

A Doing Community

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times Sermon 5

Ephesians 2:1-10

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A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins **2** 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— **3** among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. **4** But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, **5** even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— **6** and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. **8** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9** not a result of works, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
(Ephesians 2:1-10 ESV)

In the previous sermon, we considered one habit of the Christian community: Christians are, as we saw, a *thinking community*. But we can't stop there. Thinking, in many cases, is a means to another end; it is preparation for doing. This week we look at how Christians turn from thinking about the world to engaging it, acting within it; in this sermon, we'll note that we are a *doing community*.

Ephesians 2:10 introduces us to this subject: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). This verse comes at the end of a paragraph, and we'll consider below that larger flow of thought. Seizing our attention, however, is this phrase "good works", and the fact that we are told God has prepared them for us beforehand, to walk in. Here is the Biblical entry point for our sermon: we are called to walk in good works. We need to explore what this means. This is a complex topic—Christian doing of good works—and it will help to begin by clearing some space.

We need to be able to recognize and respect differences. There are differences in life stage and calling, for example, between the 23-year-old activist and the 43-year-old parent. There are differences in views of applied wisdom between shared desires for the common good, and different opinions on the methods to achieve it. Historically, there were differences in social contexts between

good works in Rome of AD 60, when Nero was Emperor and hated Christians; there were differences in the Rome of AD 380 when Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Also, to note is an important distinction between the *doing* of the institutional church and the *doing* of individual Christians. The two are of course intimately related, like rivers and side streams are related to an original spring or headwater. But there is nuance to be noted.

- *The institutional church*, the gathered people of God, can do things individual Christians cannot, such as celebrate the Lord's Supper, baptize and confirm members, and enact Church discipline.
- *The individual Christian*, however, can do things the institutional church cannot: the most obvious and relevant example would be that while the local church should not affiliate with a political party, and cannot itself vote, individual Christians can and should.

This means that when it comes to doing good works, we need to see a distinction and nuance between what the individual Christian may be called to do in their individual lives, and what the local, institutional church, is called to do in its gathered, communal life. In this sermon, I am mainly concerned with the individual Christian's good works. In a later sermon titled "An Outwardly Loving Community", we will consider the role of the gathered body in terms of doing good works.

However, the topic of good works can often be misapplied.

1. Works Righteousness: Sometimes Christians engage in doing good works, in order to earn God's favor. As we'll see in our passage, however, this is not at all the reason we do them. This leads to what's called "works righteousness," where we are constantly trying to be good and do good so that God will save us.
2. No Works Necessary: The opposite extreme is when, because God accepts us by grace, we swear off good works altogether and live like there is no need to do anything. But James says, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17), and when Christians end up in this camp, they appear lethargic and totally indifferent to the needs of the world around them.

3. Our Works Save the World: Yet another way works can go wrong is when we begin to think that it is by our efforts that the world will ultimately be put to right. But the world is not ours to save; it is God's to save.

Tyler Wigg-Stevenson came out of college a passionate activist; he wanted to do good. He burnt out in his efforts or fell into what he calls "cause fatigue". But this led to reflection, which led him to write his book, *The World is Not Ours to Save: Finding Freedom to Do Good*. In the book, he calls Christians to do good, but reminds us that "we are not the hero of the story", God is. And our ability to do good "depends on our ability to confront our particular weaknesses." He explains that we cannot engage issues, such as poverty for example, "in a way that presupposes that, or at least acts as if, the human condition can be fixed through human effort—that the world is ours to save."¹

We need to find the right way, the right posture and practice, for doing good works. I believe a close look at Ephesians 2:10 can shed some light on these matters—on the question of Christian *doing*.

I. God's *Done* Precedes Our *Do*

The first principle is that God's doing—what God has *already done*—precedes all our doing. Paul makes the point by how he strategically sets up verse 10, by what he says in verses 8-9.

Here, Paul explains the basics of the Gospel of grace: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) Paul is underscoring that God has *done* something for the Christian that is *not* a result of their works. By sending His son to die for their sins, God has saved them *by grace*, and this is not due to their works.

Immediately after stating that our works do not earn us salvation, he then states that we still do have work to do: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). The *motive* for working is changed.

A child obeys, not to earn the right to be part of the family, but because they already are—not to earn love, but because they are loved. Here is the first principle to remember anytime to set out to do

something for God: you are accepted by Him, loved by Him, and belong to Him already, and because of what He has done for you in Christ. Therefore, what you do for God is not the grounds for being accepted by Him. This changes the whole atmosphere of Christian doing.²

II. Our *Doing* Depends on God

Form matters when lifting weights. High school football coaches will tell you this. When young players come into training camp, they often get hurt in the weight room. The reason is not because they lack strength or desire, but because they have bad form. They bend too far forward with the squat bar, and they hurt their knees. They don't know how to tighten their core when doing rows, and they hurt their back.

Form matters when you're doing work for God.

If you're like me, you tend to go about your work often with bad form. You feel God has called you to the work you do—from raising kids to practicing medicine to coaching soccer, but you end up bearing the weight of it all on your own shoulders. And this threatens to crush you at times.

Notice that in verse 10 it is the action and purpose of God that surrounds the good works we do: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Here, God does the real weight bearing.

1. God bears the weight of ultimate responsibility

God takes responsibility for forming and fitting us to the task. The passage explains, "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." **This means that God is at work upon you and within you, and for the purpose of equipping you for the task.** In this sense, there is an active passivity to Christian good works. We work with all our might, but rest in the fact that God is at work within us, to will and to do His good pleasure.

God claims our work as His work—He is at work through you. Notice that these works are "good works, prepared by God beforehand" for us. The good works lying before us are not merely part of our plans; rather, they are part of God's eternal story, His ultimate purposes. God is working *through you* to accomplish His good works.

2. God bears the weight of the final analysis of success

If our works are prepared beforehand by God, then they are for the purpose of His ultimate plans, and therefore, we leave to Him the weight of what success looks like. God bears the weight to ultimate responsibility and ultimate determination of success.

Working our hardest, we rest in His hands.

Over a year ago this church held a service on May 26, 2019, that it hadn't done for 40 years. Our long-time leader, John Yates, was retiring, which meant officially being released of his responsibility as rector of this body. I was stepping in; the first new head pastor in 40 years. The shoes to fill seemed huge. The service was held at Bishop O'Connell auditorium, and I stood in the back moments before it began. I felt like I was going to throw up. I was suddenly terrified. How could I ever bear the weight of the yoke that John was getting out from under, and which would subsequently be put on me?

It all came down to form. Either I would misunderstand the work of leading a church as ultimately done in my strength, or instead reliant upon God's. Either I would see the responsibility for this church's welfare as ultimately mine, or I would recognize that this was God's people and His ultimate responsibility. Either I would work with my own view of success in mind; or I would decide that success meant faithfulness to God and service to His people, for as long as He called me, and for whatever fruit He saw fit to give. Whatever work God has called you to—from rearing kids, to practicing law, to leading a company. Consider your form.

Are you bearing the weight of ultimate responsibility, success on your shoulders? Or are you letting God bear the heavier end of the yoke?

Paul models the right form for us when he speaks of his own calling to do works for God this way:

17 In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. **18** For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed (Romans 15:17-18).

Work with all your might, knowing that it is God and Christ at work through you, and that is God who will ultimately determine the results.

III. Our *Doing* is Assigned by God

Another principle, our *doing* is handpicked by God. This passage is very personal; it is not saying we are all called to be workers, but that we have been created in Christ “for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). And these works are not only marvelous but also *mundane*.

As I was studying Paul’s thought, trying to figure out more specifically what he might have included as “good works”, I stumbled across this passage in 1 Timothy. In this passage, Paul is describing which widows should be allotted for in the distribution of funds from the church, making sure no one takes advantage of anyone. But in doing so, he gives us a window into some of the things he means by good works:

9 Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, **10** and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. (1 Timothy 5:9-10)

Everything from Paul’s seemingly marvelous calling to the good work of world evangelization, to the calling of a widow to the good work of hosting someone for a meal, in God’s eyes, *matters*. When you feel that the labor before you is personal, not meaningless, that it is something God has prepared beforehand for you to walk in, it changes the feeling. Life as it confronts us with our own unique, daily portion of duty and need for endurance and discipline—this is precisely the arena where the good works lie before us for the doing.

IV. Do in Light of God’s Story, Not Culture’s Tale

Lastly, we need to *do* in light of God’s story, not culture’s tale. Lesslie Newbigin was a British missionary to India. He thought deeply about the role of Christian life and the need to engage in good works for the world around us. Newbigin came to see how important it was that we engaged in life and work by looking through the right lens. In his book, *The Gospel in Pluralistic Society*, he writes,

The world looks [the way it does to us] because these are the lenses through which it is seen. The lenses themselves are not seen. We do not look at them but see through them... [T]he Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look at, but for us to look through.”³

I want to conclude by looking through the lens of the biblical story, and noting a few ways it focuses our sight, and thus orients us for Christian doing. *How does seeing through the biblical story shape how we engage, how we approach doing good works?*

1. Exiles are never quite at home

The Bible says Christians are “exiles” (1 Peter 2:11), our “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:10), and “were we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14). So while we work to make our house and world more and more like home, we must accept that in a deep way, we will never feel totally at home here.

This does not mean we don’t care about our culture and world. It does mean, however, that we exert influence often as outsiders. And it means that we are often broken-hearted when we feel how “off” the world is, how hard so many have it, and how many reject the Gospel.

2. You will be loved and hated

In Matthew 5, Jesus says we are to be the salt and light of the world. Surely meaning a good thing, a preserving and enlightening presence. Then in Acts, as the story unfolds, riots, fighting and persecution breaks out when Christianity grows, and Christians are said “to be turning the world upside down” (Acts 17).

Sometimes the world will love you and give you a seat at the table by digging wells in arid places, aiding in food distribution during a pandemic, and decrying the evils of racism and all forms of human exploitation. However, when Christian good works require speaking against the de-godding of education, the horrors of abortion, and the rejection of our Creator’s design and purpose for sex and gender, then the world will hate you. Christianity is good for the world, and at the same time, destabilizing to its idolatrous ways. Christians called to do good deeds, to expand the common good, can never reduce a good deed in the world with a good response from the world.

3. *Being* and *doing* go together in God’s view of things

This not only reminds us of Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees as whitewashed tombs--doing good on the outside but on the inside being full of the bones of the dead (Matthew 23:27-28). But also, it reminds us that the most important facet of our doing lies in our resting in God. Sometimes the best thing we can do is quietly rest in the care of God. And, like a tree, God will produce fruit through us in season; but some seasons are seasons for primarily resting in Him.

4. Service, not success

Our doing is aimed at serving God and serving others. Our doing is not aimed strictly at any human standard of success—although we surely want to see good results from good efforts. However, success for the Christian is faithfulness, faithfulness to God, and to doing one’s best, albeit always imperfectly, for God and others.

To close, I want you to feel the dignity and joy in being a servant of a Good God. There is a great pleasure in offering to God your best efforts, your good works, and leaving the results in His hands. Tyler Wigg-Stevens, the young activist who nearly burned out in this attempt to do good, said the turning point for him, when it came to Christian Doing, was when he heard the voice of the Lord speak to him. And it said:

The World is not yours, not to save or to damn. Only serve the one whose it is.⁴

Endnotes

1. Tyler Wigg Stevenson, *The World Is Not Ours to Save: Finding the Freedom to Do Good* (InterVarsity Press, 2013), p. 12.
2. Leslie Newbigin, “Rather than hoping to be forgiven because of my good deeds, I am in the joyful position of being able to do good deeds because I know I am forgiven. I will therefore give myself as a sort of Christ to my neighbor, as Christ has given himself to me” (Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbiggin: A Theological Life*, 37).
3. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK Classics, 2014), p. 38.
4. Tyler Wigg Stevenson, *The World Is Not Ours to Save: Finding the Freedom to Do Good* (InterVarsity Press, 2013), p. 18.