

Pako Evening Service 11/12/2016

Scripture Reading: Mat 7:15-23; John 15:1-8; LD 32 Q&A 86-87; Sermon: "Saved to work"

Congregation, one of the things we generally do during our worship services is have what we call a 'law' section. Usually the leader of worship will read a passage from Scripture that highlights God's will for our lives. Now the point of this is at least threefold. First, it highlights God's holiness as compared to our failures, sinfulness if you will, and hence makes us realise we need a Saviour. Secondly, knowing God's will for our lives and desiring now to be obedient because of our forgiveness and salvation in Christ, the Holy Spirit creates within us a desire to flee from sin. So one would hope that a leader of worship after reading the law, would not leave us in a state of despair, but remind us the wonderful forgiveness we have in Christ and the desire to live in obedience. And then lastly, God's law reveals to us how to live pleasing Lives to God in response to the wonderful free grace and forgiveness we have received.

Now the question we need to grapple with is this. If our forgiveness and salvation, including eternal life is free in Christ, why is there a need to do good works? Are our good works not superfluous? Now I deliberately mention the phrase 'good-works' for some Christians are so scared to even use the phrase because they incorrectly state that all our good works are as filthy rags to God.

Some of these pious Christians love to quote Isa 64:6. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." But that verse doesn't say that our righteous acts are worthless. They are worthless if we think that somehow they contribute to our salvation, as if Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient. However, for those of us who are saved by Christ through his death and resurrection and rest completely in that can now again do good works by the power of the Holy Spirit living within them.

Jesus himself made that teaching fairly plain in passages such as Mat 7:16-17; "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit." John 15:1-2; is also a well-known passage that teaches us this. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." Furthermore, God has planned these good works in advance for us to do in Christ. Eph 2:10; "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Now please understand we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone guided by Scripture alone. And we reject any teaching that is contrary to it. Yet, because of our wonderful salvation and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we want to obey God's Word and our works are the beautiful fruit of salvation. That doesn't mean they are perfect in and of themselves for they are still performed by sinful creatures like ourselves, but the Holy Spirit also cleanses our prayers and our good-works so that they are acceptable to God the Father.

The goal of salvation is thankful, grateful, obedient people. Therefore, any good-works that we do are purely out of thankfulness, cleansed by the Holy Spirit. I put it to you that was the goal at Creation. The Creator God made a beautiful world, everything was perfect. He basically said to Adam and Eve that they should work in the garden, eat its fruit, enjoy everything He had made for them, not because they must, but out of thankfulness, delighting in God's goodness.

The same is true of our salvation. Titus 2:13-14 reminds us, "While we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." So because of Christ's sacrifice for our sin, and now through the work of the Holy Spirit within us, guided by God's Word, we are no longer under the power of sin but delivered from it and therefore able and eager to do what is good! Doesn't mean we always do it perfectly, but the desire is there.

That means we cannot claim to have been redeemed if there is absolutely no evidence of good works. We cannot have Jesus as Saviour if we refuse to honour him as Lord in all that we do! Let me put it this way. If we claim to be Christians, justified by faith alone in Christ alone, then from that moment on we exist only "in Christ." We do not have a life of our own anymore, but as HC Q&A 1 says, we belong totally to Christ. In fact, crudely put, outside of Christ, we have no existence; we are dead people walking. But in Christ we have died to sin, therefore we cannot live in it any longer (Rom 6:2). In Christ, we are part of the new creation that has been restored to love and glorify the Lord. And this is the purpose of God's salvation through Christ. That in all our living, our doing, thinking, we may show that we are thankful to God.

Now we don't do extra good works because we wish to repay God, or receive an extra reward in heaven. We do good works because we are thankful and wish to give him glory by delighting in his goodness to us! The result of God's redemption through Christ is thankfulness. And for those who are in Christ it is impossible not to be thankful. For Christ continually renews us through his Spirit. But this thankfulness is impossible for those outside of Christ and his renewal work. That doesn't mean that non-Christians cannot do good works. They can and many do, but it has no value in that it is not done out of thankfulness for what Christ has done, nor are their good works cleansed by the Holy Spirit, nor do their good works have the glory of God in mind.

Now that is not God's fault. Sinful man is without excuse for their unbelief, because even in their sinful state they have an inkling that there is an almighty powerful God. However, the unregenerate man denies Him and cannot bring themselves to acknowledge Him. And it is this very thing that is unbelieving man's problem. Almost from the beginning of time, sinful man has reacted negatively to God's general revelation. They rather worship the creature than the Creator. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21).

Yet, this is where Christians are different. We, being renewed by the blood and the Spirit, can begin to fulfill God's original assignment and give God His due and to thank him who owns us because he has bought us with the precious blood of his Son. But not only does God receive honour and glory when we live in thankfulness to him, we too receive some benefits. And one benefit we receive is knowing that our faith is real. Yes, yes, I know it's a dangerous line and sounds like a contradiction, yet it is true that a tree is known by its fruit as Mat 7:16ff reminded us.

Galatians 5:22-23; reminds us of the fruit of the Spirit and it would have been silly to include those verses if that were not observable. However, before we run away with ourselves, I suggest that our lives will never convince us that our own faith is real. Some people say, let your conscience be your guide, but they forget that our conscience is also tainted with sin. Some like to say that the amount of works is directly related to the amount of faith we have, but that is an equally dangerous line I would not like to entertain.

Someone else's life may encourage our faith and be worth telling others about, but our own faith can only be real if it is firmly anchored in the Word of God and in this regard we need to be very critical of our own performance. Having said that, there is a link between faith and works. Our faith grows when our Christian activity increases. If we go out on a limb for Jesus we feel a real sense of his presence. On the other hand, we will stunt the growth of our faith if we continually take on board the ideas of people who deny the Saviour.

Yes, I know that in this world we do have to work with people who deny the Saviour, but we have a problem if that never creates a problem for you. If you know Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, then you also need stand up for Christ. If we refuse discipleship than all our talk is rather hollow. Faith and action go together. We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that stands alone. Or as James 2:26 puts it, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

There is also another benefit when we do good works. Our neighbour may be won over to Christ. The gain or if you like the profit of our works are supposed to go to Christ, after all, he is the author of salvation. We don't do good works so that other people will think a bit better of us, and let's be honest we are inclined to do so. Sometimes I hear people say after they have helped someone for a while, "You would think that they would be grateful after all I have done for them"

So let's be sure. We don't do good works for our neighbours or someone else because we want our church group to become bigger, or because we want to make our figures in the National Church Life Survey improve or our Year Book statistics look a bit better. No. Mat 5:16 reminds us, "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." If people keep talking about us, or about our church or our good deed, then the goal of good works has not been reached. The praise must go up, and only then will Christ and our neighbour be the winner!

In 1 Pet 2:12; the Christians who are accused and spoken about falsely are to live such good lives that the pagans will taken a careful look and conclude that the God of these people is good and great. The onlooker in both cases knows that Christ already owns the person doing the good work. In 1 Pet 3:1-2; there is another instance where the Word has been ineffective and the deed has become the only weapon. "Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives."

These women had believed the gospel but their husbands had not. The wives couldn't keep quiet about their new riches, but their talk was merely a nagging nuisance to their husbands. Preach with your lives!

Finally, it is without doubt that God loved the world, and that His offer of salvation is for one and all. There is this story about two Christians who come up to this great sinner and one says, "Friend, God loves you" and the other Christian adds, "and he loves to change you." Many Jews and the leaders of the church were irritated by Jesus's desire to save the worst of sinners. He even came to save the rich and crooked according to Luke 19:9-10; Jesus loves them and still loves them otherwise he would not have gone to the cross (1 Tim 1:15).

Jesus' death is sufficient to save all and effective for those who believe! But salvation involves conversion. And those who have not been converted have not been saved. Conversion is a bit like a western family who adopts a child from a hopelessly decadent ghetto. The parents adopt the child because they love the child. And as soon as they can they will bring that child to a new environment and changes will need to be made. So salvation involves conversion. And if Jesus loves you enough to die for you, then be assured that through his Holy Spirit he will change you. It cannot be any other way.

We see that very thing happening in the Corinthian church. Paul writes to them in 1 Cor 6:9-11; "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Did you notice? That is what they were (v11). God in his power changed them! Yes, we too are called to do good works, so that by our godly living our neighbours may be won over to Christ. And God still has the same power to change the stubborn hearts of sinners. Wonderful hey! So let's keep doing the good deeds that God has created for us to do in Christ.

Oh, did you also notice what the gardener does to those who do not bear fruit – he cuts them off and burns them. Let us not go there. Amen.