

Of Good Works in General.

by John Gill

Good works in Christianity are done to testify gratitude to God, adorn our profession and doctrine, and benefit others, but not to procure salvation or make atonement for sin.

Scripture: Matthew 7:12, Romans 3:20, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Ephesians 2:8-10, Philippians 1:11, 2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 3:14, Hebrews 13:16, James 2:18

Topics: "Good Works", "Faith and Salvation"

Description

John Gill emphasizes the multifaceted nature of good works, categorizing them into natural, civil, relative, and charitable actions. He explains that true good works must align with God's will, stem from love, be done in faith, and aim for God's glory. Gill also highlights that while good works are essential, they do not merit salvation, which is solely through grace. He stresses that only those transformed by Christ can perform good works, and these actions serve to glorify God and benefit others. Ultimately, good works are the fruit of faith and a reflection of one's relationship with God.

Transcript

A Body of PRACTICAL Divinity

Book 4--Chapter 5

OF GOOD WORKS IN GENERAL

Good works, or actions, are of various sorts. There are "natural" actions, which respect the physical life; such as eating, drinking, &c. which, when done in moderation, and not to excess, are good, and are necessary for the preservation of health and life. And there are "civil" employments, trades, businesses, and occupations of life, men are called to; and it is good to attend them; and they are necessary for the support of a man and his family, and that he may do good to others, and are for the credit of religion.

These, by some, are thought to be meant by good works, in Titus 3:14. There are "relative" duties, or good works to be performed by husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, magistrates and subjects, before treated of. And there are acts of "beneficence" and charity to fellow creatures and Christians; which are called "doing good", and are acceptable and well pleasing to God (Heb. 13:16; Gal. 6:10). There are some good works to be done to men, as men, and are comprehended in that general rule of Christ's, (Matthew 7:12) and others to believers in Christ, who are "by love to serve one another".

Some are of a "positive" kind, in obedience to a positive law of God, the effect of his sovereign will and pleasure; such were the institutions and ordinances of divine service observed under the former dispensation, and baptism and the Lord's Supper under the present. Others are of a "moral" nature, done in agreement to the moral law, and to the law and light of nature, binding upon all, in all ages. And of good works some are "materially", or as to the substance of them, and in appearance good, when they are not "circumstantially" good; or as to the circumstances of them; nor radically, and as to the principle of them: such were the virtues of the heathens Austin calls "*splendida peccata*", shining sins; and such the works done by Herod, on hearing John; and by the Pharisees, who were and did things outwardly righteous before men, but at heart wicked; hence it is sometimes said^[1], not "nouns", but "adverbs", make good works; it is not barely doing "*bonum*", a good thing; but doing that good thing "*bene*", well.

The circumstances requisite to a good work, are, 1a. That it be according to the command and will of God; as every evil work or sin is a transgression of the law of God, and a want of conformity to that; so every good work is in agreement with it, and a conformity to it. By this rule many works are cut off from being good works, done by the Pharisees of old, and by Papists now, though they may have a great show of religion and holiness, because they are done according to the precepts and traditions of men, and not according to the commands of God. 1b.

That it spring from love to God, and not influenced by any sinister and selfish motive; "The end of the commandment is charity", or love; love to God is the root and spring of obedience to it, and is the motive inducing to it (1 Tim. 1:5; John 14:15). 1c. It must be done in faith, for what is "not of faith is sin", and so no good work; without faith it is impossible to please God; herein lay the difference between Abel's work and Cain's; the one was done in faith, the other not (Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:4, 6). 1d.

It must be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). The Pharisees prayed, and fasted, and did alms; but all to be seen of men, and to get glory from them, but sought not the glory of God; and so were not good works; good works are "by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11). Now concerning these may be observed, 1. First, the springs and causes of them. 1a. The efficient cause is God, who works in his people, "both to will and to do"; gives the inclination to a good work, and power to perform it.

Every action, as an action, is of God, by whom we move; and a good work is not only of God, as an action, but as a good action, who is the fountain of all goodness; the beginning, progress, and perfection of a good work are of God, and so prayed for (Heb. 13:21). 1b. The influential cause is the grace of God; it was by that the apostle Paul did works more abundantly than others, and to that he ascribes them; and through that had his conversation in the world, in simplicity and godly sincerity (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 1:12).

The grace of God, both as a principle and as a doctrine, teaches influentially to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly (Titus 2:11, 12). 1c. Good works, that are truly such, are owing to union to Christ; men are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works", (Eph. 2:10) they are first in Christ as branches in the vine, and then bring forth the fruit of good works; as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it is in and abides in the vine, so neither can any except they are in and abide in Christ, who is the green fir tree, from whom all their fruit is found (John 15:4; Hosea 14:8). 1d.

Faith in Christ is productive of them; the heart is purified by faith in the blood of Jesus, which purges the conscience from dead works, whereby men are better fitted to do good works, or to serve the living God; faith without works is dead; and works without faith are dead works: a living faith produces living works; not that the life of faith lies in works; but as Dr. Ames^[2] observes, works are second acts, necessarily

flowing from the life of faith. Faith, some call it^[3] the internal, instrumental cause of works; the external instrumental cause of works is, 1e.

The word of God; as faith comes by hearing it, so the obedience of faith; the word, written and read, preached and heard, is a means of making the man of God, whether in a public or private character, "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16; see Luke 8:15). 2. Secondly, the nature and properties of good works. 2a. The best of works, which are done by the best of men, and in the best manner, are but imperfect; there is sin in them all; there are none found perfect in the sight of God, however they may appear before men, (Eccl. 7:20; Rev. 3:2) knowledge of the will of God, the rule of them, is imperfect; and so are faith and love from whence they spring; and there is indwelling sin, that hinders saints from doing the good they would, and in the manner they are desirous of, and which pollutes their best actions. 2b.

They are not meritorious of anything at the hand of God; the requisites of merit are wanting in them. 2b1. To merit, they must be profitable to God; but such they are not; they are no gain to him: men, by their works, give him nothing, nor does he receive anything from them, and therefore he is under no obligation to them for them (Job 22:2, 35:7; Ps. 16:2). 2b2. They are due to God; whereas they should not, if expected to merit by them; but in doing them men do but what is their duty; for the doing of which they are debtors, and under obligation to perform them.

God has a prior right unto them; could these be given him first, a recompence might be expected; but this is not the case (Luke 17:10; Rom. 8:12; 11:35, 36). 2b3. They must be done by men in their own strength, and not in the strength and by the assistance of God, of whom it is expected to merit; whereas without the grace and strength of Christ men can do nothing; but all things through him strengthening them: his strength is made perfect in their weakness, and by his grace they do what they do, and therefore can merit nothing. 2b4.

There is no proportion between the works of men, and any mercy and favour of God; they are not "worthy" of the "least" of the temporal mercies they enjoy, and still less of spiritual ones, and especially of eternal life and happiness; between which, and the best works of men, there is no manner of proportion; there is between sin, and the wages of it, death; but none between works of righteousness and eternal life; that is the free gift of God (Gen. 32:10; Rom. 6:23, 8:18). 3.

Thirdly, the subjects of them, in whom they are found, and by whom performed. Every man is not capable of performing good works; there is an inaptitude, and an impotence to that which is good; men are naturally to every good work reprobate or unfit; to do good they have no knowledge, and have no inclination nor disposition unto it; have neither will nor power; the bias of their minds is another way; they mind the things of the flesh, and their carnal minds are enmity to God, and to all that is good; and hence the truth of that observation, "There is none that doth good, no not one!" (Rom. 3:12).

Such only are capable of doing good works who, 3a. Are made good men; "Make the tree good, and its fruit will be good"; let a man be made a good man, and he will do good works; but it is God that must make him good^[4], none else can; he cannot make himself good; the good work of grace must first be begun in him by the Spirit and grace of God; and then, and not before, will he perform good works; he must be made a new creature in Christ, in order to do good works (Eph. 2:10). 3b.

They must first be purified and sanctified: Christ gave himself, his life and blood, for the redemption of his people; "That he might purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works", (Titus 2:14 and a

man must be sanctified by the Spirit and grace of God, that he may be "meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (2 Tim. 2:21). 3c. They must have the Spirit of Christ, and be strengthened by him, with all might in the inward man, in order to perform them; and for this end is he promised (Ezek. 36:27). 3d.

They must have faith in God, and strength from Christ; they that have "believed in God", in his Son, and in his promises, and in his covenant, ought to be "careful to maintain good works"; as they are the only persons capable of them, since faith is requisite to them; and such are under the greatest obligations to perform them: and strength from Christ is necessary; in whom are both "righteousness" to render them acceptable to God, and "strength" to perform duties incumbent on them (Titus 3:8; Isa. 45:24). 3e.

The apostle says; Let ours learn to "maintain good works" (Titus 3:14). Such who are the chosen generation, a peculiar people, the redeemed of the Lord, and who have drank into the same Spirit, have obtained like precious faith, and are heirs together of the grace of life. 4. Fourthly, the "necessary uses" for which good works are to be performed. 4a. First, not to procure salvation, is whole or in part; not to make peace with God, which they cannot effect; nor to make atonement for sin, for which they cannot answer one of a thousand; nor to obtain the pardon of it, which is only by the blood of Christ; nor to justify in the sight of God, for by the deeds of the law no flesh living can be justified, (Rom. 3:20, 28) the best works being impure and imperfect.

Salvation in general is denied to be of works; this is the current language of scripture (Eph. 2:8, 9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5). They are not in any rank and class of causes respecting salvation; they are neither efficient, nor moving, nor meritorious, nor adjuvant causes of salvation; nor even conditions of it; they do not go before any part of salvation, but are fruits and effects of it; not of election, which was before the children had done either good or evil; nor of redemption, in consequence of which the redeemed are a peculiar people, zealous of good works; nor of calling, works before calling are not good works, and those that follow after are fruits and effects of calling grace; "Who hath saved us and called us, not according to our works", &c. (2 Tim. 1:9) nor do they go before, to make and prepare the way to consummate happiness, but they "follow" after (Rev. 14:13).

Yet, 4b. Secondly, there are uses for which they are necessary. As, 4b1. With respect to God, they being of his "ordination", that his people should walk in them, and according to his command and will, in obedience to which it is necessary to perform them, (Eph. 2:10) as well as to testify our gratitude for mercies temporal and spiritual we receive from him; and they are to be done with a view to his glory; for hereby is our heavenly Father glorified; and we not only glorify him ourselves, but are the means of others glorifying him also (John 15:8; Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12). 4b2.

With respect to ourselves; as for the ornament of ourselves, to adorn our profession, and the doctrine of God our Saviour, (1 Tim. 2:9, 10; Titus 2:10) and to testify and show forth our faith to others, and to make our calling and election sure; not surer than they are in themselves, nor surer to ourselves, being certified to us by the Spirit and grace of God; but sure to others, by our good works and holy conversation, as fruits of them; which is all the evidence we are capable of giving to the world, or they are capable of receiving from us (James 2:18; 2 Peter 1:10). 4b3.

With respect to others, to whom they are good and profitable, and therefore to be done, (Titus 3:8) both by way of example, and by real benefit received through them, either in a temporal, or in a spiritual way; and because they serve to recommend religion to others; and may be, without the word, a means of winning

them to a liking of it; or, however, may serve to stop the mouth of gainsayers, and make them ashamed who falsely accuse the good conversation of the saints; and so prevent any just offence being given to Jew or Gentile, or to the church of God. ENDNOTES:

[1] Maccov. Distinct. Theolog. c. 15. s. 10.

[2] Medulla Theolog. l. 2. c. 7. s. 35.

[3] Synops. Purior. Theolog. Disp. 34. s. 9.

[4] "Bonus vir sine Deo nemo est", Seneca, Ep. 41. "Nulla sine Deo mens bona est", ibid. Ep. 73.

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