

The Meaning of Necessary Good Works

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You have always been taught that good works are necessary. What does “necessary good works” mean? Those who promote error give the word *necessary* just their one meaning that is often the first meaning listed in many dictionaries. We are called sometimes to explain the proper meaning of terms that have been corralled into one culturally popular meaning.

We learn in catechism that good works are much more than helping a little old lady cross the street, starting a soup kitchen in the city to feed the homeless or building a school, and digging a well in a third world country. Although those things are fine to do, they are not always good works. Good works are what we do throughout our daily existence. It is the “regular” stuff that doesn’t really seem like a big deal or make a big splash that anyone is going to congratulate us for. Things like prayer, repentance, crucifying our old man, happily going to church, willing obedience to authority, discussing the truths of scripture together, taking care of your responsibilities, guarding your tongue, and being nice to someone who hasn’t been nice to you are good works, even though they seem like just average life.

We would agree that for even these regular things to be good works, they must meet the standard that the Bible tells us they should meet. They are to be done in accordance to the law of God as found in the ten commandments and the summary that teaches us to love God above all else and love our neighbor as ourselves. They are also to be done for God’s glory and not our own honor or advantage. And they are to be done out of faith.

What about that word *necessary*? Our first thought is often that it means a requirement or obligation. This would be the meaning that many use today including Arminianism, many evangelical groups, promoters of the federal vision and Roman Catholicism. These teach that good works are a requirement that we must do in order to get conversion for ourselves, maintain our salvation, or finish the work that Christ started in us. That meaning of *necessary* would amount to trying to earn our salvation or be a form of works righteousness. Good works are also not a requirement that we must do in

order to prove that we are saved as if it were a hoop to jump through similar to a dog's performing a trick to prove that he learned it.

The second meaning of necessary listed in the dictionary is: inevitable, unavoidable, predetermined and preordained as in a result of something or a "necessary consequence." This is the biblical understanding of *necessary* as explained in scripture by the picture of fruit. The idea is that if a tree is healthy and well sustained by the gardener, it will be fruitful. It will be. It cannot be unfruitful. It will be unavoidable that the tree produces fruit. That is an explanation that many of you have been taught. Continuing with the idea of fruit, when you think of a new baby, the Bible calls that the fruit of the womb. It is a necessary result of what happened within that womb. The newborn must come out of or spring forth from the womb. It is necessary. It is inevitable. If a child doesn't emerge from the womb, it dies. So also our good works: they must emerge and flourish, grow and mature. When we are born again spiritually, good works must inevitably come out of our now-livened hearts. Good works are signs of spiritual life even though they are polluted with sin. The works of our hands, the thoughts of our hearts, and the speech of our tongues display the life of Christ within us. This is the life that God sees when he looks at us and delights in us as his own. The Bible is teaching quite a lot by calling regeneration our being born again because it is at the same time teaching how our good works are necessary. Thankful actions of obedience necessarily and inevitably spring forth from a regenerated and justified heart.

Let me give you another example that I recently ran across. Good works are necessary like the noise of a cannon is necessary when it is shot off. The noise does not cause the cannon to shoot. Rather, the noise is a part of the effect of the cannon being shot. The timing you see is important when you are considering the necessity of something. Is something necessary before something else or after that something else? Good works are not to be related to justification as happening before justification or during it or even as finishing it, as John Piper is teaching lately¹. They are related to justification as happening after it. Christ performs 100% of the work of justification, and our good works follow that justification. Good works are related to justification much like the noise of a cannon is related to the shot itself. The noise does not cause the cannonball to fly through the air. The noise is not part of the cannon or the cannonball, and it is not part of the flying. It does not contribute to the process at all. But the noise is

always there, accompanying and resulting from the cannonball being fired. Good works are always there, accompanying and resulting from our justification. The intensity and amount of them are directly related to our awareness of and gratitude for that justification.

So why are good works always there? God makes sure that they are always there for his own glory. Good works are a core part of the sanctification that God works in us as he conforms us to the image of Christ. They are basic, entry-level participation in the Christian life as the commonly shared life of the family of God. Good works are “sanctification 101,” straightforward, uncomplicated, easy to understand and do. They are central to the Christian life because they are how we show love for God and our neighbor. Good works equate to our serving others instead of being consumed with ourselves. Good works promote growth in sanctification because their presence in our lives encourages us in our life of gratitude. They are the activity of what we know about God and his word of salvation to us. Even our very desire for good works is a great comfort and reassurance to us against the lie of Satan that tries to tell us we are too evil for Christ to bother with us. Our good works are evidences that Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts. They prove our faith like our pulse proves we are alive. Because they are an assurance to us that we can see, we are moved to praise God with thanksgiving even more. This leads to more good works and then to more thanksgiving. The bringing forth of praise to God is how our good works glorify God, whether it is praise from others upon seeing our good works or whether it is from us for what he has done in us. This type of glorifying God is not an attempt to add something to him. Do we praise God often enough for the good works that we see in others?

Good works are for our benefit as assurance of our personal salvation according to Q&A 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism. They are proof to our weak and doubting hearts that the seed of spiritual life has sprouted and is growing. We need them in our fight against Satan’s continual accusations. Scriptural knowledge is a wonderful thing to have. Pure doctrine is wonderful. The rich young ruler had knowledge and pure doctrine but he still went away sad because he did not have good works, Matt. 19:16–22. His knowledge did not produce true action because his heart was not yet changed. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:10–14 that if one can understand spiritual things, then he already has the Spirit within his heart. Proof of our salvation that is shown to us in our own personal lives

in a personal way with good works is a true gift of the Spirit for us. Our good works make our own salvation known to us in a way that an academic “A” on a spiritual test will not. God graciously sets forth and causes us to perform good works that are designed especially for each of us to do, Ephesians 2:10. Our good works are unique and particular to each one of us. Our personalized good works are a strong form of personal witnessing to others, 1 Peter 2, especially verse 12. The calling of Matthew 5:16 is to let our light shine so that others may see our good works and glorify God. When others see our good works, this gives us opportunity to speak of God’s message of salvation. These then may rejoice and glorify God with us. This is why we should not be consumed with a false humility that causes us to hide our good works or only to show them to a few fellow believers in the household of faith. We are called to let all our light shine before all and this includes the good works God gave us.

Good works are also the fulfillment of the promises of scripture. Every time we read an ‘if/then’ statement in the Bible, we should read that as a promise and not a condition. Our natural and corrupted mind that is tied down by our own selfish thought process assumes that the Bible is full of all of these conditions: “If thou shalt obey, then thou shalt be ...” To our natural minds this sounds like a condition. If we read these as promises, we see these passages in a whole different light. Now we see these promises as ways to validate to our fearful and doubting selves the truth of our salvation. Our redemption is sure because it is based on the work of Christ. But it is shown to each of us because when we examine ourselves, we see the fulfillment of all of these promises actually transpiring in our own lives as we willingly perform good works. If/then statements however, are not to be used to judge each other or measure each other’s purity or Christianity.

Good works are also the inevitable and preordained finishing touches on our being born again because we are God’s workmanship according to Ephesians 2:10. They are God’s finishing what he started in us spiritually, and God does not leave his work unfinished, Philippians 1:6. Trials and sufferings are not the only thing that God uses to prepare us for eternal life or strengthen our faith. He also uses our good works for this purpose according to the parable of the talents, Matthew 25:14–30. Good works do not earn heaven for us, but without them we will not be prepared to enter into heaven. Good works are expressions of submission to God, and putting the needs of others above our

own desires. If we were not living from that mindset now, then why would we want that activity in glory? It is not our calling to just wait for perfection to happen in heaven. Being perfected in heaven doesn't just mean "without flaws," but it means also a completion and fullness of what was started here, including good works that we did in faith and by grace. It is amazing to me that God not only saves such poison worms as we are, but he then gives us work to do and calls it good! Heaven is where our good works will be rewarded according to grace. Heaven for us then becomes the fruition, fulfillment, and completion of the grace and the good works that were given us in this life, Romans 8:30. We often say when someone dies that his or her work here was done. It is a very true thing because it is their good works being finished by God and the completion of the last of their good works that God crowns with their entrance into their eternal home.

So you see, properly understanding the word necessary is important for us to understand the place of good works in our lives as gratitude. Our good works are not our own doing and contribute nothing to our salvation, and this keeps us humble. Yet, because our good works are not our own doing, we rejoice in them and praise God for them. We are thankful for the necessary presence of good works, the fruit of our salvation.

ⁱ Standard Bearer, vol. 92, #7, pg.154

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