

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Septuagesima Sunday, February 12, 2017**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 380, 237:1, 383, 389, 385:8-9

Lessons: Psalm 51:1-12, Ephesians 2:1-10, Luke 18:9-14.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:10

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

How do you get to heaven? Is it by doing good works? I think that you have heard often enough the plain words of Scripture that assure us ***“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”*** Mark 16:16 (NIV) to realize that your good works will never earn your way into heaven. Faith, believing in Jesus Christ as your only Savior from sin gets one into heaven. It is a free gift of God and cannot be earned by sinful man.

Yet our sermon text tells us about good works. ***“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”***

Today let's look at what the Word of God tells us about

**GOOD WORKS AND THE WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

1. **Our good works don't get us into heaven**
2. **The GOOD WORKS of Jesus get us into heaven through faith.**
3. **The role of good works in your life;**
4. **And, the Holy Ghost has kept me in the true faith!**

Words in our Epistle lesson assure us of how we have been saved. ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) This is Gospel truth from the Bible which Martin Luther helped restore to the visible Christian church after centuries of people being told that they must do things – they must obey the commandments and the laws of the visible church – to earn their way into heaven.

Grace is God's gift of undeserved love and mercy. It is not something we have earned or deserve. It is free. We couldn't earn it if we tried. We confess publicly, together each Sunday, that we are sinners and deserve eternal damnation as well as temporal punishment because of our sins. Grace is what God decided in eternity to give for all mankind. Grace is what God offered to all mankind because he ***“so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** John 3:16 (NIV)

***“You have been saved, through faith”*** – you have to believe what God did for you to be saved. Think of someone, for example, perhaps you, drowning in rushing water. Someone throws a rope right into your hands and tells you to hang on to it and you will be saved. You have to trust that it can and will save you. If you don't hang on you will drown. That's just one example of faith, in this example, faith in the rope. We could use other human examples of faith. If someone gives you a piece of paper with black and green ink in payment for a debt, you believe that is worth what is printed on the paper although in itself, that piece of paper is worth nothing. You believe that everyone around the world will accept that dollar bill, and so you believe it has value. But it has no value in itself. In a similar way you trust or have faith or believe that every bridge you drive over will hold you and will not collapse – until something happens to break that trust. So much for earthly examples of trust, of believing, of faith.

But we had to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved from eternal damnation and God has even given us the power and ability to believe. He gives us faith. "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

How could God the Holy Ghost do this? Because Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless life in our place, for us. What we could not do, cannot do, and never could do, Jesus Christ did for us. He was "***tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without sin.***" Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

Not only did Jesus Christ live that perfect life that God demands in our place, but he also received all the punishment that we deserve for our sins. He suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross all the sufferings of hell. He was forsaken by God. He cried out on the cross: "***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***" Matthew 27:46 (NIV)

But God did more. God imputes Jesus' perfect life to us. This is called justification. Listen to First Corinthians: "***But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.***" 1 Corinthians 6:11 (NIV)

In the Augsburg Confession, part of our public confession as a congregation and as a church body, we confess "that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight." Scripture assures us: "***But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.***" Romans 3:21-24 (NIV) And again: "***For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.***" Romans 3:28 (NIV) The New Testament speaks of the faith of Abraham: "***What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'***" Romans 4:1-3 (NIV)

God takes Jesus' perfection and credits it to us; he applies it to us; he gives it to us. Paul assures us in Acts 13: "***Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.***" Acts 13:38-39 (NIV)

So you should be able to see clearly that it is not our good works that get us into heaven. It is not our good works or deeds that save us.

This is plain and clear to us today; although after Martin Luther died controversy shook the Lutheran church about Good Works. Some falsely claimed that "Good works are necessary for salvation. It is impossible to be saved without good works [and that] No one has ever been saved without good works." Others falsely claimed that "Good works are injurious to salvation." Neither side is correct according to Scripture. The Formula of Concord resolved these controversies by stating: "That good works certainly and without doubt follow true faith, if it is not a dead, but a living faith, as fruits of a good tree. We believe, teach, and confess also that good works should be entirely excluded, ... in the question ... of justification before God, as the apostle testifies with clear words, when he writes as follows: Even as David also describe[s] the blessedness of the man unto whom God impute[s] righteousness without works, saying, Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin, [in Romans 4] And again: "***By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.***" Ephesians 2:8-9 (KJV) We believe, teach, and confess also that all men, but those especially who are born again and renewed by the Holy Ghost, are bound to do good works." (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article IV, Good Works)

So to summarize that awkward language, we conclude that good works are necessary for the Christian, but good works do not earn salvation. And we can do good works only by the Holy Spirit working in us.

So we really must ask “What is a good work in the sight of God?” Men consider many things to be “good works” or “good deeds” or “good turns”. In the sight of God good works are far different than in the sight of men.

It is not for man to say what works are good in the sight of God. God himself must do this, and he does tell us in the Bible.

In the sight of God a good work is everything that a child of God does, speaks or thinks in faith according to the Ten Commandments, for the glory of God, for the benefit of his neighbor. A good work is everything a believer does according to God’s Word out of love and thanks for all of God’s goodness. Good works are everything that a believing child of God does in the fear and love of God. Jesus tells us: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”** John 15:5 (NIV) He also commands: **“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”** John 14:15 (NIV) We read in the letter to the Hebrew Christians: **“And without faith it is impossible to please God.”** Hebrews 11:6 (NIV) Good works might be summed up in these words: **“Serve one another in love.”** Galatians 5:13 (NIV) The letter of James tells us: **“faith without works is dead.”** James 2:20 (KJV)

An unbeliever cannot do a truly good work. Outwardly his works may appear very good to us, but God looks at the heart. Because natural man has no faith, and because his works do not proceed from true fear and love of God, they are not acceptable to God. Only a child of God is able and willing to bring forth the fruit of good works. Although an unbeliever may give millions or even billions of dollars for a charity or to help others, that is not a good work in God’s sight.

Yet not everything a Christian does is also a good work. Whatever proceeds from our old Adam is evil. Only when faith, the new man, prompts us, do we bring forth good fruit.

We should not invent good works of our own, but use God’s Law as a guide. God has told us what he wants us to do. **“They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”** Matthew 15:9 (NIV)

Such works must be done in the right spirit, joyfully and willingly, as angels do the will of God in heaven; not from a selfish motive to earn something for ourselves, but from love. Remember Jesus’ words: **“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”** John 14:15 (NIV)

They must not be done for our own glory, but for the glory of God and for the benefit of our neighbor. We repeat again: **“Serve one another in love.”** Galatians 5:13 (NIV) Luther wrote: "It is impossible that a work should please God which is not done in free love".

In all we do we should honor and glorify God as Paul writes in First Corinthians: **“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”** 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)

And yet we must realize that it is not of ourselves that we do and continue to do those things which God calls good works.

We confess in Luther’s explanation to the Third Article that the Holy Ghost has, by the Gospel, kept me in the true faith. Scripture tells us that we who believe **“are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”** 1 Peter 1:5 (KJV)

By means of earthly food God preserves our physical life. By means of the Gospel, through which he created faith in us, he also preserves this new spiritual life. The power of God, by which he keeps us in the faith, operates through the Gospel. Paul speaks of **“the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”** 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV)

Paul rejoices for the Philippian Christians – and us, too – with these words: **“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”** Philippians 1:6 (NIV) God is able to preserve us until the end!

We rejoice that God has saved us through the work of Jesus Christ and that he has called us to faith and sanctification through the work of the Holy Spirit. With his help we can fight the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. He has given us his Word and Sacraments and we must faithfully hear, learn, and use that Word and use his Sacraments in that struggle. And so we can be sure that he will keep us in this way, until we are safe in our Father's home. Amen.