

The Necessity of Good Works

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The sacred Scriptures from Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah 31, we begin to read at verse 27.

27 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man, and with the seed of beast. 28 And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the LORD. 29 In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. 30 But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge. 31 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. 35 Thus saith the LORD, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The LORD of hosts is his name: 36 If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever. 37 Thus saith the LORD; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the LORD. 38 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the city shall be built to the LORD from the tower of Hananeel unto the gate of the corner. 39 And the measuring line shall yet go forth over against it upon the hill Gareb, and shall compass about to Goath. 40 And the whole valley of the dead bodies, and

of the ashes, and all the fields unto the brook of Kidron, unto the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be holy unto the LORD; it shall not be plucked up, nor thrown down any more for ever.

Thus far the reading of the holy and divine Scripture.

It is on the basis of that passage and many others in the word of God that we have the teaching of our Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 32. Lord's Day 32.

Q. 86. Since then we are delivered from our misery, merely of grace, through Christ, without any merits of ours, why must we still do good works?

Because Christ, having redeemed and delivered us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit, after His own image; that so we may testify, by the whole of our conduct, our gratitude to God for His blessings, and that He may be praised by us; also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith, by the fruits thereof; and that, by our godly conversation, others may be gained to Christ.

Q. 87. Cannot they then be saved, who, continuing in their wicked and ungrateful lives, are not converted to God?

By no means; for the Holy Scripture declares that no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or any such like, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Beloved, in the Lord Jesus Christ with Lord's Day 32, we come to the third section of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism has three main sections. Those three main sections treat the three main things that the believer must know in order to enjoy his comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ body and soul, in life and in death. That comfort is an all-sufficient and all-embracing comfort. That comfort is our comfort because it is the great good that we put or posit by faith over against all of the evils of life and death.

We may never forget the Catechism's viewpoint of life and death. The Catechism's viewpoint of life is that life is death. Indeed, it is nothing but a continual death. Young people don't necessarily understand that so clearly but as you get older, you understand that very clearly. Life is death. Life is full of misery, heartache, affliction, sorrow, sin, and all sorts of turmoil. Life is death and death is death. The believer then needs a comfort in that life which is death and in death. That comfort is that he belongs to Christ, his faithful Savior.

Now, in order to enjoy that comfort, we must know three things. We must know how great our sins and miseries are. The believer cuts off his comfort the moment he departs from the knowledge of the greatness of his sins and miseries. All his lifelong he must confess, "I am a great and terrible sinner, from Adam, because of my own nature, and

because of all my transgressions." Otherwise he has no comfort. He must know, as well, how he has been delivered from those sins and miseries, through Christ Jesus, merely of God's grace. All his lifelong over against his sins and miseries, he confesses the truth of his gracious salvation, that God in Christ delivered him from those sins and miseries and accomplished his salvation perfectly. Christ's cross. So too in order to enjoy his comfort, the believer must know how he must show his gratitude to God for that deliverance.

That gratitude is the subject of this third section and you must understand what gratitude is. Gratitude is not something you or I do to get something from God. Gratitude is not something that you do in order to pay God for what God gave to you. Gratitude is not something that you do now apart from God in order to get from God. Rather, gratitude is a testimony. It is a testimony in which the believer acknowledges the greatness of the giver. He acknowledges the greatness of God as the giver of every good and perfect gift to him. He acknowledges too in that gratitude the greatness of the gift that God gave to him, and that gratitude which is the testimony of the greatness of the giver, of the greatness of the gift, that gratitude too is given to him by God's grace. God delivers us of mere grace but it is of mere grace too that God grants us this testimony of gratitude.

Now the Catechism begins this whole section on gratitude with a very important question: why? Why is it necessary that we who are saved by pure grace and not by works, why must we do good works? Here the Catechism teaches us that our gratitude consists in works. The Catechism does not yet define those works. The Catechism will come to that. The Catechism's whole emphasis in this Lord's Day is on that question why. Why must we do good works? The emphasis is not on why should you, the emphasis is not on why will you, the emphasis is not on why can you, but the emphasis is on why must you?

The purpose of the Lord's Day then is to call and exhort us in light of that "must." It is to impress upon us, therefore, the necessity of this life of good works in order that that might be urged upon us, urged with diligence, urged with some vehemence. The urging of good works can be an offense. It may not be an offense but it can be. The preacher in his urging of good works can offend the whole congregation, put a stumbling block in front of them so they can trip over it and perish. It's to avoid that, that the preacher does not offend in his urging of good works, and I will urge you to good works not to offend you, not to put a stumbling block in front of you, but to urge you according to my calling and your calling. It's to teach why those good works may and must be urged that this Lord's Day exists. It is to teach the preacher and the congregation how the minister may urge those good works so that he doesn't offend.

He can offend. He can offend in his urging of good works if he teaches wrongly about those works. He can offend and put a stumbling block in front of the congregation if he urges those good works as that which the believer must do for his salvation. Then he offends grievously. Or he can offend in his teaching about good works if he teaches that those good works are merely a suggestion. He offends likewise, then too. Rather, in order that we may be urged to a life of good works, called to it with all diligence in order that

we hear it without offense, the preacher first of all has to explain to the congregation why they must do good works.

So let us consider this Lord's Day under that theme: the necessity of good works. Notice first of all, that we are delivered merely of grace; notice secondly, that we are renewed by the Holy Ghost; and notice finally, assurance and the neighbor. In teaching about the necessity of good works and in order to cut off any offense that may arise in the preacher's urging of those good works to the congregation, the Catechism first cuts off any wrong teaching about the necessity of good works by its question. The question that begins Lord's Day 32 may not simply be read over and we quickly move on to the answer to the question that begins Lord's Day 32 on the necessity of good works. The question that broaches this whole subject of the necessity of good works must be considered and considered closely.

The question itself contains important teaching about the necessity of good works. That question reads, "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?" That question presents the problem of good works in the Reformed theology. The problem simply stated is this: if good works do not contribute to our salvation in any sense whatsoever, if those good works do not obtain from God anything at all ever, they are not merits, they are not works that we must perform in order to receive something from God, they do not add to our righteousness in any sense, if that's the truth about good works, why in the world then must we do them? But you understand that problem is only apparent. That problem proceeds from a wrong assumption about good works and about the speaking of the necessity of good works. That problem proceeds from this assumption: that the only way to speak about the necessity of good works is to speak about those good works contributing to our salvation, or as the ground or basis of our receiving something from God, and it is exactly that assumption about the necessity of good works that the Catechism is interested in cutting off with its question. The good works are not necessary for our salvation. The good works are not necessary as the ground or basis to receive something from God. It is exactly because they are not necessary in that sense, that we may also speak of another way that those good works are necessary.

That question then teaches us to consider in connection with this idea of the necessity of good works, that question teaches us to consider once again the truth of our gracious salvation. That question is kind of a shorthand summary of all of the doctrine that the Catechism has taught us up to this point. That question teaches us, first of all, about our misery, who it is that God saved. The one that God saved was the one that God made at the beginning perfect. He made him good and upright and in his own image. He was capable of willing the will of God and he was capable of doing the will of God so that he actually did the will of God. He was capable too because he had a free will. He was capable of turning away from God by an act of that will, departing from God in sin and disobedience, and that's exactly what that man did. He did not obey God. He disobeyed God and in that disobedience he turned from God who was his life and departed from him, and by that sin and according to God's just judgment, that man entailed upon him terrible darkness, death and bondage.

Never forget when you're talking about good works, who you and I are by nature. Who you and I remain by nature until the day that we die, and which nature makes it impossible that any work that we do ever contribute to our salvation. For what is our misery? Our misery is that we are prone by nature to hate God and the neighbor. Our whole nature has been corrupted. Our mind has been darkened so that we cannot know God. Our will has been put in bondage so that we cannot will any good. Our heart has been corrupted so that it is black, full of hatred. We cannot even think one good thought. In the fall, man wholly corrupted himself. He corrupted his whole nature and he corrupted all his ways. He was bound in iron and woe.

Now from that, we have been redeemed and delivered by mere grace through Christ. God delivered that wretched, dead, and damn-worthy sinner. God did that according to the counsel of his own will because eternally he loved some of those dead, damn-worthy, fallen sinners. He loved them but he chose them and he appointed them to salvation in Jesus Christ and as the manifestation of his love and for the accomplishment of the salvation of those sinners, he sent his own Son into the world, born of a woman and born under the law to redeem them from the curse of the law.

The Catechism points us to the cross of Christ, his blood. It's the power of our redemption. At the cross of Jesus Christ, God laid the only ground and foundation of our salvation. You and I can't add to that work. No good work you do can add to that work. All the works that you do flow out of that work, but that work alone, that work in which God poured out his wrath upon Jesus Christ, in which Jesus Christ hung beneath the curse of God and descended into hell there at the cross, that work alone is the work that redeemed us.

That work accomplished a full satisfaction for sin. All that God required for the punishment of our sin, all that God would have punished us for, Jesus Christ suffered. God said it's enough. Jesus therefore at the cross as the ground and foundation of our salvation, accomplished a perfect righteousness. You know what righteousness is, don't you? Righteousness is God's verdict that one is in perfect conformity to his law and worthy of eternal life. Jesus accomplished that righteousness at the cross and that righteousness is imputed to us, it is imputed to all and everyone who believes in Christ alone for his salvation. They are declared without any work at all, ever, they are declared in spite of all their evil works, and they are declared without any of their good works righteous before God, perfect in his sight, and worthy of eternal life.

He redeemed us and he delivers us of mere grace through Christ without any merit of ours. That's what Jeremiah teaches in language that is so clear, a child can understand it. God says in Jeremiah 31, "I will make a new covenant," and he describes that new covenant as his fellowship with his people. "They will be my people and I will be their God. I will take them under the shadow of my wings. I will reveal myself to them. I will draw near unto them in fellowship with them, and they will know me. They will know me as the God who loved them. They will know me as the God who saved them. I will make that covenant." On what ground? For what reason? "For," he says, "I will forgive their

iniquities and their transgressions will I remember no more." He will make that covenant on the ground of his own gracious act in Jesus Christ to pay for their sins. He will make that covenant on the ground of his own gracious act through Jesus Christ to forgive their sins, all of them.

Our salvation then, our salvation is through Christ of mere grace without any work of ours. Our works are not to be considered in any way the ground or foundation of our salvation or any benefit of it. To put it another way and at the risk of being misunderstood, your good works, whatever they are, do not in any way contribute to your salvation, and your evil works, whatever they are, do not in any way detract from that salvation.

The natural man will take that and he will run with that. That's the conclusion of the natural man, though. He'll say, "Oh, that means then I can live however I please." And if I say, if that's your response, then you or I as a natural man were carnal, were corrupt, were yet unconverted, if that's your or my response today to my preaching about your works, you need to be converted. You need to change your attitude and your heart. You need to repent from that wickedness for that isn't the response of the believer to that preaching.

The believer does not say when the word of God comes to him and says you are delivered of mere grace through Christ without any merit of your own, the believer doesn't say, "Oh, that means I can live however I want." The believer does not say that. The response of the believer is, "Since we are delivered of mere grace without any of our works through Christ, why must we still do good works?" That's the response of the believer. It is inconceivable that the believer would not think that he has to do good works, but he is asking now: but why? Why if those works don't contribute to my salvation? I know I have to do them but why? And the Catechism's answer is simple: you and I have to do good works, even though those good works do not contribute to our salvation, you and I have to do good works because Christ also renews us by his Holy Spirit after his own image, that so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for his blessings. That's why you must do good works. You must do good works because Christ who delivers you also renews you. You must do good works because Christ who died for you also changes you.

That must be plain that Christ who died for you also renews you. The righteousness that he earned at his cross for you and I, the righteousness that is the only ground and foundation of our salvation, you understand that's a perfect righteousness. God says about that person to whom he imputes that righteousness, "He is perfect in my sight. He has never broken any commandments." That righteousness, therefore, demands that the one who receives it also be made perfect. God imputes that righteousness to the perfectly rotten sinner, then God is also going to make that sinner righteous too. He is going to go to work on that sinner's nature. He's going to start changing things in that sinner.

That's what the Catechism means by that word "renewal." The Catechism is talking now about a gracious work of Jesus Christ inside of the sinner upon the sinner's nature. You understand, your and my nature was wholly corrupted. Our minds were darkened, our

wills were bound, our hearts were changed so that we hated God. Now how in the world is that kind of nature going to do anything good? It can't. That nature can only do something good if God acts upon that nature by his grace to renew that nature, and that renewal, you understand, is an astounding work. The fact that the believer renewed does good works is more astounding than that Adam did good works in the garden. Adam, of course, did good works in the garden because God gave him a perfect nature. There was, though, as it were, no barrier to Adam doing good works. There was no wall or there was no opposition to Adam's doing good works. That's not so in the believer. In the believer, in order for the believer to do good works, his old man of sin must be overcome. That's the astounding reality of the renewal of our nature, that God so changes our minds that he overcomes the natural opposition and ignorance of the human mind. He so renews our hearts that he overcomes the natural hatred and opposition of the human heart. He so operates in our wills that he overcomes the natural opposition and willing of the evil in the natural will.

That's an astounding renewal and that's the renewal that Jeremiah is talking about in Jeremiah 31 when he is describing the new covenant. What is God going to do for his people in the new covenant and how does that differ from the old covenant? He says, "I'm not going to make a covenant like I made when they came out of Egypt." What does he mean by that? He means that that law that he gave to them concerning the covenant, the law that formed their whole life in the covenant, that law came to them as an external code. It was written upon pages by Moses. It was written upon tables of stone front and back by the finger of God. They had to write that law upon the posts of their house. They had to write that law on phylacteries that were between their eyes so that that law was a frontlet between their eyes. The law was external.

The new covenant is different. God would take that law, that law that says, "Love me with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself," and God will write that law upon our hearts. When he says that he will write that law upon our hearts, he means, first of all, you and I are utterly devoid of righteousness by nature. Your heart by nature doesn't have the law of God in it. It is lawless. And God takes that heart and he writes the law on that heart, and when he writes the law on that heart, he makes that law of God that says, "Love me and love your neighbor as yourself," he makes that law the actual delight of that heart.

The law is not the power of the renewal. Don't make that mistake. The law is not the power of the renewal. The law, as such, does not do anything in that human heart. The law can't do that. The law can only say "do." The law doesn't provide a remedy, the law doesn't regenerate anybody, the law does not give grace. God takes that law that says "do," and God by his grace and through the operation of the Spirit, writes it on that heart so that that "do," that "must" of the law, becomes the desire of that heart, and then God also by his grace gives the ability to do that.

That's the renewal. You have to say that's as wonderful as any work of God, to take such a nature that hates God, that wills the evil and that loves the evil, and to make that nature begin to love the good, to will the good, and to do the good. That's an astounding

renewal. That's more astounding than God's work in creation in the beginning and our creeds speak about that renewal very clearly. The Belgic Confession, Article 24 says, that this true faith being wrought in man by the hearing of the word of God, and the operation of the Holy Spirit, doth regenerate him and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. If you want to get at what that renewal is in its essence, that renewal is faith. Faith in you makes you a new creature and by that faith in you, being a new creature you become a new man, and you begin to live a new life, and you are freed in that faith from the bondage of sin.

That's what faith always does. Faith always turns from sin and turns to the living God. Faith always hates sin and faith loves God. That's why if we are going to be more holy, our faith has to be built up because faith makes us a new creature. The stronger our faith is in us, the holier our lives will be. But more especially, the Canons of Dort speak about this renewal, especially in Heads 3 and 4 in Articles 11 and 12. Maybe you can read those with your children at dinner today. Article 11 speaks of our conversion. That's what we're talking about when we're talking about this renewal. We're talking about our conversion and it says about that conversion that he not only causes the Gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminate their minds by his Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern spiritual things, but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, he pervades the innermost recesses of the heart. He opens the closed, he softens the hearts, he circumcises the uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will and quickens that will so that whereas that will before was evil, disobedient, and refractory, he makes that will good, obedient and pliable. He actuates and he strengthens that will, that like a good tree, it may bring forth good fruit.

You understand then, you can't understand the renewal this way, that God renews your nature and then says, "Now do this." God renews and says, "Now do this. Do this in your strength." No, the renewal is this: he renews us and that renewal in that renewal, he works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. All the good that we do, he works in us. When I will the good, it is the Spirit willing inside me, the good. When I do the good, it is the Spirit doing the good in and through me. When I desire the good, it is the Spirit desiring that good in and through me. All that work is simply to be attributed to him in his grace and his Spirit.

That's what the Canons and Article 12 are pointing out later on. All in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner, are certainly, infallibly and effectually regenerated and do actually believe so that that will thus renewed is not only influenced and actuated by God, but in consequence of that influence, becomes itself active so that we are said to believe and to repent.

That's how he renews us. Without him, we can do nothing. Without him, we don't have a single good thought, we don't have a single good will, we don't have a single good deed. It is he that works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. That's why you can't found your salvation on that. You didn't do it out of yourself. He did it in and through you. Only then did you do it. All that you do that is pleasing to God, he gives.

That's why you must do good works. There is really no other reason besides that. The Catechism mentions other things but those flow out of this main reason. There is no other reason. To make a simple comparison between what the Catechism's answer and the analogies of life, in answer to the question why you must do good works, the Catechism says because he renews you. That's like saying why does this wind up toy that I have move forward? Because I wind it up, that's why. That's how simple the answer is. Why do you move forward in the Christian life? Because he wound you up, that's why.

We are to make another analogy. The Catechism's answer is like this: man is like a house that was occupied by an owner who abandoned it, and that house now is disconnected from the power grid, it's disconnected from the electricity and from the gas and from the water, and that house has fallen into dilapidation. The house is ruined and now a new owner buys that house and a new owner hooks that house up back to the electricity, back to the water, and back to the gas, so that those things begin to flow into that house, and the owner takes up his abode in that house and that house now is alive. That's what has happened to the sinner in Adam's fall. The sinner was a dilapidated house, cut off from all spiritual resources. The sinner was dead in his trespasses and sins and now we are grafted into Jesus Christ by a true faith. We are hooked up to the source of our spiritual electricity, our spiritual water, and our spiritual gas, and it comes into us and we begin to live and a new owner has taken up his abode in us, namely the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and because of those things, just like that house, we spring to life.

That's why you must do good works. That's why it's a very serious false doctrine to teach that a believer doesn't need to do good works. That's serious false doctrine. Very often that's called antinomianism. I think there are very few today who understand what an antinomian is. That's not just antinomianism to say you and I don't have to do good works, it's no big deal how you live your life, that's not just antinomianism, that's atheism. That's a denial of God, a denial of his grace, a denial of his Spirit, a denial of his will and purpose for the salvation of the sinner.

We must do good works because he works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure, and by those good works, we give a testimony of gratitude to God. Our whole life is a conversation, a testimony, and that whole life may only say one thing: God be praised. That's all it may say. It may not say anything about me, it may not say anything about man. God be praised. And God gives us that testimony of gratitude. He gives it to us so that we can thank him. An old member of this congregation always used to say that, "I thank thee, Lord, that I might thank thee." That's the Reformed faith.

Then if you understand that, if you don't go off the rails on that, then you can talk about two other things, why you must do good works, that flow out of that reality that God works in us by his grace. First of all, that every one of us may be assured of his faith by the fruits thereof. It's very easy to understand why the Reformed faith connects closely assurance and good works. The reason is not that our good works gain the assurance or that assurance is the fruit of the good work. That isn't the reason. That's a corruption. The Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 32 and the entire Reformed doctrine, they never teach that. They connect them very closely because the same Spirit who works works in us, is

the Spirit who also assures us. Where that Spirit is operating, there will be good works. And where that Spirit is operating, there will also be assurance. There is that close and inseparable connection. Where there are no works, there is no Spirit, and where there is no Spirit, there will be no assurance. That's the connection.

If you and I walk in sin, and we all know this from our experience, every single one of us who is a child of God knows this, if you and I walk in sin, there is an assurance. Is that not true? Did any one of us every think then that because we walked in a right way, that we gained and earned that assurance? Not a one of us. Assurance is a free gift of God. Assurance belongs to the essence of faith and where the Spirit is working faith in us, the Spirit is also working assurance, and where he's working that, there will also be good works. That's why you must do good works. We want to have God's face shine upon us, do we not? That's dearer to life to us.

So we have to be exhorted to walk in a good and holy way and, furthermore, you have to consider your neighbor. If our whole life is a testimony, our neighbor surely sees it, and you and I must consider our neighbor, especially our neighbor who walks in sin, who doesn't believe the truth. It may please God by your good conversation that he be won to Christ. That's the word of the Catechism, won. That is, won over. And that's a good word because that teaches us that when that neighbor who walks in sin, or does not believe the truth, when that neighbor turns to the living God, a great victory has happened. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and God himself has recovered one of his own, and God is pleased to use our conversation to do that.

Our conversation can have another effect, God forbid, that other effect is that we bring blasphemy to the name of God. We don't want that, that the neighbor says, "Well, you're no different than the world. You don't live any different than I do. You don't talk any different. You don't work any different. You don't live your life any different. What's all this talk about God, Jesus Christ and the truth?" And he blasphemes God. Rather, we want the neighbor to say, "Why are you different? What explains that you live your life this way and work this way and talk this way?" That's why we must do good works too. God may be pleased to use it for the advancement of his kingdom.

So for those reasons we have to do good works. He renews us so we can give a testimony of gratitude, so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that the neighbor might be won to Christ. For those reasons, works have to be urged on us, and in light of those reasons, we're going to consider the law of God in prayer so that they can be urged upon us for God's glory. Amen.

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, work in us by thy Spirit that we may give a testimony of gratitude to thee for our gracious salvation, and in that way we may also experience the assurance of thy favor, and that thou being gracious, one of our neighbors may be gained to Christ. For Jesus' sake. Amen.