

Faith and Good Works?

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[0 : 00] We are in a series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and Paul wrote this letter sometime between the year 60 and 62 in the first century, and he's writing to a church that he had planted.

But a lot of people in the church had become Christians after he had left, and so he's hearing about their faith, and now he's writing them a letter, and he's writing a letter to a church, to the church, to us, and in it he's telling us all about what it means to be a Christian, and he's really answering the question, who is the church?

Who are you as a Christian? How did you become a Christian? And he's told us all about how God sees that, what God's been up to in our lives ever since the foundation, before the foundation of the world, all the way into your life right now.

And so Ephesians 2, this chapter, we've been looking at these first 10 verses for a little while. It's actually the heartbeat of Christianity, and it's all about what it means to become a Christian, and so Paul has said in verse 1 to 3, every single one of us, no matter where we were born, when we were born, our age, stage, socioeconomic status, our class, our nationality, no matter what, we are dead. We were dead, spiritually dead, in trespasses and sins, and then in verses 4 to 9 he says, but God, these great prepositions we looked at last week, but God, even when you were dead, God came in and made you alive through Jesus Christ.

[1 : 32] And then lastly today, verse 10, and now go and do good works. And so today we have a rare opportunity, which is to just look together at one verse, I never get to do it.

So today we get to do it. One verse, one verse only, verse 10, and it's so important that Paul puts verse 10 where verse 10 is, that good works come at the very end of this long section talking to us about God's grace in our lives.

And so let's think about it together. We're going to think about what Paul says. He says we need to know the place for good works and the definition, then what is a good work, and then how can we grow more and more into people of good works.

So let's think about that. First, the place for good works. The order, like I just mentioned, the order is everything in the way he outlines. He teaches us here in Ephesians 2, 1-10.

What is unique in all the world is the Christian message. And as we looked at last week, what's unique about the Christian message from all the world religions, all philosophies, all worldviews is the idea of grace.

[2 : 39] That God, God, despite your qualities. God, despite the conditions. God, despite your performance, is willing to love you all the way to the point of the death of his son on the cross.

That's grace. It's what makes Christianity different from every other religion, everything else on offer in all the world. And the order here is so important to know that verse 10 comes at the very end.

And you can see that, again, verses 1-3, you were dead, verses 4-9, grace. God's grace entered. In verse 10, now he says, you are his workmanship.

And again this week, like last week, the prepositions are everything. So remember last week, it's by grace through faith that you're saved. And this week, the preposition in verse 10 that we have to pay attention to is he says, we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus.

And then here's the preposition for good works. And let's say something incredibly boring for a moment so that we can make a very good point.

[3 : 43] And that's that when you read the commentators on this little preposition that we were created in Christ Jesus for good works, they will tell you that this is a directional preposition.

That means it can be translated something like, we were created in Christ Jesus which leads us to good works. Another way to translate it is unto good works.

So when grace comes into your life, he's saying this little directional preposition has got to be there. That you know that Paul is telling you that you're saved unto good works, not by good works. And the preposition is everything. The direction is everything. The order is everything. If you flip it upside down, you've lost Christianity again. And so it's so important. And so he's talking to us about something very simple but very, very important.

And that's that we can never say, we can never say that we achieve God's love. We become Christians. We receive forgiveness because of our faith and our good behavior and our good deeds.

[4 : 47] And instead what Paul is trying to get us to see is God's grace enters our lives and even faith is a gift. And then when we have justifying faith, that gift of faith, then we become people that are called to good works.

That's the order. Now, there are two ditches that he's trying to talk to us about. I think subtly that you can fall into on either side of this path.

Two ditches. The ditches on the one side is he's warning us against the possibility of legalism creeping into our lives. And what is legalism? Legalism is when you begin to think, when anybody thinks that it's my performance, my good deeds by which God will love me.

That's legalism. And on the other side of the ditch is a little bit of a more difficult word but a simple idea, antinomianism. Antinomus in Greek means law. And so antinomianism is anti-law.

So legalism is nominism, lawism. And on the other side of the ditch is antinomism. So you can get caught in the trap on the one side that you say, it's my faith and my good deeds.

[5 : 55] That's religion. That's legalism. No, no, no. Verse 10 is where it is for a reason. But then on the other side of the ditch is anti-lawism which says, you know, if it really is God's grace from top to bottom, I can do whatever I want and God's going to forgive me anyway.

I've got grace in my life. It doesn't matter how I live. And he's saying, no, it's neither of those things. He's saying instead, if you're a Christian today, what's happened to you? Grace has come into your life.

You've got the gift of faith and you've been set apart for the rest of your life to be a person of good works, of good deeds. It's not your good deeds that justify you, not at all.

But once you're justified, God has said, now you're called to a specific life, a life that's been transformed and changed. And so this is how he says it. Verse 10, he says at the very beginning, we are his workmanship.

And that's a word that summarizes everything that we've been talking about so far. It's a great word, workmanship. If you translated this literally, it would say, for we are his doing, or for we are his making.

[6 : 59] And in Greek, it's the word poema. And it's where we get our English word poem. Poem. I never feel like I can say the word poem correctly. I don't know.

You can tell me after what you think about that. Poem. We are his workmanship, his poem, his poetry. That's another way of saying it. Now he's combining two ideas into this.

The order even in verse 10 is everything. We are his poema, his doing, his making. And he's talking there about both creation and artistry at the same time. And he's saying that when you become a Christian, when you receive God's grace in your life and you believe it, you are now his masterpiece.

You're his artistry. You're his poem. He's writing you. He's sculpting you. He's painting you. He's repainting you. So he's picking up here on an idea that comes to us all the way from the book of Genesis.

And in Genesis 2, when God first made Adam and Eve, we get the same ideas. We get that God raised up Adam from the stuff of the earth. And the verb that's used there is an artistic verb.

[8 : 06] It's the verb that's normally used for a potter raising up, using clay from the earth to make something. And it says God made Adam poema, like his poetry, like a piece of art.

And then when you jump down to Genesis 2.15, it talks about the making of Eve. And it uses even a greater artistic term. He fashioned her. It's an architectural verb for designing a palace or a great piece of a building that he uses for the making of Eve.

See, Paul's leaning into creation, language, to talk about your salvation. And the reason he's doing that is because, remember last week, let me ask you again, when you were born physically, when you were your birthday, when that came about, you know, how much did you contribute?

What did you do on the day you were born? We said last week, it was all your mother, right? You didn't do anything. You received it entirely. And he's saying, remember, from the very beginning of human history, you are fashioned by God.

You didn't do anything. He raised you up from the dust. You are his painting. But then when salvation comes into play, oh, you see, verse 1 to 4, you rejected that.

[9 : 16] All of us, we walked away from the path of God's artistry. We were made to be a masterpiece, a masterpiece of God's love expressed into the world. And we walked away from it.

We rebelled against it. And God is saying, what salvation is, is recreation. It's God coming into your life and saying, I want to make you into the poetry you were always meant to be.

You walked away from it, but I can remake you. You see, every single human is like a defaced masterpiece. Have you ever seen, you know, maybe on Twitter, Instagram, on YouTube, somebody that is protesting or something like that, and they go and they throw paint all over a great piece of art?

And there's a real tragedy in that because it really can't be recovered. And what he's saying here, when he uses the word workmanship, is we are defaced poetry, defaced art by our sin, by our doing, by our rebellion.

And salvation, the grace of God comes into your life that says, now I'm going to chisel away all the bad parts of the sculpture until you're beautiful.

[10 : 18] Now before we move on, you've got to see something even deeper than that because this language of recreation, another way to translate this is, for we are his artistry recreated in Christ Jesus for good works.

That's what he's saying there. But how do you get past legalism and antinomianism? How do you avoid ever thinking that your good works will save you? How do you avoid ever running away from the path of good works and good deeds and love?

Because you think, well, grace is just going to get me out of this. How do you do that? And what he gives us here in verse 10 is this little preposition in Christ Jesus.

He says, this is the antidote. The antidote to really see the grace that work in your life and the fact that you've been set apart is God's masterpiece for good works. Is to realize that this is all about relationship.

It's all about being in Christ or with Christ. It's all about the relationship you have with Jesus. And if you go back to creation language again, workmanship ideas, creation ideas, artistry ideas, one of the things we see throughout the Bible is this idea that God made the world good, beautiful, perfect.

[11 : 26] And by our sin, we in a sense unmade the world. We undid it. We decreed it. You see the language here, he says, you are his doing, his making.

But by your sin, you unmade it. You rebelled against him and you became the person you were never meant to be. Not by God's creation order, not by what he made us to become.

And you see this language all throughout the Bible, this idea of decreation. It's a reversal of creation and images all because of sin. Think about the 10 plagues.

If you look at each, every single one of the 10 plagues that came down upon ancient Egypt, facing one of those is reversing creation. It's making something into what it shouldn't be.

Rivers aren't meant to be blood, right? They're meant to be water. But God made the water to blood because it's not what should be and he was showing what you're doing, how you're behaving Pharaoh. It's not the way the world should be.

[12 : 23] And one of the plagues was darkness. I remember darkness fell upon the land that in the beginning of creation there was darkness and God shone the light into the world.

Do you remember what happened at the cross? Darkness fell upon the land when Jesus was at the cross. Why? Because he was being unmade.

He was being decreed. He was being undone. He is the great piece of art that God put into the world, the image of God himself, the masterpiece.

But he was ultimately defaced. Why so that you and I could be remade, recreated, redone, that we could become the great masterpiece of God.

And so here's the idea that Paul is giving us and we'll move on. It's this that when you realize what grace says, grace says that God looks at you in Christ, meaning when he looks at you, he sees Jesus.

[13 : 20] And when he looks at Jesus, he sees you to the point where he says you're beautiful long before you ever actually are. See, that's workmanship.

When his grace enters your life, he says, I see you as a masterpiece, forgiven, clean, washed, purified, full of love, even though you're not yet.

That's grace. That's forgiveness. That's what we call justification. And then he says, now go and be beautiful. Go and chisel away the bad parts so that you can become the masterpiece that I've pronounced you to be in Christ Jesus.

What is that? What is a good work? Okay, let's think about it secondly and briefly. A good work, this next thing he tells us is after we are his artistry, his poem, recreated in Christ four good works. And then he says this, we're four good works and God prepared these works beforehand that we should walk in them. What's a good work?

[14 : 24] Yes, Oliver O'Donovan, a theologian, a scholar that worked at New College across the street here that passed away a few years back. And he helps me a lot on understanding what Paul means here.

When you first look at this idea of God has made good works beforehand, made them ready, there's another way to translate it, that we would walk in them, it sounds at first like God has prepared very, very specific individual good works for every single one of us Christians.

And he made them for you beforehand that you at some point in your life should walk down that road and do them. And there's truth in that, God's providence, he's prepared everything we're going to do in our lives. But O'Donovan is very helpful because he says what Paul is actually talking about here is that God has made the path called the good for us.

In other words, in a simple language he's saying God made a world and there is such a thing called good. There's good and there's bad. God prepared it at the beginning of creation.

What is good? It's what God says about the world and we are meant to walk down that path. And so when you've come to see the grace of Jesus and faith in your life, you've been set apart to walk down the path of creation order, goodness, that God had originally set out for us, the life of love.

[15 : 42] Now that's a simple thing to say, but let me just say it is so important for us to say that that there really is such a thing as the good.

There really is a path, a way of being that is good, and to veer off that path is bad and evil that really exists. And maybe there's never been a more important time than 2024 to say that there really is such a thing as the good way, the good path.

And that's what he's talking about here. God made ready the good path for every human to walk down. And in Christ we get to be put back on that path to walk down it once again. Now it's so important to say that in 2024 because of many, many people, maybe you're here today thinking this, you're not sure what to think about the idea of the moral order.

So is the good a real thing? Is it something that actually exists? So one of the most famous thinkers of our time, 19th century philosopher was Friedrich Nietzsche.

And he was an atheist, probably the most famous atheist perhaps that's ever existed, ever lived.

And Nietzsche, when he thought about this, he said that in an age where less and less people are believing in God, he said that we'll realize what he believed.

[16 : 56] And this is what he said. He said, the idea of good works, that you can walk down a path called the good life, the good, and that that would please God, that is entirely for Nietzsche.

He said, a construct. So it's something that humans have created that we've invented that we've gathered together in our society and decided that we're going to believe in a moral order and we're going to create laws.

And Nietzsche said that that's a construct, the moral of the good life, good deeds, it's something we invented. And he said, but actually, even if you don't believe in a God, he said, you still have to have some form of values.

So Nietzsche said, we need to replace this idea with a new form and realize actually what we've done. And this is what he said about it. He argued that the law, the moral, the good doesn't actually exist, but it's important for us to create it.

And who does the creating? He says, aristocrats, the nobility, and the geniuses, sometimes, or maybe the aristocrats.

[17 : 58] Aristocrats or cats. The geniuses, the smart people, these are the people that create the moral. They construct the good, he said. Why? And Nietzsche's argument, he says, we have to

create good or values, and it's the nobility that has to do with it, the upperclassmen.

Why? To keep the lower class and the inferior, those with less education in order so that we can be free, be free to be what, well, for him, he called it to be a superman, a superwoman, to rise above the common.

And he said, that's what the moral is, that's the construct. It's that those in power create rules to keep the lower in check. Now let me ask you, if you don't believe in God, what are you left with? Is there such a thing as the good, the path, the right, the way to walk? There is. And all of us feel that, no matter what you believe today, you know that maybe you're here today exploring it, because you know that atheism really falls flat here, that there must be a good.

There must be something, there must be a reason I can look at what Hitler did and say, that's evil. Otherwise, Nietzsche says it's just a construct. It's just the powerful creating an idea to control people.

[19:14] And God says here, no, there really is a good, and it's because God created it. What is it? And if you read across Paul, he's pretty clear that the good, the good life, the path, what we call good, is God making the world in the image of his own character.

Good is truly good. It's God. It's his character. And he's made the world to be like him in that way. And so whatever is good is whatever conforms to God's character.

God created the good, the good path, good works, and we've been called to walk on it. Now the last thing, and we'll move to the final point, is to say, what does he say? He says that we, God created the good that we should walk on it.

That's the last thing Paul tells us here, that we should walk in these good deeds. What is he telling? He's saying, look, every single one, there's an object of reality, the good, the good path, that love is real.

Where do you find it? Look at the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the command to love God and love your neighbor with all of who you are. This is the good path that's described for us all across the Bible.

[20:17] It's written into our conscience. But he says, but there's also a subjective side. And the subjective side is God is saying to you, when you become a Christian, when you see the grace of Christ brought into your life and you're forgiven, he's saying, now go and walk on it.

You should, you can. Go and walk down the road the good path. You see what he's saying to us, if you put it all together, this whole theology of salvation, Paul is saying, even good works are God's gift to you.

You are his workmanship. You know, he's beautifying you. He's taking that chisel and chiseling away the bad parts. It's actually even the good things you do in your life are God's work through you.

It's the Holy Spirit. And you should walk in them. Meaning and you've got to go and be active. And you've got to go and get serious about walking down the path of good works, good deeds, love, the life of love.

He's saying grace is all God, salvation and justification. It's all God and you go and get serious about the life of good works simultaneously. You see, it's both.

[21:22] It's passive and it's active. It's both at the very same time. And so he says, in other words, we've got nothing to boast in. If you're a Christian who's lived a life of good deeds for the Lord, you've done great things for God, you've got nothing to boast in.

But if you're a person coming today saying, you know, I'm a believer, I am a Christian, I do have faith, but I've not done great things for the Lord. Remember there's nothing to boast in.

Today's the day where you can remember that you're saved by grace through faith and come back to the path that God set apart for you. So let's close by thinking about that. How can we grow in the life of good works?

The final thing. Francis Schaefer says that when you're born or you're born again in Christ, now it's time to go and live.

When you've received grace, you've been born again, but now you've actually got to go live. And good works is the path that we live on. So let's think for just a second, a few helps maybe for how to grow in a life of good works in the light of the gospel.

[22:29] The first thing we learn here is that you can only do a good work, a good deed that truly pleases God. This is not a generic word, good works. It's a precise word.

If you have had your heart changed by Jesus Christ, your motivation, your heart actually has to be in a posture to actually be doing works of love for the Lord to be good works before the Lord. All right? So it's not generic. Everybody in this world does good things all the time. Civic, good things. People love each other all the time.

But Paul's talking about something more technical than that. He's saying a good deed that truly delights the Lord is one that begins with a heart that's been changed by God.

And maybe if you've been around the past couple of weeks and you've been looking at this heartbeat of Christianity, this idea of being saved by grace through faith, one of the things I think that may come into your mind, may pop up for some people, as you might say, look, we've said over and over, we're saved by the grace of God through our faith.

[23 : 36] And I want that. I want that in my life. I want to receive the forgiveness of the cross, but I just feel like I'm not sure if I really believe that it comes and goes for me.

I want to be a person of faith, but I don't know if I am a person of faith. And let me say today, if you're coming and saying that, then that means that God is at work in your life giving you right now the gift of faith.

You are in process of awakening to that because dead people don't say that. Dead people don't come and say, I really want to be a Christian. I just don't know if I truly believe.

But if you're saying that God's working in your life, don't lose heart. Keep going. Keep walking down that road of awakening to God's grace through faith in your life. And then become a person of good works.

You've got to have your heart changed by faith in order to walk down this path of good works. Don't lose heart. Secondly, of just four helps. Secondly, the other side of it is that you only have a good work, Paul teaches us, when it's done from a heart that's been changed and when it's done from the motivation for God's glory.

[24 : 51] So a nice thing, a kind thing to be exactly what Paul's talking about here is something from a regenerate, a change, a born again heart and with the motivation that you actually want to do it because of the gospel, for God's glory, that the gospel is the motivation for the reason that you're wanting to do a good deed.

How do you grow in that? And the simple answer, I think, in a very brief time we can give is look at the cross, look at Jesus every single day.

If you, in other words, I think Paul's calling us here to say, if you want to be motivated more and more to a life of love, you've got to wake up every day and look once again at the grace of the Lord, at the cross.

You've got to cling to the cross. You'll never be changed. See, if you don't do that, you'll drift back into performance and then your good works will actually be about your being a good person.

And so every single day we're being asked, you've got to wake up and you've got to look at the cross all over again and say, I am not saved by my good works but by Jesus' performance in order to actually be free of yourself.

[25 : 58] In other words, a life of true good works is actually a life where you forget about everything, yourself, your works, and you just love people. That's the heartbeat of the true life of good works.

And so every day it's about waking up and clinging to the cross and seeing it all over again once more. The third thing of four is to have a bigger vision for good works.

What are good works, good deeds, the life of love for in the Christian life? One of the things that this is for, growing and growing in a life of love, is it's for signposting and witnessing to the life that is to come in the future.

If you read all across the Gospels, some of the New Testament scholars will say that Jesus' miraculous deeds in the Gospels were not so much for showing that he was the Messiah in the moment, but many of them were about pointing people to the life he's going to give us when he comes again.

So when he makes hungry people not hungry because of bread, multiplying bread, he's saying, I'm going to give you something. I'm going to give you bread forever.

[27 : 08] When he raises up Lazarus from the dead, he said, I've come to give you life forever. And in the same way the New Testament teaches that our good works are about signposting a life that is to come, a life that is better, better than the idols of this world, better than power hunger, better than chasing after sex, money and power.

And how does Jesus put it? He says, go out into the world, Christian, and be salt and light. Signpost a better city, the city of God. We've got to have a bigger vision, a vision for what good works are really all about.

And then the last thing, and we'll close with this, is just to say the Gospel changes everything. And that means every single day it really is about the pattern of confessing our sins, clinging to the cross, and stepping out with a renewed vision to be people of love, conforming to the image of the Son Jesus.

I want to close with Martin Luther's story for a second. This is what happened to Martin Luther at the beginning of the Reformation. So Luther was a Catholic priest, and he was a legalist.

He was full of religion. He didn't understand the Gospel at all. And we talk about what happened to him in his tower experience is the way people talk about it.

[28 : 27] And what happened is, I'll paraphrase his own words. He says, I was a monk, and I was never sure if God loved me, and I was constantly troubled by my performance.

I was never sure if God could be satisfied with me. And he says, so I worked, and I worked, and I worked, and I tried to love, love, love, and do everything right all the time, and obey the Ten Commandments, and the Sermon on the Mount.

And his priest, his own priest in the monastery tells the story of how Luther would come to confession every single day to the point of exhausting all the priests, hearing six hours he would sit in the confession booth, going through every little detail of every little lie, every little selfishness, every little thing he did.

He said, I tried so hard. I tried to live a perfect life. And I realized every day in confession how far away I was. And so he says something very extreme.

When he realized that he said, when I read the Bible and I realized the truth that my performance was so weak, even though I was trying so hard, he said, I began not to love, but to hate the just God who punishes sinners.

[29 : 37] He said, I hated the justice of God. And then he said, but then I realized what Paul was saying in places like Romans and Ephesians, and he writes this, that the just God is a merciful God who forgives us not because of our performance, but because of the justice of Jesus Christ at the cross.

He said, I realized that it wasn't me, it was Jesus. And at once he writes, I felt as though I had entered paradise itself. I had been born again.

I had been made new. They call it Luther's breakthrough. Today you've got to break through. You've got to see it's not your performance.

But when you look at the cross of Christ, you're freed from that so that you can actually go and love people. And that's Paul's invitation for every single one of us today. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the beauty of the gospel, that we are your masterpiece, not because we deserve it, not because we're actually beautiful in our moral condition, but because you have decided to make us so.

So thank you, Lord, for beautifying us. And then we just pray today for somebody that they would see the breakthrough that they need, that they would need to see that it's not about subjectivity or feeling or even the power of our faith.

[30 : 54] It's all about Jesus's work. And so I pray for many in this room that we would be reignited by the beauty of the gospel this morning. And then lastly, Father, we do ask that you would send us out from this place as people who are full of good works, not for our sake, not for our glory, not for our achievements, but because we want to conform to the beauty of Christ Himself.

So motivate us, Lord, by your glory today. Change our hearts. Give us desire for the good things and the Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments and the great works you've laid before us on a good path that we really would want to walk in them.

And that you would give us a lot of joy in that, we ask. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.