Of Good Works (WCF 16:4-7)

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4. "They who, in their obedience, attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do" (WCF 16.4).

    a. In 1981 a book was published by Rabbi Harold Kushner called, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner's book was a New York Times best seller for many months and sold over 4 million copies. If the apostle Paul had read this book, he would have responded, *they don't*! Paul quoting Psalm 53:1-3 writes in Romans 3:10-12 ESV, as it is written: *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God...no one does good, not even one.""* And we read in 1 John 1: 8, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*." The only good person according to God's standard of goodness is the Lord Jesus Christ.

    b. Section 4 of the WCF is refuting the doctrine of *Supererogation*. To *Supererogate* is to go above and beyond the works of Christ for salvation. According to Roman Catholicism, one could not only be *good* or *perfect*, but could actually go beyond perfection. This form of perfectionism adds to the works of Christ, the works of the Virgin Mary and the saints. These works form a spiritual *treasury of merit*. This treasury of merit can be applied to the church to reduce the temporal punishment for the sin of those in purgatory. This is one of the most pernicious doctrines of the Roman Catholic church that the Pope has the power to draw from this treasury of merit through indulgences.

    c. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, an indulgence is "the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sin whose guilt has already been forgiven. A properly disposed member of the Christian faithful can obtain an indulgence under prescribed conditions through the help of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints. An indulgence is partial if it

removes part of the temporal punishment due to sin, or plenary if it removes all punishment."

d. Roman Catholicism divides sins into two categories, mortal sins and venial sins. We would agree that there are degrees of sin, some sins are worse than others. However, Scripture teaches that all sins are mortal. Romans 6:23 ESV, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

e. During the Reformation, John Tetzel, a Dominican monk, was commissioned by the Pope to sell indulgences. Tetzel declared that as soon as the coins *"clinked"* in his money chest, the souls of your loved ones would spring from purgatory. To think that you can buy salvation with your money is blasphemy. We read in Scripture of Simon the Magician. Acts 8:18-21 ESV, *"Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."*

f. The disagreement with the Roman Catholic church during the Protestant Reformation was over that one word, *alone!* The RCC did not disagree that we're saved by the works of Christ or that the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God, but that they add to the works of Christ, the merit of the virgin Mary and the saints, they add to the sufficiency of Scripture the traditions of the church. From this debate we have the Solas of the Reformation, that the final authority in faith and life is Scripture *Alone.* That we're saved by Christ *Alone,* through *Faith Alone* and by Grace *Alone* for the glory of God *alone* – "*so that no one can boast"* (Eph 2:9).

g. We read in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV:

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." I attended a debate many years ago

between Michael Horton's CURE and Catholic Answers. Dr. Robert Godfrey references this verse concerning the sufficiency of Scripture. The Roman Catholic teacher pointed out that Paul writes that Scripture is "*profitable"* but not the only authority of faith and practice. Dr Godfrey responded, my Bible says that the "*man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."* What do the words "complete" and "equipped for every good work" mean but that the Word of God is sufficient and we're not to add to the Word of God the traditions of men. Jesus said to the Pharisees, Mark 7:13 ESV, *"thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."*

5. "We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment" (WCF 16.5).

    a. To say that one can have more merit than what is required is contrary to Scripture. When you say you're saved by your merit, you're no longer talking about grace since grace is *unmerited favor* form God. In Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* Luke 17:10 ESV*, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"*

    b. To actually think, not only that you're perfect in the sight of God, but also that you can go above and beyond perfection. We're justified before God only by the merit of Christ alone received through faith alone (Rom 3:28). The apostle Paul writes in Phil 3: 2-20, *"Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has*

reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

6. "Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprovable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections" (WCF 16.6).

    a. This section teaches that the good works of the believer are not meritorious, however, they're accepted through the mediation of Christ. That we must be accepted by God first before our works of obedience can be accepted by God. God accepted Abel first before He accepted his offering (Gen 4:4). 1 Peter 2:5 ESV, *"you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."*

7. "Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God" (WCF 16.7).

    a. This section addresses the seemingly good work of the unregenerate, or non-believers. John Calvin called these external good works of the unregenerate, *"civil righteousness."* The Confessions makes the distinction between the external acts

of men who may do charitable acts such as giving to the poor. However, because these good works do not proceed from a purified heart of faith or from the right motive, which is to glorify God, they're sinful and cannot please God.

b. We read in Romans 2:14 ESV, *"For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law."* The apostle Paul here is referring to what the theologians call *natural law,* where the law written in the conscience accuses us.

Freedom in Christ

In the movie by Clint Eastwood, called *Unforgiven,* there is a scene where the young man that's riding with Clint Eastwood kills his first man. His conscience is so seared that he throws up. He says to Clint Eastwood, "I guess they had it coming," and Eastwood responds, "we all have it coming." The Scriptures say, Romans 6:20-23 ESV*:*

a. *"For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

b. Willaim Hendrickson writes, *"To be slaves of sin means to be enemies of righteousness; to be enemies of sin means to be friends of righteousness. To be devoted to both sin and righteousness at the same time is impossible. Compare the words of Jesus, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and look down on the other (Matt. 6:24)."* However, when we're united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit through the gift of faith, we're freed from the bondage to sin to merit our salvation, but out of love and gratitude for what God has given to us in Jesus Christ.

c. Romans 6:17-18, *But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."* You see, God not only saves us from the curse of the law, because *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13).*

Galatians 5:1 ESV, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

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