

Beloved people of God.

Martin Luther, the great reformer of the church in the middle ages issued this warning, "The Devil is always attracting people to good works to ensure they don't reach the point of thinking they need the grace of Christ." Do you know that all other religions bar Christianity is built on that premise? Islam; Hinduism; Buddhism and all others believe that you need to do good works to ensure they will make it to eternal life. And even some in the Christian church believe that, at least it seems like it.

But note the following Scripture. John 6:28-29; "Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me!" Acts 4:12 is clear – "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved!" And it is this very fact that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions! Christianity teaches the inability of man to assist in his own salvation. Salvation is in Christ alone and in no other way.

Now I don't take great delight in this fact for I know many lovely God fearing people who sincerely believe there is a God, but who don't believe that Jesus is the only way to enter heaven. They have this idea that God cannot take offense against good works and although they don't say it, they almost feel that God should be thankful for their good works.

Now of course, we know God isn't against good works, in fact he has prepared them in advance for us to do (Eph 2:10). But what God's word teaches is that these good works are not done to earn salvation or add to the work of Christ but out of thankfulness. Isa 64:6 reminds us; "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." Congregation we need to come to a point in our Christian life where we take great delight in the fact that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Jesus has done it all! We cannot add to it and what's more, we don't have to add to it!

Now some denominations suggest that God has done his gracious work by sending his Son to die for us, but now it is up to us to do the rest! Hence there are Christians today who work tirelessly in the kingdom of God for they see their work as a repayment to God for what He has done for them in Christ. In fact, in some cases, Christian leaders place this burden on them. They have a yoke placed on them that Jesus came to take away! Scripture clearly teaches that we are saved by Christ alone, out of sheer grace alone through faith alone. "Ah" you say, "Are we not meant to do good works?" How can it all be grace? How can it all be free? Surely, we need to do something!"

The short answer is No. No! The thief on the cross is the prime example. If he needed to do something other than believe, he would not have seen Jesus in paradise that day, for he didn't get the chance to do something. So please, don't rob Jesus of his glory by even thinking you can add to his work. Salvation is free and it is all by grace alone! And anyone who regards that their work, whether it be teaching SS, or leading a bible study, or their missionary work as a repayment for God's grace to them, are sadly mistaken.

This is what the Pharisees thought. If they could only observe the law to its enth degree, they would be saved. And they were diligent! They even crossed the oceans to make new converts [Mat 23:15], but as Jesus said, it only resulted in them making the converts sons of hell. Paul addresses this very issue in Gal 3. The false teachers were not saying they could be saved without Christ, but they taught that something needed to be added.

That is why Paul exclaims in Gal 5:2; "If you let yourselves be circumcised", in other words, if you go back to the old ways of trying to keep the law, "Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Gal 5:2). Congregation, if we could save ourselves then God has not only made a huge mistake, Jesus is worthless to you! But that is not the case! Rom 3:20 reminds us that no one is saved by observing the law.

The same thing is said much stronger in Gal 3:10, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." In other words, we cannot do it! Everything we do is tainted with sin. Even our best thoughts and deeds done with the best intentions are not without blemish. Let me describe God's hate for sin with a simply illustration.

Most people here would be quite happy to drink this glass of water. However, if I were to squeeze a drop of puss from my infected wrist into that glass of water, none of you would come and drink it even though it was still 99.9% pure water. It would be contaminated. So it is with God. Even our best works are tainted with sin and therefore unacceptable to a thrice holy God! In fact, if you think you can add to or repay the work of Christ, you are being sinful! God has so ordained it that there can never be a human being that can stand before him and boast. No one can say, "Lord I helped a little, or wasn't it good of me to do this or that?" No, No! Christ alone! And because of that, all flesh shall praise him to the glory of God the Father.

Now some may regard this teaching as rather negative, but the opposite is true! It not only teaches that in Christ alone we are saved, but also that Christ presented the kind of work that met all of God's demands to save sinners. With Him, God was well pleased, and He crowned Him with glory and honour! Now let me say that there still remains a tension in our lives. "By their fruit you shall know them" says Jesus. "Faith apart from works is dead" says James. We're saved to "do the good works that God had prepared in advance for us to do" says Paul. John Calvin's comment was that we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that stands alone. And that's where the tension lies. The Bible teaches that Jesus alone saves sinners, but the Bible also tells us that God rewards good works in this life and the next.

Heb 11:26 tells us that "Moses regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ of greater value than the treasures of Egypt because he was looking ahead to his reward." Jesus promised all those who followed him will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life (Mat 19:29)! Rev 14:13, "Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them."

Congregation let me encourage you to take the narrow road, for the richest rewards are found on the road we travel with Jesus! Let us invest in Christ and his cause. It is the best investment! Better than self. Better than the stock market. Better than the bank! Better than the footy team. Better than trying to win tattslotto. The Lord says in his word that, if we are found faithful in a few things, we will be put in charge of many things when the accounts are settled (Mat 25:21, 23).

So every resource we have, every sinew of strength in our body, may we learn to use it to promote the cause of Christ in this life, for the Lord has promised that we will reap the rewards in the next (Lk 16:9). "Behold I am coming soon" says Christ, "and I have my reward with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Rev 22:12).

Now please do not misunderstand! None of these verses I have quoted above mean that our good works are meritorious as far as our salvation is concerned. Don't be tempted to make up a list of claims for the works that we have done and that God needs to reward. That would be poisoning the gospel. No, our works are free labour. We live and work in the shadow of the cross and what it cost our Saviour to set us free. In life and in death we depend on his mercy and not on our works. And our reward is purely a gift of grace. Anything we do as far as good works are concerned are an outflow of Christ's Spirit working within us.

Without the Spirit's presence our good works would still be seen as completely and utterly sinful to a Holy God. And let us also remember that even though God rewards, He remains free to be gracious and merciful to whomever He wills. The parable of the workers in the vineyard in Mat 20:1-16; makes that very clear! All the workers were paid a denarius, even the ones who had only worked an hour. This particular parable has a special message for those who have been slaving away for some time.

Sometimes we feel we have borne the burden of the work in the church! Sometimes we even wonder what the vineyard would look like if we had not taken care of it. And then someone who is still wet behind the ears comes in, making all the noises of just a new Christian. Do you know how much they will get paid? A denarius! One day's wages! But who cares! They're saved and we praise God! By the way, do you know how much you will get paid after all your years of labour? A denarius! That is the freedom of God. No seniority, no long service entitlements, no "I am the oldest member therefore..."

No boasting, "we have been here the longest..." No pride in what you do as compared to another! We are all members of the kingdom, purely by grace. I once was privy to administer baptism and witness the public profession of faith of a young woman who had only known Christ for six months.

Afterwards, while we were having coffee in the hall, an elderly man who had been instrumental in setting up the church, came up and shook the young lady's hand and said, "You, young lady share the same rights and privileges that I do. Welcome" This elderly man understood the nature of grace that gives us our place in God's church. So our free salvation by grace results in thankful obedience. And thankful obedience will be rewarded by the Father. However, those who obey are not doing so to have some bargaining power with God. Our obedience is free labour! We are unworthy servants, having only done our duty! (Lk 17:10).

Now some suggest that because we are saved by grace alone in Christ alone it can make for cheap religion [q64]. However, anyone who says this is misunderstanding the gospel. Grace religion tells us that it is impossible to be saved by works, but that once we are saved by grace, it is impossible not to do good works. In fact, it is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude. If we claim to be Christians and live a life void of good works, we should not merely be asking them to try a little harder, but whether or not they are in Christ? For it is impossible to be in him and not to produce fruits of gratitude!

Our tree should be over laden with fruit. Let me put it this way. You cannot have the righteousness of Christ because you subscribe to the right theory or you belong to the right church! You cannot have the righteousness of Christ without having Christ first. Christ cannot be for you without being with you and in you with his Holy Spirit. He cannot be your Saviour, without being your Lord! The judge is coming and He will have his reward with him! "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" [Rom 8:1].

It is not because we are in the right church, although that is essential, for we need good teaching to lead sinners to Christ. It is not because we subscribe to a particular theory. It is because we are in Christ! We have been set free from the law of sin and death because we are found in Christ! How do we teach this balance between grace and works? When do we speak of grace and when do we speak about thankful obedience? Perhaps we need to be wary of two extremes.

One is that we draw the circle of salvation to narrow and that only the spiritual elite can be members or sit at the Lord's Table. The other extreme is that we draw the circle too large and we talk everyone into heaven. Interestingly, God's children will not have trouble getting the right connection between grace and works. We tend in the church today to be too frightened of free grace. And rightly so. It cost the Saviour his life!

However, there is this added concern that I have, and that is we should never forget to teach God's grace to those whose knowledge about Jesus and his love is very little. We must all learn again and anew that God's grace, his forgiveness and love is his way of bringing us to works of thankful obedience. Because without faith we do not have Christ and without his Spirit we have no good works. However, being in Christ we have his Holy Spirit and are able to do good works. May those who are walking in darkness see our good works and be drawn by the Holy Spirit to praise our heavenly Father! Amen.