

The Necessity of Works

*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.
James 2:18*

Something seems to be missing

In the musical “Fiddler on the Roof,” Tevye sings of his longing to be a rich man. But as the song progresses, we learn his deeper desire: time to spend with the other men in his village, discussing the sacred texts of their faith. Wistfully he sighs, “That would be the sweetest thing of all.”

Today’s Christian believers have access to more godly instruction, more elaborate worship environments, more Bible translations and customized study helps, more global fellowship and more freedom to interact with one another concerning all aspects of our faith than believers in any other generation. It might seem that we would be soaring spiritually, in love with God and passionate in our commitment to seeing His kingdom come to earth “as it is in heaven.”

Instead, much of our passion seems directed elsewhere, often leaving only the stale crusts of our attention and energies for matters of faith. While there are of course a number of factors contributing to this condition, I would like to focus on one which I think receives relatively little attention these days. I would like to examine the scriptural perspective on the necessity of works.

The wrong role of works

If you ask the average Christian what his theology of works might be, chances are he’ll assure you that he believes salvation comes by grace alone, through faith, “not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:9). He may also be able to tell you that our ongoing perfection is also a matter of God’s grace. “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:2,3).

If he understands these two truths, he understands the essence and glory of the gospel of Christ. We are brought into the kingdom by His grace alone, and we are further made holy only as He works His nature into ours. Any variation of Christianity that retains components of the “works of the law” as being essential for either salvation or sanctification tragically dilutes the power of the shed blood of Christ and the sufficiency of His indwelling Spirit.

Thus when I speak of the necessity of works, I am not replacing what God alone does with anything that we might do or even attempt to do.

Is there still a need for works?

Anyone who reads New Testament instructions carefully will know that there are a great many passages that talk about works—not just the works God does, but also works He expects us to do. It

is my suspicion that in our care not to steal credit from God for what He has done, we may have unintentionally backed away from those things He specifically left on *our* “to-do” list.

If I’m right, it would seem important to look more closely at what the Bible actually teaches about works. Are there several kinds of works? How are a believer’s works different from the works of a non-believer? What is the purpose for working? What are the consequences if we don’t work?

For starters, Scripture reveals that works are a primary reason we have been created. After clarifying that we are saved only by grace, Paul goes on to tell the Ephesians, “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). It would seem that our personal activity in the kingdom of God on earth is neither optional nor an afterthought.

What these works are not

What kind of works are we to do? To answer this very important question, let us first eliminate two types of work that God is *not* referring to.

The first are the works mentioned in Galatians 3, that is, the works of the law. These were the ritual activities established in the Old Testament, designed to build into God’s people an awareness of the price of their sinfulness. For generations worshippers had practiced (more or less faithfully) a number of elaborate procedures, including sacrifices, feasts, cleansings and other deliberately symbolic requirements that foreshadowed the redemption of Christ.

Nevertheless, we must understand that any continuation of these beyond Calvary now blasphemes the sufficiency of His death and resurrection.

But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God....For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified (Hebrews 10:12,14).

To be sure, centuries of habit were hard to break. The conversation Paul was having with the Galatians specifically concerned the ritual of circumcision, which the Jews were insisting had to be retained as part of a believer’s entry into God’s family. Paul warned them (in no uncertain terms), “And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law” (Galatians 5:3). In other words, Christ’s sacrifice had severed history into two non-overlapping pieces. One either lives under the law, or else he lives under grace.

The second kind of works that are not included in the works God prepared specifically for believers are those that are common to man. Adam and Eve were given clear tasks: he was to till the ground, she was to bear children. These were their assignments before the Fall; they simply became far more difficult and painful thereafter.

There are several passages in Scripture that indicate that such common labors, while necessary in and of themselves, are not the particular works God calls His church to perform. For example, Paul admonishes Timothy that anyone who did not provide for his own family, particularly those in his

own house, was “worse than an infidel” (I Timothy 5:8). In other words, even the infidels earned a living. In a letter to the Thessalonians he says bluntly, “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). These labors are simply an integral part of our human existence, and will be rewarded as such.

But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing (1 Thessalonians 4:10-12).

Our calling to good works

We can now move on to a consideration of the special works God has prepared—them for us and us for them. At first glance, these works may look a lot like works that might also be done by an unbeliever. James gives the following example.

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” (James 2:15,16).

But Jesus Himself drew an important line of distinction between the service that would be offered by an unbeliever and what He expected from His followers.

But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to sinners to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return (Luke 6:32-35).

Here we can begin to see that what is required of us goes beyond natural human labor prompted by natural human goodness. Paul echoes this in 1 Corinthians 13:3.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

He describes this love as completely unselfish, ever patient, and absolutely humble—a love that can only be borne of God’s Spirit in ours.

How can this be?

Perhaps by now you are beginning to understand that there is far more to the matter of Christian “good works” than merely working more diligently. God calls us to a standard of service that is humanly impossible. In Matthew 5:16, Christ tells us to “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” These must be supernatural works, clearly manifesting God’s power on earth.

How can we ever be able to do such works? The key, as James explains, lies in the intimate connection between works and faith. Just as there is a mysterious tie between faith and grace at the point of our salvation, so there is a tie between faith and works as we mature in Christ. Quite simply, one cannot function without the other. Listen to James.

But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also (James 2:18-26).

Both Abraham and Rahab did things that were humanly unthinkable, but divinely logical. They understood God well enough to risk all that was dear to them on their conviction that He would miraculously take care of things.

That’s the essence of faith. It’s knowing enough about God, and believing enough in His power and goodness, to walk through life radically unaffected by the things our human eyes and natural minds might otherwise tell us.

Our part in the plan

Even though God is ultimately sovereign over all of life, the Bible clearly holds us responsible for the choices we make and the things we do (or don’t do). And if good works are required, then it is vital for us to understand what we must do to accomplish them in a manner that pleases God.

How is this done? Actually, it remains a joint effort by both God and us. And in fact, Scripture leads me to believe that our primary attention should not be to increase our *works*, but rather to increase our *faith*, out of which works will naturally flow.

Romans 7:17 tells us that “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Paul spells it out more clearly in Galatians 3:2-5.

Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Therefore He who supplies the

Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

Here we see that the “hearing of faith” is the key component, both when we first receive the Spirit and also when the Spirit works in and through us.

What does faith hear? Above all, faith desires to know the nature and purposes of God. As we begin to grasp these, we are drawn powerfully into His service, desiring more than life itself to please Him and to be part of His workings on earth. Paul expresses this process magnificently in his prayer for the Colossians.

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, *being fruitful in every good work* and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light (Colossians 1:9-12).

Specific kinds of work

Before we go further with the question of how to become a doer of good works, let’s look for a moment at some of the works specifically described in Scripture. It must be understood that any list we come up with will be partial. A careful student could no doubt find hundreds of examples on the pages of his Bible; even more, there is nothing to say that God wouldn’t call and equip future generations to do works beyond those done in Bible days.

One of the clearest categories of good works, which we’ve already mentioned, is ministry to the poor and neglected. James tells us that “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). John comments in one of his epistles, “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

Another way to learn about the works required of us is to examine the works Jesus did when He walked the earth. The idea of possibly doing what He did might seem tremendously presumptuous—except for the fact He Himself said we would.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father (John 14:12).

While we can’t be certain of all He is referring to, it is reasonable to believe this would include at least miracles and teachings, both of which He specifically mentioned as being His works.

In John 9:3 Jesus tells His disciples, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day.” What work was He in the process of doing? He was about to heal a man who had been blind from birth. Later, in the upper room, Jesus tells His Father, “I have finished the work which You have given Me to do...I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world” (John 17:4,6).

We also know that the early church continued both types of works, i.e. miraculous ministry and the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. This was clearly consistent with Christ’s commission to them before He ascended to heaven.

Go unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature...And these signs will follow those who believe...they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover (Mark 16:15,17,18).

Works in the household of faith

Another sort of works mentioned often in Scripture are works of ministry to those in the body of Christ. Paul exhorts the Galatians, “Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:9,10).

Beyond caring for physical needs, however, ministry within the church is extensively described in the various epistles. This activity is divided into various gifts and callings, given by the Spirit of God for two distinct purposes: “the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” and “the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these gifts and callings in detail. However, as an example we might look at the “job description” with which Paul tasks Timothy, specifically defining Timothy’s calling as an evangelist.

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching...Be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:2,5).

In these words we are given a clear sense of the scope of activity and depth of commitment that are implicit in God’s concept of ministry. This was no once-a-week offering of a few spare hours of Timothy’s time.

But we must remember again that God does not call us to exercise our gifts in our own strength. After all, what the church really needs is not us, but the grace of God in us. Peter spells it out like this.

If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever (1 Peter 4:11).

It seems the only works that produce divine results are those that contain some sort of divine energizing or direction. It's our hands and feet and voices that minister, yet somehow we have become representatives of Someone higher than ourselves, and the blessings received by those to whom we give such ministry touch not only their human selves, but also their spirits.

Taking the first step

So, how exactly do we let God work through us? Do we wait for Him to nudge us along? Is there a risk that we might run off ahead of Him?

Let me remind you of our earlier discussion that closely linked works with faith. Our starting point is not action—not even good, passionate action. Our starting point is our relationship with Christ. In Jesus' instructions to His disciples, we see described a tandem process that integrally joins our faith with our will to obey. First, He tells them that the *work* of God is precisely faith itself.

Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God." Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:28,29).

Following that, however, He tells them that the key to *faith* is found in their willingness to work.

If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority (John 7:17).

Clearly, both to will and to believe are vitally present in the life of a spiritually healthy believer. And both are activities of the mind, long before the body gets involved.

The discipline of cleansing

As we consider this first step of mental preparation, we run headlong into one of Scripture's great perplexities. As mentioned above, our perfection is distinctly the work of God's grace. Yet at the same time, there are equally explicit instructions that require our voluntary participation.

Look closely at the picture of "teamwork" represented in these passages.

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

And those who are Christ's *have crucified the flesh* with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Galatians 5:24,25)

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore, if anyone *cleanses himself* from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Timothy 2:20,21)

Let us *lay aside* every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us *run with endurance* the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1,2)

In each of these descriptions, we see that our portion of the work primarily involves turning away from the influences of sin and choosing instead to fill ourselves with what is holy and righteous. We cannot do this alone, but He will not do it without our corresponding effort (the old-fashioned word here is *discipline*).

Working together

In one of His sermons, Jesus provides us with a picture that helps us understand how this joint activity works. In Matthew 11:29,30 He says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

The picture is of a team of oxen, yoked together and walking in unity of purpose. From the view of an outside observer, it might be hard to tell which ox is leading. But Jesus tells us it is *His* yoke, His right to choose the direction and pace of the plowing.

An especially wonderful component of this image is His guarantee that the burden will be easy and light. Of course! He is the one who carries the weight. If we are uncomfortable as we work alongside Him, it’s probably because we are somehow fighting His will.

Jesus also suggests that if we can learn to bring our spirits into unity with His, we will begin to take on His nature, characterized by gentleness and lowliness of heart. And as we are able to replace our natural stubbornness and independence with these qualities, we shall indeed find rest for our souls, even as we labor alongside Him.

What a beautiful promise! We can pour ourselves into our work, knowing all along it’s really up to Him to provide the resources that will make our work fruitful.

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Beware of snares

As we begin to see more clearly the “race” He has set before us, we must keep in mind that there will continue to be deceptions along the way. Scripture again provides ample warning, but we need to pay attention to what it says.

The first stumbling point is one we’ve already mentioned, that of hearing without doing. There is something subtly comforting about a lot of talk—it makes us feel as though we’re busy and productive—but we never get around to any action. A well-drawn picture of this phenomenon is tucked back in Ezekiel.

As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, "Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord." So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them (Ezekiel 33:30-32).

James paints it slightly differently.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:22-25).

Such inactivity must be seen as more than simple procrastination. Rather, it's a strong clue that something far deeper may be amiss. If someone never gets around to doing good works, the Bible groups him together with unbelievers.

But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall (Matthew 7:26,27).

They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work (Titus 1:16).

Wrong works

On the other end from inactivity, it is also possible to do what appear to be good works but which are done for all the wrong reasons. The obvious example of this in Scripture was the "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees. Here is one of Jesus' many comments regarding them.

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly (Matthew 6:1-4).

Most serious, though, are works that seem to be divine in nature, but which really have their origin in the kingdom of darkness. Paul warns the Corinthian church of this coming reality.

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Do these people realize they are serving in the wrong kingdom? Perhaps some do. But we must not forget one of the most sobering passages in all of the Bible.

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matthew 7:22,23).

Doing the will of God

Once again, we’re back to our tie between faith and works. Clearly, the only works that God accepts are those He Himself initiates and empowers. How can we know our works are of this sort?

One important feature of authentic Christian service will be the evidence of humility. Jesus had to remind His disciples of this more than once. For example,

Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26-28).

In the long run, our service to God will become its own incentive, bringing us satisfaction that requires no additional reward beyond the sheer joy of pleasing our Master. We will stop tallying up our accomplishments, stop comparing our labors to those of our neighbor, and stop expecting attention or appreciation for what we have done.

And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, “Come at once and sit down to eat”? But will he not rather say to him, “Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink”? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, “We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do” (Luke 17:7-10).

It sounds tough, perhaps, but what true kingdom workers discover is that there is an immeasurable sense of privilege that comes when they realize the God of the universe has permitted them to have a small part in the unfolding revelation of His glory on earth. When this happens, they become not only willing workers—they become “*zealous* for good works” (Titus 2:14).

How much work should we do?

There is always danger in this kind of discussion that the reader might interpret it as one more pep talk, prodding him to start another project or ministry effort. For this reason, let me clarify once more that it isn't the quantity (or actually even the quality) of our work that determines whether or not God is pleased. Maybe the better word would be "accuracy." Are we doing exactly those works that He has "prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10)?

Remember what Jesus prayed to His Father in John 17:4. "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." We might notice that at this point He had not yet accomplished His greatest mission, the sacrifice of His life on the cross. But He was now done with His "work." He had completed the earthly ministry (to the people in general and to His disciples in particular) which He knew His Father had assigned Him to do.

But how had He known what those tasks were? Listen to some of His earlier comments.

Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. (John 5:19)

I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. (John 5:30)

For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. (John 12:49)

When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him. (John 8:28,29)

Once again, we see that the starting point is not activity (works) but relationship (faith). Jesus intimately and continually sought the heart of His Father, and the works He did were precisely in unity with His Father's will.

If we look back at His life, we can see that there were some works that He *could* have done, but didn't. For example, He often failed to explain the meaning of His parables to the crowds, only giving His disciples the deeper truths they contained. When Jesus healed the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9), there was a multitude of sick people there, but Scripture gives no record that Jesus healed anyone else. The point of that healing seemed to be Jesus' demonstration to the Pharisees that His Father would permit Him to heal someone on the Sabbath.

Our human temptation is to follow our own compassions, our sense of what is right or needed. But there is so much of God's greater plan that we cannot see. We need to learn to be "guided by His eye," as David put it in Psalm 32:8. That can only happen, however, when we commit ourselves to daily seeking the face of God.

Greater rewards

Even though the true follower of Christ becomes content and fulfilled simply doing what he has been assigned, one of the most consistent themes in the Bible when works are discussed is the promise that they will also one day bring us rewards in heaven.

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:23,24).

For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works (Matthew 16:27).

At the end of time, there will be grand sorting out of our works—between those we did on our own and those we did properly yoked to Christ. Paul describes it as follows:

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:9-14).

The final judgment

Well, you say. That's good to know. I'm trying to work in God's way, but if I don't, at least I'll still be saved. But maybe it isn't that simple. You see, it's one thing to have done a few "wood, hay and straw" works along the way. But what if we end up without any fireproof accomplishments whatsoever? Will it matter?

Our first encounter with the kingdom of God comes when we are brought to a realization of our sin and our desperate need for God's grace. But it is arguable whether we are actually "in" until we are moved to authentic repentance. And the test of such repentance? According to Acts 26:20, it's "works befitting repentance."

In other words, we aren't saved because we do works. But if we *are* saved, we *will* do works, godly works. It can be no other way. Paul spells it out bluntly in Romans 2:4-11.

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor,

and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

There it is. God will reward us, not for our general good behavior and occasional good deeds, but for our “continuance in doing good.” It’s a full-time, full-passioned commitment to walking yoked in step with Christ. For in the final count, that’s how Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats on judgment day. Matthew 25 casts the dramatic scene.

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

What makes someone a sheep or a goat? Jesus doesn’t mention their spiritual knowledge or accurate theology. Nor their prayer life. Nor their passion for worship. Not even their sinless lifestyle. It’s their works that reveal to Him the state of their heart.

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.”

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.”

Then they also will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

It is our *deeds*—feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners—that seem to determine whether we will be among those who will “inherit the kingdom

prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” or whether we will be among those expelled to “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

What must we do?

The first step toward restoration of full-blown, godly labor to the church is, I believe, the one we have taken here. We must return to a sober and diligent examination of the Word of God, not just looking for His promises, but also searching out and embracing His call to a daily walk of faith and obedience.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, *thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

A second step is to begin to bear responsibility for encouraging one another. We function as a body, not as lone rangers, and God will work through us corporately to do His most effective work.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and *good works*, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:23-25).

Finally, we must continually remind ourselves that the judgment of God is nearer than ever—and none of us will be exempt. In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, God evaluates seven different churches. In each instance He begins His critique with the simple phrase: “I know your works.” One day soon, each of us will stand before the throne of God and will hear His words: “I know your works.”

What will He know?

*And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me,
to give to every one according to his work.
Revelation 22:12*

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