

When Good (Really) Works

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Preacher: Rev Andrew Coghill

[0 : 00] And I'll read now in St. Matthew's account of the gospel, chapter 5. The Sermon on the Mount, we'll read the first 20. St. Matthew, chapter 5, beginning at the first verse.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you, when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

[1 : 02] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand.

And it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

[2 : 11] For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Amen. And the Lord art his blessing to this reading of his own most holy word.

Let's again bow for a moment of prayer. Our loving Father, we ask thee now to bless thy word that is open before us. That thou would help us as we think upon it.

That thou would guide us, Lord, into thy truth. And as we, O Lord, consider that which thou hast written and revealed. We would enable thy spirit, Lord.

Or thou wouldst enable thy spirit to work in our hearts and through thy word and teaching. We know that no words spoken by men are ever going to enhance the pure word of God.

But we pray thee, Lord, to let thy truth go forth that it would not return to the void, but accomplish that which thou pleaseth and prosper in the thing whereto thou descendest. For this treasure is truly in earthen vessels.

[3 : 11] But we pray, Lord, that the treasure would be scattered forth nevertheless, and that we would receive all thy riches and thy grace. So help us now, we pray. Bless thy word to us and forgive our sin for Jesus' sake.

Amen. I'd like us to think for a while today, some of you will know the title of the sermon, has been When Good Really Works. And when we think of works that we are called upon to do, in what sense are they good?

In what sense do they do good? We read in Matthew 5, at verse 16, Jesus said, In other words, the purpose of any good works that we do, anything that we do, is to glorify God.

Now, that does not necessarily mean that everything good that you do will or indeed should be seen publicly. Some of it will and should be unseen.

If we go into chapter 6 of Matthew's account of the gospel, we see there when Jesus talks about doing alms or giving to the poor or the needy or others. He said, you know, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

[4 : 32] Do it quietly. Do it in secret. Don't sound a trumpet before you like the hypocrites do. When you pray, go into your closet, shut the door, and pray to your father in secret. And your father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

He says, when you fast, don't make it obvious to everyone, Oh, I'm really suffering, I'm really fasting, and so on. All the good that you do, or a lot of the good that you do, should be secret. It should be hidden in a sense.

But whilst we take care that we attend to the unseen requirements of our faith, you know, to prayer, to reading God's word, and to making sure we give and share, whether with missionaries or with the poor or with those who can't support themselves, you know, all these things in the same way as, for example, the athlete doesn't just turn up on the day at the stadium for the big sports event, not having done anything in preparation.

He or she has to slog away, you know, going that early morning run when it's still dark, it's freezing cold, and they'd rather be warm in their beds. They have to be working at the gym, they have to be doing all their slog away that nobody else sees, so that when they turn up for the big sports event in public, they don't get shamed and humiliated then, because they haven't attended to what's unseen.

And likewise, the scholar or the student, they have to work away in the library or at home, burning the midnight oil, doing the revision, their swatting, so have you, so that when it comes to the exam and the results that the results will be posted up on the notice board, everybody will see who has passed and who hasn't passed, that they won't be shamed with what is seen, because they haven't attended to what is unseen and what's in secret.

[6 : 12] And in the same way, we have to attend to what is unseen. What we should be doing that's unseen. Attending to our prayer life, attending to God's word, attending to our giving to and sharing with those who are in need, or to the Lord's cause, or to missionaries in other lands, or to the persecuted, or whatever it may be.

We don't sound a trumpet when we do that. But we have to attend to these things as well, so that our public, our outward and our inward lives are worthy of each other, and are honoring to the Lord. But if that is the purpose of good works, to glorify the Lord, which Jesus says it is, you know, let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven, then it follows that we cannot, by definition, do that in a state of unbelief.

We cannot glorify God by anything we do in a state of unbelief. For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Hebrews 11, verse 6. And likewise, in John 15, verses 4 and 5, Jesus says this, This means that it is impossible to do any good works, capital G, capital W, in a state of unbelief.

[7 : 55] A non-Christian cannot, by definition, do anything that would constitute good works in the sight of the Lord. Good works, in any case, are only those things which God has commanded in his word, and not the things that men have invented, or just decided of themselves, that this or that should be pleasing to the Lord.

And the most important thing in the entire Bible that God commands men and women to do is to repent and believe in his Son, Jesus Christ.

If we're not doing that, which to God is the most important thing of all, then he's not going to be impressed with anything else that we do.

Now, this fact is important because so many people build their hopes for any afterlife on a sense of having had, you know, and lived a good life, you know, not too bad.

I mean, done some good things in it, and as many would see it, having done very little harm, or at least rationalizing that the good in their life outweighs the bad.

[9 : 05] But the whole point is that without Christ, nothing we do is by definition good in the sight of God.

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, as Romans tells us, chapter 3, verse 23. And all our best efforts without Christ continue to be, as St. Augustine put it, mere splendid sins. Now, our church's confession of faith, which all office bearers sign up to, often gets criticized for spelling out this fact, as it says in chapter 16 and paragraph 7, works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands and of good use, both for themselves and others, yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the word, nor to a right end the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God.

And yet the neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing to God. Now, sometimes folk like to make out that this is some kind of catch-22 situation, you say damned if you do, and damned if you don't, no matter what you do.

But all it is saying is, firstly, that everything we do in a state of sin is by definition sinful. I'll say that again. Everything we do in a state of sin is by definition sinful.

[10:40] If I live in a mud bath, and roll about in the mud bath, and somebody beside the mud bath, on a decent piece of ground, sets out a table, and a chair, and nice clean stationery, and an envelope, and a pen, and says, would you come and write a letter for me, please just sit down at the table, and write a letter.

So I come out my mud bath, and I sit down at the table, and I pick up the nice white piece of paper, and a pen, and I start trying to write. Now, that stationery is going to be clarted with mud.

The desk is going to be clarted with mud. The chair is going to be clarted with mud. Not because I've deliberately tried to contaminate it, but because I am wallowing in a mud bath, and everything I touch and do will be contaminated by it.

It will be muddy. Likewise, the example I always use, if you are underwater, everything you do will be, by definition, wet. And if you take half a dozen towels with you down to the seabed, and you rub yourself with them, no end, whilst you're still down in the seabed, rub, rub, rub, you're not going to get dry.

No matter how much you rub yourself with any number of towels, whilst you are underwater, you're going to stay wet. By the same token, everything you do in a state of sin, submerged in that sin, is going to be sinful, because it's in a state of sin.

[11:59] Like muddiness, if you're in a mud bath. Like wet, if you're under the surface of the sea. It's all going to be in that same state. Even in a state of sin and unbelief, of course, some sins, and this is what the confession of faith was referring to, some things are still worse than others.

That stands to reason. Even in a state of unbelief, cruelty is still worse than kindness. And neglect is still worse than attentiveness. Adultery is still worse than faithfulness.

Reneging on bills that we're due to pay is worse than paying them promptly. And even for Christians, though, there is a danger that just doing these basic things might puff them up with the idea that they are good somehow.

But listen to what Jesus says on that kind of subject. You know, we think about what Jesus says in Luke chapter 6, verse 32. For if you love them which love you, what thank of you?

For sinners also love those that love them. And if you do good to them which do good to you, what thank of you? For sinners also do even the same. And if you lend to them of whom you hope to receive, what thank of you?

[13:12] For sinners also lend to sinners and hope to receive as much again. But love your enemies and do good and lend hoping for nothing again. And your reward will be great and you shall be the children of the highest.

For he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be therefore merciful as your father also. Is merciful.

And in Luke 17 at verse 10, he says, So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants. We have done that, which was our duty to do.

In other words, nobody can out good God. Nobody can say, well, actually, you know, God really owes me. He owes me heaven. He owes me salvation because I've been good.

Nobody can out good God. Nobody can make God their debtor by how much good they've done.

Rather, we are unprofitable servants. How much less then can we count as good works things which God has not himself commanded or required?

[14:20] We mentioned previously that good works are only those things which God has commanded in his word and not things that men have invented or just decided of themselves that this or that should be pleasing to the Lord.

In a former age, the church encouraged pilgrimages and veneration of relics or observing of certain holy days or saints' days, none of which had any biblical warrant.

Nowadays, of course, it's claimed that the church is acting in line with God's will if she is open and inclusive and tolerant enough to regard all religions as equal. And all sins as acceptable.

But that is not how God sees it in his word. We go back to an incident in the Old Testament, 1 Samuel chapter 15, where Saul has had a great victory.

The king Saul has had a great victory. But he was told by Samuel that everything in a particular bataria was to be destroyed. And we read here in 1 Samuel 15, But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the Lord by God in Gilgal.

[15:32] And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams.

And then a couple of verses later on, Saul acknowledges, well, fair enough, yes, you did command that. God did command that. He says, I have sinned for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and thy words because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.

But even where the intention may be sincere, even where somebody's humbly, genuinely trying to please the Lord, think about King David who in 2 Samuel 7, he sits in his own house and says, look, I'm living in this beautiful palace and the ark of God, it's living in tents, you know, in a tabernacle.

So see, now I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains and Nathan the prophet, he said to him, go do all that in thine heart for the Lord is with thee.

So far, so good. But the Lord appears that night to Nathan and he says, go and tell David, you know, in all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel, spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel whom I commanded to feed my people Israel, saying, why build ye me not a house of cedar?

[16:50] Now verse 12, when thy days be fulfilled and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee which shall proceed out of thy bowels and establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

You see, David had a good and devout and honorable idea. I want to do this for God. But God said, no, that's not what I want from you. That's not what I plan. I've got a son lined up of yours.

He'll do it, but you're not going to do it. You see, we think we know what God's will is, but it's only what the Lord reveals to us and makes known and commands that we can safely say is his will that we are obeying.

The danger of men deciding for themselves what is pleasing to God rather than having the humility to investigate what he says in his word is not a new problem.

Jesus says, Matthew 15, verses 8 and 9, this people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth and honoureth me with their lips. He's quoting Isaiah the prophet, but their heart is far from me, but in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

[18:04] See, so far we can establish what good works are most certainly not. They are not works done by the unbelieving. They are not works done by non-Christian people.

And even what is done by the Lord's people is not necessarily good works unless God in his word has said it. So what do we classify as good works?

What can we say they are? Well, Jesus has already given us some examples. Let's go back again to what he says in Luke chapter 6. We'll read from verse 27.

But I say unto you which hear, love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer the other also, also the other. Taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh thee, and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.

[19:05] And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. And at verse 35, again, love your enemies, do good and lend, hoping for nothing again. Be merciful as your father also is merciful.

Judge not and ye shall not be judged. Condemn not and ye shall not be condemned. Forgive and ye shall be forgiven. Give and it shall be given unto you. Good measure pressed down and shaken together and running over shall men give into your bosom.

For with the same measure that ye meet with all, it shall be measured to you again. This is part of the message, of course, of the gospel.

God is no man's debtor because God is no man's debtor. You will never be the poorer for living it out, for being prepared to swallow down some pride and forgive those who wronged you.

And all of us, all of us either are wronged by other people or are convinced that we have been wronged. If we think it, if we feel it, then to all intents and purposes, it has happened.

[20 : 13] But swallow it down and forgive because the Lord has forgiven you. Turn the other cheek because the Lord has waited patiently for you.

Give to those that ask and lend freely because you've been blessed with such abundance that God has given you much more than you need and he is going to keep on giving because God is no man's debtor.

You will never be the poorer for living out what he commands and it will mean a measure of self-giving, of sacrifice. But that is part of the Christian witness anyway, isn't it?

We could all have been having a long lie this Lord's Day morning but if we are the Lord's, then we want to be in his house or at the very least if we're self-isolating or anxious about restrictions, tuning in to the Lord's worship to make sure that we're honoring him at the right time on his day.

We could be doing our own thing in the middle of the week. There would be 101 other things or activities or meetings we could be at but if we are the Lord's, then prayer together with his people whether in his house in the days when we could physically gather or tuning in online to the midweek prayer meeting to make sure we give the Lord his worship, his due in the midst of our busy lives.

[21 : 30] This is part of our outward witness reflecting our inward priority. I'll say that again. It is part of our outward witness reflecting our inward priority or lack of it if we don't.

We could just keep ourselves to ourselves or spout gossip or slander if we felt like it but that isn't doing good, is it? not doing what God's word says anyway.

We look at what James says in his letter, chapter 1, verse 22, but be ye doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass.

For he beholdeth himself and goeth his way and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this same man shall be blessed in his deed.

If any man among you seem to be religious and bride love not his tongue but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

[22 : 54] This giving out of ourselves, this giving while seeking to be preserved from sin itself. This is part of what God commands.

It's for the benefit of others because we belong to Christ. It's part of our witness. It's partly what the New Testament means by that good old-fashioned authorised version word communicate which isn't to do with telephones and emails and so on but rather so we read in Hebrews chapter 13 verse 16 but to do good and to communicate forget not for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Now that's put perhaps slightly more understandably in the ESV where it says do not neglect to do good and to share what you have.

To share what you have. To communicate for with such sacrifices are pleasing to God. It is a sacrifice. It is a giving out of ourselves to those in greater need.

What Paul says when he writes to the Philippians in chapter 4 verse 14 it says notwithstanding you have well done that you did communicate with my affliction and again the ESV has it yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.

[24 : 11] Communicate with my affliction share my trouble and again there is this sense that the Lord gives us of his bounty precisely because he wants us to be able to share it out so that we can give it out and share it.

Again 1 Timothy chapter 6 verse 17 charge them that are rich in this world that they be not high minded nor trust in uncertain riches but in the living God who giveth us richly all things to enjoy that they do good that they be rich in good works ready to distribute willing to communicate laying up in

store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come that they may lay hold on eternal life.

We've been given so much so that we can share with others so that we can live it out so that we can do good in a state of faith and so glorify the Lord which is in heaven and we have been given much I mean for most Christians in the world they would look at us and think my goodness they are rich I mean how did you come to church today?

Probably came in a car. Most Christians in the world probably couldn't imagine owning a car. Many of us are maybe two car households perhaps. I can remember when we first got married feeling guilty that Devin and I were actually going to buy a microwave because my parents never had a microwave and it was considered something really sort of high tech and sort of really rich if you had a microwave.

I can remember feeling guilty when we got our first dishwasher because we never had a dishwasher when I was growing up you did it all by hand and it was just a symptom of kind of indulgent richness but now of course it's often second nature in many houses.

[26 : 02] Nowadays you build a new house you automatically leave a space for the dishwasher for the appliances. You expect there to be a microwave you expect there to be all these things because we expect to be at a level of richness that a previous generation could only dream about.

Why have you been given all these good things? So that we can be a benefit to others so that we can give out and share more of ourselves so that the Lord has blessed us given us all these things richly to enjoy.

He doesn't want you to feel guilty about having them but he wants you to do good with them. He wants you to put them at the service of the Lord. If it frees up time having labor saving devices what are you doing with the time?

Is the time being given to the Lord? Is it being given to the service of others? Is it being given to living out the gospel? Living out your life for Christ because you can justify all these things if they're at the Lord's disposal and all of our lives should be at the Lord's disposal.

That's how we glorify the Lord. This generosity with his own abundance is what the Lord himself is like and he wants his children to be like him.

[27 : 12] Going back to the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5 verses 44 and 45. But I say unto you love your enemies bless them that curse you do good to them that hate you pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven for he maketh his son to rise on the evil and the good and sendeth rain on the just or on the unjust.

God doesn't just do good to those who love him he does good to all and although we can only ever do good as the children of God it doesn't mean that we only do good to the children of God.

It's part of our witness. The living out the sharing the doing good the witnessing for Christ the public witness and the private devotion because his children being like their father shows and proves to the world that they really are truly his and that pleases him it honours him it glorifies him you can imagine a parent being chuffed to bits if their child does well and they seem to be a chip off the old block and we might feel a wee bit of pride well God I suppose pride isn't a sin for the Lord but God is if not proud God delights in his children being like him so if you are truly his you have so much cause for thankfulness so much reason to rejoice and to exercise your faith in practical merciful outworkings of witness in your love for him showing that love for him by your public witness and worship and in your love for others that which is seen and that which may be unseen remember what Jesus said about the two greatest commandments you know in Mark 12 we read verse 29 Jesus said the first of all the commandments is hear O Israel the Lord our God is one Lord and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength this is the first commandment and the second is like namely this thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself there is none commandment greater than these or as Matthew's account has it on these two hang all the law and the prophets this light which living out the gospel shows this light was meant to shine Christians are meant to be doing good and it will inevitably be seen and be known about without trumpets without broadcasting without boasting it will out because if a house is dark but there is a light in a room or even outside shining in even through a shut door it shines through the cracks shines through the crack under the door shines through the crack in the curtains if there is light in the midst of darkness you can't disguise the fact there is light it's always going to eek out creep out through a little crack through a little crevice somewhere the light will shine out

because that's what it does it will crack every vent into the darkness and lightens it a little and the more the door or the curtains are opened the more the light comes in or floods out as the case may be that is part of why

Christians are in the world Jesus said going back to the previous verse to the one we're taking as our text ye are the light of the world a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel a basket but on a candlestick and it giveth light unto all that are in the house that is part of how we show whose children we are and who our father is and when we do it he is glorified that is what good works are that is when good really does work and that is what they are for let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven let us pray come to heaven let us pray that is what it is

[31 : 51] I lean I like my mother I'm I think it is the power that is what does it you said I like I wish