

Fruits of Thankfulness – LD 24

Heidelberg Catechism 4 - 2017

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For our Scripture reading we turn to John 15, especially the first 8 verses or so that set out the teaching of Scripture that we find in our Heidelberg Catechism that we consider this morning. We will read the whole chapter together, though, now.

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. 2 Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. 3 Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. 5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. 6 If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. 8 Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. 9 As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. 10 If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. 11 These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. 12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. 13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. 14 Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. 15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. 16 Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you. 17 These things I command you, that ye love one another. 18 If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. 19 If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. 20

Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. 21 But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me. 22 If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. 23 He that hateth me hateth my Father also. 24 If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. 25 But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause. 26 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: 27 And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.

Thus we read in God's holy word.

I draw your attention this morning to Question and Answer 64 of Lord's Day 24. Lord's Day 24, Question and Answer 64,

Q. 64. But doth not this doctrine make men careless and profane?

A. By no means: for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

Beloved, Lord's Day 24 is really an antithetical Lord's Day. It is meant to answer objections to the doctrines of grace, in particular, it is meant to answer objections to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Lord's Day 23 then said this is the way that it is. And Lord's Day 24 says not this, this is not the way it is. So the two Lord's Days really belong together: Lord's Day 23 setting out the positive truth of justification by faith alone, and Lord's Day 24 setting out the antithetical, what we do not mean by that doctrine.

In answering these objections, Lord's Day 24 deals with good works. Lord's Day 24 first says why our works cannot be our righteousness before God, why our good works cannot be the whole or even part of our righteousness before God. That's Question and Answer 62, and that, as we saw, because our works are not up to the standard that God demands, our works are too sinful. Second, this Lord's Day says though our works are rewarded, they are not rewarded according to merit but according to grace, and that because of the objection, if there is good works and they are rewarded, then there must be merit, and the Lord's Day says, no, there is no such thing. There is no merit involved, it's all of grace, even the reward that God gives us according to our works. In the third place, the Lord's Day says that the Reformed doctrine of justification does not destroy works, it does not destroy the possibility of good works in the life of the child of God, does not destroy the motive for good works in the life of the child of God, but rather the doctrine of

justification, that Reformed doctrine of justification, makes works inevitable. In fact, it's impossible that one who knows this doctrine not live a life of good works before God.

So we answer, especially that last, that third objection to the Reformed truth, we answer that as we consider that Question and Answer this morning, we answer that over against those who resist and seek to destroy the system of Reformed doctrine but we also consider this Question and Answer and answer these objections because there is a little Arminianism in each of us. That's the truth, beloved, we are not saved because we're not prone to Arminianism, we are not saved because we're free of that sort of thing in our own hearts and minds. We have those tendencies as proud, sinful creatures and so we need to consider this Lord's Day as we are instructed also, humbled before God, filled with gratitude and instructed as to the proper motive for good works.

So we consider this third truth of Lord's Day 24 this morning and we consider it under the theme "Fruits of Thankfulness." Fruits of thankfulness. First of all, inevitable, and notice that they are inevitable, these fruits of thankfulness. Secondly, that they are volitional, which means that they come out of the will; they are something that we will to do. And thirdly, that we perform these fruits of thankfulness eternally. So inevitable, volitional and eternal.

As we said, this Question and Answer answers the objections or an objection to the Reformed faith, that objection comes out in the question before us, "But doth not this doctrine make men careless and profane?" That's the accusation against the truth of God's word, the truth of the Reformed faith. If you teach that a man is justified before God only on the basis of Christ's merits, only which he only appropriates unto himself and embraces as his own by faith, and works do not justify him as he stands before God, if you say that, you're going to make men careless and they are going to be profane, profane in the sense of common. They are not going to live a holy sacred life consecrated to God but they are going to live a common life alongside of and identical to the life of the ungodly, of the reprobate. They are not going to be motivated to be careful to live a life of good works. That's the objection. That's the line of thinking, and that objection applies not only to justification by faith alone as our Catechism ties it into that doctrine, but that's the objection with regard to the doctrine of election as well, as the Canons make plain. "You say God elects some people and reprobates others and it has nothing to do with how a man lives or what he does? You make a man careless and profane. He'll never live a godly life." That's the argument, and that's the case with regard to, really, all of the doctrines of grace. Wherever grace is extolled, this objection will be raised.

They have, those who object, have a proposed solution to the problem and that solution is really just one word, it's the word "merit." You must do something. And there have been theologians long ago and that persist today who say, "We're saying you have to do something but we're saying that what you're doing is non-meritorious, it's not merit." But the fact of the matter is that they lie when they speak that way. If there is something that I must do to be received by God, to have a right standing before God, to be declared righteous before God, to be chosen by God, if God bases any of that upon anything in me, it's merit whether one will call it that or not. But they say that's the answer, you have to

set out that doctrine of merit before men, they have to know that there is something that they have to do, they have to earn their standing before God; they have to believe and then God will see that they are believing and God will choose them, God will elect them. They have to do some good works alongside of their believing so that God can take both of those and present both of those before his judgment seat as the basis for declaring them righteous. That's their teaching and, of course, we adamantly reject such a thing for many many reasons.

One of those reasons is this as brought out in this Question and Answer: the child of God does not need merit to be motivated to do good works. In fact, we could go on from there and say, holding out this idea of merit and you have to earn, terrifies the child of God, destroys him, for he has found his confidence and assurance and leaves him living a life of sinful carelessness and profanity. But we don't need and we ought never resort to merit in order to motivate ourselves or to speak of a motivation to do good works. We do not need merit to do good works, rather we will do good works because as those who are elected by God, as those who are viewed by his grace and grace alone, as those who are brought unto him justified in Jesus Christ, justified by faith alone, we will do good works because we are also those who are implanted into Christ. As the Heidelberg Catechism explains it, "By no means: for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness." To flip it around and to put it positively, the answer is saying: it is inevitable that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, it's inevitable that they will bring forth good fruits. They simply will.

The picture that is alluded to there in that answer is the picture taken from the plant world. It's the same picture as Jesus uses in John 15 which we read just a moment ago. Jesus says in verse 5, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." He doesn't mean there, of course, that he is a literal vine and we are little branches anymore then he meant he is literal bread when he said, "This is my body." He means to employ a picture. He says, "Here's a picture for you to understand things. I am the vine, you are the branches," and he explains that picture. Verse 4, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." Jesus simply means to say, "You are like branches and I am like a vine, and you are branches that are engrafted into me, the vine, you are implanted into me, and therefore my life, my power, my good, holy, obedient life flows from me, the vine, into you, the branches, so that the result is you produce fruit, that is, good works. It's my goodness," Christ says, "that manifests itself in you in the form of good works." And even as there is an inevitability with regard to the vine and branches, so it is with regard to the child of God. It's inevitable that that life from the vine flows into the branches. It's inevitable that those branches produce fruit. So it is with the child of God. As he is engrafted into the vine, he will produce fruit, good works, by his union to Jesus Christ.

The picture there is of a vine and branches. Our creeds use also the picture of a tree. Canons Three, Four, Article 11 ends this way, "that like a good tree," it, that's the will of the child of God, "that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions." Again, the Belgic Confession, Article 24, speaks of the fruit of a tree. Good works are

like the fruit of a tree. And that we sang of this morning in Psalter 2. It's found in the Psalms. We will sing of it again in our last Psalter number this morning. Like a tree, the Scripture says in the Psalms, the child of God is like a tree planted in the earth, its roots going down to the good life-nourishing water and nutrients in the soil. He will produce good fruits. If he's a good tree, he'll produce good fruit and that inevitably.

But this picture doesn't mean only to speak of a bond, a graft, a union, but means to speak of faith, not only from that viewpoint of a bonding unit, but means to speak of faith also as believing, as activity. As the child of God united to Christ with a bond of faith has, by the grace of God, that faith actively expressing itself within him, believing positively, he bears good fruit. In other words, the child of God believes by the gift of faith that God gives to him, he believes, "Jesus Christ died for me." He says, "All my sins were placed upon him. All of them. The sin that condemned me in Adam. The sins I committed as a little child. The sins that may flit through my mind on my deathbed. All of the sins of all of my life were put upon him and he took them to the cross and he paid for them. He was punished for them in my place. He bore the full wrath of God in my place and he did so all the while loving God perfectly and thereby meriting, earning, righteousness for me which he has imputed into my account so that God looks at me as righteous, indeed as righteous as Christ himself is. That's how God views me in Christ." He believes that by the gift of faith. He believes that so that it becomes real unto him in his own heart, so he hears that testimony of God within his own soul.

That's the activity of his faith and then looking at it from that point of view, we can understand, again, the inevitability of thankfulness. That's the way faith works. That's the way God works, by his grace and powerful Spirit within his child. When we hear and know we are forgiven by Christ and Christ's work alone, how can we respond in any other way than thankfully, joyfully? Thankfully with gratitude to God. In fact, it's impossible that there not come out of that faith good fruits, good works, and thankfulness to God, as at the same time that faith knows and believes, "I'm forgiven. I'm righteous in Christ."

That's the doctrine, again, of Article 24 of the Belgic Confession. Therefore it is impossible that this holy faith, the holy faith which is a justifying faith, true faith, that therefore it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man. Impossible that faith be unfruitful in man for we do not speak of a vain faith, empty faith, dead faith, the kind of faith that the Scripture describes the demons and devils have. Not that kind of a faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a faith that worketh by love, which excites man to the practices of those works which God has commanded in his word. And again, these works as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God.

Just a little bit later again in that same Article: otherwise it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works, otherwise they could not be good works anymore than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good. The meaning there is: we don't do good works before we are justified, we do good works as those who are justified and in response to that justification, in particular the justification known by

faith. In response to that, the child of God is filled with gratitude to God and he lives a life of good works. Certainty of our justification is especially that which brings out of us the good works. If it is left a little bit in doubt, which it cannot be and is not, but if it is presented as a little bit doubtful whether we or not we are justified, whether or not we are lacking, whether or not it's only the grace of God whereby we are brought unto God and loved by God and made right with God, if that's left a little bit in question, then that has a dramatic effect upon good works. It's in fact, only when there is a certainty of grace, absolute certainty of grace and we stand upon that certainty of grace, that then we inevitably live a life of good works.

Again, the Canons, Head One, Article 13, "The sense and certainty of this election afford to the children of God additional matter for daily humiliation before him." The sense and certainty of God's grace, particularly now in election. The certainty of it. It causes or affords the children of God additional matter for daily humiliation before him, "for adoring the depths of his mercies, for cleansing themselves," it is being sanctified, fighting against sin, "and rendering grateful returns of ardent love to Him who first manifested so great love towards them." So that these fruits are viewed by the Canons as not only the fruits of justification by faith, of course, that's involved, but also the fruits of election. As God elected us, so then we are justified and justified by faith. As God elected us and we are justified, so out of that faith come these good works. So tied are our good works to the certainty of our election that the Canons in Head One, Article 12 calls them "the infallible fruits of election." In other words, what comfort is that, what tremendous comfort. Everyone that God elects will inevitably live a life of good works before him. Inevitably because those works are infallible, without error, without the possibility of failure, of not occurring. When God elects, God justifies, and when God justifies, God produces through that faith and out of that faith, good works in his children.

Canons One, 13 brings out another possibility and that is that there are some who do not live godly, who do not walk as they ought. "The consideration of this doctrine of election is so far from encouraging remissness in the observance of the divine commands or from sinking men in carnal security, that these," that is, remissness, not walking as they ought according to the divine commands, living in carnal security, not the security of faith but a trumped up, carnal, fleshly security, though, "in the just judgment of God, are the usual effects," not the effects of – notice – not the effects of too much grace, not the effects of understanding and knowing with absolute certainty that it is God alone who saves me by electing me, by regenerating me, by giving me faith and justification and all the rest. That's not what causes men to live foolishly, but what does? "Rash presumption or of idle and wanton trifling with the grace of election." What stands behind that? Why would someone want to live a life of rash presumption, not true faith, but just assuming or presuming? Why would one want to be involved in idle and wanton trifling with the grace of election, with the truth of election? The Article goes on to say, "in those who refuse to walk in the ways of the elect."

There are such, there are always such, there are always such in the church too, those who say, "I don't want to walk in the ways of the elect. I love the ways of the world. I love the sins of the world." I don't mean that we find that in our own hearts, we do, every last one

of us does, but I mean those who do not even fight that. It's in them, they don't fight it, and so they trifle about election and they presume upon the grace of God rather than believing in that grace of God and embrace it and love it. They will walk lives careless and profane. They will walk lives of ungodliness before God, but that cannot for a moment be blamed upon grace or upon the doctrines of grace but upon their own innate sinfulness.

It's inevitable that a child of God elected by God, granted true faith, and who lives in that faith and out of that faith, it's inevitable that he will produce good fruits, as inevitable as it is of a good tree, that it produces good fruits, but as helpful as that picture is of a tree and fruits, the fact is we are not trees. That picture can only take us just so far. It brings out the inevitable nature of our good works and it does that remarkably well but we are not trees, obviously, or branches. In fact, in the creation order of things, we're quite a ways away from trees. Trees were created on the third day and God continued day after day to build and to cause to create more complex and greater, more marvelous works, and finally the sixth day, God created man. The third day, relatively simple trees. The sixth day, far more complex, man. And that which was of greater complexity within man is that God gave to man an understanding, an ability to understand that he didn't give to a tree. And God gave to man an ability to will, to desire, to want, which he didn't give to the tree. So that must come into all of this too. God deals with man as a man with an understanding and a will, not as he deals with trees. To the trees God gives nutrients, God gives water. To man God must give so much more in order to bring out of him good fruits, good works.

Again, the Canons Three, Four, Article 11, we quoted from it earlier, we quoted the last line, "and like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions." What is the "it" there? We mentioned it in passing earlier but from the context of that Article, it's clearly it's the will of man. God works within man. God infuses new qualities into the will which though heretofore dead, he quickens from being evil, disobedient, refractory. He renders it good and obedient and pliable, actuates and strengthens it that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions. We sang of that this morning too out of Psalter 325 and, again, it's throughout the Psalms. God deals with us as thinking, willing creatures. We're saying that, "I may steadfastly obey." That's my purpose, that I may steadfastly obey. "Give me an understanding heart. Work upon my heart, Father, and my will and my mind. Give me understanding. Give me a heart that loves thy will. Work within my will so that I love thine. Then I will inevitably live a life of good works before thee. Then I will," as we saw in Canons One, Article 13, "then I will live with grateful returns of ardent love." Isn't that a beautiful phrase? Grateful returns, thankful, conscious, purposeful, willing, grateful returns of ardent love towards God.

That's how God works within us and that's why we could even say that's exactly why the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of these fruits as fruits of thankfulness. Thankfulness too implies clearly an understanding of what God has done so that I am moved to be thankful. A willing, a desiring to live in thankfulness before God. The very word itself makes plain that what is needed is that this will be freed from its enslavement to sin. That's how we are by nature. Apart from the grace of God, apart from the work of God,

the regenerating and converting work of God, we are enslaved to sin in our will. All that our will wants to do is to live in this world and live of this world and to live in carnality and selfishness and ungodliness, careless and profane. Until God comes by his power and his grace in our hearts and changes that will and sweetly and powerfully bends that will into harmony with his will, then we render grateful returns of ardent love. Then we produce willingly because we want to, fruits of thankfulness.

That's the wonder of a life of good works. That's, again, the testament of the grace of God. How could God come to a dead sinner, one totally enslaved to sin, come into him by the power of his grace and change that will and that understanding, change that heart in such a profound way as to take one that hated God and took God's good gifts and squandered them ungratefully, indulged in them in his life on this earth, how could God take such a one and turn him around and change him into one who says, "Lord, it's all by thy grace. All of it. Thou hast elected me in thy grace. Thou hast sent thy Son to die in my place in thy grace. Thou hast raised him for me in newness of life and put his life in my heart. By thy grace, thou hast given me the gift of faith and thou hast justified me and thou hast given me all the blessings of salvation. By grace and grace alone. And wonder of wonders, thou hast even worked upon me in my will and made me want to love thee and to live in thankfulness before thee. And not only do I want to, but I do by thy marvelous grace."

Some, of course, laugh at the Reformed faith. They make a foolish spectacle of the Reformed faith. They make a caricature of the Reformed faith and they say, "You can't simply tell people all about grace and then expect them to live a life of good works. Besides, if you do that, all you're doing is telling them about grace and promises and things like that, how are they going to do any good works? They won't. You haven't even any place in your preaching for admonitions. How can you give commands to people? Why would you give commands to people? What's the place of that? What's the usefulness of that in your preaching?" And we answer with the fathers of old, we answer from the Canons again, Three, Four, Article 16, we say, "by the fall did not cease to be a creature endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin which pervaded the whole race of mankind deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death; so also this grace of regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away their will and its properties, or do violence thereto; but is spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it," so that God gives freedom to our will. So that man, in other words, has a will, has understanding and he is not dealt with as a senseless stock and block but as the man with an understanding and a will so that he needs doctrine. He needs doctrine explained to him so that he can understand it, so that understanding it he can live a life of gratitude to God. But also he needs the promises of the word, as that Article goes on to say. He needs the promises of the word so that he can be motivated within his will to live willingly, gratefully before God. And then he also needs the commands of God as God uses those too graciously to guide and direct his children and to bring out of them willingly the good fruits that he commands them unto.

Really, that's brought out even more plainly in the next Article, Head Three, Four, Article 17. Article 17 is really talking about how does all this happen, all this regenerating work, all of this working within man and bringing out of his will, bringing out of him willingly to do good works? How? And the Article says: by the preaching of the Gospel which includes precepts of the Gospel and which includes admonitions, requirements, commands, instruction in grace but also sacred admonitions. That's how God works with his people so that when we hear promises we say, "That fits with all the rest." When we hear commands, we do not say, "Well, that has no place. That should be set aside." Why would we command anyone if it's only grace and the doctrines of grace that bring out of him a godly life? The Canon says: yes, it's the doctrines of grace all right but the doctrines of grace as steering that will by the commands as well, unto the way that God would have his people walk so that his people willingly and lovingly walk in those ways.

That, beloved, is how God deals with us. That's how God works with us, in grace. That's how God takes his children, his own beloved children in his own arms and teaches them and instructs them and crafts them and creates them and transforms them into new creatures who live according to him. God is not a God who deals with us as trees; like trees, yes, but not trees. God is not the master of an orchard. God does not stand up his servant before us lined up here as so many trees in an orchard, but God deals with us as children, understanding, willing children, and in grace brings us inevitably to live the life of good works before him. And that, beloved, for this life but also everlastingly, eternally. That's how we will live.

Article 15 of the Canon says this, "He, therefore, who becomes the subject of this grace owes eternal gratitude to God, and gives him thanks forever." That's what God has given to us. That's what God has privileged us with. He's taken us unto himself, made us a subject of his grace. We are a work, a wonder work of God, a wonder work of the grace of God, and we see that and we know that and we thank him now. Our hearts are filled with gratitude to God and we will live in gratitude to God in all good works, but what a grief it is to us that in this life we do that so imperfectly and the comfort and the joy we hear and we can meditate upon is that there comes a day soon when that old nature is stripped away from us, it is torn out of us and all that we are is perfect children of God who live in heaven perfectly, perfectly serving the Lord, perfectly thanking him not only with our words, thanking him with all of our life, rendering to him grateful returns of ardent love forever and ever. That's our privilege. That's our future. Altogether by grace, God's grace and grace alone. Amen.

Father, we thank thee for thy word and we thank thee for thy grace and we thank thee for working in us so that we do live a life of good works before thee producing under thy care fruits of thankfulness to thee for what thou hast done for us. And when we think about the depth of thy mercies, the wonder of thy grace, all that it has accomplished for us, Father, we realize even though we shall have everlasting opportunity, still we will never be able to say our last thank you to thee. But we thank thee that we can and we will everlastingly live in thankfulness to thee because of thy grace, and everlastingly we shall praise thee for that grace which is the grace and the only thing that saved us. In Jesus' name we pray it. Amen.