

## **“A GOOD TREE BEARS GOOD FRUIT.”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**  
**First Christian Reformed Church**  
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**Sermon Texts: Matthew 7:15-19; Ephesians 2:8-10**  
**Belgic Confession Article 24**

### **Introduction.**

I distinctly remember laying in my bed at night as a freshman in high school in Wichita, Kansas thinking about God and heaven and hell and thinking about whether I was good enough to be let into heaven. I wasn't a bad kid and I didn't do bad things. As the old saying goes, "I didn't smoke, drink, dance or chew or go with girls that do." I wrestled in my mind how God could possibly not let me in.

I figured just trying to be good should be good enough.

But I also laid there with a nagging feeling that my thinking wasn't giving me much peace of mind. Something about my reasoning left me with a troubling uncertainty. Little did I know how futile my thinking was.

I didn't know God and how righteous and holy and perfect He was. I didn't know about the justice of God and the demands of the law. I didn't know how great a sinner I really was even though I didn't do the big sins (like the seven deadly sins, wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony).

And I especially had no clue about the work of Christ and His righteousness and about how my thinking completely negated what He did on the cross and robbed Him of His glory.

I thought goodness could be achieved by living a relatively good life.

### **Justification and sanctification.**

Having talked of justification by grace through faith, we now turn to talk about sanctification which also happens to be by grace through faith. They are the double benefits of the work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Article 24 begins the way it does to make sure in this discussion that we understand that everything is from God and by grace. The work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God regenerates a person and "makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life and setting him free from the bondage of sin" (Art. 24).

The tree must be good before there can be good fruit. Justification comes before sanctification, but sanctification must follow. A fruit tree is not good unless it brings forth fruit.

## **Conflict over Justification by grace alone.**

The Reformation was a time of Biblical and doctrinal conflict and struggle and clarification. One of the biggest arguments was over the relationship between grace and works.

If we are saved by grace and if we can't earn our salvation or any further merit or favor with God, then why do good works? Are good works even necessary at all, and if so why?

The ***Roman Catholic Church*** accused the Reformers of prompting carelessness or laziness or even license to sin. They said if we are completely justified by faith alone there was no need to seek to live a holy life.

They said this doctrine was destructive to holiness and Christian conduct, that it destroyed any need for holiness or any motivation for good works.

Rome said we needed faith and good works to be saved. The commandments must be kept. After all didn't Jesus tell the rich young man he had to keep the commandments to be saved (Matthew 19:17)? And didn't Paul say God will judge every man according to his deeds (Romans 2:6)? And didn't James say "by works a man is justified, and not by faith only (James 2:24)?"

The Roman Catholic challenge of the sixteenth century has become the Mormon and Muslim challenge of the twenty century.

Those groups all tie our justification and redemption to some form of works. Faith must be added to or completed by works. So when we disconnect works from our salvation, when we say Christ has done it all, they ask then what's the point of any good works?

The Reformation swept aside the unbiblical errors that had crept into the church, but the Reformers also had to be very careful to state what the work of the Holy Spirit is in the life of the Christian. They had to take great care not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

***Belgic Confession Article 24*** is one of many examples of the Reformers answers:

**BC Art. 24** "Therefore, far from making people cold toward living in a pious and holy way, this justifying faith, quite to the contrary, so works within them that apart from it they will never do a thing out of love for God but only out of love for themselves and fear of being condemned.

"So then, it is impossible for this holy faith to be unfruitful in a human being, seeing that we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls "faith working through love," which leads a man to do by himself the works that God has commanded in his Word."

Instead of saying that the doctrine of justification makes us dismissive of a holy and righteous life, the opposite is actually true. The faith that justifies is the faith that also stirs up our desires for good works. Good works grow from the good root of faith.

The tree must be good before there can be good fruit. So justification comes before sanctification, but sanctification must follow. But it's impossible to separate good works from faith, they are two sides of the same coin, fruit follows from faith and proves it.

By their fruit you will know them.

### **What happens in sanctification?**

Sanctification is the special work of the Holy Spirit. It's a divine work of transformation and character change where the old man is made new, where we are conformed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, and where the fruit of the Spirit become more evident.

Whereas justification is a change of position and status and is a one time work, sanctification is a change of nature and is an on-going process. This is our double benefit.

In justification God deals with the guilt of our sin.

In sanctification the Holy Spirit deals with the lingering pollution of our sin.

In justification we are declared righteous.

In sanctification we are begun to be made righteous.

The faith that embraced Christ for our justification is the same faith that enlivens us toward sanctification/good works.

It's a time when we slowly agree more and more with God about our sin. God gives us desires we didn't have before. We begin to care about things we didn't used to care about. We have desires for worship, for holiness, for truth, for beauty, and goodness. For the things of God.

Sanctification is a cooperative effort involving us, but our part is a God-dependent effort.

**Philippians 4:13** I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

**II Corinthians 7:1** Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

**Philippians 3:12-14** Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

“To know God is to be changed by God” (John Calvin).

**The Spirit-flesh tension.**

As long as we have life on this earth our Adamic nature and instincts remain. We are constantly distracted and tempted and fall into behavior and thoughts that we hate. This tension frustrates us constantly.

This will be our battle until death. In the immortal words of Alexander Whyte, “It’s a sore fight to the end, laddie, it’s a sore fight to the end.”

Brothers and sisters, there is nothing fun or easy about being a Christian and becoming more Christ-like. It’s a battle, a fight to the death. There is an enemy dogging our every step.

Christianity is not just an easy-going lifestyle choice or a nicer way of living. It’s a long hard fight to the end. Three steps forward and two back. One sin is defeated and another appears in its place.

As in any life long war, there will be battles won and battles lost. There will be some most satisfying victories and some soul crushing defeats. But glory to God the war is won.

So we must encourage each other day after day to not grow weary in the fight or in well doing, but to press on in faith and hope.

### **Good Works.**

**BC Art. 24** “These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable to God, since they are all sanctified by his grace. Yet they do not count toward our justification-- for by faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do good works. Otherwise they could not be good, any more than the fruit of a tree could be good if the tree is not good in the first place.”

Even the best of our good works are stained by sin and selfishness and self-interest. Our righteousness is as dirty rags. God accepts them not because they are good but because He sanctifies them by His grace.

The reason for our good fruit is because of God, because He first made us into a good tree that could produce good fruit. Good works are the natural fruit of a good tree. It’s all His doing.

We are indebted to God for any good work that we do.

**Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for *it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Salvation is by grace and good works are by grace. Our ability to do good works is from God. What can we do and what do we have that is not enabled and from God? There is no room for boasting, all our good works are the work of the Lord and by His enabling grace.

**II Chronicles 29:14, 16** “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. ... 16 O Lord

our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own.

**Titus 2:11-14** For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Our good works are sanctified by God's grace. What is done out of a sincere love for God and out of a desire to show our gratitude to God, He accepts as good and pleasing to Him.

**II Thessalonians 1:11-12** To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, 12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Good works is holy effort on our part. Holiness is effort and striving. Not in our own strength, but in the Lord's strength. But after we acknowledge we can do nothing on our own and after we get down on our knees then we get up on our feet and strive against sin (Hebrews 12:4), resist the devil (James 4:7), and fight the good fight of faith (I Timothy 6:12).

Why do we do good works?

We do good works as a sign of our justification, a sign of our righteousness and our repentance.

We do good works as an expression of our faith.

We do good works as a sign of our gratitude for what God has done for us.

We do good works to glorify God and show that He is worthy of all our best efforts.

We do good works that they might be a light that shines for others to see and follow.

We do good works as an assurance to our own hearts that God is at work and that we are really becoming a good tree.

*We do good works because faith transforms our hearts* with new holy desires and affections.

*We do good works because faith transforms our wills* with new sincere and earnest desire to avoid evil and all that offends God and to obey His Word and all that He says without exception.

*We do good works because faith transforms our behavior* and external actions and associations with new direction, walking in the paths of righteousness and truth.

**Rewards in heaven.**

“Yet we do not wish to deny that God rewards good works-- but it is by his grace that he crowns his gifts.”

Our acceptance into heaven is based on Christ's work.  
Our rewards in heaven are based on our work.

What are rewards? Notice this remarkable phrase in Article 24.

This appears to repeat a saying of Augustine, "Rewards are a case of God's gracious crowning of His own gifts." Or, "When He rewards man He rewards only His own gifts."

As our good works are the result of God's good grace so our rewards are really a rewarding of God's gifts. There will be no boasting, only rejoicing.

### **Conclusion.**

God glorifies His grace by giving it to us and then glorifies it more by making every act of faith and obedience and gratitude dependent on it every day.

**I Peter 4:10** As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: **11** whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.