

Introduction

After His resurrection, Jesus gave the apostles and us the great teaching-learning commission (Mat. 28.16-20). Accordingly, the end of the Gospel of Matthew gives us a picture of the church in which teaching disciples how to keep the commandments of the King of kings and Lord of lords is central in what pastors are to teach and members are to learn. Therefore, it is appropriate that we move from Matthew to a study of the Ten Commandments in Sunday school and to a preaching series on perseverance in the book of Hebrews. The Lord's treatment of good works early on in Matthew (5.13-16) will help us make these transitions.

Thus, it is helpful to ask, what do disciples look like? In summary fashion, how will they conduct themselves? What characterizes their lives, attitudes and ambitions?

A negative answer to these questions can set the positive into relief. They will not be full of pious baloney. They will not have the character of pie in the sky other-worldliness that has a lot of religious show but no down to earth get up and go. Disciples do not do good works as a merit ladder of legalism by which to obtain eternal life. Legalistic good works are bad "good works." Instead, positively speaking, our king points us to good "good works" in Matthew 5:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

The title for today's message is "Teaching and Learning Good, Good Works." We can get our teeth into this subject by covering four things regarding the nature of good works: good works are of the law, from the heart, in full view, and for God's glory. These things combine to make a good work good.

1A. Of the law

First, a good work is a law-work. Notice the parallel between good deeds (v. 16), law (v. 17, **Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law**) and commandments (v. 19, **the least of these commandments**). Jesus is teaching about the true spirit and intent of the law in contrast to Pharisaic teaching on the law (v. 20; the true spirit of the law yields righteousness that exceeds; per the Beatitudes, this is the righteousness of the blessed man). Do we think of works of the law when we ponder how to find blessing and greatness? If we combine this context with Matthew 18.1-4 on greatness and 28.20 on commandment keeping, we learn that we have blessing and greatness in the kingdom of God by humbling ourselves like little children in obedience to the commandments of Jesus and by teaching others to do the same (**Mat. 5.19, Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven**).

What Jesus says here must always be kept in mind as we work through difficulties of learning how to observe all that Jesus commands (of interpretation as in the antithetic language, and of application as in the narrowness of our hearts). The good works in view are clearly good works of the law (we cannot properly or wisely shy away from the notion of good law works).

2A. From the heart

Second, good works are of such a nature that they arise from the heart (from the Christian heart, from the heart of the blessed person). We get this aspect of good works from the context that reaches back to the Beatitudes (Mat. 5.1-10). Law-defined righteousness and law-defined good works form a unity. Therefore, we are back to what we may call the righteousness spiral of the Beatitudes. This is maximally important to remember. The heart attitude that predominates in

righteous works of the law arises from the due recognition of sin (blessed are the poor in spirit, 5.3). A disciple is also pure in heart (5.8), that is, he is open before the perfect righteousness of God. Therefore, aware of his spiritual poverty, he sorrows over his sin (5.4), and he turns away from unrighteousness with hunger for righteousness (5.6). Thus, although in tension, insulted, and opposed, he is gentle as a merciful peacemaker (5.7, 9-12). This is an ascending spiral of a sinner in tension because he has one foot in the kingdom of heaven now and the other foot in the kingdom of heaven yet to come.

There is a strong contrast between the Christian view in this regard and that of the Greeks. The Greeks sought after the good, the true, and the beautiful. However, they never did so from the posture of humble acknowledgment of sin. The Christian heart feels and expresses a fundamental helplessness. The Greek philosopher feels no need of righteousness (he is satisfied with his own righteousness) and claims autonomy as his ultimate starting point. Instead of seeking God's law and authority over him, he goes about to establish his own law based on himself and not on God, as unbelievers still do today.

By contrast, the person that aims at righteous works of the law hungers for the righteousness that comes from God through Christ. Underneath action is desire. Driving the pursuit of righteousness is a thirst for God and His righteousness. The Christian heart pants after Christ in all His holiness like the deer that pants after the water brooks.

From the perspective of the resurrection (Mat. 28.16-20), true, good, and beautiful law-works are actions that flow from a heart for God that submits to the authority of the triune God in order to live by the commandments of Jesus, the risen Sabbath king. Good works are works that arise from a pure heart, a poverty-stricken heart, a sorrowful heart, and a hungry heart. Thus, good works arise from a repentant heart that manifests itself in the pursuit of Christ's law. This means that you commit yourself to Christ as your prophet, priest and king (Mat. 12.28-30, ²⁸ **Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.** ²⁹ **Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.** ³⁰ **For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light**"). Pursuing the perfection of the law, you find rest of soul (amazingly!) because of the gentleness and lowliness of Christ, because of what is in His heart.

3A. In Full View

I have just stressed the depth of good works and how they have an essential quality that is hidden in the heart beyond the eye of man to see. However, I cannot leave the subject there as vitally important as it may be. The Lord Jesus directs us otherwise. We must know that good works that are worthwhile are those that are done in full view of the eye of man to see. In a word, true, righteous, and good works are visible, noticeable, and observable. Jesus says, **"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works"** (5:16). This takes us far beyond good intentions alone. True good works of the law must be specific, particular, concrete, and in full view of men. Christianity is definitely not pie in the sky religiosity, asceticism, or monasticism. It does not involve separation from the world by withdrawing to be so heavenly minded that one is no earthly good.

Put together with what has already been stated, the Christian life is to be marked by concrete, down to earth, and observable works of the law that flow from a recognition of personal sinfulness and from a spirit of submission to the sovereignty of Jesus. Some comments are in order regarding the "in full view" nature of good works.

1) For balance, we must compare this verse on works that are seen (5:16) with works that are not done before others to be seen (6:1). Interestingly, on one hand, we are to do the kind of works that others are to see (we must act in such a way that our works may be seen by others), while on the other hand, we are not to do our good works before others to be seen by them. We are to do our works so that they may be seen (5:16) for God's glory and praise. We are not to do our works to be seen (6:1) for our glory and applause.

What we are to avoid is doing righteous deeds for the praise of men, to be noticed for selfish ego building and the inflation of the all important "I, me, and mine." However, our good deeds must be noticeable, observable, visible, and otherwise real and down to earth or they are not worth a plug nickel.

2) For perspective, we can compare the visibility of good works with the seasoning quality of salt: **"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet"** (5:13). A central function of salt (beyond preserving food) has to do with how it affects our taste buds. When added to food it makes it tastier. We use salt to bring out the flavor of food, to make it spicy so that those who taste it will relish it.

Good works of the law are like salt in this seasoning effect. They are to have a feature additional to visibility, that of tastiness. True, righteous, good, and beautiful works are to be such that they make life tasty to others. They help people relish living. They make life more bearable for them, even enjoyable in the midst of pain of body and suffering in heart.

I remember a particular event in my mother's life in this regard that illustrates this point in an unforgettable way for me. It was the last visit that my Mom made to her hometown of Imlay City, Michigan. We called ahead and a number of her nieces met with her for lunch and spent a good part of the day with her. The impression I got was something to this effect, "Aunt Vi is in town, let's all go see her. I will pay for lunch. I will get her some flowers." When they met they greeted her with hugs, kisses, and flowers. I watched and when they all left for lunch, I pondered the especially painful life of my mother of the previous two years that continued to that very day. For this afternoon, all the pain was gone. My cousins had made my day because they made my mother's day. They made life tasty for her. They generated tastiness. Without question, my mother could make life difficult for those around her when the pain on the inside manifested itself in snarling ways on the outside. My cousins knew that fact but on this day they salted her life and made it tasty and enjoyable for her. That is an afternoon in the painful history of my mother that I will never forget.

How contrary saltiness is to bitterness. Some people so carry themselves that their negativism begets negativism and their depression yields depression, their gloom spreads gloom. No one likes to be around a gloomy crybaby that always talks about his or her problems. When they say, "do you see how bad things are for me and how mistreated I am by this person and that person," we may feel like saying, "yes, I do. I feel bad too. I am suffocating, let me out of here." I am talking here about people who are negative in their manner and tone of life because they are like salt that has lost its saltiness. Of course, we all need to share our difficult times with others. That is right and proper and that is where the salty person will give an ear and be there seeking to find a way to make life a little better and more bearable for the one who suffers. With this kind of good works, we will listen intently and sympathetically at times weeping with those who weep.

Paul says our speech should be seasoned with salt, tasty, and in good taste. It is not to be corrupt speech but needful, kind, considerate, and courteous (Col. 4:6).

You have all experienced the opposite of salty good works. One memorable occasion took place at the doctor's office where I went with a pounding headache. My eyeballs felt like grapes in a wine press. Feeling this way I walked up to the receptionist who growled at me in the following ways, growl: "what are you doing here, what do you want?" Growl: "sign here, take a seat." Growl: "are you paying today or do you have insurance?" I wanted to say what I was too weak to say, "Hey, you don't have to give me any sympathy; just don't make my headache worse."

Tastiness of character that outwardly manifests considerate words will seek to build others up and not tare them down (Eph. 4:29). The person of a salty manner will be concerned about how they make other people feel. Those who do good works of this kind will be sensitive

to avoid making others feel stupid (or small or poor; cf. boasting does this); the good will be such that others are put at ease and made to feel welcome in your presence. Words that can cut deeper than a knife will be restrained. Speech will be a tool chosen to dispel stale air replacing it with fresh air. Even greetings that can be so ceremonial and hypocritical will be used to create background music. One way to do this is to remember and speak out of faith in the fact that we live now in the dawn of the new day. Since we live in the morning of eternal Sabbath rest and wait only for the noonday sun, we can pour much into a "good morning" greeting. Remember, the words of Jesus after His exaltation to Sabbath Lordship and universal sovereignty were the words of a simple and kind greeting.

This kind of goodness carries with it the preserving effect of salt. By it the corruption and spoilage of food is prevented. In this way, we overcome evil with good and counteract it by the strength of a life dedicated to Jesus Christ the risen Lord of glory. The sins of my mother were swept aside that afternoon in Imaly City by the good deeds of my cousins. So it should be in the life of a Christian. We are to practice good deeds of a very practical kind against all odds and contrariness. Otherwise, we are like salt that has lost its saltiness. What then is it worth? It has no worth whatever (cf. the woes). It is no good. It is not good for anything except "to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (5:13). Likewise, "disciples" who lack good works are not genuine or real.

Therefore, good good-works flow from God's law, out of the heart, and in very practical full view. Good works of this quality and nature earmark true discipleship. This is learning, yes, but learning how to work in a way that is good, learning how to do good works in our work, and learning how to observe all that Jesus commands.

4A. For God's glory (the ultimate goal)

The immediate goal of true and worthwhile good works is that they be "seen" in concrete, tasty, and observable ways without the taint of applause seeking. The ultimate goal is "the most sublime and final end of all action and all existence" (Matthew, Alexander). That end beyond all other ends in value, importance and ultimacy is the glory of God. The goal in good works is that others may see them and glorify your Father in heaven (5:16). To glorify God means to praise Him and thus give Him glory. It also means that we reflect His glory. Glorifying God takes in our speech by which we acknowledge His glory in praise and proclaim His glory by confessing a good confession (i.e. O Lord, you are sovereign O Lord, you are great and greatly to be praised).

However, our text stresses our deeds, our good deeds done in a public way. There we are to manifest His glory and display His beauty. We reflect the character of our Father in heaven and honor Him when we work hard at visible deeds of the law. Then we are light in the darkness (5:14-15; then we are a city on a hill, a light on a candlestick and not under a basket). Our light shines brightly and reflects well on our Father when we do good works defined by the law and noticeable in the real world (5:16). Obviously, we are to work at glorifying God in the workplace, marketplace, home place, and not only in the church-place. Then we show others what God is really like. Good works radiate what is true about God and genuine in life. They reveal God as good and thus they give a true picture of what is real, true, good, and beautiful (versus giving a false picture of God; and thus breaking the 9th as well as the 2nd commandment). Good works reveal man at his best, truly human with real humanity and authentic existence. To be "really real" and truly human is to reflect God as His image bearer in His world.

Conclusions

1) Aim at the law to learn it and to live it. That is where you find the righteousness that satisfies the hungry soul. By this goal, you live in active submission to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. A great way to go forward is to aim earnestly and prayerfully at the goal of finding

and living the true spirit of the Ten Commandments. This directly feeds into the new Sunday school series and the new preaching series on Hebrews.

2) Display a teachable spirit or be teachable.

Here is a needed caution. When you disagree with pastoral exhortations or correction from others and you say to yourself (and perhaps to others), "I disagree" be careful, you think you stand, but you are in danger of falling. If you say, "I don't need this," then mark it down, you probably need it in a big way. There is something there for you that you need. But you will never tap into it if you are unwilling to take a hard and possibly painful look at yourself. Here is a valuable perspective by which to guard the heart: whenever you find yourself in a spirit of resisting something, of hand waving, and of throwing up barriers to block full consideration of something, then at that very point you need to humble yourself under God's authority by the commandments of Christ.

Thus, willingly receive teaching, admonition, and correction. Recall the fact that pride makes us uneasy when we are exposed. It may make you angry. Humility means that you willingly embrace correction (being corrected). Pride means not being willing to receive correction. Peter directly says "clothe yourselves with humility" (1 Pet. 5:5-7; he weaves humility before God and before man into the same fabric of godly conduct).

3) Let the light of good works radiate from your life. Work hard at the visible and the down to earth qualities of the Christian life. Doctrine is essential and soul-absorbing but it must be broken down and digested. It must be absorbed into your life, into all that you are and possess. That takes work. Good works demand hard work, repentant hard work but hungry hard work, clinging ever so tenaciously to the risen Lord Jesus.

4) Seek to glorify God in whatever you do (1 Cor. 10.31). That brings all things down to one main goal. This is the final reference point needed to guide all your actions and set them straight on the good path. Therefore, glorify God and live life to the fullest for that is where you find yourself, ultimate dignity, and true worship because to be truly human one must do good works, good-good-works, on behalf of others for the glory of the triune God.

May we fall down before the majesty of the triune God in humble recognition of our sins and our utter need of His righteousness. May we worship Jesus because as risen Lord of the Sabbath, He is our righteousness. May we therefore serve Him in the pursuit of good deeds by His grace, according to His law, and for His glory. To Him be glory forever, amen.