

## Obedience or Sacrifice?

I Samuel 15:16-23, Trinity Sunday IX

August 9, 2009

Beloved of the Lord.....Isn't it true that as Christians we often feel so fruitless in our good works for the Lord? Isn't it true that we can look at any number of other Christians and see how their life is so much more fruitful than our own? When we feel fruitless we begin to think, "What is there more that I can do? What good works should I be doing right now for God's kingdom?" While it is true each believer loves the Lord and by faith we desire to do God's will alone, there is a great danger when we focus on our works or the works of others. When our focus is on works we take our eyes off of Christ, the sole source of our justification. Rather than repenting of our sin and remembering Christ alone is our righteousness, sometimes we try to make up for sin by doing good. But is it a good work or an evil work when we do good because we have done evil?

Let me give you an example. This week in the City of Corcoran newsletter, I read the following notice: "The Corcoran Police Department along with Maple Hills Estates, Lord of Life Lutheran Church and Corcoran Jaycees, are partnering to sponsor the first 'Community Outreach' program." The first event of these combined groups is to take an underprivileged child from Maple Hills Estates to a Twins baseball game. Not only will they be able to watch the game with a representative of the police department, the Lord of Life Church and Jaycees, but they will also receive a free hot dog and beverage. This is a good illustration of what many churches are doing today, even Lutheran churches. They are inventing good work programs, things which will be very visible to the eyes of men, and also very gratifying to the hearts of those who take part. For those who feel they are not doing enough for the Lord, this program has a certain appeal? And isn't it always good to help a child in need?

While we should always be careful never to condemn as evil those things which are good, at the heart of this matter the question which needs to be addressed is this: Does God desire obedience or sacrifice? Are good works nothing more than obedience to God's commands by faith in His sacrifice, or are we free to pick and choose the sacrifice, the good works which will be pleasing to Him? To put it more exactly, does God command us to feed, clothe and help a child in need, or do we go above and beyond the call of duty by taking a child to a baseball game AND getting public recognition for it? Jesus said, "How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that *cometh* from God only?"

I. We dare not invent our own good works as Saul did. In our lesson today God's commandment to King Saul was straightforward and crystal clear, "Go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." The whole race was to be utterly annihilated because years ago when Israel journeyed through the wilderness, the Amalekites would again and again attack them from behind. They would slay from behind the tired and defenseless soldier, the sick and elderly people, even the children. The sword of King Agag himself made many mothers childless. God's judgment for the sins of Amalek was the annihilation of the entire race, for "God is angry with the wicked every day."

But Saul did not do as God commanded. Though he slew all the men, women, and children, Saul spared King Agag [A'-gog] and the best of the spoil. Since Saul had rejected God's Word, God likewise rejected Saul. When Samuel came to admonish Saul, Saul had the audacity to say "Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord." Samuel answered, "Why then do I hear the bleating of sheep and lowing of the oxen?" Saul then tried to lay the blame on his people and then he then tried to excuse "their" sin by saying they kept the best only so they could sacrifice. That was a lie also because Saul "didst fly upon the spoil" meaning he swooped down with his army and scooped into his clutches the best of the wealth.

By way of God's commandments, we are just as guilty as Saul. To disobey even one commandment is to disobey them all and rebel against God authority. "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." God does not accept even one rebel into heaven, but He does welcome all those repentant rebels who confess their rebellion and trust in Jesus who paid for the sins of all rebels on the cross. Jesus also paid for our sins of covetousness. That is why we should not covet our neighbor's goods as Saul did, but work hard for everything we have and then give God our firstfruits, nor our leftovers. "We give Thee but Thine own, whatever the gift may be." Is the money we give to church the last bill of the week to pay, or is our returning gift, our "thank you" to God for all He did for me? In like manner is Sunday the last day of the week where we begrudgingly come to church, or is it the first day of the week in which we happily give our first hours to the Lord?

When Saul was admonished for disobeying God's clear command, he quickly thought up a way which could make things right. He would give the spoil which he had illegally obtained to the Lord and "sacrifice" what was not his to sacrifice. "That is like playing the lottery and trying to make it right by giving some of the winnings to church" (Miller). God doesn't want nor does He need our

dirty money. He doesn't want our sacrifice which we obtain in a sinful way. He desires our firstfruits, not our evil fruits of covetousness. "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver" but if we give out of guilt or fear we have given God nothing at all.

Saul's great sin was inventing a good work which God had not commanded. The Bible calls these superfluous works "the sacrifice of fools." Ecclesiastes 5:1 says, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil." What are deemed good works in the eyes of man are most often evil works in the eyes of God - for they are not done out of love and faith in Him who loved us first, rather they are done out of guilt and fear or the desire to make up for what has not been done. Obedience is what God desires of us, not self-chosen sacrifices. Why then do people and churches make up good work programs and ceremonies and personal ministries God has not commanded? It is because the world thinks they can please God and gain extra credit by doing something good. But good works can never make one righteous, and any attempt to earn extra credit with God is the surest way to be rejected by God, for Samuel said, "Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king."

II. Our sacrifice or the sacrifice of Christ? In John 15:5 Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." Be careful then dear Christian when you are that branch on the tree and you find yourself looking at and comparing yourself to other branches. The Bible says, "Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." Before faith we are nothing more than dead branches fit for the fire but when God grants us faith, it is only because Christ the Living Vine has grafted us in. It is then His life alone which sustains us, helping us to bear fruit. Let us ever remember the very heart and soul of the Invisible Church is that glorious doctrine of our justification by grace through faith: namely that "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ." This is why we say we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is not our works that matter or count, but God's work alone! That is why in John six when the people proudly asked Jesus, "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" Jesus answered, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." There is only one good work that can save us sinners from our sin, and that is the good work God has done! It is His sacrifice which counts, and not our own! That is why we so joyfully sing, "Thy works not mine O Christ, Speak gladness to this heart; They tell me all is done,

They bid my fear depart." That also why we sing "on Christ the solid Rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand."

So while it is true "there is none righteous, no not one", it is also true that through Christ God counts all men righteous. "For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." What then is faith? It is nothing more than believing, receiving the righteousness of Christ, for in the Gospel it is God Himself who covers all our sins and evil works with His own righteousness like a garment, a robe, the righteousness of faith.

From this point, and this point alone proceeds and flows works of love, which is obedience to God's commands. What then is a good work in God's sight? It is nothing more than saying to God, "Thank you Lord for being my righteousness! Thank you Lord for redeeming me from all my evil works! Thank you Lord for leaving Thy heavenly throne and coming into this filthy world only to make my sins Thine own. Thank you Lord for laying down Thy holy life for my unholy sins. Thank you Lord that though I was a poor and wretched miserable sinner, Thy face has shined upon me and is gracious unto me! Thank you Lord for taking away and canceling out all my debt and filling my account with all the good Thou hast done. Thank you Lord for conquering my fears of sin and death and that power of the devil, and bringing all these enemies into Thy grave, only so You could rise again in triumph! Thank you Lord, thank you Lord, thank you Lord!"

What is a good work in the sight of God? It is saying Thank you Lord: by feeding, clothing, and helping your loved ones, by speaking the words of truth to our neighbor in love, by keeping ourselves from all things sinful and doing only that which is good, by giving God the firstfruits of our labors and not the leftovers, by speaking to our spouse words of encouragement, forgiveness and love, by repenting when we have sinned against others, by comforting the brokenhearted and giving a warm hug to those in need. To put it in another way, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law." "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, and mind, and thy neighbor as thyself."

If then you want to be fruitful dear Christian, begin with faith in Christ who was fruitful for your sake and then happily obey His commandments from your heart. We can never be more fruitful than Christ, yet through Christ we are perfectly fruitful. Amen.

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