

Our Motive to do Good Works – LD 24

Heidelberg Catechism

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For our Scripture reading, we turn in the word of God to Isaiah 64.

1 Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence, 2 As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! 3 When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence. 4 For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. 5 Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. 6 But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. 7 And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. 8 But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. 9 Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people. 10 Thy holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. 11 Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste. 12 Wilt thou refrain thyself for these things, O LORD? wilt thou hold thy peace, and afflict us very sore?

Thus far we read in God's inspired word.

It is upon that passage and others like it and, indeed, the whole word of God that we find the truth of Lord's Day 24 which we consider this morning. Lord's Day 24.

Q. But why cannot our good works be the whole, or part of our righteousness before God?

A. Because, that the righteousness, which can be approved of before the tribunal of God, must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law; and also, that our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Q. What! do not our good works merit, which yet God will reward in this and in a future life?

A. This reward is not of merit, but of grace.

Q. But doth not this doctrine make men careless and profane?

A. By no means: for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

Why do we do good works? What's our motive to do them? Beloved, why do we do good works? Do we have any motive to do good works? These are the questions that are answered in this Lord's Day, and these are the questions, really, that stand behind the questions that are written down and actually asked in Lord's Day 24, and these are important questions. Extremely important. The answer that one gives to these questions will determine if one believes the true Gospel or another Gospel. Perhaps the answer does not determine but the answer reveals, the answer one gives to these questions reveals whether he believes the true Gospel or another Gospel. The answer one gives to these questions, the questions of why do I do good works, the answer one gives to that question can make the difference between works righteousness and righteous by faith in Jesus Christ.

It's also important to know the answer to these questions in order to be able to motivate ourselves rightly to do good works and that we need to do. We notice that, perhaps you noticed that as we read through Isaiah 64, the prophet uses the phrase "stirreth up himself," and that we must do. We must stir up ourselves. In fact, constantly we must be stirring up ourselves unto good works. What do we use? What kind of thinking do we employ? What thoughts do we put into our minds so as to motivate ourselves to live a life of good works?

It's vital that we do good works. We must do good works. They are not optional for the child of God. An absolute requirement for the child of God. Virtually every Christian would acknowledge that but it's good to be reminded of that. The only exception might be an Antinomian, one who stands against the law and says, "The law has been fulfilled in Christ and therefore I need not worry about the law. I'm not concerned about the law. The law has not authority over me. It's not binding upon me. I'm free to do whatever I want." Certainly that's not the freedom that Scripture speaks of, but that is the freedom that an Antinomian might hold to or does hold to.

We recognize that we were regenerated. Jesus Christ died upon the cross and we were regenerated in order that we might be sanctified, which is to say the same thing as in order that we might live in good works. Sanctification is simply living a life of good works before God. Ephesians 2:10 makes that very plain that we must perform good works; that we were, in fact, even predestinated and saved in order that we might live a life of good works before God.

Let's consider this Lord's Day, then, under the theme "Our Motive to do Good Works." First of all, not merit, not merit; and secondly, only thankfulness; and thirdly, inevitable. Why do you do the right thing, what God commands? Not in order to earn God's approval, and let's say also at the outset before we go into that too much further, let's make plain to ourselves and remind ourselves that we do not do the right thing, we may not be motivated to do the right thing in our life simply in order to meet the approval of other people. That too is a danger, especially when we live in and among good people of God who look and watch over us to make sure that we live a godly life. It's easy for us to fall back and to say, "Well, what does everyone else expect? Then that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to live up to that standard that everybody else expects so that I can fit into the community and measure up." That's a wrong motive for our good works. May not let that be our motive, certainly not our first motive. Certainly not.

But it's also true that we may not perform our good works in order to earn God's approval. That is really what merit is. One will do a good work in order to earn God's approval or to merit. Merit means to earn. To merit God's approval. The Heidelberg Catechism is plain on that in this Lord's Day as well as really throughout the Heidelberg Catechism but as well as also in the previous Lord's Day. Notice in answer 60 that God has saved me, the answer says, without any merit of mine. Merit is excluded from salvation. Merit is not part of our life of good works, but then more to the point and more specifically, we find in question and answer 63. I realize the question and answer 63 has to do with the reward of grace; it's not really focused so much on whether or not merit may be a motive for good works but that certainly comes out, though, in the question and answer, doesn't it? Look at question 63: do not our good works merit which yet God will reward at this and in a future life? Do not our good works merit? And the answer is: this reward, the reward that's tied to our works, this reward is not of merit but of grace, which means to say, our works, then too, may not be done and cannot be done in order to merit. When we speak of merit, we're speaking of an exchange; that which commonly occurs in commerce or when individuals barter together. The idea of merit is that one might do many good works and that that earns, as money earns, the right to the receiving of God's favor, just like one might bring a certain amount of money to the store, hand that money to the cashier and that money gives that person the right, merits him the right to have that possession that he wants to obtain from the store, whether it be groceries or clothing or whatever else. God is not in the business of salvation in that sense. God does not barter. God does not enter into commercial exchanges with his people.

That whole idea, though, of merit, we have to admit, is very appealing. We must admit that. It's very appealing to our old nature. That's really at the heart, this whole idea of

merit is at the heart of every false religion, in fact there's only one religion in the whole world, at least that I'm aware of, and it seems must be too if we understand human nature accurately, but there is only one religion in the entire world that's not based upon merit. Every false religion has at its heart some concept of merit. One must do some good works in order to gain something from the gods or god. This idea of merit also has plagued, perpetually has plagued the Christian church of Jesus Christ throughout church history. The idea of merit was really what was at the bottom of Pelagianism; the idea of merit is part and parcel, the heart, the very heart of Arminianism. In our own history in 1953 where there were individuals espousing a conditional covenant view, our fathers, those who were faithful, accurately put their finger upon the issue when they said, "A conditional covenant view is really a taking of Arminianism now and injecting that into the covenant itself, into the covenant doctrine." And therefore really ourselves as churches, we have faced this idea of merit, though somewhat cloaked to one who was not perceptive perhaps, but nevertheless it was the idea that we struggled against, the false teaching that we fought against in 1953.

Despite its popularity, merit by works doctrine is a fool's doctrine, really. It is, we could even say, doubly foolish. It's foolish in the first place as the Catechism explains, that for works to merit with God, the holy, righteous, pure, holy and pure righteous God, for works to merit with God, those works must be perfect. Answer 62 speaks of that: because that the righteousness which can be approved of before the tribunal, that's the judgment seat of God, must be absolutely perfect. Perfect. And in all respects conformable to the divine law. And we are reminded that divine law is spelled out very plainly in the Scriptures; it's not something that men make up or that men draw up, agree upon, it's something that God has revealed. Our righteousness in order to merit with God and to be called a good work that has meritorious value must be absolutely perfect and the reality is our works are far, far from perfect.

The prophet speaks rightly when he says that "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses," all our good works, "are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." Verse 7 again, "And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee." The Heidelberg Catechism also in answer 62 again, says the same thing: our works are far from perfect, also that our vast works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin. The Catechism notices, not talking about our sinful deeds so that we can think along concrete lines and so often we're prone to do this, we draw a line through our life and we say there are good things over here that I've done and there are bad things over here that I've done. The Catechism says really, beloved, look again, look more carefully and you'll see that they really all belong in one category. All of our works, even those that we call good and that God will reward yet in the future, even those works are imperfect and defiled with sin. Even those cannot be called good works in the highest sense of the word so as to be perfect and have some meriting value before God.

The Belgic Confession also speaks of the same thing, Article 24, but we move on. Our good works cannot be meritorious, again, from another point of view and that's that our good works are not our gifts to God but his gifts to us. That's the reality and that we need

to recognize too; to be humble and to view things properly. We often think that the good works that we do, we present them to God and God ought to be very pleased with that. The good works that we do, they come out of us, we've really struggled hard to perform this good work and we bring it to God and we imagine perhaps that we put a big smile on God's face as we hand him this wonderful good work that we've performed, we're giving him quite a gift but, again, that's not how to look at our good works at all, rather, our good works are gifts that God gives to us. God commands, "Perform good works," and then God designs a good work that's perfectly fitted for us, knowing who we are and our character and personality, the life that we're living and the calling that he's given to us, and he gives that good work; he works it within us so that it does come out of us in our life to our joy, to our delight, and to our comfort. But it's God's gift to us and it cannot earn us anything. Then before God, God gives us a gift, God hands us something and we turn around and we say, "Lord, I'm going to use this to buy thy approval." Vanity. What foolishness.

Isaiah 64 has really that idea in mind, again, in verse 8 when it says, "But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand." We're the work of God's hand. The good works that we do, that's the work of God's hand, the great potter upon the humble clay that he has chosen in his grace. Again, the Belgic Confession, Article 24, speaks of that same thing: our good works are God's gift to us.

But it's worse than merely foolish, beloved. This idea of merit is worse than merely foolishness, it is, in fact, damnable. It is. Holding to the idea of good works is damnable if one persists in it unrepentantly. To claim that works have merit, you have to understand the claim that works have merit and works are required before God in order to gain his approval unto ourselves, denies Christ and rejects Christ for God has made it very plain in the Scripture. Good works have their place, we'll continue to talk about that, but God has made it very plain in Scripture that the earning of his approval has taken place only to the work of Jesus Christ his Son. Christ has earned all the approval we need. He has gained for us the right to have the approval of God. He has taken away our sins. He has taken them upon himself. He has paid the price for those sins so that now God looks at us with approval, with favor, as he views us in his Son.

To hold, and we need to be reminded to hold even a little to good works as having some meritorious value, is still damnable and leads to hell, if it can even be imagined that one holds a little to works. But if one were to say, "I'm saved mostly by Christ, but I have to do just this one thing or just a little bit of this or that, perhaps a little bit of believing. God takes that, too, puts that alongside the work of Christ and takes it altogether and says, 'There, that's what is the basis for my approval.'" If one holds to that, he is condemned. The Belgic Confession, Article 23 says: and verily if we should appear before God relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should alas be consumed. And that's the word of God as we find it here in the Belgic Confession.

Judgment day, beloved, if we stand before God on judgment day wearing a robe of righteousness and we point to that robe of righteousness and we say, "See, Lord, this one

stitch in this robe of righteousness, this one stitch that you see here, I've contributed that. I've done that. That's my own work." And God would say, "Get away from me! I never knew you. That robe you wear is no robe of righteousness but self-righteousness, pride and sin."

Yet, what about ourselves? You can say that's the truth. That's the truth that churches ought to hold to, that churches ought to maintain. The focus ought not be upon what churches hold to and what churches maintain but what we believe. Yes, what others believe, too, but what do I believe in my own heart? Not simply what does my church teach, what does my church hold to, but what do I hold to? Or rather to put it another way, what is my motive? Yesterday, what was my motive for doing my good works? Today, why am I here? Why am I in church? Why do I listen attentively to the preaching of God's word? What's my motive? What will be my motive tomorrow? Your motive tomorrow? Is it in any sense that I might merit with God? That I might earn but a little of his approval? That I might comfort myself that, yes, I'm saved because through my work I have earned something with God?

We need to examine ourselves, beloved. We need to examine ourselves constantly, daily throughout our life. The devil is always putting that thought in our minds that if we look and we examine ourselves carefully, we admit it, we have to confess it's the truth. I hate it but it's the truth. And then we fight against it. We turn away from it because we know that way robs God of his glory and that way robs me of my comfort. It does. And that way of living robs me of joy and robs me of thankfulness.

We've got to examine ourselves but we ought also to examine how we instruct our children and how we raise our children. We ought not seek to motivate our children and that's a large part of parenting, isn't it, to motivate our children to be good? They don't naturally come out of the womb that way. They come to us as the baptism form puts it, with a fallen nature, as sinners. How do we motivate them? How do we call them to good works? Beloved, don't seek to motivate your children with the idea of merit, even in a subtle way. Don't bring that to them. Don't hold that out before them. Sure it's true and we ought to remind ourselves and our children to that walking in the way of good works is walking in the sunlight of God's favor so that is that we can know and enjoy that favor of God. That is true in that we must maintain and bring to our children as well and hold before ourselves. When I walk in the way of sin, though God's favor is still mine for Christ has earned it, though I walk in the way of sin, I walk under the cloud of his disfavor so that I do not know the sunlight of his grace. That we ought to bring to our children too, but never leave them with the impression that they earn something through their good deeds with God. We teach them humility.

The proper motive to good works is thankfulness. Thankfulness. The Heidelberg Catechism also speaks of that in answer 64, the end of that: fruit of thankfulness. That's the way the Catechism refers to good works: fruits of thankfulness. And we're reminded that the Catechism uses the whole theme of gratitude as how to handle good works in the third section of the Catechism. That gratitude theme of the Catechism is correct. We live our lives before God, lives of godliness, out of thankfulness. Thankfulness implies faith.

One without faith cannot be thankful. One who does not believe in the word of God, who does not believe in Jesus Christ, cannot be thankful, but with faith, one is thankful. That means from a very practical point of view, how do I motivate myself to do good works? It means, beloved, don't start with the law, don't start with the works, but start with faith. We start with faith in Jesus Christ. We call to our mind, we remind ourselves, "God has provided us a Savior, one who has come and made it his business to earn for me the right to know that I have the approval of God, the favor of God, the grace of God. That's been his work and he has accomplished that work perfectly. He has removed from me all my sins so that now as God looks at me, he sees no sin whatsoever, rather he sees righteousness for Christ has also been about that work so as to earn righteousness for every one of God's people. God has applied it to my account so that now as God looks at me, he sees me as righteous in Christ." That, beloved, believe in. Return to that over and over and over again in your life as I must in my life. Reject merit. Turn away from sin. See Christ, his righteousness, his atoning work, and believe that that's yours. Jesus Christ came to save sinners. If you say, "I'm a sinner," then you must say God commands it, you must say, "Then I am righteous in Christ."

That implies then also a real knowledge of our sin. The knowledge of our sin, the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins but the knowledge of our sins as well. We cannot be thankful unless we know what we're saved from. It's good for us, it's a bitter pill, so to speak, but it's good for us to focus upon our sin. That's not the calling, an old fashioned calling that preachers used to bring to God's people, and it's not necessary anymore. Always it's necessary for us to see our sin, beloved, be confronted with our sin, see even our own proneness, our own lust, our own lust for merit. How much we love that thought and that theology, how much we can be addicted to that kind of motivation. We see that sin as well as all our sins and then we say and they're all, all of them, washed away and remembered no more by God. They don't appear before him in his judgment throne. Then we're thankful. Then we're thankful and then we desire to walk in good works. We remember the sins of our whole life, in fact, we could look back, we can look way back to our childhood and we have some memories of childhood. We have memories, certainly, of our young adulthood. We can look back and we can say it's been a life of sin and then we can remember, again, "He's forgiven me. How thankful I am." We can look at our sins in marriage towards our husband, our wife. We can look at sins in parenting, our weaknesses, and all of it leads us to the same place, thankfulness under God that he has forgiven me and the he yet counts me his child, his son or his daughter.

And that thankfulness, that thankfulness we ought to seek to grow in. The fact of the matter is, we're not as thankful as we ought to be. We never are, not here in this life. We confess that sometimes. Perhaps sometimes as we compare ourselves with a newer congregation, with those who are in their generations more recently brought to the truth. We say, "Look how alive they are. Look how energetic they are. Look how full of good works they are." And perhaps we say about ourselves that we're not as thankful as we ought to be; we're not as aware of that salvation as we ought to be and that's why we're not filled with that same level of zeal. That's really another way, we ought to realize that, of confessing our sinfulness. We are called unto thankfulness and we must constantly grow in our thankfulness. Don't let that fall away, beloved. Don't let that grow stale. We

can hold to all the truths of the Reformed faith, we can hold them as maintained by the church, and we can recite them and we can say, "I know them," we can even argue about them and defend them before others who would attack them, but we can also lose them, all of them, one by one, if we first lose our thankfulness before God for what he has given to us as his people and as churches.

Guard that door as a first priority, beloved, and then that not so much as far as everyone else, but as far as me, as far as you personally. Maintain that motive of thankfulness in your life and then as we do that, as we walk in thankfulness before God, as we stir ourselves up unto thankfulness again and again in our lives, then we inevitably will perform good works. We inevitably will. There is that slander that militates against the truth of grace, the blessed preaching of the Gospel of grace that says you tell people that they're forgiven, you tell them all about the grace of Jesus Christ and you say they don't have a thing to do in order to merit God's favor, you make men careless. You make profane Christians. There is that slander. The Catechism asks the question: doth not this doctrine, the doctrine of pure grace only, no merit, doth not this doctrine make men careless and profane? There are those who level that charge against us. Sometimes it comes in a slightly different form. They'll say you believe that God saves children in the line of generations and that only on the basis of his own promise and that only as fulfilled and worked out in Jesus Christ and by grace alone, you don't hold out any condition before the children that the children must attain to in order to enter more fully into the covenant and have more of the privileges of the covenant or to have the covenant at all, that's what you teach? You make careless and profane, godless children, that's what you're going to do.

And they can point sometimes too, to the weaknesses and the sins of our children, our young people, and they say, "See, there's evidence." You can't deny the sins but we say those sins do not come from this doctrine. Those sins are not the inevitable fruit of the doctrine of grace or of an unconditional covenant that God has established with us and with our children. Sin comes because we're not in heaven yet and the sin comes out of our children and young people perhaps too because, really, we don't teach them plainly enough and vigorously enough the doctrines of grace. We don't stir them up and call them unto thankfulness like we should but that's our calling. That's our calling. We tell ourselves and we tell our children we are saved only by grace and we're a member of the covenant only by grace. Not by any condition that I have fulfilled, but by God's grace alone. Tell our children that, beloved. All of them. We say, "You," organically speaking, "You are members of the covenant. You are covenant children. God has brought you into the covenant as God brings all of his children into the covenant and only by grace; taken all your sins away through Christ alone. Do you hear that?" we might add as we speak to our children. "Doesn't that make you thankful?"

And for those whom God has elected and those whom God has regenerated, those whom God has given faith, it does make them thankful inevitably. It doesn't make them careless and profane no more than it makes us careless and profane. It makes them thankful. It is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, faith which clings to grace alone and Christ alone, it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by

a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness. Putting it positively: those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith and are fed the word of God, the word of grace, sovereign grace alone, will walk inevitably, must walk and will walk in thankfulness as God in Christ so works it in them. Thanks be to God, beloved, that even our good works are fruits of his grace. Amen.

Father, we thank thee that thou hast given to us such glorious truth, such perfect, pure, complete Gospel that we can take hold of it and know we are forgiven and know that we are thine and know that it's all by grace, only by grace, so that we can truly be thankful and then live out of thankfulness unto thee. And we thank thee that thou hast given to us that same promise, a promise of sovereign grace alone, that we can cling to as we receive and raise our children. And we pray, Father, that we may teach them too as thou hast called us. Teach them of thy grace that in that way, they may be moved unto thankfulness and a life, a holy, new, godly life of good works. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.