

The Unconverted “Believer” (15): The Good Works of True Believers

Throughout this series, “The Unconverted ‘Believer’”, we have made frequent reference to the good works of true believers. We have emphasized that we are not saved by our good works, that is, they are not the ground on which God saves His people. But good works are essential to salvation. Good works characterize the life of the true Christian. They are the evidence that a person has been born again of the Holy Spirit, has exercised and is exercising true repentance, true saving faith, and is living as a true Christian. Good works are one basis of personal assurance of salvation, a matter that we will address before long. And as we set forth last Lord’s Day, our good works will one day undergo the Lord’s examination on the Day of Judgment, who will distinguish by their works true believers from hypocrites¹ and unbelievers. Today we will address more clearly and fully what the Holy Scriptures reveal to be the nature of good works, what they are and how they are produced in our lives. We will do so by first affirming that God saves us by His sovereign work, not by our works. Second, we will show that God has created us as His people in order that we would produce good works. And third, we will show from the Word of God what God has declared to be good works in contrast to what fallen people wrongly assume to be good works. In order to set these matters before us, we will consider a very familiar passage to most of us—Ephesians 2:8-10.

I. God saves us by His sovereign work, not ours.

We may see the need for Christians to perform good works when we consider the purpose for which God brings us to salvation. Let us read the first 11 verses of Ephesians 2 in order to establish the context in which we find verses 8 through 10.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ²in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

The apostle Paul was instructing the new Christians in the church of Ephesus that God was the sole cause for them coming to new life in Christ. Since Paul had first heard of two evidences of their conversion—their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for other Christians (Eph. 1:11)--, Paul had continually prayed to God for them. He thanked God repeatedly that He had brought them to salvation. He also continually prayed that God would give them understanding that it was due to His sovereign grace toward them in Christ, even from eternity, that they had come to embrace Jesus Christ in faith and repentance. It was when they were in the state of spiritual death, both unwilling and unable to come to Christ, that God had caused them to become alive in Jesus Christ. Due to God’s unconditional election of them as sinners, He purposed to

¹ Hypocrites are those who profess to be Christians, but whose lives testify otherwise.

bestow salvation upon them. It was not due to any desire or effort on their part, for they had been spiritually dead. Ephesians 2:1-3 declare their fallen condition when God brought them to receive new life. Paul wrote,

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ²in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

God went to work to save them due to His love for them and through His mercy toward them. It was a work wholly and solely of His grace. This is what we read in Ephesians 2:4-7.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

God had taken His people from spiritual death, had enabled them to rise unto spiritual life—it was a spiritual resurrection—and had caused them to ascend positionally to be seated with their Lord and Savior on His heavenly throne, sharing in His reign through His grace.

Paul then explained further the nature of this work of God’s grace in their salvation. In verse 8 Paul restated the truth, “***For by grace you have been saved.***” The word, “for” is a conjunction, which begins his explanation of what he had just stated. Their coming alive together with Christ in salvation was wholly due to God working in them and upon them. Earlier Paul had written that this great power that God had put forth to bring them out of their state of spiritual death was the same power that He had employed in raising Jesus Christ from the dead on the day of His resurrection (Eph. 1:19-21).

Now frequently salvation is set forth in the New Testament as a future prospect for believers—we shall one day receive salvation. For example, the Word of God declares that we are heirs of salvation that we will one day inherit.² But here salvation is set forth as the present possession of the Christian. We were saved when God had caused us to be raised from spiritual death unto spiritual life and we had come to believe on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. If you are saved, you have God alone to thank and to praise, for you were formerly unconcerned and unable to come to Christ. You were spiritually dead; you were void of the desire and the capability to believe on Christ. But due to His love for you, through His mercy upon you, and His work of sovereign grace in you, He brought you to salvation in Jesus Christ. He saved you from your sin, bringing you out of your state of spiritual death in sin unto spiritual life in union with Jesus Christ.

How did God bring you to experience salvation by His grace? We read, “For by (God’s) grace you have been saved ***through faith.***” Now Arminians teach that saving faith is the sinner’s contribution to his salvation that is born of his own free will. They would say something like this:

“God offers salvation to all by His grace and then the sinner who responds in faith of his own free will receives that gift of salvation. God has done His part in having His Son die, but you must do your part in believing this, and by these two acts, God’s and yours, you became saved.”

That is what is called ***synergism***³; it means the two, God and fallen man, work together in order to bring about salvation. This is not biblical teaching. The Bible teaches ***monergism***⁴, which means that God works

² See Hebrews 1:14; Romans 13:11; 1 Peter 1:5

³ The word, synergism, is derived from the Greek language; “syn” is a preposition meaning “together with”; “ergism” means “work”, hence synergism means to work together.

⁴ The word, monergism, is comprised of the Greek word “mono”, which means “alone” and “ergism” meaning work, that is, “one at work.” Salvation is due to God alone working to save His people from their sin.

alone to bring salvation to His people. Monergism is what historic reformed Christianity has affirmed and proclaims. And so, Arminians teach that fallen man has “free will” in the sense that he has the ability in and of himself, granted, with some assistance by God, to come to Christ for salvation. This passage, however, and this verse of Ephesians 2:8, does not support their unscriptural teaching. Salvation is not a cooperative effort of both God and man, for it is wholly a work of God’s grace. Now granted, every true Christian had come to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of his free will, because he desired salvation in Jesus Christ, but it is only due to the operation of God’s sovereign grace in his soul that he had begun to desire and then freely chose to come to Christ in repentance and faith. We love God because He first loved us.

This verse (2:8) teaches that God saves His people *by* grace, and He does so *through* faith.” To be precise, God does not save His people *by* faith, but rather, it is *by* His grace. It is by God’s grace that He enables and moves those He has loved in Christ from eternity to exercise faith in Jesus Christ and receive salvation through that faith. We freely came to Christ, but it is because He gave us through the power of His grace a new heart to desire to know Him and submit to Him as our Lord and Savior. It is as Paul wrote to the Christians in the church at Philippi: “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure” (Phi. 2:13). That is a good description of God’s grace at work in the heart and life of His people. When God purposed to save us from our sin, He put forth His power to cause us to come to Him in faith and repentance. It was wholly due to His grace operative upon us and in us. He had made us “willing in the day of His power” (Psa. 110:3, KJV).

That saving faith is due to a work of God’s sovereign grace in a sinner is abundantly clear in the Word of God. We read of this in the case of Lydia having come to salvation. Luke recorded that he and Paul had an encounter with a business woman beside a river just outside the city of Philippi.

And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met *there*. ¹⁴Now a certain woman named Lydia heard *us*. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. ***The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.*** ¹⁵And when she and her household were baptized, she begged *us*, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” So she persuaded us. (Acts 16:13-15)

Why was it that Lydia gave “heed” to the things that Paul had declared? It was because the Lord had “opened her heart.” That describes the work of saving grace in her soul. God in His providence had directed her to the riverside that day. God had moved Paul to go to the same place on this day, for he knew that he would probably meet some Jews there.⁵ And when Paul spoke the gospel to her the Lord gave her understanding of what he said, gave her the ability to believe what Paul was saying was true, and He gave to her the desire and willingness to embrace and commit herself in faith and faithfulness to Jesus Christ. God saved her by His grace through faith, having opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.

Salvation solely by God’s grace is also set forth in Luke’s account of the success of the gospel through Apollos in the region of Achaia. Here is Acts 18:24-28:

Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. ²⁵This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those ***who had believed through grace***; ²⁸for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

⁵ By a riverside was the common place that Jews would gather to worship on the Sabbath when there were not at least ten Jewish men in the region to establish a formal synagogue.

Here we read of Apollos having greatly helped Christians, whom Luke described as having “believed through grace.” We see again that saving faith is due to the work of God’s grace. God saves people through saving faith that He creates and sustains in them by His grace.

As we return to Ephesians 2, we next read that Paul then set forth the entire work of salvation as God’s work for us, not our works. Again, Paul wrote in verse 8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, **and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God...**” Salvation, which comes by God’s grace through faith is not of yourselves. This repudiates Arminians who say that salvation is of yourselves, “of your own free will.” The Word of God says it is not of yourselves; rather, it is the gift of God.

There is some debate as to what “it” (“this” in the ESV) refers to in verse 8, which again reads, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; **“it is the gift of God.”**” Some say that Paul intended the pronoun “it” to refer to saving “faith”, that faith is the gift of God. And although we could rightly say that saving faith is the gift of God, and we have already shown that this is so, nevertheless, that would be too narrow an interpretation here. Here “it” refers to all of God’s work of salvation. God’s grace by which He enables faith that brings salvation to the sinner is all due to a work of God’s grace. As one wrote,

The context demands that *this (it)* be understood of salvation by grace as a whole, including faith (or faithfulness) through which it is received.

God’s magnificent rescue from death, wrath, and bondage is all of grace. It neither originates in nor is effected by the readers. Instead, it is God’s own gift, a point which Paul goes out of his way to emphasize by changing the normal word order and contrasting ‘God’s’ with ‘yours’. The particular word for gift, though common enough, does not appear elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. Other words with a similar meaning are used to speak of God’s gift of righteousness and life in Christ (Rom. 5:15-17; 6:23).⁶

Fallen people can take no credit for their salvation. From first to last the application of redemption is due to the work of God’s sovereign grace bestowed on undeserving, helpless, damned sinners. But even when they were in their sin, God had loved them from eternity in Christ, and so He would not allow them to perish. He purposed to work in saving them from their sin by His grace.

This is what Paul declared in **verse 9**. Again, the entire sentence reads, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹**not of works, lest anyone should boast.**” If anyone takes credit for his coming to salvation through faith in Christ, he is either ignorant or in error. To claim that you came to faith in Christ of yourself, due to your own ability, of your own free will, you are claiming that you are saved by your own works. You have made faith a work that you have produced yourself, and God does not save anyone in that way. The result of that kind of thinking could result in the Christian boasting of his own ability, of his own wisdom, of his own will, but God saves people in a manner that they can only give the glory (credit) to God.

Now it is rather commonplace that when people quote this passage they stop at the end of verse 9. But the apostle, in order to confirm this matter further, included the words of **verse 10**. Again, the entire statement reads,

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰**For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...**

Paul declared that we are not saved by our works, but rather we are the result of God at work. It is God’s sovereign work of grace that saves sinners through Jesus Christ. Here we have the additional referral of our salvation to an act of God’s creation; we were “created in Christ Jesus.” One wrote of this verse:

God’s salvation has already been described in terms of a resurrection from the dead, a liberation from slavery, and a rescue from condemnation. Now it is spoken of as a new creation, and a further reason (*for*; cf. v. 8) is given why this salvation is not of human origin and therefore cannot be the basis

⁶ Peter T. O’Brien, **The Letter to the Ephesians** (William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 175f.

of human boasting. It is *God's* workmanship from first to last; believers *have been created* in Christ Jesus for good works. These 'good works' cannot be the ground of our salvation or the subject of our boasting since it is the *goal* of the new creation. They are the fruit of salvation, not its basis or cause. So once again in this magnificent paragraph the apostle makes clear that we are wholly dependent on God's gracious, sovereign activity for our salvation.⁷

Here are the words of **John Calvin** (1509-1564) commenting on Ephesians 2:10:

What remains now for free-will, if all the good works which proceed from us are acknowledged to have been the gifts of the Spirit of God? Let godly readers weigh carefully the apostle's words. He does not say that we are assisted by God. He does not say that the will is prepared, and is then left to run by its own strength. He does not say that the power of choosing aright is bestowed upon us, and that we are afterwards left to make our own choice. Such is the idle talk in which those persons who do their utmost to undervalue the grace of God are accustomed to indulge. But the apostle affirms that we are God's work, and that everything good in us is His creation; by which He means that the whole man is formed by His hand to be good. It is not the mere power of choosing aright, or some indescribable kind of preparation, or even assistance, but the right will itself, which is His workmanship; otherwise Paul's argument would have no force. He means to prove that man does not in any way procure salvation for himself, but obtains it as a free gift from God. The proof is, that man is nothing but by divine grace. Whoever, then, makes the very smallest claim for man, apart from the grace of God, allows him, to that extent, ability to procure (earn) salvation.

II. God has created His people so that they would live characterized by good works

It is the second portion of Ephesians 2:10 to which we will now give our attention. Let us again read it in its context.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, ***created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.***

Matthew Henry wrote these words regarding verse 10:

The apostle having before ascribed this change to divine grace in exclusion of works, lest he should seem thereby to discourage good works, he here observes that though the change is to be ascribed to nothing of that nature (*for we are the workmanship of God*), yet God, in His new creation, has designed and prepared us for good works: *Created unto good works*, with a design that we should be fruitful in them. Wherever God by His grace implants good principles, they are intended to be for good works. *Which God hath before ordained*, that is, decreed and appointed. Or, the words may be read, *To which God hath before prepared us*, that is, by blessing us with the knowledge of His will, and with the assistance of His Holy Spirit; and by producing such a change in us. *That we should walk in them*, or glorify God by an exemplary conversation⁸ and by our perseverance in holiness.

The point that Paul was making is that we were not saved by our works, but ***God saved us by His work in order that we might then produce good works.*** In other words, the purpose of God saving us was so that we would become submissive, compliant, even obedient followers of Christ, ones whose lives are characterized by good works.

⁷ Ibid, p. 178

⁸ "Conversation" is the old English word for the way one lives.

The point that we should stress here is that this is the primary purpose for which God has saved us from our sin. He did so that we might produce good works in our lives. This reveals a great deficiency in the way that message of the gospel of salvation is often portrayed and proclaimed. The purpose, the end, or goal of salvation, it is commonly thought, is to save us from damnation, to forgive us of our sins. But that is not what Paul declared in this passage. The primary goal or end is so that we would be His people living lives in conformity to His will, to live lives characterized by good works.

Salvation is a reversal of the fall of mankind. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they and the whole human race thereafter refused to live for God, but purposed to live for themselves. They did not live according to the will of God but according to their own fallen nature. Their works were evil works, for they were not done in obedience to God, not performed according to the standards of God's righteousness.

The Scriptures elsewhere state this same truth, that God saves us so that we would live lives characterized by "good works." Consider Paul's words to Titus:

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, ¹²teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, ***we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age,*** ¹³looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave Himself for us, ***that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.***" Titus 2:11-0

Why did God save us, simply or primarily to escape His punishment of us for our sin? Well, yes, He has done that, but His primary desire and design was to create a new people who were loving, submissive, and compliant in doing His will, that they would be "***zealous for good works.***" This why Paul would write to Titus in the following chapter these words: "his is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that ***those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works.*** These things are good and profitable to men" (Tit. 3:8). Now again, Paul made it very clear that we are not saved by our works, rather, He saved us so that we would live doing good works. To live characterized by good works is the end and nature of being saved by God's grace alone through faith alone, apart from works.

Ordering our lives in order to do good works is the course that leads us to our full and final salvation. For example, Paul wrote to Timothy:

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. ¹⁸Let them do good, ***that they be rich in good works,*** ready to give, willing to share, ¹⁹***storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*** (1 Tim. 6:17-19)

The apostle wrote to the churches of Galatia that the life of doing good is like sowing seed that will one day result in a great harvest that we shall reap, even everlasting life. Here is Galatians 5

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. ⁸For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but ***he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.*** ⁹And ***let us not grow weary while doing good,*** for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. ¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, ***let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*** (Gal. 6:7-10)

This is the end or goal of our salvation, a life ordered not according to our own sinful desires and will, but to order our lives according to the will of God. This is why the Scriptures can declare forthrightly: "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17). This is what true Christians do.

III. The nature of the "good works" that characterize true Christians?

What are the “good works” that God’s Word reveals should characterize Christians? ***First, good works are those that are in accordance with the will of God.*** The doxology of Hebrews describes these works:

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, ²¹make you complete ***in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight***, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20f)

These works are the obeying and fulfilling God’s will as set forth in the Holy Scriptures. In other words, the moral law of God set forth in the Holy Scriptures prescribe the kind of works that God regards as “good”, which should performed by His people.

The standards or commandments devised of men that are not taught in the Word of God should not and cannot be said to be “good works” in the sight of God. God spoke through His prophet, Isaiah, respecting this matter: “Therefore the Lord said:

‘Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths
And honor Me with their lips,
But have removed their hearts far from Me,
And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men,
¹⁴Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work
Among this people,
A marvelous work and a wonder;
For the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
And the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden.’” (Isa. 29:13f)

You may be recognize these words also used by our Lord Jesus when He was denouncing the error of the Pharisees. We read in Matthew 15 these words:

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ²⁴“Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”

³He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ⁴For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ ⁵But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”— ⁶then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. ⁷Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:

⁸‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
And honor Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
⁹***And in vain they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.***” (Matt. 15:1-9)

We may conclude that the Lord’s standards for living were the commandments of God, but not the commandments of men. All “works” that are said or thought to be “good works” that are not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures are not good works in the sight of God.

Today this principle is commonly disregarded. Many people believe that if a person is genuinely sincere in his act of devotion, no matter what form that devotion takes, is accepting and pleasing to God. It is thought that God approves of such “good works.” But this is not true. The Jews had a zeal for God, but that zeal was without knowledge (Rom. 10:2). It was that zeal that moved them to crucify Christ and persecute His people.

Second, in order for someone to perform good works that God recognizes and accepts, those works must be done from obedience to God with the right biblical motives. This means that only the works performed by true Christians can be regarded as truly good in the sight of God. Our confession of faith speaks to this:

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

Only true Christians can produce what the Bible regards “good works” in the sight of God. Our Lord declared that the way that His disciples could be identified and distinguished from those who were false was by the “fruit” of their lives, in other words, by their good works. He spoke of the impossibility of an unregenerate man to bring forth fruit unto God. But at the same time He suggested that it would be a common expectation to see fruit produced in the lives of His disciples. He declared these words in His sermon on the mount:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Even so, *every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.* ¹⁸*A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.* ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (Matt. 7:15-20)

It is important for us to understand that when we speak of the need and importance to produce good works that these works must be performed according to what Christians have historically referred to as “*evangelical obedience*”, not due to “*legal obedience*.” This involves the right motivation for keeping God’s laws, or commandments. We are to obey God’s commandments because we love God. Legal obedience is the desire and motivation to obey God’s commandments due to fear of God’s punishment rather than due to love for God. Legal obedience is enslaving and powerless to transform a person or to characterize a person as one who is holy before the Lord. When we are converted to Christ, we are to shift our understanding of our desire and motivation for obedience to God’s commandments. We are to obey God because we love God, but further, we obey God for this is what it is to love God. Sadly, too many Christians still cling to a sense of legal obedience rather than evangelical obedience. They obey out of fear of what God might do to them if they fail, rather than out of love for who He is and for what He has done for us in Christ. Those moved to obey through legal obedience will continue in misery and defeat as long as they do. But when we are saved from our sin through the love of God manifest to us by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we are to embrace the spirit of evangelical obedience.

We have referred in the past to the classic puritan writer on this subject, **Samuel Bolton** (d. 1654). In his book, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, he set forth the nature and role of the law of God for the New Testament believer.¹⁰ Here are Bolton’s words that address the transition that we undergo when we are converted to Christ to live according to evangelical obedience, not legal obedience:

⁹ **The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**, Art. 16, par. 7.

¹⁰ **Samuel Bolton** (1606-1654) wrote a classic book entitled, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*. In this book he had a section in which he identified nine differences between evangelical obedience and legal obedience. These are listed at the end of these notes.

Previously (before conversion), the principles of obedience were legal and servile, now they are filial (as in a family) and evangelical. As the law was given with evangelical purposes, so it is now kept (obeyed) from evangelical principles, principles of faith, love, and delight, which causes the soul to obey, and facilitates the whole of obedience. The love of Christ constrains (2 Cor. 5:14), yet is the obedience free. Love knows no difficulties; things impossible to others are easy to them that love. The grounds of obedience differ: heretofore, fear, now love. Previously the strength was our own; now we have fellowship with the strength of Christ. Our works are said to be wrought in God, by union with Him (John 3:21), and by fellowship with Him. As we can do nothing without Him, so we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. And this strength He has promised: The Lord hath avouched thee this day to be His peculiar people, as He hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all His commandments' (Deut. 26:18). He tells us that He works all our works in us and for us (Isa. 26. 12), the required works of grace in us, and of duty for us.

The ends before were for justification and life; now they are for other ends - to glorify God, to dignify the Gospel, to declare our sincerity, to express our thankfulness. Before, we obeyed, but out of compulsion of conscience; now we obey out of the promptings of nature, which, so far as it works, works to God, as naturally as stones move downward or sparks fly upward. Thus, then, it is that we preach the law, not in opposition to, but in subordination to the Gospel, as we shall show at length later.

And then unto all believers, Bolton wrote:

Lastly, under this head, let me exhort you all to judge of the law aright, and then let it be your care to maintain it. Let not Moses take the place of Christ; but, at the same time, make a right use of Moses. When works and obedience take their right place, when the law is rightly used, then it is holy, just and good. But if we use it as our life, then we trample the blood of Christ underfoot, and make His life and death in vain. Let the servant follow the Master; let Moses follow Christ; the law, grace; obedience, faith; and then all act their proper and designed parts. Remember what Zacharias said: You were redeemed that you might serve' (Luke 1:74), that you might live unto Him that died for you. Reason from mercy to duty, not from mercy to liberty (license). O beware that the great things of Christ do not make you more careless! Take heed not to abuse mercy. It is a sad thing when Christians abuse the grace of Christ. The justice of God prevails with others; oh, but God would have His tender mercies prevail with you: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice' (Rom. 12.1). The reasonings of saints are to be from engagements of mercy to enlargements in duty (2 Cor. 5:14 and 7. 1). Having such precious promises, let us purge ourselves from all corruptions of the flesh and spirit. None but venomous spirits will, spider-like, suck poison from such sweets, or draw such inferences from mercy as may be encouragements to sin. It would be a sad matter if believers should grow more slack and sluggish; if that which should quicken them slackens their hands; if a man should say in his heart, Christ died, I need not pray so much; Christ has done all, therefore I need do nothing. The doctrine we advance should strengthen and not weaken your engagement to duty, should heighten and not lessen your engagement to duty; it should quicken and not deaden your hearts' affections; it should inflame and not cool your spirits.

Third, our ability to do good works unto God is due to His grace working in us by means of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible for fallen man to order his life consistently according to the direction of Scripture apart from experiencing the new birth and being enabled by the Holy Spirit to live for God. We read of this in Romans 8:2-8.

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. ³For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ***4that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us*** who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to be carnally minded is death, but to be

spiritually minded is life and peace. ⁷Because *the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.* ⁸So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Paul declared that it was not possible for an unregenerate person to be subject, that is, willingly obedient, to the law of God. He is averse to God ordering his life according to His moral law. He has no interest, desire, or ability to keep the law of God. The unconverted person cannot be subject to God's law. But the true Christian can be and will be. God saved Him through Jesus Christ in order for "*the righteous requirement of the law*" to be fulfilled in him. This is how our confession states this:

Christians' ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ; and that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is necessary an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do of His good pleasure; yet they are not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty, unless upon a special motion of the Spirit, but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them. (John 15:4, 5; 2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 2:12f; Heb. 6:11f; Isa. 64:7)¹¹

Of course we should understand that though the Word of God tells us that Christians are characterized by good works and that He places a new and holy nature in us that aspires to knowledge and conformity to God's law so that we will manifest good works, that does not mean that it is an easy task for us to accomplish. Even as Christians we should realize and acknowledge that we are powerless in ourselves to do the will of God apart from the continual bestowal of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. To read further in Romans 8, we may take note that Paul wrote of this struggle of the Christian to live a holy life even while it is absolutely necessary that he does so. Here is Romans 8:9-13:

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. ¹⁰And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

¹²Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³*For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.* ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Here we read that it is absolutely essential that we live manifesting good works in our lives. In order to do this we must not live according to the flesh, that is, to indulge sin, doing our own will. Rather, we must put to death those deeds, that is, we must repent of our sinful actions. But this is only made possible "by the Spirit." As we call upon Jesus Christ our Lord to enable us to live for Him and not for our sin, we ask Him to empower us with the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to resist temptation and to order our lives in obedience to the will of God, that is, to His righteousness. If we rely on our own resolve or love, we will fail. But if we rely in faith upon the Lord to give us His enabling power by the Holy Spirit, He will enable us to put to death the sinful deeds of the body.

Because only true Christians can truly do "good works" before God, it exposes and convicts those who are without Christ, who are still in their sin. **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677) in his sermon on Ephesians 2:10 wrote the following of the unsaved, to which this doctrine may be applied:

For the reproof of many professing Christians, who are not more prepared for the Lord and made ready for every good work. Alas! Some are 'to every good work reprobate,' Titus 1:16, unfit for any Christian practice. In others, all their holiness standeth in being less vicious or wicked than others. If they avoid greater crimes, though they freely practice the less, they are accounted good men. Some talk, but do nothing, like cypress trees, tall and beautiful, but unfruitful; or the carbuncle, afar off seeming all

¹¹ **The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689**, Art. 16, par. 3.

on fire, but the touch discovers it to be key-cold: their zeal is more in their tongues than their actions. Others are very un-ready, arguing for mediocrity, disputing every inch with God, beating down the price of religion as low as they can, as little worship and charity may be, and will do no more than needeth, and it is well if they do that. True goodness, like live honey, droppeth of its own accord, 2 Cor. 8:2; and is always desirous to do more for God: Psa. 71:14, 'I will praise Thee more and more.'¹²

Fourth, the Holy Scriptures describe and define the good works of God's people to be of five different kinds. These were presented by **Thomas Manton** in the sermon mentioned above:

1. Acts of God's immediate worship, both internal and external. The internal acts are faith and love, trust, delight, reverence. External, as to pray, read, hear, to be much in communion with God in all parts of worship. Without works of piety we are practical atheists. God's people do certainly make conscience of these: the internal acts are the life of their souls; the external are their solace, strength, and support, their songs in the house of their pilgrimage, their refreshing in the way.

2. Every man must labor in the work to which he was called. God is pleased to appoint and accept the duties of our calling as a good work. To be profitable to human society in your place is good; the new nature helpeth us to be.

3. Works of righteousness and justice, to hurt no none, to give every one his due, to use fidelity in our relations. The credit of religion (true Christianity) is much concerned in the just dealing of them that profess it. God would have the world know that religion is a good friend to human society... In short, they that do not make conscience of paying their debts, and using justice, equity, and honesty in all their dealings, are robbers, thieves, and enemies to human society.

4. As to relieve the poor, to be good to all, to help others by our counsel or admonition... Now if you do not mind this kind of good works, you are unfaithful stewards in the good things committed to your trust. You must not deny God His own when He or any of His have need of it.

5. I think there is another sort of good works which concern ourselves, and that is, sobriety, watchfulness, mortification, self-denial. A man oweth duty to himself: Titus 2:12, "Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly." These conduce to our safety.¹³

Our God has saved us by His grace in which it is described as a new creation. This old creation was ruined by man's fall into sin. God has purposed, however, that He will create a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. He calls forth sinners through an act of creation to populate His future new creation. He has fitted us and He is preparing us for our glorious entrance and our eternal existence in the new world coming in which all of the citizens of His kingdom will live in joy, peace, and righteousness (Rom. 14:17). Thank God for His unspeakable gift in Christ.

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;
and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves,
but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Cor. 5:14)

¹² Thomas Manton, **The Complete Works of Thomas Manton**, vol. 2 (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), p. 402.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 398f.

From the
Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689

Chapter 16: Of Good Works

1. Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his Holy Word, and not such as without the warrant thereof are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intentions. (Micah 6:8; Heb. 13:21; Matt. 15:9; Isa. 29:13)

2. These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith; and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that having their fruit unto holiness they may have the end eternal life. (James 2:18, 22; Psa. 116:12, 13; 1 John 2:3, 5; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; Matt. 5:16; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Pet. 2:15; Phil. 1:11; Eph. 2:10; Rom. 6:22)

4. They who in their obedience attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do. (Job 9:2f; Gal. 5:17; Luke 17:10)

5. We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because as they are good they proceed from his Spirit, and as they are wrought by us they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's punishment. (Rom. 3:20; Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 4:6; Gal. 5:22,f; Isa. 64:6; Psa. 143:2)

6. Yet notwithstanding the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unprovable in God's sight, but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections. (Eph. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5; Matt. 25:21, 23; Heb. 6:10)

The True Bounds of Christian Freedom.

Samuel Bolton (1606-1654)

Nine differences between evangelical obedience and legal obedience

(1) The principle that moves the one spirit to duty is slavish, the other childlike. In one case the man does things in a legal spirit, either hoping to get rewards by it, or fearing punishments if he omits the duty. The godly man, on the other hand, goes about duty for the sake of obtaining communion with God, and knows it to be his reward and happiness to have that communion, while the lack of it is the greatest punishment he can endure.

(2) The one man does these things as his delight, and the other as his burden. And indeed it must needs be burden to them who find not God in prayer, either something of God going out from them to Him, or something of God coming down from Him to them. To the man who has to do with nothing but duty

while he is performing duty, to him duty is tedious; but to those who have to do with God, with Christ, in their duties, to them duty is a delight. Though the man of slavish spirit prays, he has nothing to do with God in prayer, he has no converse with Him; he has to do with nothing but duty in duty; yea, and not with duty alone, for he has to do with the world, with sin in duty, not with duty in duty, much less with God in duty. Therefore it is tedious work to him. But the godly man has to do with God. He labours, he breathes, his heart gapes after Him. He it is whom he has in his eyes, and whom he labours after in prayer, even if he cannot enjoy Him.

(3) *The one type of man performs duty from the convictions of conscience, the other from the necessity of his nature.* With many, obedience is their precept, not their principle; holiness their law, not their nature. Many men have convictions who are not converted; many are convinced they ought to do this and that, for example, that they ought to pray, but they have not got the heart which desires and lays hold of the things they have convictions of, and know they ought to do. Conviction, without conversion, is a tyrant rather than a king; it constrains, but does not persuade; it forces, but does not move and incline the soul to obedience. It terrifies but does not reform; it puts a man in fear of sin and makes him fear the omission of duty, but it does not enable him either to hate sin or to love duty. All that it does is out of conviction of conscience, not from the necessary act of a new nature. Conscience tells a man that he ought to do certain things, but gives him no strength to do them. It can show him the right way and tell him what he ought to do, but it does not enable the soul to do it. Like a milestone by the roadside, it shows the traveler the way, but does not give him strength to walk in the way. On the other hand, where there is the principle of the Gospel, where there is grace, it is in the soul as a pilot in a ship who not only points the way but steers the vessel in the way which he appoints.

(4) *The one kind of man looks for his satisfaction in the duty by the performance of the duty, the other looks for satisfaction in the duty as he finds Christ thereby;* it is not in the duty, but above the duty, that he finds his satisfaction.

(5) *The one kind of man contents himself with the shell, the other is not content without the substance.* The godly man goes to duty as the means of communion with God, to see God, to enjoy God, and to talk with God; the other goes to duty merely to satisfy the grumblings and quarrels of his conscience.

(6) *The one type of man performs duty in order to live by it. Ask such a man (for he prays) how he thinks he will get to heaven, and he will say that he will reach it by prayer. But the believer prays and performs duty, yet he looks beyond them, and looks to live by Christ alone.* He lives in the duty, but not by the duty; he lives in obedience, but yet looks higher than the obedience: I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' He looks for as much by Christ, and from Christ, as though he had never prayed a prayer or shed a tear. Even though he has done both these things in abundance, yet for his acceptance he looks up to Christ as if he himself had done nothing at all.

(7) *The one type of man does things coldly and formally, the other fervently.* Yet I do not question but that at times there may be coldness in a godly man and earnestness in the other. If Baal's priests prayed to their idol so earnestly, much more may a natural conscience God-wards. A natural man may pray earnestly. There is no doubt that Ahab was at one time earnest. A condemned man may cry earnestly for pardon. A natural man may pray earnestly at times when in fear or horror, or under pangs of conscience, but he does not cry believingly. There may be much affection in a prayer when there is but little faith; there may be fleshy affections, natural affections, affections heightened either from convictions or fears or horrors. Yet these are but the cries of nature, of sense, and of reason, the cries of flesh, not of faith. Affections based on true faith are not loud, yet they are strong; they may be still, yet they are deep; though they are not so violent, yet they are more sweet, more lasting.

(8) The formal man does duty with a view to it serving other ends, and especially when he finds himself in extreme difficulties. In certain cases things which in themselves are looked upon as most evil may be performed. A merchant may cast all his goods out of the ship in which he sails; not that he looks on the act as in any way desirable - he may cast away his heart with his goods - but yet in a certain case he may submit to it, to save his life. Some men engage in duty in a similar way; they desire holiness but only under great external pressure. They look upon prayer, upon obedience, upon the mortification of their lusts, and such like, as so many hard tasks and impositions which they must submit to if they would come to glory. **But it is not so with the godly man. He closes with these duties as his heaven, as a part of his happiness, a piece of his glory.** He does not close with them from a necessity of submission, but out of delight; these things are not his penance but his glory and his desire. The other man parts with sin, not because sin is not desirable, for he weeps after it, but because it is damning. He parts with sin as Jacob parted with Benjamin, because otherwise he would starve; or as Phaltiel with Michal, because otherwise he will lose his head; or as the merchant with his goods, because otherwise he will lose his life. And so he closes with holiness, not out of love and desire for it, but because he must endure it if he would come to heaven at last. But the godly man, on the other hand, parts with sin as poison, as an accursed thing which he desires to be rid of, and embraces holiness as his happiness. He thirsts to enjoy it and to be swallowed up by it.

(9) The one kind of man does duty as a sick man eats his food, not out of desire for it and delight in it, but because he knows that he will die if he does not eat; yet he has no desire or stomach for it. But the godly man does duty after the manner in which a healthy man feeds, not merely because he needs food, but because he desires it and delights in it. The one man engages in duty as if it were medicine, not food. He is reluctant to perform it; he has no pleasure in it; he is driven to it only because he conceives that his soul's health demands it. But the godly man engages in duty as a healthful man sits down to meat; there is delight, desire, and pleasure in the exercise. The godly are as the new-born babes that desire the sincere milk (1 Pet. 2:1).

The one man cries: The good that I would do, I cannot do; the evil that I would not do, I do.' The other man cries: The good that I have no desire to do, I do; and the evil that I desire to do, I dare not do.' The latter would sin, but dares not because of wrath; he does duty but has no heart for it, because he lacks the right spirit.
