

Don't Downgrade Good Works

By Irwin J. Habeck

“We can't do anything good. It is written: ‘We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags’ (Is 64:6).” Statements of this nature have a way of cropping up in sermons which our Seminary students prepare for preaching to Christian congregations. They also surface from time to time in the writings of more mature theologians. The result is that there will be no acknowledgment of good works. It is this phenomenon which prompted the preparation of this article.

Now it is true that natural man can produce no works that are good—in the eyes of God. The doctrine of original sin, of the innate depravity of human nature, is so familiar to us that it requires no elaboration here. “The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth” (Gn 8:21). “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rm 8:7). “[You] were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). Jesus makes it clear that those who are thus constituted cannot do good works: “Make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt...an evil man out of the evil treasure [of the heart] bringeth forth evil things” (Mt 12:33, 35). So it is quite proper that we should tell people, also Christians, that as we are by nature we can do no good works—before God.

It must be observed, however, that the truths set forth above refer to man's vertical relation, his relation to God. If this fact is not borne in mind, overstatements and false impressions could result. Our dogmaticians have been careful to note that there is such a thing as civic righteousness. On the horizontal level, in man's relation to his fellow men, there can be good works as well as bad works. There can be philanthropists as well as criminals. And the Lord has arranged His world in such a way that there will be temporal rewards for those who do good to their fellow men and society. Witness the promise attached to the Fourth Commandment. Therefore we must be careful not to give the impression that there is nothing good about the works done by the unregenerate man lest we confuse people by making them wonder whether it really doesn't make any difference in this life whether a man gives generously for the support of his favorite charity or whether he robs a bank. But then, indeed, we can be quick to add that when it comes to the vertical relation to God, the good works of the unregenerate are only “glittering vices” and merit nothing.

The regenerate, however, do good works. The new man does only good works: “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (Rm 7:22). But in the same context the Apostle laments: “With the flesh [I serve] the law of sin” (Rm 7:25). Sad to say, the flesh often intrudes even when the new man is doing a good work. It was certainly a good work when the disciples forsook everything in order to follow Jesus. But it was the flesh speaking when Peter in retrospect asked Jesus: “What shall we have therefore?” (Mt 19:27). This called for an earnest warning on the part of Jesus: “Many that are first shall be last” (Mt 19:30). It is a good work when trusting in Jesus and what He has done for us and prompted by the Holy Spirit we approach our heavenly Father in prayer. But how often it happens that somewhere along the line, especially in the case of the Lord's Prayer, our thoughts begin to wander and what started out well ends up as vain repetition. A pastor may exult when he receives a call, rejoicing over the opportunity to serve the Lord by serving His people. But it is so easy for him to rush over the solemn charge in order to get to the salary figure. The pastor therefore will need to point out to his people that even our good works easily become tainted with sin, in order to help them realize anew how sorely we need a Savior and why our Lord taught us to pray daily, “Forgive us our trespasses.”

But at the same time he will acknowledge their good works. This needs to be done honestly, however. Our motives need to be pure. When we express our appreciation for the good works of believers, it ought to be done because we are happy to see the Spirit at work and want to share our reaction with the other. It ought not to be done for selfish reasons, for example, to gain the good will of the other in the hope that he will be inclined some time in the future to show us a favor. Furthermore, what we acknowledge ought to be a real good work. We don't want to “gush,” to credit the other with more than he has actually done, again for the selfish motive of expecting some favor in return. We are nauseated by the empty praise with which Tertullus sought to win the favor of Felix so that he might deliver Paul into the hands of the Jews: “Seeing that by thee we enjoy great

quietness and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence, we accept it always, and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness” (Ac 24:2–3). Paul was well aware of the practice which was so common in his day (as it is common in our day also) of “buttering up” people in order to gain some advantage from them. He writes to the Thessalonians: “Neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloak of covetousness; God is witness” (1 Th 2:5). Flattery is mutually harmful. It is harmful to the flatterer because of his insincere motives, and harmful to the one who accepts it because it inflates his ego and makes him an accessory to what he knows is an untruth. So, as is the case with everything else that we do while still living in this flesh, caution needs to be exercised in acknowledging the good works of fellow believers.

But they ought to be acknowledged. Our Lord did. John the Baptist in his battle against doubt and depression had begun to waver in his conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. Bound in prison himself, he sent two of his disciples to seek support from Jesus. Jesus pointed to objective evidence: His miracles which proved that He must be the Messiah, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Then, lest any who witnessed the incident might jump to the wrong conclusions concerning John, He acknowledged the good works of John. “What went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist” (Mt 11:9,11).

Perhaps His most enthusiastic acknowledgment of any good work is that which He accorded Mary of Bethany. There was no commandment to chart her course, there were no precedents for her to follow. There were those who expressed serious doubts as to whether she had moved in the right direction. But Jesus settled the matter: “She hath wrought a good work on me...She hath done what she could” (Mk 14:6,8).

Then there was Maundy Thursday evening. Jesus knew that all of His disciples would forsake Him and that Peter would even deny Him. Yet in that very context He acknowledged their good works: “Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations” (Lk 22:28). Even after He had returned to glory, His saving work down here completed, He still revealed himself as the one who acknowledges the good works of His believers. In five of His seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor His words: “I know thy works” are followed by an acknowledgment of whatever good works He saw in their life.

His great slave and apostle, Paul, followed the pattern set by his Master. In his first letter, that to the Thessalonians, he set the tone. “Your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope...ye became followers of us...ye were examples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia” (1:3,6,7). The Philippians twice supplied him with financial support. Paul did not just send them a receipt. In a most tender tone and complete purity of motivation He acknowledged what had been done as a good work: “an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God” (Php 4:18). Then look at the extended list of greetings in Romans 16. Notice how often he does not only mention names, but also in connection with names acknowledges the good works of those named.

So instead of droning into the ears of our people, “We can’t do any good works” let us be bold to tell them, “You have done good works.” There are two considerations which may inhibit us. For one thing, we don’t ever want our people to relapse into the notion that good works merit salvation or that something we do contributes to our salvation. We want them to remain firmly anchored in grace, in something outside of them. We’re afraid that if we credit them with good works, they might get the idea that these works give them a claim to favorable treatment on the part of the Lord. We know how deeply ingrained the *opinio legis* is in all of us. But the rejection of good works as the price of salvation and the acknowledgment of good works on the part of the saved are not mutually exclusive. When we preach the law in all of its severity, we shall pull all of the stops as we show our people that we have nothing to offer to wipe out our guilt or to bail us out from under the verdict of damnation. Jesus had to do it all. But when we speak of the response of love to what our Savior has done for us, we can speak of it not only as a duty which must be performed, but also as a fact in our history and thus acknowledge good works.

The other inhibition which we might feel about acknowledging good works on the part of our people is that they might begin to think that we are trying to tell them that they have done enough and need to make no efforts to improve. The *opinio legis*, which operates with the concept of work and wages, is always trying to strike a good bargain and get by just as cheaply as possible. But let’s give some credit to the new man. He wants

to be encouraged to do more by being told that what he is doing pleases the Lord whom he wants to please. We mentioned how Paul acknowledged the good works of the Thessalonians. Still he did not encourage them to settle for their present level of performance. Rather, he wrote: “We beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would *abound* more and more” (1 Th 4:1). Similarly our Lord Jesus says that believers as branches in Him, the heavenly Vine, are not to be content to be static at the level of doing good works to which they had attained. Rather, “every branch that beareth fruit, [my Father] purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (Jn 15:2). So there is room both for acknowledgment of good works and for encouragement to do more. But this ought not to be done in the same breath lest the impression be given that the acknowledgment is after all not sincerely meant but rather a veiled rebuke: “You have done some good works, but...”

No, let the acknowledgment be full and free. Our Lord teaches us that even where the seed of the Word is received in good ground, it does not produce the same measure of the fruit of good works in every case: “He that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Mt 13:23). We may be inclined to be more happy over the cases where the seed bears “an hundredfold.” But we not want to subject the one who has brought forth “only” thirtyfold to unfavorable comparison with him who had brought forth more. He has brought forth good works. Acknowledge them! By that very act we may even be encouraging him to greater effort.

The scene which meets a pastor’s eyes when he surveys his congregation is not always exhilarating. Church attendance often is not as good as he would like it to be, nor is Communion attendance, nor are contributions. The list of delinquent members weighs like an alp upon his heart. Other cases which call for brotherly admonition and church discipline keep cropping up. It is hard to find members who are willing to contribute time and effort to serve on the church council, the evangelism committee, the stewardship committee. If the pastor holds these problems too closely before his eyes, they prevent him from seeing the good works which the Spirit is producing on the part of his people. As a result his tone becomes billigerent, carping, or whining. Now he is not to become a Pollyanna, he may remain realistic. But he ought to train himself to give equal time to the good instead of harping only on the bad. Don’t take good works for granted. They are miracles. Acknowledge them. Be specific. “We know that there are fathers in this congregation who make sure that their children memorize the Bible passages which have been assigned as memory work in the confirmation class.”

Why the plea not to downgrade good works? Because it is only honest to acknowledge that Christians do good works. It is not honest to tell Christians that they can do nothing good. That is true only of the old man. To Christians it is written: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). “Good works” is not a naughty term. To be specific in pointing out good works is proper. One of the most depressing features about the quota system under which our Synod once operated was that it led to grouping congregations into two categories: the good guys who made their quota and the bad guys who did not. No grays, only either all black or all white. A congregation may not have remitted its full quota, but may have improved its performance by 25 per cent in one year. No difference. It had not made its quota, it belonged among the bad guys. How refreshing would have been a word acknowledging the fruits of faith, the good works, which had been produced even in the area of synodical support.

The acknowledgment of good works performed by a group of Christians may have a beneficial effect upon other Christians. Thus Paul had told the Macedonians about the eagerness of the Corinthians to collect for the relief of the needy Christians in Jerusalem. This, in turn, stimulated the Macedonians to go all out and beyond in their efforts. “Your zeal hath provoked many” (2 Cor 9:2). Reason enough not only to admit the capacity for good works in general, but also to point to specific contemporary examples of them.

What effect will such an acknowledgment have upon the one whose good works are recognized? Will it go to his head? The old man will move in that direction, but not the new man. The new man has been trained. “When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we

have done that which was our duty to do” (Lk 17:10). The Christian is more inclined to see the “how little” rather than the “so much” of his good works. But while it is enough for him to know that his Lord knows what he has done, he will be happy if others do notice—more for their sake than for his own.

Christians can do good works. Admit it! Christians have done good works. Acknowledge them! Don’t downgrade good works!