled and still plagued by sin condition. It's folly to think that from an ant on earth, the God of glory of the universe was somehow obligated to us; that somehow what we do contributes to his being, who he is. No, beloved, nothing that we could do would put God in a position where he must repay us for doing something. He does not have to repay us for anything because nothing that we did improved him. Nothing we did, nothing we do, nothing we ever will do will make him better than he already was and is. If a contractor comes to my house and does work and adds value, I'm in his debt. I have to pay him. I owe it to him because he has given me a skill and a product that I didn't have before. We don't relate to God on that basis. God is not our contractor. So we recognize that the utter difference in God's essence compared to our own makes it so that our good works, they may be good but they are not that good. They are not of infinite transcendent goodness like God is. They are not of infinite purity and holiness like God is. Therefore, we view ourselves, we view what we do from a perspective of who God is and we become very small by comparison, don't we?

Fourthly, finally: God's reward is far greater than your works. The reward that he has stored up for his children in heaven in eternity that is waiting for us to enter into, is far greater than anything that we do. It's in complete disproportion to everything. There is no proportionate value here at all. I want you to think through this with me for just a bit. Beloved, we're talking about really really transcendent principles here but it is the transcendent principles we grasp that inform the way that you think about life and the way that you live and shape everything else, because what we do is formed by what we think, what we believe and how we respond to these great transcendent principles of God in Christ, and it is in here that we break the bonds of legalism from the foolish thinking that I merit pride or that God owes me something by what I do. You realize that it could never be about your obedience to rules that would be the crux, would be the basis, would be the foundation upon which God would deal with you. If it was based on what you would do, God would have nothing to do with you because he's too great, he's too holy, the blood of Christ is too precious. This changes everything but fourthly, and this in some ways is the sweetest of them all: God's reward is far greater than your works.

Look with me in the writings of Peter, if you will. Go back to Peter, just after Hebrews, and in 1 Peter – oh, beloved, this is just great – Peter is praising God here in 1 Peter 1:3 and he says,

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Beloved, do you know, do you remember or do you sometimes forget like we are all prone to do, the greatness of salvation in Christ; that it is so great for what lies ahead that the present blessing that we enjoy of being a Christian is almost incidental by comparison? God saved you by his great mercy at the cost of the great precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ though you were dead in sin and hostile in mind against him. He saved you not only to deliver you from the power of sin in this life, to deliver you from the penalty of sin in this life, there is an untold treasure-house of glory and blessing that awaits us all when we get to glory. Scripture describes it here as an inheritance which belongs to us; something that is imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away. The glory of what is to be revealed to us is stunning. It is beyond earthly description. It is far beyond any earthly value. That's what God saved you for. Fifty million years after our first arrival in heaven, the glory and the splendor of it will not be diminished in any way in our eyes. You know, you can go to theme parks, you can go to Disneyland, Disney World, and after a while it gets kind of old. Heaven is not going to be like that. Peter says the glory of it will not fade away. A great gift still to be received by us from the merciful hands of God, that is our hope, that is our certain expectation, and in the meantime God is protecting us by his power to make sure we arrive there, that we arrive safe in his heavenly kingdom, and whatever the vicissitudes and the ups and downs of life might be in the meantime for Christians, there is an eternal principle of power that is keeping us, bought for us by the precious blood of Christ at the hands of the mercy and the love and the grace and patience of God, all bestowed upon us unworthy sinners and he's going to introduce us from this miserable life by comparison into an eternity of great glory. That is our ultimate destination.

Look at Revelation 22. We have this eternal unending reward waiting for us in glory. The final outcome after Christ reigns on earth, after that, this comes. Verse 1,

1 Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, 2 in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; 4 they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the

light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever. 6 And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true"; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place.

Beloved, this is it. If you can grasp this point, it will break the bonds of legalism forever in your mind. It will open up fountains of hope and peace. It will put to bed the thoughts of despair. It will put to bed the sense of pressure that says, "I have to do this today or I'm going to be in trouble with God"; a rules-based approach to relating to him. Beloved, think about that glory. Think about its duration. It is endless. Consider how spectacular it will be. Consider the privilege that will be ours to look upon the face of Christ; to see him glorified; faith having become sight; to somehow be sharing in that glory because to see him in his glorified state, Scripture says, we will be made like him. Somehow we are going to share in resurrected glory in the realm of heaven for endless duration, a great gift that we did not deserve. Now think about it from this perspective: that's eternal. That never ends while the good works that we do in this life are done in time. Not only are they done in time, they will be quickly forgotten by those who come after us. Our flesh will perish. Our name will perish on earth and just as you don't remember who your ancestors were from 200 years ago, one day that will be the case of all of us. We will be forgotten. Our vapor will disperse in the wind.

Beloved, because our lives are like that, understand this, this is the great comfort of your soul: nothing that you could do in the realm of time in that kind of life could possibly merit or deserve that kind of infinite blessing throughout all of the eons of eternity. There is no comparison. What we do in a little sliver of time for that to yield for us into eternal blessing and glory, your works may be good but, beloved, they are not that good. They are not that good. Nothing we do even as Christians could possibly be an equivalent exchange. There is no equivalent exchange between what you do as a Christian and the reward that God is going to give you in heaven, is there? Your works may be good but they're not that good. Nothing we do in the realm of time, which is the only realm we know right now, could deserve that kind of blessing in eternity.

You see, beloved, what we're dealing with here, what we're seeing afresh from another perspective is something that we've said all along, that Scripture has said for millennia. Salvation is of the Lord, Jonah 2:9. Salvation is by grace. Salvation is an act of undeserved favor from God to you. Your initial justification was a gift of grace. Your ultimate reward in heaven is going to be a gift from the same kind of grace that saved you in the first place. You didn't deserve it. You won't deserve it. Nothing, nothing we could do. I could preach for 10,000 years, well, I'm speaking hypothetically, I couldn't actually do that, but hypothetically speaking if I perfectly exegeted all 66 books of the Bible and perfectly preached them and I did that for 10,000 lifetimes, it wouldn't be worthy to be compared to the glory that's on the other side. How much more so when I have just one life to offer? A few measly sermons and then I go to my eternal reward. How much more all of us in the lives that we live in the realm that God has given us, to recognize that

there is nothing that we could do within the realm of time that would deserve eternal blessing.

You say, "Well, then why does God do that?" That's kind of the question that we're begging here, isn't it? "Why then is there this reward? Why then, why would God, if my works are always tainted by sin anyway, if they add nothing to God and if they don't deserve the eternal reward that God gives to his people, why then does God do that?" That's the million-dollar question. "Why does he do that, then?" Beloved, God does that for the sake of his Son. He does that for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. He blesses us like that because we are in union with Christ, because Christ purchased us with his blood, Christ brought us into his family. Christ shares his nature with us so that God blesses us according to the merit and the deserving of Christ, not the merit and deserving of our own. God accepts – beloved, listen to me, please listen to me; for the name of God and the glory of Christ, hear me on this point – God accepts your imperfect works and blesses them not because they are independently worthy of anything in his sight, he blesses them because of your union with the Lord Jesus Christ, because they are done in Christ. God sees you in Christ, God deals with you according to the merit of Christ, not according to your own, and therefore the blessing flows eternally.

Go back to Romans 7. We need to read the next verse. Paul, feeling the sense of encroaching despair over his remaining sin that perhaps some of you sometimes feel, did not end there. We have too many people in the realm of the broad Christian church throughout the world who are content to stop at verse 24, "Wretched man that I am!" Alright. Okay. But you're not the end of the story. This is not ultimately about you. Paul goes on to say in verse 25,

25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Do you see it there? Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

God gives this blessing through Christ. He does it because we are in Christ. He does it because it pleases him to do so, not according to your works.

Go back to 1 Peter. I should have told you to keep your finger there. 1 Peter 2. Paul said, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" 1 Peter 2:4. Why are our lives as Christians, why are our good works acceptable to God when they are not that good by comparison to him? Verse 4 of 1 Peter 2,

4 ... coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones,

are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

What we offer to God in the name of his Son he accepts despite its imperfections, and part of the blessing of Christ upon our lives, part of the gracious way our Master deals with his slaves, is that Christ sanctifies our good works in a way that makes them acceptable to the Father. Why does God accept our works? That was the question I asked. One writer answers it this way, "God graciously and kindly responds to our efforts to please him not withstanding all their defects because he looks upon us in Christ."

Our initial salvation rests entirely on Christ. For God to accept our good works, we rest entirely on Christ, not on our own merits, and do you know what that does, beloved, those of you that come out of this background? That deals a deathblow to legalism because you understand, "I could never possibly be relating to God on a basis of my life performance, on a basis of what I do or on the basis of rules." That is not the basis on which he accepts us. He accepts us in Christ and we receive Christ by faith. We rest in Christ by faith. It's for the sake of Christ that he receives your works.

So beloved, as we obey God in the ways that we've talked about earlier in the series, we don't offer to God our good works from a sense of pride and self. On the other end, we don't offer them from a fear of punishment or a loss of his love if we don't, because in Christ God has placed eternal love on us and he accepts us in the Beloved, Ephesians 1:7. So we offer our good works not because God relates to us looking on us in our behavior, he looks on us in Christ and so we offer our lives by faith in Christ. We offer them in a sense that we are secure forever based on what our Lord has done for us. That motivation is utterly foreign and completely different and deals the deathblow to legalism, and as we recognize these things, we are protected from despair in our weakness.

Beloved, you know, I know our lives and works are stained by sin. We could introvert that and go into the spiritual pit. Understand, beloved, that some of you have things in your past that you cannot fix. You have sinned and it cannot be repaired. As I say from time to time, that aborted baby cannot be brought back; that relationship that you broke can't be fixed, and we realize that. We realize that some of our past wrongs are just beyond our ability to repair. Beloved, rather than lament your inability on those matters, rejoice instead that Christ is a gracious Savior. Rejoice instead that he graciously has paid the price of all of your sin at Calvary. Rejoice instead that Christ saved and sanctifies you in such a manner that God is pleased for the sake of his Son to receive and reward you. Yeah, you don't deserve it but do you know what? That's the whole point. That's the whole point. That's the whole point. We are humbled and yet we are joyful in the presence of this God of love, grace, patience, mercy and goodness, in such a way that our eyes are lifted up from the never ending cycle of our own sin and weakness to the amazing Christ who saves us in the first place, and we see in light of these things, we see in light of this precious word, the greater excellence of resting in Christ by faith rather than trying to earn favor with behavior, and we are led away from tears of frustration and failure into tears of joy and peace for the sake of our gracious Lord. Christ-centered faith,

beloved, not man-centered rules, there we find our rest and hope and praise. There we break the bonds of legalism.

Father, help us to that end. Your glory is so magnificent and it was before the beginning of time and nothing has changed. Thank you for saving us by grace, keeping us by grace, and one day, Father, rewarding us in grace, rewarding us with the privilege of seeing our Lord face-to-face and being made like him in resurrected glory. Father, out of great gratitude for that which you have first given to us, we offer you our life, our obedience and our heartfelt praise. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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