

What We Believe: Knowing and Loving our Doctrines  
 Adult Sunday Studies 2023-24  
 27 | Good Works

## APPLYING OUR UNION WITH CHRIST: GOOD WORKS, THE LAW, AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

### What are good works to a Christian?

WCF 16.1 - "I. Good works are **only such as God hath commanded** in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention."

16.2 - "These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the **fruits** and **evidences** of a true and lively faith: and by them believers **manifest** their thankfulness, **strengthen** their assurance, **edify** their brethren, **adorn** the profession of the gospel, **stop** the mouths of the adversaries, and **glorify** God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life."

- How do the works relate to faith?
- Why do them? What do they accomplish?
- The gospel working itself out - "Persons who know they are totally accepted already do the right thing out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake, and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes "doing the right thing" a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end." - Keller

**Works accepted in Christ** - 16.6 - "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 unprovable 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."

**Works by non-Christians** - 16.7 - "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.”

### **How do we know what works to do? On the Law of God**

WCF 19.1 - “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.”

Given to Israel - 19.2 – “This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.”

#### ***Three parts to the Law***

1. ***Ceremonial*** [19.3] – connected to sacrifices, temple, etc. – now ceased, why?
2. ***Civil*** [19.4] – connected to Israel as nation-state and body politic – now ceased, but differently from the ceremonial - why?
  1. Church is no longer national or political, but transnational; no longer strictly physical or temporal, but spiritual. For example, 1Cor. 5.13 - Old Testament civil law of execution gets re-applied to the church as excommunication. So it’s not ceased, but transformed.
  2. Hence, no holy wars in the New Covenant now, our battle is spiritual (Eph.6.10ff).
3. ***Moral*** – 19.5 – “The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof.....Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation”
  1. ***Three uses of the Moral Law*** [19.6]
    1. **Civil** – curbing evil and injustice in society in general
    2. **Enclectic/Pedagogical** - reveals our sin and need for Christ - this is particularly evident in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus teaches us the full force of the Moral Law in order to show just how far away we are from fulfilling it.
    3. **Didactic (“third”)** – guiding believers in grateful obedience. This is the

so-called “third use of the law” that the Reformed tradition is known for, but other traditions certainly teach similar things.

Notice that the law is a form of God’s love - He loves us enough to tell us what will destroy us and how to avoid sin and pursue righteousness. It would NOT be love, if He left us without a law.

### **But aren’t we freed from the Law?**

[Another devotional-worthy section of WCF!] WCF 20.1 – “The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the **guilt** of sin, the **condemning wrath** of God, the **curse** of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil **world**, **bondage** to Satan, and **dominion** of sin; from the **evil** of afflictions, the **sting** of death, the **victory** of the grave, and everlasting **damnation**; as also, in their free **access** to God, and their yielding **obedience** unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike **love** and willing **mind**. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.”

-What are we freed *from*?

-What are we freed *to*?

### ***From Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian”:***

- "Every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of a spiritual power, he is lord of all things without exception, so that **nothing can do him any harm**. . . . The power of which we speak is **spiritual**. It rules in the midst of enemies and is powerful in the midst of oppression. This means nothing else than that “power is made perfect in weakness” [II Cor. 12:9] and that in all things I can find profit toward salvation [Rom. 8:28], so that the cross and death itself are **compelled to serve me and to work together with me** for my salvation. This is a splendid privilege and hard to attain, a truly omnipotent power, a spiritual dominion in which there is nothing so good and nothing so evil but that it shall work together

for good to me, if only I believe. Yes, since faith alone suffices for salvation, I need nothing except faith exercising the power and dominion of its own liberty. Lo, this is the inestimable power and liberty of Christians."

- **"Faith is truly active through love** (Gal. 5.6), that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith...We should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such **abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus** with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor. . . . Hence, as our Heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians. ....Love is true and genuine where there is true and genuine faith. . . . A **Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor**. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By **faith** he is caught up beyond himself in God. By **love** he descends beneath himself into his neighbor."

### **Liberty of Conscience**

- 20.2 - "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, **contrary** to his Word; or **beside it**, in matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."
- Notice the higher standard when it comes to matters of faith and worship.
  - Notice also the implications for how the church engages with politics. If something is "beside" the Word, then we need not obey it or believe it, no matter how good it may seem to our reason; and the church cannot bind a believer's conscience toward it.