

VOCATION

Colossians 3:1-4:1

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 8, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

This is the last part in our “Doctrines of the Reformation” series. The previous four sermons aren’t really complete without this one. And this one doesn’t really stand on its own very well without the previous four. So if you missed any of them, you can always find them on our website or even on iTunes.

So what about good works?

We have discussed justification by grace. That is, God declares you righteous on account of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Last week we talked about sanctification by grace. That is, the Holy Spirit is the one who works to renew in us the image of God. Both of these activities take place by God’s grace without our works. It is all based on Christ’s work for you by his perfect life, death, and resurrection. In the divine economy of grace, everything depends on what Christ did for you. God does not need our good works.

So then what becomes of good works? Why does God still command us to do them? Does God even care if we do them?

And when we talk about doctrine, if good works have no place in either justification or sanctification, then where do we put them? We need a third category called “vocation.” This is where our good works belong.

“Vocation” is another fancy Latin word. It means, “Calling.” In our modern English usage, the word “vocation” usually just means your job or your career. You might be a teacher or an electrician or a doctor or a police officer. Or you might say, “I’m retired,” or, “I’m a stay at home mom,” or, “I’m a child; Therefore, I don’t have a vocation.” That, by the way, is false. Every person—every man, woman, and child—has a vocation. In fact, you probably have several of them.

A vocation is anything God calls you to. If you are a parent, God has called you to that. If you are a child, God has called you to that. If you are a neighbor, or a citizen, or a grandparent, or any number of different things, God has called you to that vocation. He has placed you there to love your neighbor within your vocation.

One theologian explains this profoundly and simply by saying, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does” (*Wingren, Luther on Vocation*, 10). That’s why we do them, and that is why God is pleased with them—because they benefit those around us. God loves you. And he also loves your neighbor. That is why he wants you to love your neighbor as yourself.

That, in short, is the doctrine of vocation.

The Scripture passage I have chosen to teach this doctrine comes from *Paul’s Letter to the Colossians*. We will begin at chapter 3, verse 1, and read through chapter 4, verse 1. It is on page 834 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Colossians 3, we begin reading at verse 1. And we read in Jesus’ name.

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¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

^{4:1} Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

God declares you righteous. Your sins are forgiven. Your sins cannot take anything away from your status before God, and your good works cannot add anything to your status before God. You are righteous for Jesus’ sake. You are holy. The blood of his cross has cleansed you from all sins. His righteousness has been given to you as a gift, and there is nothing left for you to do. Everything—and I mean *everything*—is a gift of God’s grace.

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Now this teaching of grace is a problem for the Church—or, at least, an apparent problem. If your good works add nothing, and if your sins subtract nothing, then where’s the motivation for anything? How does the Church get people to do what we want? What leverage do we have to get people to pray, pay, and obey? And it’s not just a problem of getting people to do what the Church wants. It’s really a problem of obedience to God’s commandments. If there’s no punishment or reward left in it, then what’s the point? Why not just do whatever we want if God already forgives us anyway?

There are two answers to this question: First, because that’s not who you are anymore, and, second, because it won’t help your neighbor.

First, that’s just not who you are anymore. Jesus Christ is your Savior. He purchased you with his holy and precious blood and has delivered you from sin, death, and the devil. He has made you to be a child of God. You are now an heir of heaven. Now, in light of all that, what do you want to do? I have never come across a Christian who just says, “I would like to keep sinning. Thank you very much.” I have never met a Christian who would say with absolute sincerity, “I would like to rob banks, sleep with whoever I want, and murder everyone who looks at me sideways.” That simply is not the fruit of repentance.

Every Christian has at least some desire to do what is right. It’s natural for a Christian. The Scriptures describe conversion—specifically Baptism—as a new birth (John 3:5). There’s something new here that wasn’t here before. There is a purity and righteousness that did not exist before. And this is God’s gift. In the Scripture we just read, Paul describes this as a “new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (3:10). There is a new nature that actually delights in doing what is right. So, why not keep sinning? Because it’s not who you are anymore. There is at least a part of you that simply does not want to sin anymore.

But that, of course, does not mean you cease sinning altogether. I’ve never met a Christian who simply wants to do evil all the time. But I’ve also never met a Christian who isn’t at least tempted to commit the heinous sins I previously mentioned. The new self has come to life. But the old self still clings to you and must be put to death again and again and again. Paul still has to tell the Colossians, “Put to death ... what is earthly in you” (3:5). And he has to tell them, “Put on ... compassion hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (3:12).

As Christians, we live in this life-long struggle between the old and the new. So we don’t lose heart when fall, again and again, into the same old sins we swore we would put away for good. Instead we repent of them and we receive Christ’s forgiveness. And God declares that your true identity is the new self he has created in you. That is who you are in Christ Jesus, and that is the “you” that will live on into eternity. So when you live and act according to God’s commandments, you are simply living in harmony with who you really are in Christ Jesus.

So why not abuse God’s grace and go on sinning? Because that’s not who you are anymore.

And the second reason is, *because it won’t help your neighbor*. God commands you to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31). Remember, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”

Here’s the thing: God loves you, and he also loves your neighbor. That is why he commands you to love your neighbor—because he wants good things to happen to your neighbor.

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The Apostle Paul describes love as the highest virtue. After extolling other virtues, he says, “And above all these, put on love” (3:14). Elsewhere he also says, “The greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13) and, “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10). Jesus himself says the greatest commandment is, “You shall love the Lord your God ... And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37a, 39). So love is a really big deal. If we could summarize all of God’s commandments in just one word, it would be this: love. This is God’s will for his creation: love.

Now, if love is such a big deal, we should probably define the word. What does God mean when he calls us to love our neighbor? First of all, love is not a feeling. It is not an emotion that motivates you to do nice things for another person. Love is an action. Love is intentionally choosing to do what is best for another person, whether you feel like it or not and regardless of the negative impact it might have on you. Love is not a feeling. Love is an action.

The world defines “love” differently. At best, the world really means “affection” when it uses the word “love.” And affection is a good thing. It motivates us to do kind things for another person. This is good. When parents have affection for a child, it makes them move just a little bit quicker to do good things for the child. And it helps them do it joyfully. Affection is good. But affection is not quite the same thing as the highest virtue of love.

At worst, the world really means “lust” when it uses the word “love.” This is bad. This is very, very bad, because lust is the exact opposite of love. Now, the meaning of the word “lust” is not limited to sexual desire. That’s usually what we think of with the word “lust.” But the meaning is much broader. It really means any kind of selfish desire to gain pleasure from another person or another thing. So, for example, when you say something like, “I would just love a big, juicy steak,” what you really mean is, “I’m lusting for a steak.” If you literally love steak that means you are committed to doing what is best for the steak. It means putting the steak back into the cow and making it come back to life again. And I don’t think that’s what we mean when we say, “I love steak.” So nobody actually loves steak. We like it, and we lust after it, but we don’t love it. Because lust always takes, and love always gives. Okay? That’s the key difference. Lust takes, and love gives.

Now, lusting after a big, juicy steak is usually okay. You can enjoy it. That’s what it’s there for. But we run into serious problems when this opposite definition of the word “love” finds its way into our relationships with other people. We start using them for the enjoyment we get from them, and when that enjoyment runs dry or gets boring, we say, “I don’t love you anymore.”

Now what does that mean? Unless it’s a confession of sin where the person is saying, “I have failed to put your interests ahead of my own,” it’s not the biblical definition of the word. Usually it means something like, “I don’t have affection for you anymore,” or, “I’m not getting as much enjoyment out of you as I used to.” But that’s not love. That’s either affection or lust. But it’s not love. So if your friend ever says to you, “I just don’t love my wife anymore,” the correct thing to say is, “Repent. Confess that sin, receive forgiveness for it, and start loving her again.”

There’s this completely unrealistic idea that love is some kind of magical and inexplicable force between two people that comes and goes as it wills. You fall in love, and you can’t help it. And when it goes, there’s nothing you can do about it. The only thing to do is move on and hope you find love with some other person. This understanding of love is pure evil, because it

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causes people to actually stop loving each other. But love is not a feeling. It’s not a magical force. It is a continual and intentional commitment to put another person’s interests ahead of your own, whether you feel like it or not. It’s easy to do good works for another person when we want to do them—when we have feelings of affection. That’s why affection is a good thing—because it motivates us to do good works. But love—love means doing those good works when affection isn’t there to help us. Love means putting that other person’s interests ahead of our own, especially when we don’t feel like it, or when it causes us suffering. That’s why love is the greatest of all virtues.

Consider the way God loved the world: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). Now what does that word, “love,” mean? It doesn’t mean God’s feelings of affection for us. It describes his action. He gave his only Son. And it wasn’t because he saw anything good in us that stirred his affections for us. If anything, it was our depravity that moved God to give his Son for us. God loved us because we do not love. Now think about that; that’s counter-cultural.

And what did God experience in his action of loving us? He experienced pain, rejection, suffering, even death. He loved us to death, literally.

Now this demonstration of love obviously serves as a good example for us. God calls each of us to love one another as he has loved us. But this is so much more than just an example. If it’s just an example, then the act of love really loses its benefit, and the Gospel ends up condemning us far more than the Law ever did, and that’s not good news. But God’s act of love is good news for us because, first and foremost, it is an atonement—a payment for our sin. In the heavenly courts, this cancels out all our misdeeds. It atones for our lack of love. Our unrighteousness is taken away from us, placed on Jesus, and, in exchange, his righteousness is transferred to us. This has made peace with God. So now in the heavenly courts, you stand before God justified, not because of your own good deeds, but because of Christ’s good deed on your behalf.

So we don’t need to bring our good deeds to God. We don’t have to please him anymore. He’s satisfied. He still wants us to do good works, but not for him anymore. He wants us to do them for our neighbor, because God loves your neighbor. So our good works are pleasing to God only in the sense that they benefit those around us. So Paul teaches us to “work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward” (3:23-24). Realize that when you love and serve those around you, in whatever form that may take, you are doing the good works God loves to see.

And this word “inheritance” makes all the difference. The reward we receive from God will not be because of our work. That would be called “wages.” But the reward is called an “inheritance,” because we receive it based on our status as children of God. That’s it. Everything we receive from God is a gift. So then our good works are not to be directed toward God. That’s not what God wants. He wants them to be directed toward our neighbors. And this is pleasing in God’s sight.

So God has placed us in relationships to the people around us. That’s what vocation is. It’s the various callings God has placed on our lives, and these callings show us which specific neighbors our good works should be directed toward. When we consider that the world has

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eight billion people in it, and all of them are our neighbors, the task becomes a little bit unmanageable. But if you are a husband, then you know, “Husbands, love your wives” (3:19). If you are a wife, then you know, “Wives, submit to your husbands” (3:18). And if you are a child, a parent, an employee, an employer, or any number of different things, God’s Word teaches us what specific good works he desires for us to do in those vocations.

And all of these good works are for the benefit of the neighbor. God doesn’t want us holding them up to him, as if now he is supposed to be pleased with us. He is pleased with us because of Christ. Jesus blood is completely sufficient in the heavenly courts. There’s no need to bring your good works in there.

It’s like a cat that kills a mouse and then brings it inside so you can see it. Your cat wants to show it off. *Look at the disgusting good work I did for you!* So you say, “That’s great. Leave it outside.”

That’s what our good works are like when we hold them up to God, as if he is supposed to be happy with us now. God is certainly pleased when you perform works of service for your neighbor. That’s what he wants you to do. But don’t bring them into his house as if he is supposed to be proud of you. Before God, all our good deeds are like filthy rags (Is. 64:6). Even our noblest deeds, done with the best of our intentions, are polluted with selfishness and pride. We cannot do a good work without sinning.

Just think about this: how often do we hear someone say, “The best thing about doing a good deed is the feeling of pride I have afterward”? No; that’s ridiculous! The value of a good work is the benefit provided to your neighbor. If you dig a well in some remote village in Africa, the best thing that comes out of that is not your feeling of pride. The best thing that comes out of it is the clean drinking water so people don’t get sick and die. The feeling of pride you get for doing that is just plain sinful.

It should be a thing of joy to serve our fellow man. That’s how it is for Christ (Heb. 12:2). But we can never let our good works simply be a matter of service. We have to turn them into something that exalts us. We use them to feel better about ourselves or maybe even to show everyone else how good we are. And that’s just plain sinful. And the worst is when we present them to God as if he is supposed to be proud of us.

So when we try to bring our good works into the heavenly courts, they don’t amount to anything. In fact, they actually condemn us.

Saint Paul considered all of his good works—everything that looked really, really good in the eyes of men—he considered it to be rubbish (Phil. 3:8). Why? Because it doesn’t amount to anything before God. Before God we have a righteousness that is not based on our obedience to the Law. It is a righteousness based on Christ’s work for us, which we receive through faith (Phil. 3:9).

In the heavenly courts, Jesus’ blood is sufficient to cover all your sin. You can leave your good works at home. Or, better yet, you can leave them with your neighbor; that’s where they belong—with your husband, your wife, your children, your parents, and all the people you encounter in your daily life.

In heaven, you have Jesus’ blood on your side. And that’s all you need. So you are free. No longer do we ask, “Are my good works good enough for God?” Instead, “How can I serve my neighbor?” And that’s it. You’re good with God. Go be good to your neighbor. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.