

Not-So-Dirty Laundry: Good Works and Pleasing God

By Chris Yokel

“But everything we do is tainted with sin”.

This is a common phrase I hear from many Christians, particularly in the Reformed community. I’ve heard it in response to some of the arguments that have been forwarded against faith alone, and I’ve heard it from well-meaning, serious Christian friends in the midst of just ordinary talk about the Christian life. It is usually offered in response to the idea of our own “works,” or obedience having any kind of significant, salvation-related place in the sight of God.

Now, I will heartily agree that there is nothing that the *unregenerate* person can do, or “work” in order to make themselves worthy of salvation, to change their status from enemy of God to friend of God, other than the works of repentance and faith, which are ultimately gifts of God (Ephesians 2:8)—although I still these are something we do and need to do (Acts 2:37-38). Paul says in Titus, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (3:5). Notice that the change comes about by the regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. What is the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant? The Lord spoke through the prophet Ezekiel about this when he said, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (36:26-27). The purpose of the Spirit is to give us a new heart and spirit, in order that we might walk in God’s statutes and rules, His commandments. Do commandments involve doing things? Yes. Do the commandments involve working? Yes. Is God pleased when people obey His commandments? Yes. So it would seem that in the New Covenant, we are to do good works that are pleasing to God.

But then we have the objection come up again: “But everything we do is tainted with sin” . This argument is often given this way: “All our works are like filthy rags before God.” This sentiment and this phrase “filthy rags” is drawn from Isaiah 64. There’s just one rather glaring problem—it’s taken out of context. In fact, in this passage Isaiah clearly says that there are some righteous works that God’s people can and should do that God is pleased with. Here is the larger passage:

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome things that we did not look for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him.
You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,
those who remember you in your ways.

Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.
But now, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people” (vv. 64:1-9).

This passage comes in the context of an entire book about Isaiah prophesying God’s impending judgment upon Israel for its disobedience. In the first few verses, Isaiah expresses his own desire for God to come down and set things right, to restore Israel and to punish unrighteous nations. And notice what he says in the midst of this, that God, “Meet[s] him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways”. But there is a problem with Israel: “In our sins we have been in a long time, and shall we be saved?” This is then where Isaiah declares, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment”. Note that this is not a universal “we”—Isaiah is not indicting the whole human race here. It is specifically covenantal—*Israel* has become like one who is unclean. This is of course a serious charge, because remember that Israel was supposed to be holy, set apart, even in their diet of “clean” animals which distinguished them as God’s people. It is their breaking of God’s law that has made them unclean like all the other nations. Now, what are these righteous deeds Isaiah speaks of that are so repulsive? Well, think of the context of Isaiah as an entire book. God indicts Israel’s leaders for corruption of justice, he indicts the Israelites for reversing morals (calling light darkness and darkness light), and for performing rites like fasting yet oppressing their fellow brothers. Consider some of the opening words of Isaiah 1:

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you
this trampling of my courts?
Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;

I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause" (vv. 11-17).

Looking at it from this perspective, the "righteous acts" that Isaiah refers to in chapter 64 are the religious rites that Israel continues to perform. As God Himself delineates in Isaiah 1, these acts have become polluted and filthy because they are raising bloody hands before Him. They are performing their rites, but turning around and breaking His law in every which way. But God desired righteousness in every way. What pleased Him was *both* temple worship *and* paying the worker a fair and just wage.

Isaiah here is not indicting the obedience of faithful Israelites, saying "Even your best obedience is just stinking filthy rags before God!" How depressing would that be for the Israelite truly desiring to please God? Why bother if your best efforts to truly please God are just miserable little rags that are disgusting to God? Isaiah is indicting hypocrites, just as Jesus indicted the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who tithed their mint, cumin, and spices but forgot justice, mercy, and faith in the law. To take this verse from Isaiah and apply it to Christians now saved and renewed by the Spirit is not only bad exegesis and theology, but also bad pastoral work. If Christians get this false idea into their minds, all they are presented with is an unbearable Father they can never please. And the fact is, the Bible tells us that our works can truly be good and please God! For instance, the writer of Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (13:16). The writer does not say, "Only with works that are absolutely unstained by any droplet of sin and are performed with 100% absolutely righteous motives are pleasing to God." Yet that is the implicit underlying attitude that is often behind the idea "everything we do is tainted with sin." We have inherited an excessive Puritan navel-gazing that is not necessarily biblical. I do not say this casually, but the Bible just does not seem all that interested in that kind of intensive self-examination to the point where we need to "repent of our repenting" (as I once heard a Bible teacher say). Are the motives of our hearts important to God? Absolutely—go read the Sermon on the Mount on that one. Should we be careful of our own motives for obedience? Yes. Should we repent of anything inside us that is not righteous? Yes! But there is a balance in these things, because the fact is that God does say there are ways to please Him and the biblical writers do speak of pleasing God. If we act in obedience towards any of the commands of God with the desire to please Him, we can believe that He is pleased with us. And *we should delight* in sensing that pleasure! It seems like some Christians are almost afraid of this, they are so hyper-sensitive to the idea of their obedience meaning anything that they are afraid to feel the pleasure of God towards them as they choose to reject evil and stand in righteousness. But if we are not seeking the joy and approval of our Father, then what are we living for? It is time for us to reject this bad idea that now as Christians, our works are still so tainted that they are nothing to God but filthy rags. This idea, not our works, is what should be getting tossed in the trash.

On a more serious note, what's the pay dirt of all this? It is the fact that a judgment of works awaits us all. As the apostle Paul says in Romans 2 (which I am fond of quoting, only because it is so crucial and yet strangely missing in our Christian discourse): "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality" (6-11). Jesus Himself has told us that "An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). And in some of His last words in recorded scripture He tells us, "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done" (Revelation 22:12). Our call is not to cower in the corner, picking through the entrails of our every action, looking for stains. But we are to build ourselves up in Spirit-empowered good works, acts of obedience to Christ, seeking His pleasure everyday, so that on the last day, we will stand before Him and hear His great pleasure declared before all men: "Well done my good and faithful servant". At that time will we spurn His commendation with an "Oh no, my works are tainted" or will we hear Him with pleasure?