



How a Believer's Good Works Are Acceptable to God

Every Christian has been '*created in Christ Jesus for good works*' (Eph. 2:10). So much are good works native and necessary to authentic Christian faith, that the apostle James tells us that '*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*' (James 2:17). In saying this James is simply echoing the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus warned his disciples to '*beware of false prophets*', he told them that they could be recognized as false prophets by the fruit their lives produced: '*Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit ... Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits*' (Matt. 7:15-20). No biblically taught, sane Christian will dispute this.

The question that naturally arises at this point, however, is a pressing one: God has created me in Christ Jesus for good works, but my good works are inconsistent, lacking, and shot through with pride, mere dutifulness, and often half-heartedness. How then can I ever be acceptable to God, who is '*of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong*' (Hab. 1:13)? Even when I have done all that I can do, all that God has commanded me to do, the Lord himself confirms that I am yet '*an unprofitable/unworthy servant*' (cf. Luke 17:10).

Modern Controversy on Works and Justification

There are some men today, even within Reformed churches, for whom this is no dilemma at all. They teach that, notwithstanding our sinfully defective good works, God accepts what we give to him and justifies us through faith in Christ *and* the good works that are intrinsic to true faith. At first sight there is a certain plausibility about this new teaching (though it echoes in its major points the teaching of the Council of Trent in the 1540). Throughout the Scriptures both the graces and the good works of believers are declared to be acceptable to God. Peter tells us that '*the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit*' is '*very precious in God's sight*' (1 Pet. 3:4); the writer to the Hebrews tells us that the continual offering up of '*a sacrifice of praise*', doing good and sharing what we have are '*pleasing to God*' (Heb. 13:15-16); Paul confirms that the sacrificial gifts of God's people are a '*sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*' (Phil. 4:18); finally, our Lord Jesus Christ says that '*Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward ... And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward*' (Matt. 10:41-42). It is not difficult, therefore, to see that 'good works' belong to the heart of the Christian faith and are acceptable to God because they are in accordance with his revealed will and because they are the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But how do these 'good works' relate to the believer's justification? Do they, in any measure, contribute towards his justification? The Scriptures answer this question unequivocally: Good works are the *effect* of faith and the visible evidence of our justification; they have no part to play in the faith that is the instrumental means of our justification. As such, 'good works' do not and cannot form any part of the ground or basis of our justification: '*Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*' (Rom. 5:1; see also 4:5). Yet, the good works of believers are truly acceptable to God – but only through the merit of Christ.

James Buchanan¹ makes the point well:

*Considered as fruits of our sanctification ... (good works) cannot be too highly commended; but considered as the ground of our Justification, or as forming any part of our TITLE to that inheritance, they are to be utterly rejected, and treated as 'dung' and 'filthy rags' **with reference to that end**; for they cannot be regarded as such, without dishonour to the redeeming work of Christ; and for this reason the Apostle, speaking of himself as having been, 'as touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless', declares that he had renounced all dependence upon it, and upon everything else but Christ alone.*

How then are we to assess the recent teaching that maintains that we are justified by *obedient faith* (in the sense that acts of obedience are inherent in our faith), and not *faith alone* in Jesus Christ? This revisionist teaching (it is a contradiction of the Reformation consensus on justification) is seriously flawed in at least two ways.

First, it over-estimates the character of the good works a believer can perform and under-estimates what is pleasing and acceptable to our thrice holy God. Put more bluntly: How much obedience must I give for God, along with my faith in Christ, to justify me? Must it be wholly consistent, or will intermittent obedience be sufficient? And what about the quality of my believing obedience? What measure of qualitative obedience will God consider acceptable? These are not arcane questions.

How Our Understanding Reflects on Christ

Second, this 'Reformed revisionism' is even more seriously flawed: It profoundly fails to understand the significance of our Lord Jesus Christ's earthly obedience. If my ultimate acceptance with God rests upon Christ's atoning work on the cross *and* on my good works, what becomes of the saving significance of Christ's humanity from Bethlehem to Calvary? Is the significance of his life from the Virgin's womb to being nailed to the cross merely a prelude to the main event, as it were? Are we only to understand Jesus' obedience as what was necessary for him to be the sinless offering that would take away the sin of the world?

In this connection it is vastly significant that Paul can describe the whole course of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as '*one act of righteousness (that) leads to justification and life for all men*' (Rom. 5:18). For Paul the 'active obedience' of Christ and the 'passive obedience' of Christ are one obedience.

As he puts it in Philippians 2:8, Jesus was '*obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*'. The saving obedience of Christ encompassed every phase of his earthly, mediatorial life. In Romans 5:18-21, Paul understands the whole course of our Saviour's life in terms of representative headship – what the One does has saving implications for all men. Our standing before God rests alone on Christ's '*one act of righteousness*', which God imputes to our account by faith alone (Rom. 5:18-19).

John Bunyan tells us in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* of his discovery of this glorious truth:

*I was all this while ignorant of Jesus Christ; and going about to establish my own righteousness; and had perished therein, had not God in mercy showed me more of my state by nature ... But one day, as I was passing into the field ... suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, **Thy righteousness is in heaven**; and me-thought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand: there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, **He wants** (lacks) **My righteousness**; for that was just before him. I also saw moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself ... Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed; I was loosed from my afflictions and irons ... now went I also home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God.'*²

The deeply flawed teaching that maintains that *'the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day' and that 'abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments ... are all necessary for continuing in the state of justification'* (as a leading exponent of this new teaching has written) needs to be seen for what it is, a regression into moralism and Romanism.

John Calvin's Distinction

It is remarkable how this new teaching seeks to trace its heritage back to the Reformers. Calvin for one, however, is absolutely clear on what the ground of our justification is and on what significance the good works of believers have. In a lecture on Ezekiel 18:17, Calvin explains how the doctrine, 'Faith without works justifies', is either true or false, depending on the sense it bears. He explains:

*But although works tend in no way to be the cause of justification, yet, when the elect sons of God were justified freely by faith, at the same time their works are esteemed righteous by the same gratuitous liberality. Thus it remains true that faith without works justifies, although this needs prudence and a sound interpretation. For this proposition, 'Faith without works justifies,' is true and yet false, according to different senses. 'Faith without works justifies when by itself' is false, because faith without works is void (nulla est). But if the clause 'without works' is joined with the word 'to justify', the proposition will be true: therefore faith cannot justify when it is without works, because it is dead, and a mere fiction (merum figmentum). He who is born of God is just, as John says (1 John 5:18). Thus faith can be no more separated from works than the sun from its heat yet faith justifies without works, because works do not form a reason (rationem) for our justification; but faith alone (**sola fides**) reconciles us to God and causes him to love us, not in ourselves, but in his only begotten Son.³*

This has ever been the Reformed understanding of the relationship between the believer's faith and his good works. Any other construction confuses justification and sanctification, makes the believer a contributor to his justification, and denies the saving significance of Christ's active obedience.

Shortly before he died J. Gresham Machen sent his colleague and dear friend John Murray a telegram with these words, *'I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.'* This *alone* is how anyone can stand before God on the great day of Jesus Christ, cleansed by his blood and clothed with his imputed righteousness.

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Notes:

¹ In *The Doctrine of Justification* (1867; repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1961), pp. 363-4, quoting Phil. 3:9.

² 1John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London, 1905 ed.), pp. 32, 129-130.

³ I was directed to the above quote from Calvin by Dr Mark Garcia. He cites it in his doctoral thesis: 'Life in Christ: The Function of Union with Christ in the *Unio-Duplex Gratia* Structure of Calvin's Soteriology with Special Reference to the Relationship of Justification and Sanctification in Sixteenth-Century Context' (Ph.D. Thesis, Edinburgh, 2004).