

“Therefore, We Do Good Works”

A Sermon on Article Twenty-Four of the Belgic Confession.

Texts: Ephesians 4:17-5:5; Ezekiel 36:24-32

Article 24 - Our Sanctification and Good Works

We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God’s Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit,¹ regenerates him and makes him a new man.² It makes him live a new life and frees him from the slavery of sin.³ Therefore it is not true that this justifying faith makes man indifferent to living a good and holy life.⁴ On the contrary, without it no one would ever do anything out of love for God,⁵ but only out of self-love or fear of being condemned. It is therefore impossible for this holy faith to be inactive in man, for we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls faith working through love (Gal 5:6). This faith induces man to apply himself to those works which God has commanded in His Word. These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless, they do not count toward our justification. For through faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do any good works.⁶ Otherwise they could not be good any more than the fruit of a tree can be good unless the tree itself is good.⁷

Therefore we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do,⁸ since it is He who is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Php 2:13). Let us keep in mind what is written: “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Lk 17:10). Meanwhile we do not deny that God rewards good works,⁹ but it is by His grace that He crowns His gifts.

Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them. We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment.¹⁰ Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it.¹¹ We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour.¹²

¹ Acts 16:14; Rom 10:17; 1 Cor 12:3 ² Ezek 36:26-27; Jn 1:12-13, 3:5; Eph 2:4-6; Tit 3:5; 1 Pt 1:23 ³ Jn 5:24, 8:36; Rom 6:4-6; 1 Jn 3:9 ⁴ Gal 5:22; Tit 2:12 ⁵ Jn 15:5; Rom 14:23; 1 Tim 1:5; Heb 11:4, ⁶ Rom 4:5 ⁷ Mt 7:17 ⁸ 1 Cor 1:30-31, 4:7; Eph 2:10 ⁹ Rom 2:6-7; 1 Cor 3:14; 2 Jn 8; Rev 2:23 ¹⁰ Rom 7:21 ¹¹ Jas 2:10 ¹² Hab 2:4; Mt 11:28; Rom 10:11

OK, “if I am justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, why then *should* I do good works?” The answer is *because* I am justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. For the same act of faith which links us to Christ, so that his merits become ours and thereby provides the basis upon which God pronounces us “not guilty,” also begins the life-long process of sanctification, in which old sinful habits begin to weaken, new Godly affections begin to

grow, and we begin to obey (however, feebly), not some, but all of God's commandments.¹ Indeed, only justified sinners can actually do good works.

We are in that section of our confession (articles twenty-two through twenty-four) which deals with familiar doctrines to many of us: faith, justification and sanctification. These wonderful doctrines not only unfold throughout the pages of Holy Scripture, but the Reformed formulation of these truths, such as we find in our confession, clearly differentiated Reformed Christianity from Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism at the time our confession was written in 1561. But these doctrines also differentiate Reformed Christianity from Romanism and much of American evangelicalism today. This is why it is so important to be familiar with our confessions, so that we know what we believe and why we believe it. For how else can we proclaim the truth to the unbelieving world around us?

As we have seen, articles twenty and twenty-one of our confession summarize and describe the saving work of Jesus Christ, which provides the ground or the basis of our justification. Jesus Christ not only satisfied the wrath of God when he suffered upon the cross for us and in our place, so also he came as our high priest who represents us before God. In addition, Jesus came as the mediator of the covenant of grace, so that through his own perfect obedience to the covenant of works and the law of Moses, Jesus' saving merits (his personal and perfect righteous) are reckoned to us through the means of faith.

The moment we place our trust in Jesus Christ, all of our sins (past, present, and future) are forgiven. As our confession puts it in article twenty two—Christ's "benefits have become ours, [and] they are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins." Through that same act of faith, Christ's righteousness becomes ours so that we can "rely and rest on the only obedience of Jesus Christ crucified; His obedience is ours when we believe in Him" (Article twenty-three). Because we are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ which we receive through the means of faith (and not through our own good works), our consciences are freed from fear, terror and dread. Since we are not paralyzed by the fear that God will punish us when we fail, we are free to obey the law of God, not to earn greater righteousness nor to become "holier." Rather, we obey the law of God because we have already been reckoned as "righteous" and our eternal standing before God has already been settled by the active and passive obedience of Jesus Christ.

Once we understand what it means to be justified, we are now in a position to discuss sanctification, which is that life-long process through which the old habit of sin (what we call "indwelling sin") is progressively weakened and the new nature (given us by virtue of regeneration) is progressively strengthened. The fruit of the flesh (as depicted by Paul in Galatians 5:19-21) gradually begin to diminish, while the fruit of the Spirit (v. 22-23) spontaneously begin to appear in our lives. And why is this? Because through faith, we are united to Jesus Christ, and since we are indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit, sanctification is the necessary consequence of the once and for all declaration that we have been justified. Therefore, whenever someone claims to be justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone but then continues to live like a pagan, something is wrong. If people who profess faith in Christ do not have a constant struggle with sin, are not plagued by nagging doubts, or don't raise questions about how what is believed is to be put into practice, then something is amiss. No justified sinner can remain indifferent about their conduct nor continue on in sin as they did before they were justified. As we saw when we covered Romans 7:14-25, the struggle with sin is the normal Christian life. In fact, the holiest among us may be those struggling the most. It is apathy to the things of God and indifference to our personal sins which are the real signs of trouble.

¹ Cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, LD 32, 33, 44, Q's 114-115.

Before we turn to the specifics of article twenty-four, it is very important that we take note of the fact that the discussion of sanctification as we find it in our confession, takes place against the backdrop of Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism, which our confession was written to oppose. Having thoroughly confused justification with sanctification, Rome's response to the Reformed and biblical doctrine of justification is that if justification is an instantaneous, once and for all declaration, to the effect that the sinner is presently righteous, this not only gives no incentive for the Christian to do good works (which Rome believes are meritorious), but it leads to the sin of presumption. Rome has always believed that it is a sin for someone to state with confidence that they are certain of possessing eternal life, when they don't know if they will remain in the faith until the end of their lives. Furthermore, Roman Catholic theologians consider the doctrine of Christ's righteousness being imputed to the sinner to be a "legal fiction," since, according to them, God is pronouncing a sinner to be righteous while they still remain sinners, and this would be a falsehood. So, after carefully defining what it means to be justified on the grounds of the merits of Christ, received through the means of faith alone in articles twenty-two through twenty-three, our confession must define and clarify the role of good works in the life of the justified.

The Anabaptists, on the other hand, present a completely different sort of problem. Since many Anabaptists believed that the Holy Spirit speaks to believers directly apart from means (word and sacraments), Anabaptists often saw sanctification (without any consideration of justification) as the heart of the Christian life. In Anabaptist piety, being a Christian is following Jesus' example, living a simple and uncomplicated life (sometime a communal life) and avoiding as much contact with the world and its institutions as possible. This not only denies the doctrine of creation and the cultural mandate, but it separates the work of God's Spirit from word and sacrament. Therefore, our confession must demonstrate that good works are not connected to the private leading of the Spirit, but that when the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts, out of a sense of gratitude we become increasingly obedient to the law of God, not to private revelations or secret leadings of the Spirit. Nor need we obey the rules of men.

With this context in mind, we now turn to article twenty four of our confession and the Reformed doctrine of sanctification.

The first point made by our confession is defining the relationship between sanctification and regeneration (or the new birth). Our confession makes the following assertion: "We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God's Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man. It makes him live a new life and frees him from the slavery of sin." There are several very important things here of which we need to take note, since they have a direct bearing upon our present circumstances as Reformed Christians living in an evangelical world.

Before the Arminian controversy began in Holland in the early 1600's, Reformed theologians (following Calvin) spoke of regeneration much the same way that we now speak of sanctification. This has caused a fair bit of confusion. After the Arminians began to contend that once we exercise faith, God regenerates us, forgives us from past sins and give us his Holy Spirit, so that if we cooperate with the grace of God, we will make progress in sanctification, the Reformed began to separate regeneration from sanctification so as to be clear that regeneration precedes faith and is not a reward for believing. Indeed, only regenerate people can place their trust in Jesus Christ. But notice the order given us by the confession. Faith is worked into us by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. The Reformed have always believed that calling precedes faith, which proceeds justification and the Christian life. Through the preaching of the gospel (the message of the doing and dying of Jesus) God calls his elect to faith. Once God's people hear the gospel and believe, they repent of their sins, they are justified, and the process of sanctification immediately begins in the lives of all those who are justified.

But there is great wisdom when Calvin and our confession link regeneration to sanctification. The new man (who was dead in sin, but is now alive in Christ) is no longer a slave to sin. The old nature (the flesh) has been crucified with Christ and buried with him in baptism (cf. Romans 6:1-7). The new man (the regenerate nature) comes alive through the resurrection power of Christ and has an entirely different orientation than the flesh. The new nature believes God's promises, it embraces Christ through faith, it hates sin and it desires to please God. Thus, everyone who is called through the preaching of the gospel and who then comes to faith (through the operations of the Holy Spirit) is not only justified through the means of faith, but also has a new set of desires and affections which reflect the new nature. You cannot argue, as certain evangelicals do, that someone can accept Jesus as their Savior, but not make him Lord over their lives until a later time (the so-called "Lordship controversy"). If you trust in Jesus Christ through faith, you have been crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, and are now alive with Christ. There is no such thing in the New Testament as a two-tiered Christian life, in which there are people who accept Christ as Savior but have not yet made him Lord, nor are there people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit but not yet baptized by the Spirit, nor are there people who are saved, but not yet sanctified.²

But having said that a definitive change in our nature is brought about by the new birth, also opens the door to all sorts of notions regarding Christian perfectionism—this is the idea that we can rise above all besetting sins. The holiness tradition, which comes to us in America largely through the efforts of the Wesleys and Methodism, teaches that this definitive break with the flesh which results from the new birth, and when coupled with the power of the Holy Spirit, enables us to live without (or above) sin. But this teaching ignores a very fundamental fact. Yes, the new birth makes us alive with Christ and forever breaks the power which sin had formerly held over us. But indwelling sin (what our theologians call the *habitus* of sin) remains in us until we die. Romans 7:14-25 is very clear about this. The new nature must struggle against the three enemies of every Christian, the world, the flesh and the devil. This is why the struggle with sin is the necessary fruit of justification and the new birth. Sadly, this struggle has led many to question their relationship with God, when, in fact, the struggle with sin is the sure sign that God is at work, molding us and conforming us into the image of his dear son.

In Romans 6:6, Paul speaks of us as people who were formerly slaves to sin. But once freed from our slavery, we struggle to stop thinking and acting as slaves, and we struggle to start living like the free men and women that we are. The struggle will not produce victory over all sin in this life as the perfectionists teach. The power of sin is broken so that sanctification and transformation necessarily begin. But the habit of sin (indwelling sin) will remain with us until we die or our Lord returns, whichever comes first. This is the very point made in our confession when it tells us that regeneration makes us new men and women, that regeneration causes us to live a new life and frees us from the slavery of sin.

The transformation of God's people into the image of his Son is a major theme throughout redemptive history. Take, for example, the prophecy of Ezekiel 36:26-27. Through the prophet, YHWH foretells of a day for his people in which,

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

² See Warfield's decimating critique of this in his view of Lewis Sperry Chafer's *He That is Spiritual*, as reprinted in Horton, et, al, Christ the Lord (Baker, 1992).

It is not until the coming of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that this prophecy makes sense. Through the preaching of the gospel (remember that the prophecy of Ezekiel 36 begins when God commands Ezekiel to preach to the dead bones so that God can bring them to life), God calls his elect to faith, the Holy Spirit regenerates them, so that God's people are not only justified, they also begin the life-long process of sanctification—spoken of as the Holy Spirit indwelling us, giving us a heart of flesh, and creating in us a desire to keep God's laws.

The same thing is seen in the ethical teaching of the New Testament. As but one example (and there are many such texts we can cite), in Ephesians 4:17-5:5, Paul describes how justified sinners are to live, now that they have been justified.

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Paul's point to the Ephesians is simply this. You have been made new, now act like it.

Paul now gets very specific as to the behavior he expects from the justified. Notice how all of these imperatives (commands) echo the Ten Commandments.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. `In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

And then, finally, in Ephesians 5:1-5, Paul goes on to say that this conduct results from what Christ has already done for us.

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

Clearly this means that the Bible never envisions a scenario in which someone can be justified but not

simultaneously undergoing sanctification, which includes obedience to the law of God. Someone who professes faith in Christ but who still lives like a pagan, or who knows no struggle with sin, has no biblical excuse whatsoever for their indifference to the law of God and the kind of behavior Paul describes above. They are either not regenerate, or else they are in rebellion against God, and will suffer the consequences of their actions—excommunication from the church, God’s withholding his blessed presence from their lives, or else God will allow the consequences of sin to come crashing down upon their heads. But let’s be clear here—it is not the struggle with sin which is the problem as the perfectionists teach, destroying the hope of those whom they label defeated or carnal Christians. Rather, it is apathy to sin which is the warning sign that all is not well.

Therefore, our confession is absolutely correct to make the point that all those who have been called to faith through the preaching of the gospel, are regenerate, and will, therefore, undergo the life-long process (struggle) of sanctification foretold by the prophets and then set forth in the ethical teaching of the New Testament. The justified sinner (once for all) is also a sinner in the process of being sanctified.

Having defined the relationship between regeneration and sanctification, our confession now qualifies the point that the same faith which justifies us and receives the merits of Christ, having been given to us as a gift by God, is a living faith which produces good works.

Our confession now responds to Rome’s charge that justification by faith leads to indifference or presumption. “Therefore it is not true that this justifying faith makes man indifferent to living a good and holy life. On the contrary, without it no one would ever do anything out of love for God, but only out of self-love or fear of being condemned. It is therefore impossible for this holy faith to be inactive in man, for we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls faith working through love (Galatians 5:6). This faith induces man to apply himself to those works which God has commanded in His Word. These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless, they do not count toward our justification. For through faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do any good works. Otherwise they could not be good any more than the fruit of a tree can be good unless the tree itself is good.”

From the many verses listed to support this assertion, it is clear that regeneration and faith are the root and that good works are the fruit of the declaration that sinners are righteous, because their sin has been imputed to Christ and his merits have been imputed to them. In Galatians 5:6, Paul makes the point that the faith which receives the merits of Christ, will also manifest itself through love for others. Then, in verse 22 of that same chapter, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, which God brings forth in the lives of the justified—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

In Titus 2:11-15, Paul puts it this way:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

According to Paul, good works are the fruit of God’s grace and since Christ has already redeemed us from the guilt and power of sin, we should now be eager to do good works. This is why our catechism speaks of the Christian life in terms of redeemed sinners living lives of gratitude before God because of

all that he has done for us.

Indeed, Jesus himself speaks this way in Matthew 7:17-20.

Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

We don't become good trees by attempting to do good works, even good works brought forth through the grace given us in the sacraments (as taught by Rome) or through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit (as taught by the Anabaptists). No, it is not until the tree is changed through regeneration that the fruit changes. Bad trees bear only rotten fruit. Indeed, the fruit of the transformed tree are enumerated by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23.

Thus the Roman Catholic objection to the doctrine of justification by faith—that it leads to a life of indifference—simply is not true. And if there are Reformed Christians who are indifferent to good works once they have been justified, it is only because they misunderstand or misrepresent the teaching of Scripture as summarized in our confessions. And if so, they are in sin and must repent!

Next, our confession deals with the question of merit in relationship to those good works which we perform.

Having set forth the fact that justified sinners will manifest the fruit of the Spirit and begin to do good works, our confession turns to the perennial problem of attaching merit or credit to whatever good we may do. Contrary to Rome, Reformed Christians do not believe that the good works which flow forth from regeneration and our right-standing before God, are in any sense meritorious, nor can we claim any credit for producing them. Our confession states accordingly: "Therefore we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do, since it is He who is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Let us keep in mind what is written: 'So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty' (Luke 17:10). Meanwhile we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is by His grace that He crowns His gifts."

Here again we are brought back to the doctrine of justification. Through faith, we have already received the perfect merits of Christ. These merits are perfect, since Christ fulfilled the covenant of works, and obeyed the Ten Commandments perfectly, and was without sin, every moment of his life. This is the righteousness which is already ours, from the moment we are justified. This means that whatever good works we do cannot add one iota of righteousness to that righteousness which we already possess. Furthermore, whatever good works we do, come from the new nature (not the old) and are in every sense the fruit of what God has already done for us (justification) and is currently doing within us (sanctification).

Therefore, we do good works because we now want to do them, not to earn something, or to put God in our debt. We do them because we love God and are thankful that he has rescued us from our sin. And while God rewards his works, what do we do with whatever rewards we may earn—according to Revelation 4:10-12:

the twenty-four elders [who represent the church] fall down before him who sits on the throne,

and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns [their rewards] before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

Finally, our confession makes clear what happens when we confuse justification and sanctification—our consciences are not freed from terror, fear and dread, and that such a conscience prevents us from doing good works as a fruit of faith, because it seeks to earn a reward from God. The focus remains upon the self, rather than upon bringing glory to God.

Our confession states the case accordingly. “Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them. We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment. Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it. We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour.”

The irony is that at the end of the day, it is Rome’s view which teaches sinners to attempt to put God in the sinner’s debt, which is utterly self-centered, and which can only lead to a conscience which is ridden with guilt. And a conscience which is still enslaved to fear, terror and dread—the very thing from which Jesus came to liberate us—will not produce good works. A terrified conscience produces works stained with fear, doubt and unbelief. People who live guilt-ridden lives can survive in only one of two ways—either they seek a priest or a psychiatrist to tell them that they are OK (even when they know they are not), and who give them something to do to take their minds off their dilemma, or else they become self-righteous Pharisees who really do think their works are good and that God is pleased with them. This way of thinking does not produce genuine good works—but works which are an offense to God and which only add to their condemnation.

But since we are presently justified through the merits of Jesus Christ, and therefore reckoned as righteous as is Jesus himself, our consciences are free from fear, terror and dread. This means that we are free to do good works, because these works flow forth from the new nature given us by God and are sanctified by the perfect righteousness of Christ himself. We have nothing to fear from God. He is pleased with all those works wrought in us by his grace and sanctified by the righteousness of his son. He delights when we struggle to obey his law and when the fruit of his Spirit is manifest in our lives.

Therefore, let us do good works! What else can justified sinners do, but live lives of gratitude before the God who has set us free from the guilt and power of sin to do exactly that.