

God, Man, and Good Works
Isaiah 3:8-11, Septuagesima Sunday,
January 31, 2010

Beloved of the Lord..... This week let us consider the picture of a Minnesota lake. Today instead of fishing, we'll be spending some time on the beach. It is the middle of a hot summer and the children are playing in the sand and swimming in the lake. As we watch our children play, we notice little Johnny is carrying a bucket of water. He takes his little plastic bucket, fills it up with water from the lake, walks a few feet away and haphazardly dumps it out into the hot dry sand. Bucket after bucket, trip after trip, little Johnny continues filling up with water and then emptying it into the sand. After watching this in amazement we finally ask little Johnny "What are you doing?" With a straight face he looks us in the eye and says, "I'm going to empty this lake with my bucket!" Can you imagine how surprised we'd be to get such an answer? Surely our little Johnny is not too bright of a boy! For no child can empty an entire lake with a little plastic beach bucket!

In this picture, little Johnny represents the many people of this world who think that if they do enough good works, they will earn a place in heaven. Every bucket of water represents a good work. Dumping the water into the sand represents the foolishness of those who think their good works can gain salvation. But this is all in vain. Such people are little Johnny's who are trying to do the impossible. Good works cannot undo sin. God not only commands that our lives be filled with perfect and good works, but He likewise commands a sinless and perfect life! We fall short on both accounts, for a lifetime of good works cannot cancel out a lifetime of sin. Anyone who thinks their good works can cancel out sin is like a little Johnny, who will spend the rest of his life trying to do the impossible! Trying to earn your way into heaven is as futile as trying to dig a hole to China! It is like trying build a ladder that reaches to the moon with toothpicks.

But how do we know good works cannot earn our way into heaven? Consider the following passages, "A man is not justified by the works of the law....by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." Gal. 2:16 "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight." Rom. 3:20 "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." Gal. 5:4 The works and deeds of the law are good works done in this world. But as we just heard from the Bible, no man is justified by them. Heaven cannot be earned by a few brownie points here on earth. Those who suffer damnation are not only those who were wicked and evil while on the earth, but it is also those who believed that their own sin could be canceled out by a few good works. On the other hand, heaven is filled with sinners who became saints, being justified in God's sight through the sacrifice of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. They were justified not by their good works, but by the

grace of God given freely in Christ Jesus. "Even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law." Gal. 2:16

As we hear more from God's Word today, let us learn more about good and evil works.

I. God punishes evil works. In our lesson today, the prophet Isaiah preached about the evil works of the people. "Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen: because their tongue and their doings are against the Lord, to provoke the eyes of his glory!" The Jewish nation was ruined, because they had become worldly in their deeds. Their tongues were filled with cursing and swearing. They told dirty jokes. They lied and deceived by God's name. They were rebellious, disrespectful to elders, immodest, immoral, murderous, treacherous, and the like. In short, their deeds were evil. But their worst crime was their rejection of the Lord, rejection of His Word. In their own eyes they had become so good, and their sins so small, that they believed themselves righteous on their own.

Their self-righteous pride was easy to see. "The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and they declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not! Woe unto their soul! for they have rewarded evil unto themselves!" The pride of their heart had led them to find no shame in their sin! They declared their sin as Sodom! Like the homosexuals of today who flaunt and promote their lifestyle in politics and on TV, the Jewish people found no shame in their sin. But the Lord punished their evil. God allowed a famine to devastate their land. Then the Babylonians came and crushed the Jewish nation, taking their riches and making them slaves. This was God's punishment for sin.

God does punish evil. Verse ten says "Woe unto the wicked! It shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him!" Woe unto the wicked, God says! Beware! I am watching! In order to illustrate and show God's anger against sin, consider the Tsunami which devastated parts of Asia a little over a year ago. In the news there was a story about a beautiful model who was staying at a resort with her lover when the Tsunami struck. Her lover was pulled out to sea and he drowned. This was God's punishment against their sin. Perhaps you remember Oprah had a big story about one of her homosexual friends who also was staying at a resort with his partner. The Tsunami struck and carried the partner away as well. Again this is God's punishment for sin.

When we as Christians hear such things, often our first reaction is to think how glad we are that we have never committed such sins. In our hearts we immediately think that we never did anything that bad. Perhaps we think we are better than they, because we've repented and they haven't. But such thoughts truly come from a self-righteous heart. Indeed we are no better than those people who died, being swept out to sea. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" and it is of "the Lord's mercies we are not consumed." Let us repent of

the pride in our own hearts, that pride which exalts itself at the expense of others, for "The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate." Prov. 8:13 When we see and recognize such pride in our hearts, we should immediately ask God for forgiveness! He will not turn us away. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit". God does not despise the sorrowful heart who hungers for forgiveness. God readily absolves and forgives us, for the sake of Jesus Christ! Even our sins of pride, the Lord mercifully forgives.

II. What truly is a good work in God's eyes. But now let us ask the question: What is a good work in the sight of God? "In the sight of God a good work is everything that a child of God does, speaks, or thinks in faith according to the Ten Commandments, for the glory of God, for the benefit of his neighbor." (Catech.) There is then a difference between what might be a good work in the eyes of man, and a good work in the eyes of God. Perhaps we remember years ago near Christmas time there was the great Tsunami that washed killed thousands, even washing many out to sea. At this time several big Hollywood stars came forth and pledged money to help. Sandra Bullock gave one million dollars to help the relief efforts. Her donation was very public and seen on TV around the world. Was that a good work? If you came to church, wrote out a check for 1000\$, put it in the collection plate....and when church was over announced to all that you had given 1000\$ to the church,...would that be a good work? Clearly the answer is NO. It was not a good work, because it did not flow from a love for God, but instead it came from a love for self, fame, and glory. Our point is this: For a work to be a truly good work in the eyes of our Lord, the motive behind it will be love for God. The Bible says FAITH WORKS BY LOVE (Gal. 2:6). Knowing that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, freely and willingly gave His life for us on the cross, such news causes our hearts to joyfully love God in return! When we hear "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son", how can we not love Him in return! God gave His life for us! Yes indeed, such godly love from Christ produces love in our own heart! And so the Bible says, "We love Him, because He first loved us!" Now, armed and enabled by this love of God which lives in our hearts by faith, we joyfully love our Lord in return, and likewise love our fellow man! Now when God says to us, "Love thy neighbor as thyself", the heart of faith joyfully responds, "Yes Lord, I do, with all my heart!" According to the New Man within us, we have a perfect love for our neighbor! And so then when we find our neighbor in need, God working in us by faith, helps us to do what is right for our neighbor. We seek nothing in return. We couldn't care less if they say "Thank you". We couldn't care less whether other people saw what we did! All that matters to us is that our neighbor now has what they needed!

Godly love is selfless. Godly love is sacrificial. Godly love is charity. "Charity suffereth long, and is

kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth." I Cor. 13:4-18

III. Good works are rewarded, but they do not justify before God. In our last verse for consideration today there is comfort, "Say ye to the righteous, that *it shall be well with him*: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings." The righteous of which Isaiah speaks are sinners who have found in Christ Jesus their Savior. Hence the "righteous" are the believers. You who trust in Christ do not need to worry or fret regarding your salvation. It shall be well with you. Jesus did not come to condemn you, but redeem you. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned." Jn 3:17-18

Being freed from sin, we then joyfully do God's work by good works. They are our duty. "Likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do." Lk 17:10 Good works are our duty. "It must never be our intention to earn anything by our good works, for this will at once destroy their character as good works." (Koehler, *Summ. Christian Doctrine*, pg 164) Truly good works flow from faith and love for Jesus Christ, our Lord and most gracious King!

Our last point for this morning is that good works are rewarded. God has promised to reward our good works. Isaiah writes "they shall eat the fruit of their doings." This is similar in spirit to the fourth commandment, "Honor thy father and mother....that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth." Eph 6 Good works are rewarded by the goodness of God, not by the merits of man. Perhaps a good way to understand this is to think of a fruit farmer who grows apple trees. He tends to that tree, prunes it, shapes it, sprays it, and in the end there is a beautiful apple. But did the farmer really produce that fruit? Though the farmer worked hard, it was really God who produced the fruit. So it is when we do good works. Though each work is tainted by sin, as imperfect as they may be, God still blesses us by His grace. To some Christians He will give a long life. Others He will spare from war, famine, or bloodshed. Still to others He may hold back suffering due to a consequence of sin. But in the end, it is always the same: God is moved by His grace to reward good works. "All this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true." Amen.