

### ***The Evil of Doing Good***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ, for the past several weeks we've been examining various aspects of what theologians call *sanctification*, that is, growing in and living out the Christian life. You see, it's one thing to be justified, by which we mean being declared righteous before God through faith in Jesus who atoned for the sins of the world, and quite another to go out and consistently live in that faith in a fallen world that thinks very much differently and that is hostile to the central truth of the Christian faith. And so, we've been working through various applications of it.

For example, a few weeks back we considered a Christian's relation to the state and its leaders. And we saw that we more than anyone ought to be good and loyal citizens because we understand that all authority comes from the Lord, so obeying the government is obeying God. We draw the line when we're told by the state to do things that contradict the Word of God. Then we have to answer to our higher authority. Or again, last week we spent some time thinking about what it means to actually belong to Jesus – how he bought us with the blood he shed on our behalf, and how that means we really aren't free to do with ourselves whatever we might like. To do so would be to impose on his business and usurp for ourselves what belongs to his discretion and rule. The time before that we reflected upon the Lord's use of evil for good purposes, and how through hardship and suffering he prunes us, as it were (to borrow the vineyard imagery in today's Old Testament lesson), so that we bring forth more fruit. We also saw how the bad things that happen can have many more positive effects that we never see or notice—but the Lord does, which is all that really matters.

So, again, these topics we've been looking at are various facets that help inform and direct us in our walk of faith, that is, our sanctification. But if we were looking for an overriding theme when it comes to living out the Christian life, a theme that appears again and again under all these topics, it would be this: the Christian life is a life of continuous repentance for sin and turning to Christ and trusting in his accomplished work on the cross for our forgiveness.

And so it's fitting that we begin our worship services like we did a short while ago by confessing our sins together before the Lord. And that's what I'd like us to think about today: the sins we confess. We've got that all-inclusive blanket statement by which we confess our sins of thought, word, and deed by which we have ever offended the Lord and justly deserve his temporal and eternal punishment. But before that, we pause for a time of silence for personal introspection. It's to give each of us an opportunity to reflect upon the past week – or perhaps *weeks* if you've been delinquent – in order to bring to mind those failures that are especially troubling your soul.

To tell you the truth, I never know how long I should pause there. I mean, if I were to do a thorough mental run down of my own failures, we could be standing here for several hours of silence. That might try your patience just a bit. On the other hand, I don't want to cut anyone off mid-thought and so destroy a deeply spiritual moment. So, I try to allow enough time for everyone to hit the major high points – or rather *low* points. But what do you think about during that time? Hopefully nobody's thinking, "C'mon, will you? Let's get on with it!" If so, I'd recommend you take a harder look at yourself, and maybe, just maybe start by considering how you might be guilty of the sin of impatience. After that you might also consider the sins of superficiality and having too high an opinion of yourself.

But more seriously, what do you think about? I expect that most of us naturally gravitate toward those aforementioned low points – those especially egregious things you can put your finger on and say to yourself, “I knew I shouldn’t have done this; but I did” or “I knew I should have done that; but I didn’t”. And right along with those sorts of things, I’d be willing to bet that many of us think about old habitual sins: the ones that we just keep finding ourselves slipping into time after time. Does that sound about right? Are those the kinds of sins you think about before the general confession? Well, let me ask you something: did it ever occur to you to think about and confess also the things you did that you would have counted on the positive side? Do you confess to the Lord also the *good* things that you did? Or how about the temptations you felt but managed in the end to master?

I suppose that may sound like a dumb question. “Pastor, why in the world would I do that? It doesn’t make sense to confess the things I did that are good and right – that aren’t sins. Nor does it make sense to confess sins I didn’t commit. Don’t be ridiculous!”

Actually, it makes a lot more sense than you might think. In fact, it often happens that the good we do can be worse and do us far more spiritual harm than the sins we commit. Let me explain why. First, and perhaps easiest to see, is that you didn’t do anything good. We’re talking about God’s standards here, not ours. And in his sight nothing we do measures up. Because we are sinners by nature, everything we do is tainted by sin. Even the best and noblest human accomplishment is corrupt in the sight of God. It’s as the prophet Isaiah confessed: our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord. Or as Jesus said, bad trees can only produce bad fruit. So even the good things you imagine that you did are indeed sin.

The trouble is that we don’t think of them that way. We really do think of them as good. So, we call good what God calls evil, and thus we add the sin of being false witnesses – of being liars – who contradict the Word and judgments of God to the evil we’ve already done; and thus we become doubly guilty. With an offense that we easily recognize as a sin there’s no such self-deception. I’m guilty and that’s all there is to it. But with something I think of as good, I’m even more under God’s wrath and judgment – and because I believe the lie of its goodness, I’m most likely unaware of it.

And this is precisely what makes my imagined good deeds so deadly dangerous to the soul. When I stand before the Lord and make confession, I have two piles of accomplishments. On this side [left] are the bad things I need to be forgiven for, and on this side [right] are the things I’m proud of. I don’t need forgiveness for them. For these [left] I need the imputed righteousness of Christ. For these [right] I’ve got my own righteousness, thank you very much; I don’t need Christ or anything he has to give me. And so, Jesus becomes my part time Savior, my half a Savior. On this side I’m saving myself. And the bigger I imagine this [right] pile to be, the more good I think I’ve done, the less of a Savior I need. Even though, as we’ve already seen, this [right] pile belongs on the left side and it’s at least twice as tall as I thought it was. We ought to be praying, “Lord, forgive me for my sins; but even more save me from the good I do.” We don’t need a fraction of a Savior. We need the full treatment.

This is what St. Paul is talking about in this morning’s Epistle reading. He’s warning the congregation at Philippi not to be deceived by the preachers of a false gospel. It happened that wherever Paul went on his missions to spread the Gospel of Jesus and plant Christian churches there followed hot on his heels a group of people we call the Judaizers. Paul had other names for them, and they weren’t very nice. Anyway, after he had a church

up and running with the fundamentals of faith firmly in place, he'd move on to the next place. And then these Judaizers would descend on the church he just left, and they'd start trying to turn things to their way of thinking.

“Oh, wonderful! You've come to faith Jesus Christ, and you trust in him as your Savior from sin. That's terrific. Now it's time to move on to the next step and become really good Christians. You do this by following all these ceremonial laws that the Lord gave to his people Israel. By observing them you please the Lord. It makes him happy. That's why he gave these commandments to us. So, we start with circumcision. Gentlemen, it's part of the covenant; and you do want to please the Lord, don't you? And then we have these dietary restrictions. The Lord called certain animals unclean. You wouldn't want to contaminate yourself and make the Lord angry for the sake of a pork chop, would you? Of course not. So, you'll have to give that up too, along with ham, bacon, shrimp and shellfish, and these other things.” And on and on it went, the Judaizers teaching the new Christians the good works they could do to please the Lord. And hey, most of these folks were Gentile converts. They were fairly new at this Christianity thing. What the Judaizers said seemed to make a lot of sense. They certainly knew their Bible. And who wouldn't want to please the Lord?

But Paul was quick to see and warn of the danger. Anyone who imagines that he can please the Lord even in some small way through his own work and effort is subtly shifting his confidence from Christ and what he did on the cross to his own goodness and merit. Salvation becomes a team effort. Jesus does his part and I do mine. And it's funny, the more I do the less I need him. Who knows? If I keep at this hard enough, maybe one day I won't need Jesus at all. And thus, the true ground of faith is slowly eroded away. The righteousness of Christ is replaced with the lie of my own goodness.

So Paul writes to them saying, “These people who are throwing you into confusion think that they're full of good works that please the Lord. I know. I used to be one of them. In fact, I was ten times the good, faithful man of God that they think themselves to be. I was blameless before the law – a Pharisee. I was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a pure-bred Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin. I scrupulously observed all their rules and regulations. And I was absolutely confident that God was pleased with me.

“And then I met Jesus Christ. I learned of his love, his perfection, and the sacrifice he made on my behalf. I learned of his forgiveness. Now I trust in his perfect righteousness – the righteousness he gives to me by faith. And now, on account of it, everything I was, everything I thought I had done to please God, everything I thought I had going for me and of which I was so proud, I consider it all to be loss – worse than a festering mound of manure. All that imagined righteousness of which I was so confident stood in the way of me knowing and trusting completely in Christ. He's my confidence now. He's already accomplished and given to me the only good I need.”

And having said this, Paul points them in a different direction. Instead of listening to these Judaizers tell you how to be good Christians, learn all the more to know Jesus Christ. Despising yourself and your contributions, look at him. Look only at him. Make it your goal to know him, his righteousness, and the power of his resurrection. His is the victory over sin that counts, not yours. And, Paul continues, by knowing Christ and by trusting more in him you will also become a partaker in his suffering. Your faith will be hardened by fiery trials as you come increasingly into conflict with the world and its way of thinking, which always seeks to find goodness and worthiness within.

And it's not just from the world that such opposition will come. This worldly way of thinking is constantly maneuvering its way into the church. It's really rather ironic. When Paul was a self-righteous legalist at least he knew he was an enemy of the Church of Christ. His goal was to destroy the faith. The Judaizers, on the other hand, honestly believed that they were good Christians doing the Lord's work. But as the Church's friends they were doing far more damage to believers than Paul ever did as their enemy. We have to be on guard just like Paul was and as he warned the Philippians to be. The teachers of good works will usually look like friends. They're not.

But a word of correction is probably in order. It's occurred to me that someone might be sitting here thinking, "If supposedly good works are in fact evil – and dangerously so because of their inherent power to deceive us into thinking that they really are good, then what I ought to do is to avoid them altogether. At least when I'm sinning, I know I'm sinning; so to play it safe I ought to do more of the sorts of things I can confess as sins and less of what I might mistakenly think of as good."

As logical as it sounds, that would be a wrong conclusion. We are repeatedly enjoined as Christians to love and serve one another as Christ loved and served us. And I'm thankful to the sewing ladies for providing a great illustration for me this morning with the quilts that are here displayed. They are the fruit of many hours of their sacrificial service. So, in light of all that has been said, here's a test question for you: are these quilts good works or evil? Certainly, the quilts themselves appear to be good things. They will be sent out to help people in need and alleviate suffering. They'll be put to use in dozens of different ways. They also provide those who distribute them a chance to share the Gospel – so they're tools of evangelism. We can say that they are good in these senses. But in fact, they are simply objects that can be used for good purposes. In a moral sense they are neither good nor evil. You could also use one to strangle or suffocate someone – that wouldn't make it bad. So really, the question of good or evil doesn't pertain to the quilts, it pertains to the effort that went into their making. Was that good or evil?

And here's where what we've been talking about comes so sharply into focus. We'd sure like to say it's good work, wouldn't we? It rather offends us to say otherwise – which is the point: the sinful old self dies hard. It clings to the idea that I ought to be able to do something that's good. But no. We have to say that the work of sinners is always sin that needs to be repented of – and doubly so if anyone who worked on them imagines that she is a better or more worthy Christian for having done the work. But there's more going on here. First, as was stated earlier, the Lord is able to bring his good from our evil. So even our evil works can be put to good use. Secondly, and far more importantly for today's study, we need to see that it wasn't only sinners who worked on these quilts. Christ also worked on them through the faithful women who made them. His Holy Spirit was at work in them. And the new persons in each of them who died to sin, who were raised in Christ's likeness, and who trust in Christ and his goodness for their salvation—they also worked on them. And their work is good. It doesn't move them a bit closer to salvation because for them that's a done deal; but it is good work in the sight of God because it is done by faith in Christ.

That's the kind of good work Paul encourages us to do: the work that flows naturally from trust and confidence in Christ. Therefore, repenting of both our sins and our imaged good accomplishments, let's join Paul in seeking always only to know Christ, his righteousness, and the power of his resurrection for to this we have been called. And in this way Christ Jesus will work his good in us. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***