

GOOD WORKS, THE 'FRUITS AND EVIDENCES OF A TRUE AND LIVELY FAITH'

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Introduction:

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul reminded his readers that “by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”.¹ Clearly, he meant to make it plain to these new converts that God’s grace extended to them in their salvation was in no way earned or merited. Instead, it was freely given to them because God is rich in mercy and He greatly loved them despite their willful disobedience and spiritual deadness. However, having just stated that their salvation was not by works, he went on to write, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”.² Paul wrote to Titus that, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”.³ And yet, in the previous chapter, he wrote regarding our great God and Savior Jesus Christ that He “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”.⁴

Clearly, there exists a very definite and important connection between one’s justification and the accompanying ‘good works’. A proper understanding of this relationship is of paramount importance. Indeed it is no exaggeration to state that the relationship between faith and works lies at the very heart of the gospel as this paper will attempt to demonstrate.

Perhaps the classic Scripture texts regarding this important relationship are found in James’ letter where we read, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead... You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”.⁵ James was essentially saying that a true justifying faith must be accompanied by ‘works’, otherwise a true faith does not exist.

The writers of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* articulated the connection between a true faith and works in this way: “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

¹ Ephesians 2.8-9

² verse 10

³ Titus 3.5

⁴ 2.14

⁵ James 2.17, 24

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”.⁶

Good works, although they are in no way a means of meriting salvation, are not an optional aspect of a true saving faith. They are a necessary manifestation and proof of one having become a new creature in Jesus Christ where “old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”.⁷

Good Works and the Covenant of Grace:

We are given a marvelous glimpse into the intimacy of the fellowship and love between the Father and Son in Jesus’ prayer on the night of His betrayal as it was recorded in John’s gospel. Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him... I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do”.⁸ In these words, our Savior gave expression to the fulfilling of a covenantal pact between Himself and God the Father, most commonly referred to by theologians as the *Covenant of Redemption*. In this pact, the Father and the Son entered into agreement for the purpose of bringing to pass the redemption of those fallen sinners on which God had set His electing love. The Father, desiring a people for Himself from amongst fallen sinners, commissioned His Son, even before creation and the fall, to accomplish that which was necessary in order to bring this to pass. The Son willingly entered into this covenant, and “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law”.⁹

This work of redemption required the Son of God, after having taken on a human nature, to fulfill the requirements of God’s law on behalf of the elect. Our first federal head, Adam, failed to comply with God’s command to obey and thereby merit eternal life. Instead of submission and obedience to His Creator, he sought autonomy and in so doing plunged himself and all of mankind into a state of guilt and condemnation, ultimately subject to eternal death. As such, “just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned... by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one... through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation... by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners”.¹⁰

⁶ Chapter XVI, *Of Good Works*, Paragraph II

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5.17

⁸ John 17.1-2, 4

⁹ Galatians 4.4-5

¹⁰ Romans 5.12, 17-19

Christ came as the second and superior Adam to obey the law where Adam had not, and in this way fulfill the first requirement of the law which is obedience. But He also fulfilled the second requirement of the law which was to suffer the consequences of Adam's disobedience to the law. Although the worth of this dual fulfillment of what the law requires by Christ is sufficient to accommodate every sinner from every age, He came specifically to accomplish this work for those that God had chosen before the foundation of the world. Jesus proclaimed regarding this work, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life".¹¹

And now Christ, having finished His work of providing satisfaction for the sins of the elect, has sat down at the right hand of the Father, and is highly exalted and given the name which is above every name. There He intercedes with the Father to obtain the promised Holy Spirit who is the executive Agent for the applying to the elect all that Christ merited and purchased in His life, suffering, death and resurrection. As such, God not only entered into covenant with His Son "as Head and Redeemer of the elect... voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him"¹², but He initiated a pact or covenant with the elect sinner usually called the *Covenant of Grace*.

The prophet Jeremiah expressed God's intention in this covenant of grace when he wrote, "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people".¹³ Francis Turretin wrote concerning this verse, "Here the relationship between God and us is designated, implying a mutual exchange of benefits and duties, so that if God is our husband, we should be His chaste and faithful spouse; if He is our Father, we should be sons; if a King and Redeemer, we should be peculiar people who live as the ransomed of the Lord".¹⁴ The people of God are no longer their own. They have been purchased at a great price and are under obligation to serve, worship and obey God alone. Scripture is clear: "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again", and, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service*".¹⁵ The sincere offering up of one's body a living sacrifice carries with it the implication that all one's faculties of intellect, will, and affections, are to be engaged in every aspect of life for the purpose of glorifying God. Paul wrote, "whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God".¹⁶ As such, the covenant of grace may be said to be conditional. But how so? Isn't salvation an unmerited gracious gift from God?

¹¹ John 6.38-40

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939, p. 271

¹³ Jeremiah 31.33

¹⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, P&R Publishing, 1994, XII, II, XXVI, p. 183

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5.15; Romans 12.1 (*italics mine*)

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 10.31

Before answering the question, it would be helpful to examine the relationship of the covenant of grace to the covenant of redemption. Louis Berkhof described this link as follows: “The counsel of redemption is the eternal prototype of the historical covenant of grace. This accounts for the fact that many combine the two into a single covenant. The former is eternal, that is, from eternity, and the latter, temporal in the sense that it is realized in time. The former is a compact between the Father and the Son as the Surety and Head of the elect, while the latter is a compact between the triune God and the elect sinner in the Surety”.¹⁷ Further, “Though this distinction (between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace) is favored by Scripture statements, it does not follow that there are two separate and independent covenants antithetic to the covenant of works. The covenant of grace and redemption are two modes or phases of the one evangelical covenant of mercy”.¹⁸

However, whether you understand the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace as two separate covenants or two aspects of the same covenant, there exists a hierarchy between the two. In the covenant of redemption, it is the sovereign electing will of the Father that provides the basis for the willingly agreed upon and accomplished work of the Son which is graciously applied to the elect sinner by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Peter captured the essence of this marvelous work of redemption when he wrote, “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ”.¹⁹ The natural or fallen man, however, who is under the dominion of sin and Satan, is absolutely not only unwilling, but entirely unable to serve, worship and obey God. Paul wrote, “There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside”, and “the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be”.²⁰ Therefore, when one is a recipient of the gospel promises of pardon and new life everlasting under the covenant of redemption, it is unconditional. This is because redemption, accomplished and applied, is an unmerited and gracious gift on the basis of God “having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will”.²¹

But Christ, in willing fulfillment of the Father’s will, not only procured a pardon for God’s people, but He also purchased new life for them in His resurrection. Paul described this new life when he wrote, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection... having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness”.²² On the basis of the fulfilling and applying of the covenant of redemption, the elect sinner is not only enabled, but is made willing to embrace by faith Jesus Christ as the One who fulfilled in His life, death and resurrection all the requirements of God’s law for him. Further, he is desirous of obeying God, seeking to

¹⁷ Ibid, p.270

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 265, here Berkhof was quoting Shedd from his work, *Dogmatic Theology*, II, p. 360

¹⁹ 1 Peter 1.2

²⁰ Romans 3.11-12; 8.7

²¹ Ephesians 1.5

²² Romans 6.5,18

please Him out of a sense of profound thanksgiving for his salvation. Therefore, as regards the hierarchy that exists between the two covenants, Berkhof wrote, “the counsel of redemption is the firm and eternal foundation of the covenant of grace. If there had been no eternal counsel of peace between the father and the Son, there could have been no agreement between the triune God and sinful men. The counsel of redemption makes the covenant of grace possible... the counsel of redemption consequently also gives efficacy to the covenant of grace, for in it the means are provided for the establishment and execution of the latter. It is only by faith that the sinner can obtain the blessings of the covenant, and in the counsel of redemption the way of faith is opened”.²³ The redeemed sinner is now exhorted to work out his salvation with “fear and trembling”, not under the power of his own natural steam, but as He responds to the workings of the indwelling Holy Spirit who powerfully works in him “both to will and to do for His good pleasure”.²⁴ The believer does not first exercise service, worship and obedience in order to obtain the blessings of the covenant of grace. That would be impossible as has been already noted. And so the covenant of grace is not conditional in that regard.

It is conditional, however, in that faith and repentance are required in order to obtain the promised blessings. Faith is needed in order to embrace the promises and repentance is the new life manifested in turning away from sin and pursuing a life of obedience out of love for God. This obedience is manifested in good works which are the result of truly loving one’s neighbor in fulfillment of what James called the royal law.²⁵ But the wonder of it all is that God graciously gives this faith and repentance. This is the realization of the promise inherent to the covenant of grace as expressed in Ezekiel where we read, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them”.²⁶ There are definite conditions to the covenant of grace, but they are not fulfilled by natural ability. They are exercised as a consequence of the promise of the covenant of grace, which as previously stated, is made effectual by the execution of the covenant of redemption in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

In his letter to Titus, Paul wrote that our great God and Savior Jesus Christ “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”.²⁷ There again we see the flow of God’s purpose in the covenant of redemption to have a special people for Himself made possible by Christ’s obedience to that purpose in the giving of Himself. His righteous life and His paying of the debt due for sin released God’s people not only from the guilt of sin, but the lawless living, ungodliness and pursuit of worldly lusts characteristic of the bondage of sin. The evidence of this release is a radical change in the mind, will and affections. The new born believer becomes like David who wrote, “I love the Lord, because He has heard my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me... You have delivered my soul from death... what shall I

²³ Berkhof, p. 270-271

²⁴ Philippians 2.12-13

²⁵ James 2.8

²⁶ Ezekiel 36.26-27

²⁷ Titus 2.14

render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?”²⁸ This new desire to render to the Lord a love offering finds expression in a zeal for good works. Jesus made it very clear that a true application of His work of redemption would result in true obedience. He said, “If you love Me you will keep My commandments”.²⁹ The recorder of those words, the Apostle John, wrote that “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”.³⁰

The upshot of all this is that good works are a gracious and necessary outworking of this new life applied per the promises of the covenant of grace. To suggest otherwise implies that Christ’s work of redemption did not procure release for the sinner from the deadness and slavery of sin. Quite the contrary, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new. Now all things are of God...”³¹

A marvelous example of this outworking of good works as a vital consequence of the gracious application of the promises of the covenant of grace is in the conversion of Zacchaeus. In the gospel of Luke, we’re told of this man who was the chief tax collector and rich, who out of curiosity wanted to see Jesus as He passed through Jericho.³² In commenting on this passage, J.C. Ryle wrote, “That curiosity roused, Zacchaeus was determined to gratify it. Rather than not see Jesus he ran on before along the road, and ‘climbed up into the tree.’ Upon that little action, so far as man’s eyes can see, there hinged the salvation of his soul. Our Lord stopped under the tree, and said ‘Come down, I must abide at thy house.’ From that very moment Zacchaeus was a changed man. That very night he lay down a Christian”.³³

As the chief tax collector, he was despised by his fellow Jews as a traitor and cheat, no doubt having become rich at his countrymen’s expense. And yet we see a remarkable contrast in his response to Jesus from that of the rich ruler in his encounter with Jesus, as is recorded for us by Luke in the previous chapter. In that case, the man was confident in his self-righteousness, fully convinced his life was in accordance with God’s laws. But then Jesus tested his assertion that he had kept the commandments by saying, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me”.³⁴ That would have been a true test of his keeping not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of it as well, which is to love his neighbor.³⁵ After hearing this, the man became sorrowful and went away to which Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”. And when the disciples then asked, “Who then can be saved?”, Jesus replied, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God”.³⁶

²⁸ Psalm 116:1,8,12

²⁹ John 14.15

³⁰ 1 John 4.7

³¹ 2 Corinthians 5.17-18

³² Luke 19.1-10

³³ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts On The Gospels*, Baker Book House, 2007, Volume Two, p. 291

³⁴ Luke 18.22

³⁵ Matthew recorded that Jesus added “and, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (16.19) to His list of commandments given to the man.

³⁶ Luke 18.25-27

The conversion of Zacchaeus demonstrated not only the possibility, but the reality of God's divine intervention in the life of this rich man. Ryle wrote, "We see the 'camel passing through the eye of a needle,' and the 'rich man entering the kingdom of God.' We behold plain proof that 'all things are possible with God.' We see a covetous tax-gatherer transformed into a liberal Christian!"³⁷ His conversion was a dramatic manifestation of the true application of the promises of the covenant of grace. Not only were his sins forgiven, but he was given a new heart and transformed mind as evidenced by his immediately proclaiming, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold".³⁸ In this way, he renounced and repented of the sinful deeds of his previous life and embarked on a new life of faith and obedience as shown by his good works of generosity to the poor and reparation to those he had cheated.

We have already seen that if good works do not accompany conversion, then there exists no real manifestation of new life or new birth. But further, if one were to assert that good works did not necessarily follow true conversion, then the implication is that Christ did not fully complete His work under the covenant of redemption. This work included not only His fulfilling of the law for the elect, but the destruction of the dominion of Satan over the elect in their bondage to sin in which they are subject prior to conversion. As such, the recovery of lost sinners includes not only a pardon for their sins, but a release from the dominion of sin. This restoration to holiness begun in this life will find its culmination in the life to come. It is in this way that the elect are God's "workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, prepared beforehand that we should walk in them".³⁹

Good Works and Our Union with Christ:

Many Christians cite Romans 8.28 as one of their favorite verses in the Bible which reads, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose". But many of them forget the relationship that exists between that verse and the one that follows which reads, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren". This is the reason that all things work together for good for God's people. Not only does the believer experience the joy of having his sins forgiven in Christ, but he also has the privilege of being adopted into the family of God. But that's not all. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is such that he progressively takes on the family image which is to be conformed to Jesus Christ Himself. The Apostle John in the midst of providing instruction to his readers suddenly burst forth into praise as he was overwhelmed by the love of God shown to Him in Christ Jesus. He wrote, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! ...Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what

³⁷ Ryle, p. 290

³⁸ Luke 19.8

³⁹ Ephesians 2.10

we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”⁴⁰.

And to be “conformed to Jesus Christ”, and “to be like Him” is to follow in His footsteps in the way He lived while on earth. At the inauguration of His public ministry, Jesus read these words from the prophet Isaiah in His hometown synagogue, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”.⁴¹ He then proclaimed, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”.⁴² Clearly, Christ’s ministry would be characterized by both word and deed. He preached and taught, but He also healed, fed the hungry, opened the eyes of the blind, cast out demons and raised the dead. In this way Christ confirmed who He claimed to be, God in the flesh, showing His authority and power over all that God had created. But He also demonstrated the nature of the kingdom He was establishing. It would be characterized by righteousness, justice, mercy and love. Peter summed up the deeds of Christ when he said to Cornelius “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him”.⁴³

And Jesus passed this ministry on to His disciples when He told them, “As you go, preach, saying ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give”.⁴⁴ Now this is not to say that the miracles of healing, raising the dead, etc. continue in the post apostolic age. These miracles and signs were used to confirm these apostles as truly commissioned by Christ to proclaim and write what He had personally taught them. But they were also expressions of love for God as shown in love for one’s neighbor. In this way they showed their clear identification with Christ as members of His body.

The calling to ministries of word and deed did not cease with the apostles, but continues for believers throughout this present age. What was true for the Apostle Paul is true for every genuine believer. He wrote that “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”.⁴⁵ Paul was not suffering from multiple personalities. He was giving expression to his release from what was the dominate power of sin which was contrary to, and at enmity with God and His purposes. He was also expressing the experiential manifestation of his new birth in Christ which was his undergoing of progressive conformity to Christ. This worked itself out not only in his preaching, but his sincere love of the brethren and the lost. His prayers, letters, physical sufferings, and personal sacrifices of his time, health and

⁴⁰ 1 John 3.1-2

⁴¹ Luke 4.18-19

⁴² verse 21

⁴³ Acts 10.38

⁴⁴ Matthew 10.7-8

⁴⁵ Galatians 2.20

temporal needs were all loving 'good works' for the good of others, the advance of Christ's kingdom and the building of the church.

This love, particularly for his fellow Jews, found its highest expression in what he wrote concerning Israel: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites".⁴⁶ This incredible willingness to sacrifice his eternal welfare was the highest form of self-less love for his neighbor, emulating Christ, which is the essence of a good work. In this way, Paul was showing his intimate union with Christ which manifests itself in following his example. We read, "But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps... ", and, "He who says he abides in Him ought also to walk just as He walked".⁴⁷ And to abide in Christ is to be in intimate union with Him, deriving the abundant life of which He spoke.⁴⁸ This ministry of word and deed is clear proof of the believer's intimate spiritual union with Christ.

Christ demonstrated the greatest 'good work' out of love for God and His brethren in the laying down of His life. This was supremely an act of utter selflessness. Jesus said, "I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep", and indeed, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us".⁴⁹ This laying down of His life procured a pardon for the believer, and it is His death into which the believer enters upon his being born again. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him...".⁵⁰ This union in dying with Christ is such that the 'old man' is put to death, and in union with Christ, the 'new man' emerges free, able and willing now to love both in word and in deed as he has been loved. This is the fruit of Christ's resurrection in His having purchased new life for the elect.

Good Works and the Building of the Church:

One of the great declarations made by our Lord was, "I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it".⁵¹ And Scripture makes it clear that God's chief means in accomplishing that end is through His word preached. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe", and likewise, James wrote, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth".⁵² The Apostle Paul made it very clear that God's ordinary means of incorporating His

⁴⁶ Romans 9.3-4

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 2.20-21; 1 John 1.6

⁴⁸ John 10.10

⁴⁹ John 10.11; 1 John 3.16

⁵⁰ Romans 6.6-8

⁵¹ Matthew 16.18

⁵² 1 Thessalonians 2.13; James 1.18

elect into the church would be through the preaching of the word as it is made effectual by the Holy Spirit. We read, “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified... and my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God”, and “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ...So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”.⁵³

However, as has already been discussed in the case of Zacchaeus, when God’s word is effectually received, this inevitably results in good deeds. As such, God is not only glorified in the preaching of His word, but with Zacchaeus He was glorified in the manifestation of His power in the transformation of this formerly greedy and dishonest man. The church therefore, made up of radically transformed new creatures in Christ, becomes the visible manifestation of Christ’s kingdom on earth.

This was the thrust of Christ’s teaching to His disciples when He said, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”.⁵⁴ The implication of what Jesus said is that there is a direct connection between the building of the church and the visible acts of mercy and love done by God’s people in the name of King Jesus. As discussed earlier, Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom in both word and deed. The church, which is the body of Christ, continues this ministry of both word and deed. The Apostle Peter wrote regarding the church, “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people”. And he highlighted this two-fold ministry of the church by writing further that we are to “proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”, which is to tell of salvation through the Person and work of Jesus Christ in His life, death and resurrection. And he then went on to write that “as sojourners and pilgrims”, we are to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation”.⁵⁵

If the church is not a visible manifestation of lives changed as demonstrated by loving acts of mercy, then the credibility of the proclaimed word of God is brought into question by an unbelieving world. That places a staggering responsibility upon God’s people in this world. The world is watching the church. And if the church, the very spiritual body of Jesus Christ on earth, is proclaiming a message of forgiveness, mercy and love, and yet is not placing those characteristics of the true church on display, then the world has every right to call Christians hypocrites. Jesus told His disciples, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 2.2, 4-5; Romans 10.14-15, 17

⁵⁴ Matthew 5.14-16

⁵⁵ 1 Peter 2.9-10, 11-12

love for one another”.⁵⁶ And that love for God is not only demonstrated, but it is confirmed by good deeds.

James elaborated on this truth when he wrote, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works”.⁵⁷ James was essentially saying that the genuineness of one’s faith must be seriously brought into question if their profession is not accompanied by acts of love to one’s neighbor.

Jesus highlighted the hypocrisy that existed amongst the religious leaders in his encounter with one of the experts in the law.⁵⁸ The man inquired of Jesus as to how to “inherit eternal life”. Jesus simply responded by asking the man to state what he read in the law. The man answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus then said, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.” This was and still is God’s standard for law-keeping. Jesus was essentially saying that if this underlying principle of the royal law of love was what characterized this man’s life, then he was indeed giving evidence of what God had promised to do, that “The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendents to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live”.⁵⁹ If that were true for this man, then all would be well because he would have been giving proof of genuine saving faith.

However, we further read in Luke’s account that the man “wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” This question clearly showed that the man’s conscience had been pricked by Jesus’ response. He knew his love had limits and he now wanted Jesus to confirm those limits. Richard Trench wrote, “He who inquired, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ who wished the entire extent of his obligation to others to be declared to him beforehand, showed in this how little he understood of that love, whose essence is that it owns no limit except its own inability to proceed further...”⁶⁰ Trench commented further, “The lawyer had said, ‘Designate my neighbor to me; tell me what marks a man to be such? Is it one faith, one blood, the obligation of mutual benefits, or what else, that I may know to whom I owe this debt?’ The Lord rebukes the question, holding up to him a man, and that man a despised Samaritan, who so far from seeking limits to his love, freely and largely exercised it towards one whose only claim upon him consisted in his needs; who assuredly had none of the marks of a neighbor, in

⁵⁶ John 13.35

⁵⁷ James 2.14-18

⁵⁸ Luke 10.25-37

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 30.6

⁶⁰ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes On The Miracles and the Parables Of Our Lord*, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953, Volume II, p. 313

the lawyer's sense of the word. The parable is a reply, not to the question, for to that it is no reply, but to the spirit out of which the question proceeded. 'You inquire, Who is my neighbor? Behold a man who asked quite another question, 'To whom can I be a neighbor?''⁶¹

How can the verbal witness of the church have any credibility if that witness is not also accompanied by good works? Paul wrote, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God".⁶² And that power is not only the power experienced by the individual believer, but it is placed on display for the world to see in the church. In His book "*9 Marks of a Healthy Church*", Mark Dever wrote, "our lives, individually and as church congregations, should give credibility to the Gospel we proclaim... Our lives together as church communities are the confirming echo of our witness".⁶³

We see this worked out in the New Testament church at Thessalonica. The Apostle Paul related to them his thankful prayers for their "work of faith, labor of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father". These expressions of faith, love and hope were to him manifestations of their election and subsequent new life in Jesus Christ. Paul attributed this change to their reception of God's word as it was made effectual through the power of the Holy Spirit. But he added, "as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake", and in this way, he linked their response to the gospel to their observance of the power of the gospel in Paul's life. Paul practiced what he preached which validated his ministry. Paul then noted that they "became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia... Your faith toward God has gone out... for they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living God".⁶⁴ Clearly, their faith was spreading as it was not only *declared*, but *demonstrated* in their radically changed lives. Certainly Paul had this church in mind when he in his letter to the Corinthians referred to the churches in Macedonia who gave liberally for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He wrote, "in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality".⁶⁵

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus prayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me".⁶⁶ That Jesus at this time in His ministry would so specifically pray for the 'good work' of unity in the church shows the tremendous role it would play in the building of the church. In commenting on these verses, J.C. Ryle wrote, "How painfully true it is that in every age divisions have been the scandal of religion, and the weakness of the Church of Christ! How often Christians have wasted their strength in contending against the brethren, instead of contending against sin and

⁶¹ Ibid, p.327

⁶² 1 Corinthians 1.18

⁶³ Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, Crossway Books, 2004, pgs. 129, 130

⁶⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1.3-5; 7-9

⁶⁵ 2 Corinthians 8.2

⁶⁶ John 17.20-21

the devil! How repeatedly they have given occasion to the world to say, 'When you have settled your own internal differences we will believe!'"⁶⁷

The Christian's true love for his neighbor "will cause us to be especially concerned that our neighbor hear and believe the gospel. True love, however, will never be satisfied to withhold compassionate deeds in the face of practical needs. Just as loving words are to be found on the lips of God's people, so too are loving deeds to be found in their hands. By this the kingdom of God is both proclaimed and displayed".⁶⁸ God has provided the church both word and deeds as a means of making disciples. Words are made effectual upon the heart and mind of the hearer by the Holy Spirit, and deeds provide the proof of the reality of new life in Jesus Christ.

However, it is important at this point to highlight a potential error that can arise when considering the relationship of word and deed. In particular, good works should accompany evangelism, but they should never be confused with evangelism. When this happens, it results in a 'social gospel' where good works in social reform are emphasized at the expense of personal conversion.⁶⁹

Good Works and Salvation:

It is abundantly clear in the Scriptures that salvation is by grace, that it is impossible to merit salvation by any works of our own. Paul wrote that God, "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began..."⁷⁰ And yet Jesus went out of His way to stress the importance of the law in the life of a believer. In His sermon on the mount, He said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets... Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven".⁷¹

In the above passage, Jesus' use of the word 'righteousness' was not a reference to that justifying righteousness Paul referred to when he wrote, "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed... even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe".⁷² Paul was pointing to the righteousness or merit of Jesus Christ, His perfect adherence to the law which is imputed to the account of the believer. Jesus,

⁶⁷ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, Baker Books, 2007, Volume Four, p.196

⁶⁸ Tom Ascol, *Word + Deed*, Tabletalk Magazine, Ligonier Ministries, December 2010, p.17

⁶⁹ The Roman priest who delivered the homily at Senator Ted Kennedy's funeral, related how he used the example of the good works commended by Jesus in Matthew 25 to assure the late Senator of his worthiness for heaven in that he had been active in social reform in his Congressional career.

⁷⁰ 2 Timothy 1.9

⁷¹ Matthew 5.17, 19-20

⁷² Romans 3.21-22

however, was warning that although the requirements of the law have been fully met by Jesus Christ for the believer, the keeping of the law is still an integral and important characteristic of the Christian's life. Commentator Leon Morris wrote concerning these verses, "(Jesus was) surely using the term righteousness in a sense different from that which the scribes and Pharisees attached to it. They looked for legal correctness, whereas Jesus looked for love. They stressed the keeping of the law, and from the standpoint of the lawkeeper it is not easy to see how anyone could exceed their righteousness. Along the lines of lawkeeping who could possibly exceed the righteousness of those who tithed mint, dill, and cumin (23:23)... Nowhere do we get the idea that the servant of God achieves in his own strength the kind of living that gives him standing before God. But when he is given that standing, Jesus looks to him to live in accordance with that standing... The Pharisees put a tremendous emphasis on the letter of the law, but Jesus was looking for something very different from the Pharisaic standard. For them it was a matter of observing regulations (and softening them where possible), but for Him it was keeping the commandments in depth; He taught a radical obedience".⁷³ Good works are encompassed in this radical obedience in that they are expressions of love for neighbor which is the foundation of true obedience to God's law. Matthew Henry also captured the essence of what Jesus taught when he wrote, "They (the Pharisees and scribes) minded only the outside, but we must make conscience of inside godliness. They aimed at the praise and applause of men, but we must aim at acceptance with God: but we, when we have done all, must deny ourselves, and say, We are unprofitable servants, and trust only to the righteousness of Christ".⁷⁴

Perhaps the most striking passage in Scripture highlighting the importance of 'good works' as regarding the believer's salvation is recorded in Matthew's gospel.⁷⁵ Jesus, in speaking of His coming again, spoke of all the nations gathered before Him, but separate from one another "as a shepherd divides His sheep from the goats". And to the sheep on His right hand He will say, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me".

In this passage, only good works are dealt with as the measure of one's eternal welfare. Nothing is said regarding grace, faith or even Christ's work of atonement. However, Jesus in no way contradicted the truth that salvation is a gracious "gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast".⁷⁶ Morris commented, "This passage deals with the evidence on which people will be judged, not the cause of salvation or damnation. That grace is not part of the present picture does not mean that it is any less significant. We must bear in mind that it is common to

⁷³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To Matthew*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992, p. 111

⁷⁴ Matthew Henry, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary*, Bethany House Publishers, 1983, p. 37

⁷⁵ Matthew 25.31-46

⁷⁶ Ephesians 2.8-9

the whole scriptural picture that we are saved by grace and judged by works. The works we do are the evidence either of the grace of God at work in us or the rejection of that grace".⁷⁷

Conclusion:

The beloved hymnwriter, Augustus Toplady, penned,

*Rock of ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood, from thy riven side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.*⁷⁸

In that verse he beautifully captured the great truth that the possessor of a 'true and lively faith' is not only cured of his guilt in the pardon Jesus procured on the cross, but he has been cured of the powerful bondage of sin. This double cure is such that he is now set free both legally and morally to progressively be what he was created to be. And that is to be one who glorifies God and enjoys Him forever.

To glorify God is to reflect the image of God in every thought, word and deed. Of course, this will not be realized fully in this life as the Christian continues to battle the remnants of sin from his old nature, but it will progressively emerge in this life as the fruit of the Spirit demonstrated in good works, and reach its fullness in the life to come.

The recovery of lost, dead sinners glorifies God in the Person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ which is founded in their eternal pact of redemption. In Christ, God places on display His many transcendently pure attributes including His righteousness, judgment, mercy, grace, faithfulness, sovereignty and power. But God is also glorified in the gracious application of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The true believer becomes a living showcase of the power of God, that same power that was exercised in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And to be a showcase of God's grace is to have a living faith which manifests itself in selfless expressions of love to God and one's neighbor. A 'true and lively faith' does not and cannot exist apart from the evidence of its existence shown in good works. But when true good works are present, the kingdom is present, and these works are a preview of the nature of the kingdom in its fullness when Christ returns. "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work... and the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'"⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Morris, p. 634, In this excerpt Morris cited Mt. 16.27: "The Son of man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works", Rom. 2.6: "(God) who will render to each one according to his deeds", and 2 Cor. 5.10: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad".

⁷⁸ *Rock Of Ages*, Trinity Hymnal, Great Commission Publications, #499, first verse

⁷⁹ Revelation 22.12, 17