

Works...Biblically Understood

Northwest Community Church | 10/23/2022 | Paul Ortiz

Today we're going to talk about work and I'm not talking about our employment or manual labor. Rather, I want to explore work as it pertains to our faith in different ways. Before we get started though, join me in prayer.

¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body^[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We see a recurring theme in these verses.....**WORK.**

- of Satan (v 2)
- as it relates to salvation (v 9)
- of God (v10)
- good works (v10)

One definition for "work" as we are considering it today is:

- Deeds in thought or action; what one does toward a desired end

Aim of this sermon:

- To clarify "works", biblically, so that you might think rightly about your own work within the context of working for God or working out your faith.

The subject of work can get confusing when we don't correctly categorize the different kinds of work shown in scripture. Worse yet, there exists a threat of damage to the assurance of the believer who mixes up this subject and I want you all to be encouraged and to have your assurance bolstered, not weakened.

As it concerns us, I want to consider 3 categories we can use to help us think rightly about works.

1. Natural works / works of the flesh

2. Works of faith
3. Good works

Natural Works

Now the first verses of our passage actually define these kinds of works really well (v 1-3)

What these verses highlight is what we call the depravity of man.

- This is the biblical doctrine of the sinful and guilty condition of all mankind before the Lord, from conception.

It is important to understand this natural condition of human beings because it is our starting point. *living in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body^[a] and the mind; by nature children of wrath.*

God's people through the ages have acknowledged this truth. For example, David declared the same when writing of his own sinfulness in psalm 51, saying, ⁵ *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.* (Ps 51:5) He knew that he existed in a sinful condition before ever he did a single thing in life.

Paul, quoting another psalm of David, in agreement, and applying the truth it contained to all mankind, says in Romans 3, *"None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."* (Romans 3:10-12)

So how does this relate to works?

In the natural state, all the works of men are self-serving and in a religious context, all men naturally seek to justify themselves. It is important to rightly understand the works of the natural man; all the effort that we put forward to achieve our own righteousness **before** we are brought to faith in Christ. Our natural depravity forms the basis for thinking rightly about our own works as they relate to salvation.....which is that **they don't**.

Now when I speak of works in this salvation context, I'm referring to any and all deeds, in thought or action, that a person might do toward the aim of earning salvation.

EXAMPLES – The idea that we can absolve ourselves of the guilt we are born with or surmount it by setting ourselves apart by what we do, how we behave, etc... is the height of self-delusion.

The works of the natural man, those born out of our flesh, are worthless in the eyes of God. We have nothing to offer of ourselves and all of our works in our natural state serve no purpose toward our own good **until** we are called to belief.

It's here that I want to look again at verse 3 of our passage. ³ *among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body^[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

Notice the language....." among whom we all **once** lived"..... and.... "**were** by nature children of wrath"

For the believer, there has been a change and they are no longer counted with the rest of mankind.

This is an important aspect of the gospel. The person who believes in Jesus is separated from the rest of mankind in the eyes of God.

The fact of the matter is that salvation is a work of God as our passage today says in v 4-9.

⁴ *But **God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, **made us alive** together with Christ—**by grace you have been saved**—⁶ and **raised us up** with him and **seated us** with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages **he might show** the immeasurable riches of **his grace** in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For **by grace** you have **been saved** through faith. And this is **not your own doing**; it is the **gift of God**, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

You may have noticed I emphasized those portions that indicate whose activity it is.

You see, salvation is by grace. For it to be by grace of God, it must be freely given by God, not under compulsion or out of any obligation. If our being saved was in response to anything in or of ourselves or because of something that we did, then it would be something owed to us, and therefore not be freely given, and therefore not be of grace.

Paul says the same in Romans 4, ⁴ *Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in^[a] him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."*

But you're a believer now, a Christian. So that means you're perfect, right?...or at least on your way to it sometime soon, right?

Hold on a minute. Did you shed your flesh?

Consider these words of Paul, speaking of himself and acknowledging the sin that **still** exists in his own flesh, as it does in all of us, in Romans 7, ¹⁸ *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.* (Romans 7:18-19)

EXPAND

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah, writing of the Israelites, says in Chapter 64, ⁶ *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.* (Isaiah 64:6)

While he is speaking of Israel particularly, and the false motives for their righteous works, it's worth noting that he includes himself among those whose righteous acts are as filthy rags.

These are 2 of God's people, specially called, pillars of the faith. But even they had to stop and acknowledge that even in God's grace, there existed a sinfulness about themselves that could not be overcome while in the flesh. They were, as we are, always in need.

"But", you say, "don't I have to be doing good works and Christian stuff to prove that I'm saved and stay saved? Aren't there a bunch of preachers saying I have to prove my salvation by my good works? Doesn't James say, ¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (2:14)* and then also, ¹⁹ *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?" (2:19-20)*

Ahh! A most unfortunate twisting of scripture, indeed, robbing assurance from God's children.

Here we will now cross over the threshold of salvation and will talk about the works of the believer.

The person who would teach that the believer must engage in "good works" to prove their salvation and would cite James to support such a notion, as most do, is mixing categories.... And this brings us to that second category, Faith works.

Faith Works

What are faith works? The working out of our faith is the alignment of our actions with our convictions.

I don't need to try too hard to illustrate what that means.....James does it for us.

In the context of these exact verses that too many use to try and say the Christian should be proving their salvation by doing good works, James provides 3 examples of this idea of faith works.

1. The poor and hungry (2:15-17) - EXPAND
2. Abraham (2:21-23) - EXPAND
3. Rahab (2:25-26) – EXPAND

We have to apply these examples to our own faith. Let me ask you, if I say that I believe Jesus paid for my sins and that my own righteousness comes from Him, and then proceed to espouse

the notion that to stay saved, our been found pleasing to the Lord, I have to be doing ABC or XYZ, can it be said that I truly have faith? This is something to keep in mind as we talk about the role of good works in the life of the believer and as you, in your own studies, encounter calls to action for doing good works.

Now, James would call a person who says they have faith (but whose actions don't align with that claim to faith) double-minded. He further describes this double-minded person in ch 1:22-24 saying, ²² *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* ²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.* ²⁴ *For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*

A question I'd ask you to consider after you leave here today is what opportunities do we have in our lives today to exercise or work out our own faith?

I'm going to touch on that some more but I want to first speak to that 3rd category of works that most people confuse with the faith works of James.....and that is, good works.

Good Works

What are good works?

- Acts of love, done in Christ

There are 2 parts to that statement and I want to address the 2nd part first..... in Christ.

We've already looked at how the natural man and his works are viewed in the eyes of God prior to coming to faith so let us now consider how the believer, that new creation of God, is viewed *in Christ*. Our verses today make a point of this distinction in v 10, ¹⁰ *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.*

Let's consider the words of Jesus in John 15:4-5 where he says, ⁴ *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.* ⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

You see, a fundamental aspect of the gospel is a transference that takes place between Jesus and His people. Our sinfulness (past, present, and future) is accounted to Him, for which He made satisfaction, and His righteousness, the righteousness of God, is accounted to us.

Paul says this in 2 Cor. 5:21, ²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

There is a spiritual, positional change made to all those who believe. We are no longer lost, apart from Christ, or as our passage today says, *children of wrath, like the rest of mankind*. We are joined with Him, found in Him.

Eph 1:7 says, ⁷ *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace*

God considers us as having the righteousness of Christ because we are viewed *in Him*, covered by Him. And it is God that has separated us in this way.

1 Peter 2:9-10 says, ⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Having this new status from God's perspective, our sins are no longer counted against us.

David, praising the Lord for how He deals with His people, says in psalm 103:8-12, ⁸ *The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.* ⁹ *He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.* ¹⁰ *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.* ¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;* ¹² *as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

East from the west.....can they ever meet each other?

And Paul states in Romans 8:1-2, ⁸ *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* ² *For the law of the Spirit of life has set you^u free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*

I emphasize all this so that you might not get hung up on the remaining sin in your flesh and that by not having the burden of trying to be seen as a "good Christian" in God's sight.....because He already sees you that way.....you can be free to do the good works for which you were created, as our passage today says (v10)

So now let's look at the first part of my definition of good works, acts of love, done in Christ. The obvious next question might be, what are acts of love?

A good place to start would be to consider yourself; specifically, how you love yourself.

Food, shelter, health, relief from pain, emotional health, pleasure, discipline, etc... the list goes on and on. In all these ways, we love ourselves.

I ask you to consider yourself in all these ways because it is there that we find the standard of love.

After the triumphal entry, as Jesus was speaking in the Temple, a pharisee lawyer asked him a question. (Matthew 22:36-40) ³⁶ *"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"* ³⁷ *And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* ³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: You shall*

love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Love your neighbor as yourself. Thinking about the examples I gave a moment ago and all the ways you love yourself, ask yourself, do you love other people in this way?

Aside from that exercise, briefly consider with me the following list of activities that are mentioned at various points in scripture within the context of good works:

- Praying for all manner of persons
- Modesty
- Self-control
- Hospitableness
- Soberness
- Bringing up children
- Caring for fellow believers
- Generousness
- Peaceableness
- Submissiveness to spouses
- Submissiveness to authorities
- Helping cases of urgent need
- Caring for widows
- Caring for orphans

This list is not all inclusive but notice that, whether a descriptive trait or a specific action, all these are similar in that they are born from a posture of love, consideration, and concern for those around us.

Now understand that I'm not trying to guilt trip anyone. If you think you are falling short of loving your neighbor as yourself, you are. We all do. This is our lifelong plight, having the down payment of future glorification now but persisting, for the time being, in corrupted flesh. So praise the Lord that it isn't about us. It's all about Jesus! But while we fall short in our flesh, doing what we do not want to do, there exists inside of us the desire to do what is right and good.

Let us always remember that Jesus has fulfilled the law for us and if ever you find yourself thinking that you must do good works to be acceptable in the eyes of God, eliminate the notion from your mind for you are already accepted for what Christ has done. Rather, consider yourself FREED to do good works.

A rich man is free to be generous with his money, spending it as he pleases to his heart's content, because he is secure in his own provision. He doesn't worry about money. He doesn't toil to maintain his home, pay his bills, pay for groceries, etc... He has all things and is free to pour out his abundance.

Similarly, the believer possesses all things. Salvation is theirs in Christ. They have an inheritance that waits for them. The believer has the promises of God and enjoys the peace of God through all things. Being secure, therefore, we are free to pour out from our own abundance

When we can internalize these truths, the burden of trying to earn a right standing before God and the preoccupation with the things of this world begin to fade away and the appreciation we have for all we've been given proceeds from our hearts in the form of love and compassion, not only to fellow believers but to all men.

Now I know that in this 1st world society we live in, it can be hard to find the opportunity to show our love to each other even though there is a zealotry in us to do just that; all of us are eager to jump at the opportunity to do good works. Additionally, most of us will downplay our own troubles or avoid discussion of them entirely for concern of others, not wanting to be an inconvenience or burden to them. In our congregation, while there are many who lovingly pour themselves out in acts of love, in very practical ways, there may be others of you who feel you don't get to show love for one another too often. I wholeheartedly commend all the good works being done in our church and would encourage all of you to excel still more. Also, if we feel we may not have the opportunity to do much in action to love others, I pray that the heart for it exists in us all. After all, if we don't have love in our heart then it doesn't matter how much we do. The pharisees of Jesus's time were zealous for the law but had no love for God and he responded with, ²⁷ *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."* ²⁸ *"So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."* This can be true of us too if we aren't careful in honestly assessing our motivations. Let good works flow from a heart that earnestly desires to do them. Don't go forcing good works just so that others can see you do them that you might look like a good Christian.

Jesus said, *"...let your light shine before others, so that²⁹ they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."* (Matthew 5:16) but he also said, ³⁴ *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."* ³⁵ *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:34-35)

So pour out your love wherever you can, and don't neglect to show it to your neighbor....that person sitting to your right and left whenever the opportunity arises. When the chips are down, it's the love we have for each other that will shine in the darkness. If society collapses tomorrow, I expect to see you all of you gathering here, caring for each other.

Now I said I was going to come back to faith works.

So often we are preoccupied by our doing good works of love and kindness that we forget how bright our light can shine by the outworking of our faith.

There is a personal working of faith that happens every time we remind ourselves of the gospel of Jesus when we find ourselves falling short in our flesh. It is an exercise of faith to be assured of our salvation, based on the finished work of Christ, when faced with fiery darts that attack our conscience and try to convince us that we couldn't possibly be saved, given our own sinfulness.

Then there is an outworking of faith that is visible by those around us. It is characterized by an attitude and demeanor born out of the faith we have in God's promises during times of hardship and general distress. There have been many such times in recent years and more lie ahead. When things get tough, whether in our own lives, the community around us, or in the lives of others, we can be a positive and stabilizing presence. When hopelessness is gripping the world, you can expect that there will be those that can't help but wonder about the hope that lies within you. And if they ask, be ready to tell them about Jesus.