

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity**

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Hymns: 377:1-6, 395:1-6, 378, 500.

Lessons: Psalm 1, James 2:14-26, Matthew 25:31-46.

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:10.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What is the place of good works in your life? Today's sermon text should definitively identify the role of Good Works in the life of the Christian. Until Martin Luther opened the Bible to people in the 1500s, people usually thought that the only way to get to heaven was through their own good works, although Christ was given some place in their salvation.

Last week you heard that it is plain from Scripture that good works don't save us. God's grace saves us by simply believing in it. A life of good works is, however, what God has in mind for every Christian. It is a part of what God set in motion when in his kindness he called us to faith in his Son. The Word of God shows the place of works when it says, "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

**GOD PREPARED IN ADVANCE FOR CHRISTIANS TO DO GOOD WORKS.**

- 1. What are "good works" in God's sight?**
- 2. Good works are not necessary for salvation, that is, Jesus Christ earned salvation.**
- 3. Good works are necessary in the life of the Christian, for they are fruits of a living faith.**

We have often made reference to the fact that good works, good deeds are fruits of faith. Nowhere else is that plainer or clearer than right here in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He has just told us, in verses 8 and 9 "*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.*"

Now he makes it plain that believers are to do good works. In fact God has planned in advance for believers to do those things.

But what do we mean by "good works"? Listen to a definition most of us learned in our catechism instruction classes: Good works are everything that a believing child of God does in the fear and love of God. Or, to put it another way, good works are everything a believer does out of love for Jesus. We read in Colossians 3:17: "*whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*" And so it is that we plainly state that an unbeliever cannot do what God considers good works or good deeds.

Our Lutheran confessions have much to say about this. As it was clarified in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, or Defense of the Augsburg Confession, we believe, teach and confess that faith is bound to bring forth good fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because that is God's will. However, we should not rely on those works to merit or earn justification before God. Forgiveness of sins and justification is recognized and grasped by faith. That good works do not earn salvation is plain from the word of

Christ: "***When ye shall have done all these things which are commanded you, say: We are unprofitable servants.***" Luke 17:10 (KJV) (see The Augsburg Confession, Article XX: Of Good Works)

We are justified before God by faith alone. Faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and grace for Christ's sake, and gives us new birth. It is by faith alone that the Holy Ghost is received.

If we wish to teach correctly, we must cling to this truth, that we are accepted with God, not on account of the Law, not on account of works, but for Christ's sake. By faith alone we receive remission of sins and reconciliation, because reconciliation or justification is a matter promised for Christ's sake, and not for the sake of the Law. Therefore it is received by faith alone, although, when the Holy Ghost is given, the fulfilling of the Law follows. (See the Apology of The Augsburg Confession, Article XX: Of Good Works) We are not made acceptable before God by our obeying the Law, which we cannot do perfectly, or by our trying to obey the Law.

Paul wrote to Timothy: "***Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.***" 2 Timothy 2:15 New International Version. The King James Version more accurately translates the last words: "***Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.***" 2 Timothy 2:15 King James Version. That concept of dividing the Word of truth has been often referred to as dividing between Law and Gospel, and not confusing Law and Gospel. We must be keenly aware of the difference, recognizing what in Scripture is Law, which in summary shows us our sinfulness, and what in Scripture is the Gospel, which shows us our Savior, Jesus Christ. The Law teaches us what good works are, that is, what pleases God, what God wants us to do. That is presented as a command: "do this" and "don't do that".

Good works are to be done because of God's command, "***We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.***" Good works are an exercise of faith, as you heard in our Epistle lesson from James today. James asks, 'what good is faith if it doesn't make a difference in your life?' By doing good works, we confess our faith in Jesus as our Savior, and indicate we want to please him. Good works are also an expression of giving of thanks to our God.

After the death of Martin Luther, additional controversies arose in the visible churches among those who followed the teachings Luther had uncovered in the Bible. One of these was a dispute over good works. Some claimed that good works are necessary for salvation. We have plainly shown that we can do nothing to earn our salvation, so we cannot and dare not say that good works are necessary for us to earn our salvation. Some claimed that no good works are necessary in the life of the Christian. The Formula of Concord, published in 1580, refuted these false teachings. (See "IV. Good Works" in the Formula of Concord)

Good works must be done by the Christian. They are necessary!

The good works of the Christian are not perfect, because of our sinful flesh, which we will have until we are taken to heaven. But, on account of Christ, the fruits of faith of the believer are holy works, and acts which show the ruling of Christ in the hearts of believers. Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit, sanctifies hearts and represses the devil, and, in order to preserve the Gospel among men, Christ through believers openly opposes the kingdom of the devil through the confession and deeds of believers, and, in our weakness, declares His power.

The devil fights against everything that may be done for the praise of God.

Therefore the remission of sins and justification are received only by faith, and not on account of any works. We therefore praise and require good works. With the Formula of Concord, We believe, teach, and confess 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 as a cause and source and reason for our being saved. Our sins are forgiven and covered by the Lord, as Paul quotes Psalm 32 in Romans 4:7-8: "***Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.***"

Ephesians 2 also plainly repeats this cause of our salvation: it is the grace of God received through faith that saves us.

We believe, teach, and confess also that especially those who are born again and renewed by the Holy Ghost are bound to do good works.

So in this sense the words necessary, shall, and must are employed correctly also with respect to the believer in Christ and in no way are contrary to the form of sound words and speech.

We believe, teach, and confess also that works, good works, do not maintain faith and salvation in us, but the Spirit of God alone does that, through faith. Good works are evidences that the Holy Spirit is working within us.

We reject and condemn the false idea that good works are necessary to salvation; also, that no one ever has been saved without good works; also, that it is impossible to be saved without good works. We reject the idea that good works are harmful to salvation, but we teach that they are fruits of faith.

Especially in these last times it is important to admonish men to the way of living godly lives. We admonish and condemn all works of the flesh, particularly today when Satan and all his followers are so blunt and bold about promoting and encouraging and boasting about the wicked deeds of the flesh. We must continually remind Christians how necessary it is that they exercise good works as a declaration of their faith and gratitude to God.

And how are we to know what deeds, words, and thoughts are good works? Christians look to the Law of God, to what has been called the third use or purpose of the Law, as a guide, a guideline, a straightedge, a pattern for good works.

With our new God-given spiritual life we are able to respond to God's will. We are able to do what God wants, even though we can only do it imperfectly. It is not that we have to, but rather that we want to do God's will. The good works that flow from faith are simply an opportunity to show our appreciation for all that God in Christ has done for us. God said so plainly in 1 John 4:19 "***We love*** [that is, we love God] ***because he first loved us.***" Any love we show for God and for our fellow men is merely a reflection of God's love for us.

But even the good deeds we do are no basis for boasting. They're really not our own doing. We're simply being given the opportunity to do the good things "***which God prepared in advance for us to do.***"

Listen again as we hear perhaps the greatest truth of Scripture which was revealed again by the Reformation, together with admonition and encouragement to good works: "***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. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.***" Ephesians 2:8-10. May God lead us to show our faith in our good deeds, our good works, our good words, with our entire lives! Amen.