

## **NOT SAVED BY GOOD WORKS, BUT TO DO GOOD WORKS!**

**Text:** Lords Day 24

**Read:** Galatians 3:1-14

**1:** Why can't the good we do make us right with God?

Justification

The righteousness God accepts must be entirely perfect

Even the very best we do in this life is imperfect (Is 64:6; Phil 3:8)

Even if we try to help, we fall from grace (Gal 5:4)

**2:** But God promises to reward the good we do

In this life and the next (Eph 6:8; Rev 22:12)

This reward is not earned; it is a gift of grace. (Mt 20:1-16; Luke 17:10)

**3:** But doesn't this teaching make people indifferent and wicked?

cf Ro 6:1

Sanctification

It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude. (John 14:15; 15:5)

Sanctification is the test for justification

**And so: We aren't saved by good works, but we are saved to do them!**

**LD 24 ser 5**

Dear Congregation

I wonder if you've noticed a pattern around your place like one I've noticed around ours. At our place, if things need to get done, Nicky or I need to do it, or organise the kids to do it, or it just doesn't happen. If the grass needs to be mown, we need to do it. If the garden needs to be trimmed, we need to do it. Or the concrete swept, or the gutters cleaned, the washing done, the house cleaned – if we don't do it, it just doesn't happen.

In fact, you get so used to that being the way things are, that you just start to accept that everything in the world works that way, don't you? If you want something to happen, you've just got to get out there and make it happen.

But what about the message of the gospel then? When it comes to the most important thing of all - being in right relationship with God - it turns out that we can't do it, we can't make it happen. We can't even help.

All we can do is accept it from God as a free gift of his grace.

### **Point 1**

***And so the first question here is 'Why?'***

And it's a good question isn't it, when everything else seems to work by a different principle? Why can't the good we do make us right with God?

In theological terminology, we're dealing with ***the whole area of justification*** - how do we come to be justified before God? You might remember from the last Lord's Day we looked at that the Bible teaches that we are justified only by true faith in Jesus Christ. That's the great truth that was rediscovered during the Reformation, 500 years ago.

In case you've forgotten what justification means, you might remember that one way to help remember is that - to be justified means that God accepts me 'just as if I'd' never sinned.

Which helps us understand ***why we can't justify ourselves***.

The reality is that God doesn't put up with sin. ***God only accepts what is in accord with his nature and character***. He created everything holy and sinless, and that's the only way he will accept it. The only righteousness God accepts is the perfect righteousness that conform to his perfect righteousness. He calls us to be holy as he is holy.

***The problem is, that isn't us in and of ourselves***. That isn't what we are able to be or do by ourselves.

Romans 3 quotes Psalm 14 and tells us that no one is righteous, not even one.

In fact, even the very best we do is corrupted by sin. Isaiah 64:6 says 'All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.' Paul in Philippians 3:8 considers whatever was to his profit, a loss, rubbish, compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

To God, even the very best we do is filthy rags and rubbish.

Sinners coming before God in their own merit are like our kids when they come to us pretending that they haven't been playing in the mud. The evidence is splashed all over them for us to see - you couldn't miss it if you wanted to. They can pretend they haven't been playing in it. They can lie. Maybe they've even tried to

rub it off. But the evidence is there for all to see - their clothes tell us another story.

And because God is a God who only accepts perfect righteousness, any goodness or righteousness we have on our own just doesn't measure up. We can come to him pretending that we are sinless, telling him that we are good, but measured against his perfect goodness we're shown up for what we are. We can try to wash ourselves clean in some way, but that only spreads the stain all the more. If we try to come to God in our own merit, we're just the children caught playing in the muck.

I remember my mum once catching my brother smoking in our bedroom when he was a teenager. Mum opened the door, and there was my brother surrounded by clouds of smoke that started floating out of the door – you could see the evidence, you could smell it. Mum asked him if he'd been smoking. And he tried to deny it. But of course the evidence was there for all to see. That's us, if we come to God in our own merit.

***But, trying to deal with sin on our own can be tempting can't it?***

Especially when that's the way the world works generally – you've got to make it happen yourself, or it doesn't happen. As we come to know God, the temptation is to think that the good we do is enough to bring us into right relationship with him. We can maybe start to think that our regular church attendance will make all the difference – coming to church each Sunday like clockwork – surely that will make the difference with God. Or our living a moral life – trying to live the way he wants as best we can. Or maybe not crossing the line so much that the church puts us under discipline – that must mean we're within the bounds of what it takes to get to heaven. We can start to think that these are the things that make us right with God.

But the only thing that can bring us into right relationship with God is Jesus, through living faith in him as our Lord and Saviour. These other things may be good things, but they don't bring us into right relationship with God.

Or maybe we feel that the good we do must at least ***help to make us right*** with God – what we need is faith and works together to give us salvation. After all, doesn't James even say that faith without works is dead?

But even here, Paul tells the Galatians that if we even try to add to what Jesus has done for us we forfeit salvation. He writes, ‘You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.’

The only way to be justified is to simply accept it as a gift from God, through faith in Jesus Christ. If we even try to add to what God has done, we forfeit the possibility.

## **Point 2**

But then, what about the fact that ***God promises in the Bible to reward the good we do in this life, and in the next one.*** Doesn't that sound like we can earn our own salvation, or at least help?

You might have had Roman Catholics argue with you that way. The official understanding of the Roman Catholic church to this day is that faith and the good we do work together to bring about our salvation – it helps.

I've also had Mormons argue that way – that we have to earn our own salvation as best we can, and then Jesus' atonement makes up the last little bit that we can't do ourselves.

In fact, every religion except the gospel takes that approach – that we earn our salvation ourselves, or at least help.

And it's true that ***the Bible does talk about God rewarding the good we do.*** Ephesians 6 calls us to serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does ... . And you probably know that the Old Testament is full of the promise of blessing, much of it in this life, for those who live God's way.

And then God will also reward us in the life to come. In Revelation 22 Jesus promises that '[he] is coming soon! [His] reward is with [him], and [he] will give to everyone according to what he has done.'

But the thing to realise is that even ***this reward for the good that we do is not something we deserve.*** It is also a gift of God's grace.

I remember as a child helping my father sometimes on the building site during the holidays. I suspect that it took him longer to explain to me each job he wanted me to do and to show me how to do it, than to just do it himself. I actually cost him money. But at the end of the week he paid me something.

Jesus teaches the same thing in a parable like the workers in the vineyard. An employer goes out first thing in the morning and hires men to do a day's work for him for a day's pay. Three hours later he goes and hires some more, and then every 3 hours during the whole day, until the day is done. And then he pays them all exactly the same amount – a day's pay.

Did the men who had only worked the last few hours of the day deserve it – not at all. Neither did any of the workers except the ones hired first thing in the morning. But God is simply an amazingly gracious and generous God. He rewards us far above and beyond what we ever deserve. And so, yes he does reward us for the good we do, but not because we've earned it – only because he is an amazingly gracious and generous God.

In Luke 17, Jesus says, suppose you had a servant just doing what he's expected to do out in the field – when he's finished and comes in, would you tell him to sit down to relax and enjoy dinner with you, or would you tell him to do the next job he's expected to do and make your dinner? God is the master. We are the servants. As we do the good he calls us to do, we're only doing what servants are expected to do. We don't even do it very well. Jesus says, 'So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

We shouldn't be expecting any reward. If anything, we should be expecting punishment for a job done badly. And yet God rewards us very well all the same.

The only way to be accepted by God, 'just as if I'd never sinned' is to simply accept his reward as a gift from God, through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Point 3**

But then a concern some people have is that teaching salvation by faith in Christ alone apart from works is ***going to make people indifferent to living a godly life and wicked.***

If we don't tell people that their salvation depends on a godly life, won't they accept salvation by faith, and forget about the godly life? Won't they say the kinds of things Paul mentions in Romans 6:1, 'Let's go on sinning so that grace may increase', or verse 15, 'shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?'

What we're looking at here in theological terminology is what it takes to see ***a life that has been justified also lead to a sanctified life.*** What does it take to have the declaration by God that we are righteous produce the fruit of good works.

After all, if we raised our young children the way we've been talking, would it work? If they knew that they would get all the privileges under the sun – everything they wanted, without any expectation of good behaviour – would they behave well? I think the last 50 years of modern parenting has demonstrated pretty clearly that that approach doesn't work.

And what about at work? If the employees knew that they would have the same bonuses, the same opportunities for promotion, and the same respect, with no fear of losing their jobs, whether they worked hard or not, would they work harder? Probably most managers would tell you it doesn't work that way.

On the other hand, don't you have to start changing your parenting approach as your kids approach 12 years old? The stick behind the door is no longer as effective, and only starts to breed resentment. Don't mutual love and trust and thankfulness need to become the main driving motivators in your parenting approach? Their obedience becoming the response that develops from those underlying attitudes of love and trust and thanks?

And don't many of the better workplaces work the same way? The workplace culture isn't geared around workers competing with each other, and out of fear that if you aren't among the best performers, you'll

probably lose your job. It has been designed around a mutual trust and respect, with everyone working together in a way that benefits everyone. In a culture like that many people work above and beyond the call of duty for a common cause they actually believe in.

And in the same way, *a true relationship with God involving living our life for him* the way he wants isn't driven by fear and doubt. It isn't built on the fear of losing our salvation, and doubt as to whether we're saved at all, and earning your way to heaven through the good you do. It's built on a real love for God, a real life commitment to him, a real overwhelming gratitude to him, simply because of the amazingly great and gracious God that he is, and the things he has done for us. And based on that kind of faith and love and commitment and gratitude the Holy Spirit works in us to build the response of obedience and moral living.

And so the answer of the catechism is that 'it is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith to not produce the fruits of gratitude'. A justified life involves a sanctified life. That is where James is coming from when he says that faith without works is dead – real faith involves a life lived increasingly for God. Jesus says in John 14, if you love me you will obey what I command. In John 15 he uses the picture of the vine to make the same point. 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; ... .'

Which means that *a sanctified life becomes the test of whether a person is justified*. A life lived openly and enthusiastically for God is the confirmation of a profession in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. And so Jesus also says that we will know a tree by its fruit. We will discern whether someone is a believer, not so much by what they say, but by how they live – do they practice what they preach, do they live a godly life.

It means that those who profess to be believers, and born again, but who live lives indifferent to God, or even lives that are wicked, are demonstrating that what they say counts for very little. At the very least they have a very big problem, at most they actually aren't saved at all and are only fooling themselves as they travel along the road to destruction.

## ***Conc***

At the end of the day, we aren't saved by saying we're a believer. We aren't saved by knowing the right information from the Bible, or by being able to explain the gospel. We aren't saved by being able to do these things and then living a life that says the exact opposite. We're only saved by a right relationship with God through true faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. And a relationship like that will also involve a practical living for God that springs out of our love and commitment and gratitude to him for the God that he is and the things he has done.

And so, as Ephesians tells us, we aren't saved by our good works, but we are saved to do good works. ***Make sure that you have a real relationship with God like that! What is your life saying about your Faith?***