

Good Works

Ephesians 2:10

Series: Loving God and Loving Others (Summer 2020)

Preaching Date: June 28th, 2020

Topic: Loving God and others with our hands, our strength

Worship: The Work of our Hands

Key Sentence: We are not saved by good works but we are saved for good works

Outline:

I. Saved for Good Works (Ephesians 2:10, Titus 2:11-14)

II. The Witness of Good Works (Matthew 5:14-16)

III. Practicing Good Works (Ephesians 4:28, James 2:15-16)

IV. Persevering in good works. (Galatians 6:9-10)

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹²training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

James 2:15-16 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

Ephesians 4:28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Galatians 6:9-10 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Good Works Ephesians 2:10

Ephesians 2 is one of the great good news moments in all Scripture. Paul begins with the bad news, that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. As we walked through this evil world we actively followed the prince of darkness and carried out the evil desires of body and mind, so we were, by nature, children of wrath, liable to death and eternal judgment. But God, rich in mercy, in steadfast love, made us alive through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This new life is gift of God's grace, not, Paul says, by works. Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. This truth, seen throughout the New Testament, is the bedrock of our hope. We are not saved by good works, by keeping rules and laws, nor by performing acts of charity or virtue. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

It's almost shockingly beautiful then that the next verse is about doing good works. Ephesians 2:10 *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* We are not saved by good works but we are saved for good works. We are created, formed like a work of art, like a masterpiece, for the purpose of doing good, actively loving God and others. Paul tells us that the plan and opportunity for this has been prepared for each of us by God in advance. His purpose for us is to walk in these particular good works. This truth does not contradict salvation by grace. We cannot atone for our sins nor wipe our record clean by good behavior, by any excess of neighbor love. But we can, as those recreated by faith in Jesus begin to love. And love expresses itself in good works.

Our goal this morning is to embrace these good works. Every few years I share from one of my true hero stories, "In memory of L. H. W" by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. As I prepared, I was reminded how well the story depicts ordinary good works. Fisher says "He began life characteristically, depreciated and disparaged. When he was a white, thin, big-headed baby, his mother used say "Wa'n't it just like that do-less Lem Warren, not even to leave me foot-free when he died, but a baby coming!" "Do-less," in the language of our valley, means a combination of shiftless and impractical, particularly scorned. Later, as he began to take on the appearance he wore through life, her resentment kept pace with his growth. "Look at him!" she cried to all who would listen. "Ain't that Warren, all over? Did any of my folks ever look so like a born fool? Shut your mouth, Lem, and maybe you won't scare folks."

The Warren's tumble-down house was across from the school, and the children shared Mrs. Warren's opinion of Lem. The ugly, overgrown boy was allowed to play only if he did all the boring or hard parts. As his speech was halting and indistinct he was never asked to recite or act in the school performances. He was not "smart at his books" and hardly learned to read, partly I'm sure, because the only time he ever saw a book was at school. So he chopped wood, made fires and listened in silent, grinning admiration while others spoke pieces and sang songs. But he was not without achievements. He early grew large for his age, and strong, and he was the best swimmer of all those who bathed in the cold, swift mountain stream near the schoolhouse. He was made to teach each class of boys to swim and dive. Even they tyrannized him. Nothing made his mother more furious "Ain't you got no stand-up in ye?" she was wont to exhort him. "If you don't look out for yourself in this world, you needn't think anybody else is gunto!" Her instructions in ethics were all he ever knew for up to his fourteenth year he never had clothes respectable enough for church, and after that he had other things to think of. Fourteen years is what we call "over school age." It was a date Mrs. Warren had looked forward to; Lem would be earning wages; she could sit back and "live decent."

It seemed more than she could bear when, that year, she was stricken with paralysis. It was the first mishap she could not blame on her marriage, and her bitterness festered. She can't have been a cheerful house-mate during the years Lem was growing to manhood. He was in demand as "help" on the farms on account of his strength and faithfulness, though the farmers found him tediously slow and, when it came to animals, not always reliable. He was good with the horses, but never learned "how to whip the work out of their hide." It was his way, on a steep hill with a heavy load, to get out and put his own powerful shoulder to the wheel. If this failed, he unloaded part of the logs and made two trips. The impatient sawyer at the end of his route was driven to exhaust his entire vocabulary. He was "the most do-less critter the Lord ever made!"

All that shows so far is that Lem, despite his deficiencies, was good natured and willing to work. And we, with our advantages, sometimes aren't. My other key verse linking God's grace to our response is Titus 2:11-14 *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹²training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.* Grace brings salvation. Nothing else does. But grace also calls us to live as saved people, renewed people. It teaches us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.

These sins and distractions keep us from wholeheartedly loving God and loving others and serving out of that love. But a true appreciation of grace teaches us to treasure self-control and patience and a nurtured hope. We recognize that because Jesus is coming again and because eternity awaits, we can work and worship now without fear of missing something the world could have given us. We defer gratification for eternal witness to the glory of our Savior. He's the one who gave himself for us, and through his sacrifice we are redeemed, bought back from all our lawlessness and sin and purified. On top of that, we are his own possession, we his people, he our God who dwells with us.

All that is great news. If this was last week I would say, these are great reasons for gratitude. And they are. But look where these things lead – to a people who are zealous for good works. The two words “good works” appear together in the Greek twenty-five times, a key emphasis of the Christian life, not to be neglected. The word ‘work’ in all those occurrences implies toil, sweat, hard work. Not that all good works are sweaty or toilsome, but all are intentional and disciplined, and we are to be zealous for them. We saw this word a few weeks ago in 1st Peter 3. Zealous means ardently active and devoted, like the Zealots of Jesus’ day. We are to be ardently active and devoted in doing good for others, for our loved ones, our neighbors, community and our needy world.

The topic of witness and apologetics that we studied in 1 Peter 3 is strongly tied to this truth. In 1 Peter 3 witness is wrapped up in doing good, loving others with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We witness from our head, having reasons for faith, but we also witness with our hands, showing love in practical ways. Jesus too teaches that good works are a witness. Matthew 5:14 *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

We let our light shine not just in our words, though words are crucial to the Gospel. But more broadly we let our light shine by our good works, by walking out the difference our faith makes in real life. People close to us in our family or our church, or distant from us in our community and our world can see our good works, not because we shine a light on them, but because they show his light in and of themselves. And because it's his light people see and give glory, not to us, but to the Father in heaven who is working through us.

This is seen in Lem's story as well. Fisher says “He had a fair degree of success with cows and sheep. It was indeed the foundation of what material prosperity he ever enjoyed. A farmer paid him one year with three or four ewes and a ram.

He worked for another farmer to pay rent of a pasture and had, as everybody admitted, almighty good luck. There were several twin lambs born that spring and every one lived. Lem used to make frequent night visits to the pasture to make sure all was well. I remember as a little girl coming back from some village festivity and seeing a lantern twinkle far up on the mountainside. "Lem Warren out fussin' with his sheep," one of my elders remarked. Later we saw the lantern on the road ahead and stopped, country-fashion, for an exchange of salutation. Looking out from under my warm shawl, I saw his tall figure stooping over something held under his coat. The lantern lighted his weather-beaten face and the expression of his eyes as he looked down at the little white head against his breast. "You're foolish, Lem," said my uncle. "The ewe won't own it if you take it the first night." "I--I--know," stuttered Lem, "but it's mortal cold up on the mounting for little fellers! I'll bring him up as a cosset." The incident reminded me vaguely of something I'd read and has remained in memory." The 'something' it reminded her of, of course, is Jesus, the good shepherd who finds his lost sheep and tenderly carries the lambs in his arms.

So good works do not save us, but we are saved for good works, which are a witness to the world of God's transforming power. But how we do good works? What is the scope of good works? In some ways this question is too easy. Be nice. See the needs of others and go out of your way to meet them. The New Testament is full of lists of virtues, from the Sermon on the Mount to Romans 12 and 1st Corinthians 13 and Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 and the whole book of James, and many more. It's impossible to cover all the aspects of virtue and all the good you can do in one sermon or one lifetime. That being said let me cherry pick just a couple of verses that stand out to me. First, James 2:15-16 *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?*

See needs. Meet needs. Don't just talk about it. Do it. One of the most powerful questions in the kitchen of your home is "what can I do to help?" But this is also a powerful question in family relationships, and in the church, and in the neighborhood, the community, the workplace, the world. Often you don't need to ask "what can I do to help," you just need to see need and jump in. Fred Rogers famously told his neighborhood to look for the helpers. When he was a boy and the news reported something tragic or scary, he would ask his parents or grandparents about it, and they'd help him understand. "In fact, my mother would try to find out who was helping the person who got hurt." "Always look for the people who are helping," she'd tell us. "You'll always find somebody who's trying to help." Even today when I read the newspaper and see the news on television I look for the people who are trying to help"

Good works means being the person trying to help, especially in our nearby tragedies and difficulties that never make the news. The other verse that stood out to me is similar. Ephesians 4:28 *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.* This comes in the middle of one of those New Testament virtue lists, and it pictures a transformed life. Don't be what you were, but by grace be a new kind of person. So maybe you were a thief, maybe you think you never were. But by self-centeredness, laziness, or greed, we rob others of the help they might have received. So, Paul says, work hard with your hands, get your hands dirty, so you have something to share with anyone in need. I don't think this means we all need to engage in physical labor, but we do need to work hard, to do good work so that we can do good works.

This is one of the reasons Lem Warren is a hero. The author weaves many episodes of selfless and thankless good works into this little story. "Certainly," she says, "his marriage aroused no admiration. It was universally regarded as addle-pated and imbecile from beginning to end. One of the girls who worked at the hotel "got into trouble," as our vernacular runs. Everyone knew her and was talking about her. One evening Lem, starting for his sheep-pasture, heard someone crying ahead on the bridge, and then, as he paused to listen, a splash. He dove in without stopping to set down his lantern, knowing the swiftness of the water, and caught the poor thing struggling and gasping in the current. He took her home and gave her dry clothes of his mother's. Then leaving the scared and repentant child by his hearth, he set out for the minister's house. When Ma'am Warren awoke the next morning, Lem did not instantly answer her imperious call. Instead, a red-eyed girl in one of Mrs. Warren's nightgowns came to the door and said: "Lem slept in the barn last night. He give his bed to me." Ma'am Warren stared, transfixed. "What you doin' here?" she demanded. The girl held down her head. "Lem and I were married last night."

When the baby came, Lottie was very sick. Lem took care of his mother, his wife, and the new baby for weeks and weeks. It was at lambing-time, and his flock suffered. He ran in debt, for he couldn't take work. The neighbors helped, but it was no cheerful work to care for the vitriolic old lady, and only Lem could comfort Lottie. She lingered for about a year, then died, Lem holding her hand in his. She tried to say something to him that last night, so the neighbors reported, but her breath failed her and she could only lie staring at him from eyes that seemed to look from the other side of the grave. He was deep in debt when he was thus left with a year-old child not his own, but he gave Lottie a decent funeral and put up a gravestone saying she was "Charlotte, loved wife of Lemuel Warren." He used to take the little girl and put flowers on the grave, I remember. Then he went to work again.

His sandy hair was streaked with gray, though he was but thirty. The doctor said it was because of the strain of his year of nursing; and indeed throughout that period no one knew when he slept. Late at night we could look across and see his light still burning and know he was rubbing Lottie's back or feeding Susie.

I don't have time to tell the part of the story where Lem takes care of Susie growing up, but he ends up rescuing her from a cad of evil intentions, and pointing her to a good young man. "In the spring her engagement to Bronson Perkins was announced, though many said they didn't see why you get engaged when you can't marry. Bronson's father was daft, not enough to send him to the asylum, but so he had to be watched. He had a horrid way, I remember, of holding lit matches to his bare arm til the smell of burning flesh went sickeningly through the house. It was out of the question to bring a young bride to such a home.

As a matter of fact, they were married that fall. Lem took old Mr. Perkins into the room Susie left. "Won't be much more trouble taking care of two old people than one," he explained. Ma'am Warren's comments on this are embalmed forever in the memories of our people: we have a taste for picturesque and forceful speech. From that time we always saw the lunatic and the bent shepherd together. The old man grew quieter under Lem's care than he'd been for years, and if he felt one of his insane impulses, ran tottering to grasp his protector's arm until he was himself again. Lem used to take him up to the sheep-pasture. He reported with pride that the old man talked as sensible as anybody, "get him off where it's quiet." Indeed, when Mr. Perkins died, six years later, he'd known many happy, lucid hours with his grandchildren.

Susie and Bronson had two boys--sturdy, hearty children, in whom Lem took the deepest, shyest pride. He loved to take them off into the woods with him and exulted in their quick intelligence and strong little bodies. It was Lem who first took alarm about the fall little Frank had, down the cellar stairs. He hurt his spine somehow, but as he only limped a little, nobody thought much of it. Then he began to have difficulty walking. Lem sent for a doctor from Rutland who, as soon as he examined the child, stuck out his lower lip ominously. He said Frank would be a hopeless cripple if it wasn't cured soon. There was, he said, a celebrated surgeon here from Europe who had an effective, but expensive new treatment. "What did the foreign doctor ask?" said Bronson, and, being informed, fell back hopeless. Susie, her pretty, childish face grieved into a wan beauty, put her arms about her little son and looked at her stepfather. He had never failed her. He did not fail her now. He sold the land he had accumulated field by field; he sold the great flock of sheep, every one of which he could call by name; he mortgaged the house over the protests of his bedridden mother; he sold the horse and cow, the very sticks of furniture.

Little Frank was taken to New York to have the great surgeon operate on him--he is there yet, almost completely recovered. Back in Hillsboro, Lem began again, hiring out to his neighbors, only asking enough time to care for his mother.

What good works are you called to? Do them, friends, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, whether large or small. Maybe you're a young mom. I did a little math this week and realized that you might change that child's diaper 10,000 times before they're potty trained. That's good works, thankless need-meeting works. But the scope is endless. At the other end of the scale might be missions, or being a staff person for Crisis Response or other things that completely change your life, pouring yourself into the needs of the world.

But most things are in-between. Generosity in giving is a good work, as the last two verses we've looked at have implied. Helping someone put a roof on their house, or fixing a leaky faucet or cutting their lawn, is a good work. Being the helper who rushes into the burning building or works the COVID intensive care unit is a good work. But so is doing your family's laundry, or taking a meal to a friend, or buying a cart of groceries for the person in front of you at the checkout line. So is comforting and caring for someone in a crisis or in a chronic crisis. Or just working hard at a hard job so you can provide for your family and give to your church and other places. I love Lem Warren because he worked and worked and worked again in order to show love to people who didn't appreciate it. But he was also willing to care for people in relational way, for a wife, for a child and eventually for that child's father-in-law. All of these are good works.

Let me just touch one more category. I've mentioned the lists of virtues found in the New Testament. I ran across a Christian-in-the-workplace blog that looked at the letter to Titus and pulled together a list. "Any workplace looking for a statement of values and good practices could begin well simply by cutting and pasting from Titus." Show respect to everyone; Be hospitable; Be kind; Don't engage in conflict about inconsequential matters; Don't be arrogant or obstinate; Practice gentleness; Be self-controlled; Don't be greedy for gain; Don't become addicted to alcohol; Avoid envy and ill will; Act with integrity; Love goodness; Submit to those in authority over you; Obey civil authorities; Respect others' property; Be prudent. The practice of virtues is a good work.

The last point in our outline says we need to persevere in these things. Good works are not something you do on a whim or once in a while. Galatians 6:9-10 says "*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*"

Let us not grow weary, but instead let us persevere. If your doing good is thankless, do not give up, for even if you get no human thanks you can count on Christ's "well done good and faithful servant." Keep looking for opportunities to do good, and notice that Paul says "to everyone." There are no boundaries to doing good. Though you can only do as much as you can do. You have to leave the rest up to God. And what you can do tends to prioritize in circles starting with those most close to you. You can't walk into your neighbor's kitchen and start doing the dishes. But you can in yours, then build from there.

Lem Warren's story ends well "Three weeks ago [Lem's mother] had her last stroke of paralysis and, after lying speechless a few days, passed away, grim to the last. The day after her funeral Lem did not come to work as he was expected. We went to his house and found, him in bed. "Be ye sick, Lem?" asked my uncle. He looked over the bedclothes with his foolish, apologetic smile. "Kind o' lazy, I guess," he whispered. The doctor was put out by the irregularity of the case. "I can't make out anything really the trouble!" he said. "Only the wheels don't go round as fast as they ought. Call it a failing heart if you want a label." The wheels ran more and more slowly until it was apparent that before long they would stop altogether. Susie and Bronson were in New York with little Frank, so Lem's care fell on the haphazard services of the neighbors.

I was on duty the night he died. He'd lain silent all day, and we hoped he'd come to himself when he woke. Near midnight he gave a great start and tried to sit up. "Yes, mother; coming!" he called hoarsely, then looked at me with his own eyes. "I must ha' forgot about mother's bein' gone," he apologized sheepishly. I took advantage of this lucid interval to try to give him some medicine. His face drew together in grotesque lines of anxiety. "Little Frank worse?" "Oh, no, he's doing finely." "Susie all right?" "Why, yes," I said wonderingly. "Nothing the matter with her other boy?" "No, no," I told him. "Everybody's all right. Here, just take this down." He turned away his head on the pillow and murmured something. When I asked what he said, he smiled feebly as in deprecation of his well-known ridiculous ways. "I'm obliged to you," he said, "but if everybody's all right, I guess I won't have any medicine." He looked at me earnestly. "I . I'm real tired." It came out in one great breath--apparently his last, for he did not move after that, and his ugly, slack-mouthed face was at once quite still. Its expression made me think of the time I had seen it as a child, by lantern-light, as he looked down at the new-born lamb on his breast.

Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due time we will receive our reward.