

Treatise on Good Works

Martin Luther made the teaching of the Bible about good works much more clear to the average Christian. He teaches that good works are commanded by God but that many Christians misunderstand what they really are.

1. First, we need to understand that there are **no good works except those that God has commanded**, just like there is no sin except what God has forbidden. So, anyone who wants to know and do good works only needs to know God's commandments. **As Christ says in Matthew 19:17, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."** (*Treatise on Good Works*)

¹⁶ And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. **If you would enter life, keep the commandments.**" ¹⁸ He said to him, "**Which ones?**" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰ The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" ²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. ²³ And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Matthew 19:16–26 (ESV)

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying, ² "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ **"You shall have no other gods before me.** ⁴ **"You shall not make for yourself a carved image**, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall **not bow down to them or serve them**, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ **"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain**, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. ⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. ¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³ "You shall not murder. ¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ "You shall not steal. ¹⁶ "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." Exodus 20:1–17 (ESV)

- What is meant by "enter life"? (Matthew 19:17)
- Which commandments are not mentioned in Jesus' answer to the man's question?
- If the first commandments are the most important why do you think Jesus left them out?
- If we know the commandments, why do we need to know anything else, since we would be walking closely with God just by obeying them?

3. **The first and most important, the most valuable of all good works is faith in Christ**, as He says in **John 6. When the Jews asked Him, "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?" He answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him Whom He has sent"** (John 6:28-29).

We find many people who pray, fast, set up charities, do various good deeds, and live a good life in front of others ... All these works [if] done without faith ... are nothing and completely dead. (*Treatise on Good Works*)

⁶ And **without faith it is impossible to please him**, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)

²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "**This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.**" John 6:28–29 (ESV)

¹⁷ So also **faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead**. James 2:17 (ESV)

- Usually, we think of “works” as actions we perform and “faith” as something we think and feel. In what sense can faith be work?
- Are good works just something going on inside our heart that no one else can know about?
- What does James 2:26 tell us about the relationship between good works and faith?

4. ... **Ecclesiastes 9 teaches: "Go your way with joy, eat and drink, and know that God accepts your works. Let your clothes always be white,** and let your head never lack oil. Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your fleeting life" (Eccl. 9:7-9). "Let your clothes always be white," meaning let all our works be good, whatever they may be, without any distinction. And they are white when I am certain and believe that they please God.

So Christ says in John 8:29, "I do always those things that please Him." And St. John says in 1 John 3:19-22, "Hereby we know that we are of the truth, if we can comfort our hearts before Him and have a good confidence. And if our heart condemns or frets us, God is greater than our heart, and we have confidence, that whatsoever we ask, we shall receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." (*Treatise on Good Works*)

5 ... **The works are acceptable** not because of themselves, but **because of the faith that alone exists, works, and lives in each and every work without distinction**, no matter how many and varied they are, just as all the parts of the body live, work, and get their name from the head, and without the head, no part can live, work, or have a name. (*Treatise on Good Works*)

- What makes a good work a good work?

9. This is the work of **the First Commandment**, which says: "**You shall have no other gods.**" This means: "Since I am the only God, you should **place all your confidence, trust, and faith in Me alone, and no one else.**"

For I couldn't trust God if I didn't believe He wanted to be favorable and love me, which in turn leads me to love Him, trust Him wholeheartedly, and look to Him for all good things. (*Treatise on Good Works*)

12 ... **Note** for yourself, then, **how different these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward actions only, and keeping it with inward trust.** The latter makes true, living children of God, while the former only creates worse idolatry and the most harmful hypocrites on earth, who with their apparent righteousness lead countless people into their way, yet allow them to be without faith, so they are miserably misled and caught in meaningless rituals and ceremonies.

- We spend a lot of time talking about faith without works, which are works that never become visible to anyone but ourselves. But what about works that well up from a deep faith in Jesus Christ and overflow into our words and actions? Are they really good works?
- If good works flow out of the overflow of God's love at work in the believer's heart what is the benefit of good works for the person who does the good works?

13 ... Now, **since human nature can't go a moment without doing or not doing something**, facing or avoiding something (because, as we see, life never stops), **anyone who wants to be devout and full of good works should start by always practicing this faith in all their life and actions**. Let them learn to do and not do everything with this constant faith. Then they will realize how much work they have to do and how everything is included in faith. They must never become lazy because even their resting should be an exercise and work of faith.

14 ... If everyone had faith, we wouldn't need any more laws, and each person would naturally do good works all the time, as their trust in God guides them."