

The Proper Purpose of Duties

by Thomas Shepard

The purpose of performing duties is to carry you to the Lord Jesus Christ, use them as evidences of God's everlasting love, and honor the Lord Jesus Christ, while avoiding false faith and seeking true faith.

Scripture: Micah 3:11, Titus 2:14, Hebrews 7:25, 2 Peter 1:2, 2 Peter 1:8

Topics: "Christian Living", "True Faith"

Description

Thomas Shepard emphasizes the importance of performing duties not for salvation but to draw closer to the Lord Jesus Christ, to deepen love, acquaintance, and union with Him. He warns against falling in love with the performance of duties themselves rather than using them as means to reach Christ, the only source of rest and salvation. Shepard also highlights the role of duties as evidences of God's love and the need to honor Christ through zealous good works. Lastly, he cautions against false faith and presumption, urging individuals to seek true faith that comes from God and not rely on their own efforts or imaginations for salvation.

Transcript

But you will say, To what end should I perform duties, if I can not be saved by them?

For these three ends:--

First. To carry you to the Lord Jesus, the only Saviour. (Heb.7:25.) He only is able to save (not duties) all that come unto God (that is, in the use of means) by him. Hear a sermon to carry you to Jesus Christ; fast and pray, and get a full tide of affections in them to carry you to the Lord Jesus Christ; that is, to get more love to him, more acquaintance with him, more union with him; so sorrow for your sins that you may be more suitable for Christ, that you may prize Christ the more; use your duties as Noah's dove did her wings, to carry you to the ark of the Lord Jesus Christ, where only there is rest. If she had never used her wings, she would have fallen into the waters, so, if you would use no duties, but cast them all off, you are sure to perish. Or, as it is with a poor man that is to go over a great water for a treasure on the other side, though he can not fetch the boat, he calls for it; and, though there be no treasure in the boat, yet he uses the boat to carry him over to the treasure. So Christ is in heaven, and you on earth; he does not come to you, and you cannot go to him; now call for a boat; though there is no grace, no good, no salvation, in the duty itself, yet use it to carry you over to the treasure--the Lord Jesus Christ. When you come to hear, say, exercise your authority, Lord, by this sermon; when you come to pray, say, exercise your authority, Lord, by this prayer to a Saviour. But this is the misery of people. Like foolish lovers, when they are to woo for the lady,

they fall in love with her handmaid that is only to lead them to her; so men fall in love with, and dote upon, their own duties, and rest contented with the naked performance of them, which are only handmaids to lead the soul unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly. Use duties as evidences of God's everlasting love to you when you be in Christ; for the graces and duties of God's people, although they be not causes, yet they be tokens and pledges of salvation to one in Christ: they do not save a man, but accompany and follow such a man as shall be saved, (Heb. 6:9.) Let a man boast of his joys, feelings, gifts, spirit, grace, if he walks in the commission of any one sin, or the omission of any one known duty, or in the slovenly, ill-favored performance of duties, this man, I say, can have no assurance without flattering himself. (2 Pet. 1:8,9,10.) Duties, therefore, being evidences and pledges of salvation, use them to that end, and make much of them therefore; as a man that has a fair evidence for his lordship, because he did not purchase his lordship, will he therefore cast it away? No, no; because it is an evidence to assure him that it is his own; and so, to defend him against all such as seek to take it from him, he will carefully preserve the same; so, because duties do not save you, will you cast away good duties? No; for they are evidences (if you are in Christ) that the Lord and mercy are your own. Women will not cast away their love tokens, although they are such things as did not purchase or merit the love of their husbands; but because they are tokens of his love, therefore they will keep them safe.

That God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ may be honored by the performance of these duties, therefore use them. Christ shed his blood that he might purchase unto himself a people zealous of good works, (Tit. 2:14,) not to save our souls by them, but to honor him. O, let not the blood of Christ be shed in vain! Grace and good duties are a Christian's crown; it is sin only makes a man base. Now, shall a king cast away his crown, because he bought not his kingdom by it? No; because it is his ornament and glory to wear it when he is made a king. So I say to you, It is better that Christ should be honored than your soul saved; and, therefore, perform duties, because they honor the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus use your duties, but rest not in duties; nay, go out of duties, and match your soul to the Lord Jesus; take him for better and for worse; so live in him and upon him all your days.

Fourthly. By reason of man's headstrong presumption, or false faith, whereby men seek to save themselves by catching hold on Christ, when they see an insufficiency in all duties to help them, and themselves unworthy of mercy; for this is the last and most dangerous rock that these times are split upon. Men make a bridge of their own to carry them to Christ. I mean, they look not after faith wrought by an omnipotent power, which the eternal Spirit of the Lord Jesus must work in them, but they content themselves with a faith of their own forging and framing; and hence they think verily and believe that Christ is their sweet Saviour, and so doubt not but they are safe, when there is no such matter; but even as dogs they snatch away children's bread, and shall be shut out of doors (out of heaven hereafter forever) for their labor.

All men are of this opinion, that there is no salvation but by the merit of Jesus Christ; and because they hold fast this opinion, therefore they think they hold fast Jesus Christ in the hand of faith, and so perish by catching at their own catch, and hanging on their own imaginations and shadows. Some others catch hold of Christ before they come to feel their lack of faith and ability to believe, and catching hold on 'him, (like dust on a man's coat, whom God will shake off, or like burrs and briers, clinging to one's garment, which the Lord will trample under foot,) now they say, they thank God, they have got comfort by this means, and though God kills them, yet they will trust him. (Micah 3:11.)

It is in this respect a harder matter to convert a man in England than in the India, for there they have no such dodges and fortresses against our sermons; to say they believe in Christ already, as most amongst us do, we can not rap off men's fingers from catching hold on Christ before they are fit for him; like a company of thieves in the street, you shall see a hundred hands scrambling for a jewel that is fallen there, that have least, nay, nothing to do with it. Every man says, almost, I hope Christ is mine; I put my whole trust and confidence in him, and will not be beaten from this. What! Must a man despair? Must not a man trust unto Christ? Thus men will hope and trust, though they have no ground, no graces to prove they may lay hold and claim unto Christ. This hope, scared out of his wits, damns thousands; for I am persuaded, if men did see themselves Christless creatures, as well as sinful creatures, they would cry out, "Lord, what shall I do to be saved?"

This faith is a precious faith. (2 Pet. 1:2.) Precious things cost much, and we set them at a high price; if your faith be so, it has cost you many a prayer, many a sob, many a salty tear. But ask most men how they come by their faith in Christ, they say very easily; when the lion sleeps, a man may lie and sleep by it; but when it awakens, woe to that man that does so: so while God is silent and patient, you may fool yourself with thinking you do trust in God; but woe to you when the Lord appears in his wrath, as one day he will; for by virtue of this false faith, men sinning take Christ for a dishcloth to wipe them clean again, and that is all the use they have of this faith. They sin indeed, but they trust unto Christ for his mercy, and so lie still in their sins: God will revenge with blood, and fire, and plagues, this horrible condemnation from heaven.

Hence many of you trust to Christ, as the apricot tree, that leans against the wall, but it is fast rooted in the earth: so you lean upon Christ for salvation, but you are rooted in the world, rooted in your pride, rooted in your filthiness still. Woe to you if you perish in this estate; God will hew you down as fuel for his wrath, whatever mad hope you have to be saved by Christ. This, therefore, I proclaim from the God of heaven:--

1. You that never felt yourselves as unable to believe as a dead man to raise himself, you have as yet no faith at all.
2. You that would get faith, first must feel your inability to believe: and fetch not this flower out of your own garden; it must come down from Heaven to your soul, if ever you are a partaker thereof.

Other things I should have spoken of this large subject, but I am forced here to end abruptly; the Lord lay not this sin to their charge who have "stopped my mouth, laboring to withhold the truth in unrighteousness." And blessed be the good God, who has stood by his unworthy servant thus long, enabling him to lead you so far as to show you the rocks and dangers of your passage to another world.

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