

God's Workmanship

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 April 2021

Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] And sometimes that means that God, as it were, digs his thumbs into your life. And it hurts. And it's not easy to be under his manipulative skill. And even when we know that sometimes God knows what he's doing, and we accept that these things are necessary, as Ewing mentioned in prayer, sometimes we complain about things as if we knew better than God, as if we were somehow not satisfied.

And sometimes, indeed, that exactly is how it is, that we would rather things wear the other way about. And that's, of course, understandable. When things enter into your life that you had not planned, that you would rather not be there if you were left in charge of your own life. Where there are so many sharp piercings into your life. That you know is under the providential sovereign hand of God.

It's the potter that's doing the work. But each of us knows that sometimes we would rather that it were otherwise. That it didn't hurt quite as much.

[1 : 11] As C.S. Lewis said when he lost his beloved wife, Why did nobody tell me that grief could be so sore, so hard, so difficult? That's how it is with various aspects of our experience in life.

And it brings us back, really, to this great image and to this great emphasis by Paul. That we are his workmanship. God is still working on your life.

And in your life, you are still on the potter's wheel. You'll be on the potter's wheel until you leave this world. And so will I. And whatever he's doing in your life, even if it's beyond our full understanding. And even if it's something that really would rather it wasn't quite as hurtful. When you come back here and see that we are his workmanship. Well, he is the potter.

We are the clay. The advantage is ours. The wisdom is his. And as we see the skill with which he sets about creating us in Christ Jesus is to be so admired, though at times difficult to understand.

[2 : 23] But there's also, of course, the power as you come back to Genesis again. We said this verse reminds us of Genesis. Genesis again reminds us that not only did God create us in his image and form us from the dust of the earth, he also breathed into man the breath of life.

And man became a living soul. The power to animate us, the power to bring us to spiritual life, to be living creatures above anything else that God had made, came from his own breath.

It came from the power with which he said, let there be light and there was light. That's the same power that's brought spiritual life into our very being as human beings.

And in verse 5 of this very chapter, you can see how Paul puts it there. Even when we were dead in our trespasses, he made us alive with Christ.

By grace you are saved. He brought us to life. He quickened us is the old word. And it's really just exactly what it's saying there, beginning with something that is dead. Although here, of course, is dead in trespasses and sins.

[3 : 36] Dead in rebellion against God. Dead in lostness. Dead in sinful activity. That's what God finds, first of all, where he begins the work of salvation in us.

And what he says here is the power that's created that, that's made us from that into a new creation. And it's so important for our own, not just for our understanding, but for our comfort and for our assurance that we go back to this particular point, to this foundational beginning of things in our experience.

Because what we tend to do, I tend to do, I'm sure you do as well, is to look at the more experiential matters of it, to begin, as it were, looking at our situation without going all the way back to being God's workmanship and the workmanship of God and all that that entails and all that that means.

And we begin looking at what a Christian is from other points of view, rather than to start at the beginning. Why are you a Christian? I'm not asking the question of myself or yourself.

Why in terms of the purpose of your life? I'm asking why in terms of how did it come to be? You're a Christian not because you follow a set of rules, though that may be part of it.

[5 : 02] You're a Christian not because you know so much of the Bible and are able to follow it and appreciate it. You're a Christian not because you love to come to church and join with others in the worship of God.

You're a Christian not because you're able to pray, because you love fellowship with other people. You are a Christian, you are a believer, because you are God's workmanship. Because that's where it begins.

And that's where the power and the energy comes from, from the hand of God to take what is dead and bring it to life, to quicken it, to make us alive by his great power.

And that's why you need to come back to that. And I need to come back to that so, so often. The devil will always tempt you. Go away from your foundational things. Look at the things just of your own experience or your feelings or the things that are happening to you in your life as you find your life, whether it's in your work or in your home or in your own particular spiritual makeup or experience.

The devil will want you to stop at these things and not really to go back to the foundational matters, and especially to the fact that the believer, the Christian, is God's workmanship.

[6 : 14] He knows what he's doing. He has the design. And he has a different way with regard to each of us as we interact with each other. What God is doing in my life is the same, in a sense, as he's doing in every other Christian life.

But he's not necessarily going about it the same way. It won't be the same experience, the same providences. So you always have to come back to the workmanship and to who is actually doing this and how you've come to be where you are as a new creation.

And as we said, the locus is there. There's the skill and there's the power, but there's the locus. I'm just mentioning it on the way past, but it's such a huge subject. Created, he said, in Christ Jesus for good works.

That's the locus. That's the sphere of God's activity. Why is that? Because Christ is central to the plan of God, to God's plan of salvation. Christ is central to the people of God in their election, in Christ.

As Ephesians 1 put it, we are actually chosen in him, verse 4, before the foundation of the world. We're chosen in him. We're not chosen by God.

[7 : 25] And then at a later stage, we're put in Christ. We're chosen in him. He is central to God's election. And you follow that through in the teaching of scripture, right through to the work of Jesus himself.

Jesus didn't come into the world detached from his people. He didn't come to die on the cross, detached from his people. He didn't come to rise from the dead in his resurrection, detached from the people.

He came to do all of these things and he accomplished all of these things in union with his people. As Paul tells us in the Roman epistle, that we are buried with him in a death like his, so we will be raised with him in a resurrection like his.

You can never cut the tie between God and his people, not even back into eternity. What a great comfort there is in that. It cannot but come to be that we are a new creation when it begins back there in the plan of God.

And when in the plan of God, it is a plan of God in Christ. You can go to 2 Corinthians and you have the same emphasis there. In chapter 5, God was reconciling all things in Christ, reconciling us to himself.

[8 : 48] So the in Christ part of it is certainly important, though we're going across it very quickly. So there's the first thing, we are God's workmanship. And aren't you thankful tonight that that's how it is?

That you've been delivered from the idea that you can somehow please God by your own efforts, by your own obedience, by the level to which you are able to obey the commandments of God, fulfill the promises of God.

No, all of that, Paul says, is nothing to do with how our salvation has been obtained or what lies at the very heart of our redemption in Christ. We are his workmanship.

But notice, you see, secondly, we are his workmanship, but we are also workers for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So the first part of the verse really leads inseparably to the second one, where his workmanship created in Christ Jesus, but it's created for good works.

[9 : 58] It's impossible to think of being a new creation in Christ without the good works following as it is in this in this verse itself. Now, you see, it's not good works leading to grace, but it's vice versa, except it's a bit more than that.

It's not just emphasizing for us that good works don't lead to grace, and that it's actually grace that leads to good works. What he's really saying is a bit more than that.

He's saying that these good works are actually inseparable from a Christian life. See, he's not just saying God saves us, and then somewhere along the line, he tacks on or we tack on good works. What he's saying is that these good works are inevitably the outcome of God's workmanship, and therefore they belong inherently. They belong as an inseparable element of the new life that you have in Christ.

You cannot think of that new life without it including, in a very central way, these good works. What are these good works? Well, you go to chapter 4 and verse 24, that is connected to what we're looking at here in chapter 2, chapter 4 and verse 24, where you find the apostle talking again about putting off the old self, putting on the new self, and he says then to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God, which is very similar to chapter 2, verse 10, but then he says in true righteousness and holiness.

[11 : 45] In other words, the new creation that we are in Christ, the product of God's workmanship, inevitably involves this life of righteousness and holiness.

Because we tend, don't we, to think of good works, sometimes similar to the way the world thinks of good works, as doing good deeds, being kind to other people, engaged in lots of charitable activities, charitable in a sense, especially of doing things that help people in their lives and being generous with that.

And of course, that is very much part of a Christian life and a Christian way of life. But what Paul is actually saying is good works is actually really more the summary of the entire Christian life.

It's good works in what you do in your relationship with God, as well as with your fellow Christians, as well as with the world, and with the good works in terms of works of charity that you engage in. It sums really, it sums up this phrase in chapter 4, righteousness and holiness. That's really essentially what the good works entailed.

[13 : 03] We have been created in Christ Jesus as the workmanship of God for good works. See, if you just confine it to doing good to others, then there'll be certain parts or sections of your life as a Christian that won't be taken into that description of good works because if you're just confining it to the good things you do to other people, well, the times that you're not doing that, you're not involved in good works.

But that's what Paul is denying here. That's not what Paul is saying. What he's saying is we are created for good works, for a life of righteousness and holiness. All that is in that work of that life of righteousness and holiness, you could see that's what we've been created for.

We are his workmanship to that end. And that's reinforced now by the final part of the verse which we'll finish with, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Literally, that means God arranged these good works beforehand. So on the one hand, it's certainly saying that this is a matter of God's sovereign appointment, God's sovereign ordination, if you like, of good works to be what is true of a Christian life, of the workmanship that he himself brings about. But it means really that these good works are actually made ready for us. In other words, something like God has already decided what these good works are.

[14 : 39] He doesn't save you and then say, now you go and decide what good works you want to do. What Paul is actually saying is God saves us and he's already decided what the good works are.

And of course, there'll be a variety in terms of the practical details of one Christian life from another, but not in terms of the scope or the meaning of good works.

Because what Paul is really saying, if we just labor the point a little bit, is that as God has designed and decided what good works are and that they are more than just works of good deeds that you do to fellow human beings.

It's an integral element of a Christian life, of the new life you have in Christ. And that's all been arranged before you ever came to do any good works.

Because they are also part of the fabric of what you are in Christ. they don't contribute towards your justification.

[15 : 43] They don't contribute towards you becoming to be the workmanship of God. It's something that actually flows from that. We are created for these good works.

And you see the word walk there. He has prepared these for us that we should walk in them. And really, that's really, again, a demonstration that is far more than just doing good deeds to others though that's included.

If you're walking in something, then it describes a course of life. A course of behavior. And not just a course of life, but a constant, habitual course of life.

Because it's a very deliberate contrast, really, with what you find at the beginning of the chapter. Look at verse 2. There he is saying, you were dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

And you find the same in chapter 4 and at verse 17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their mind and so on.

[16 : 55] So he's talking there of two contrasting courses of human life. The one that walks in the course of this world following the prince of the power of the air, that's the powers of darkness, the workings of sin, behind which is the malignant power of Satan.

And the contrast is this one. You're created in Christ Jesus for good works which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in. It's all ready to walk into, if you like, these good works.

When you come to be in Christ, when you come to have your life renewed by God, you're, as it were, being ushered by God into the kind of lifestyle that he has from all eternity placed there at your disposal.

He has already put it there as something that is already arranged and indeed made ready for us.

That, of course, doesn't, that doesn't actually mean that we are not responsible for what we do.

That is just simply an automatic switch that God puts, switches on when you become a Christian and off you go. And it's just straight, a straight way without any deviation to heaven.

[18 : 17] That is not how it is, of course. But the essence of this new life is this life of good works walking in the course that God has prepared for us to demonstrate that we are indeed his and to give thanks that he has set us on that course.

Now, tonight, you and I may be saying of ourselves, I feel very different to that. And maybe you're feeling many times when you go to the word of God and you find these kind of descriptions by the apostle or whoever, you may say sometimes, well, I just keep coming so far short of that.

I just don't find myself matching up or fitting in with these descriptions. Walking a life of righteousness and holiness and sometimes you might say, I just feel so unholy and I find so much in my life that I know is still sinful and I find myself so slow to learn and I find myself so prone to not depending upon God and just seeking to just almost dismiss the idea from my mind that I should accept his will instead of my own.

I came across some time ago when I was preparing something for the children during lockdown when we were doing that little video, Kenny and myself in the church, and I came across, I can't remember exactly where I found it, but it's a Japanese practice, a Japanese skill called kintsukuroi, and kintsukuroi means literally mended with gold.

It's a Japanese skill, it takes quite a long time apparently to develop it, but what is about is this, just imagine that you have a lovely, large, shining, black vase or bowl, and one of these days as you're lifting it up and you're going to just give it a little polish, it falls and it smashes into lots of pieces.

[20 : 25] Well, kintsukuroi is taking those pieces and using a substance to which powdered gold has been added so that that forms a kind of glue between the pieces that are broken and it's put together in such a way, that far from where the joints are being hidden, sometimes you get that on repair shop and so on, but this Japanese skill leaves the veins of gold sometimes very prominent and if it's a dark object like a black vase, it's very obvious.

These veins of gold, you can see them then as the vase has been mended and the thinking behind it, there's a philosophy behind it, I think, which in a Japanese way of thinking, which says that actually is more beautiful than it was to begin with because the mending, the gold seams

themselves come to form part of the complete renewed object.

It's not something that has spoiled it, it's something that has enhanced it, something that now makes it even more valuable and more meaningful and more precious.

And when you look at it, your eye is actually drawn not to the black shiny surface, but to the beautiful veins of gold by which they've been rejoined together.

And it is a work of art, a work of beauty, a work of meaning. And I think you can take that really into what the Bible says about being created in Christ Jesus, our recreation in him, as it were, and being the workmanship of God.

[22 : 07] Because what God finds really is a life that's smashed by sin. That's what your life and my life is like. As fallen, sinful human beings, we're in pieces.

goodness. And these pieces God takes and he renews us. I know the imagery isn't in every way. It doesn't actually quite capture everything that's in our renewal, of course.

But just keep in mind that kintsukuroi practice. God takes the broken lives that we are. And he doesn't just put them together in some old way.

He puts them together with the gold of his grace, the gold of his spirit, the gold of his own skill, the gold of being in Christ, the gold of Jesus being united to him, and therefore that coming to be the locus of a recreation.

So tonight, don't be tempted by your own heart, or by the devil, to concentrate on what you might say are the jagged edges of your life.

[23 : 22] Go more to the gold of God's grace by which you've been mended. Go to the workmanship of God that's still at work polishing and enhancing even what is already begun.

Because, as you know, the day is coming when God's people will be displayed when in the show room of heaven, all that he has put together by of grace will be displayed there for all to see, and there will be no rejects, and there will be no seconds.

They will all be perfect, and towards that perfection belongs what he's doing in your life tonight. May God bless these thoughts on his word to us.