

“Spiritual Fitness: Doing Good”

Ephesians 2:8-10

Second in Series on Spiritual Fitness

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“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good deeds, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

- Ephesians 2:10

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, by your grace, we have been saved, giving us the power to do the good you have created us to do. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Sermon Message

I cannot remember where I was but I overheard someone make the comment that he thought a particular person was a “piece of work.” It was *not* meant as a compliment.

Indeed, the whole notion of calling someone a “piece of work” is typically meant to highlight a lack of good behavior. If I call you a “piece of work,” I am probably not being kind.

But it is an interesting phrase or idiom, is it not? An idiom is a figure of speech; it is a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words.

For example, if we say someone is “under the weather,” we typically don’t mean that someone is standing outside “under the weather”; rather, the person is not feeling well. Or, if we say, it’s “raining cats and dogs,” we usually don’t mean that our pets are airborne; rather, we mean that it is really raining hard. Or, if we say, we must “face the music,” we typically don’t mean that we face the choir; rather, we confront whatever matter is before us, often not good.¹

¹ See “A Piece of Work” at *Homiletics* (March 11, 2018) at www.homileticsonline.com.

You get the idea. We typically don't see the idiom "piece of work" as a compliment, unlike the apostle Paul, who, in our passage today, sees us not simply as a "piece of work" but as God's handiwork (2:10). To the Ephesians, Paul writes, "we are God's handiwork designed to do good deeds" (2:10). This is the very purpose for which God created us: to do good work, or to act in ways that are uplifting. To be a "piece of work" in God's hand is to be a "special work" of God's new creation, of God's grace. It is to be fashioned as one who demonstrates the very characteristics of God as loving, generous, merciful, kind, faithful, joyful, patient (Galatians 5:20-22); it is to display a power, in union with Christ, which moves us toward sharing in God's own life (Ephesians 3:16).

Indeed, a whole new moral character is brought into existence (Colossians 3:12-15). Other persons can actually see in us a discernible difference in how we live. The old ways are gone: the new ways are evident (2 Corinthians 5:17). Moreover, we act in ways not expecting a reward, where we can take all the credit, but as a response of gratitude for the gift we have received in Christ (2:9).

Motivation to Do Good

Do we do what we do to gain a prize, or do we respond out of gratitude for the gift?

Over the centuries, Roman Catholics have tended to say that we should be good because our salvation depends on it; therefore, we had better get to work at being good. Protestants (or at least Calvinists) have tended to say that we should be good as a way to prove we are "saved" or among "God's elect," so we better act like it.²

Both views neglect what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount about "letting your light shine before others, so that they may see your good deeds and praise God in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). According to Jesus, demonstrating goodness is not about gaining some kind of reward, or figuring out what we need to do to show others how good *we* are, but rather about 1) giving *God* glory, and 2) drawing others to God.³

² Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness: Christian Character in a Consumer Culture* (London, UK: Continuum, 2006), 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 104.

Both Jesus and Paul seem to be saying that those who learn to practice virtues like goodness and humility as *a way of life* will begin to be noticed. That is, other persons may wonder what is different about how we are acting and pointing others to God.

Graham Tomlin, an Anglican Bishop, has written that this is why there is a “missionary imperative” to practicing the gospel. If others cannot see in us the change that the gospel of God’s grace has bought about in our lives, then why should others believe what we say?⁴ Why be good at all? Why be kind at all?

And if we think this is some kind of academic exercise, we might want to wake up and pay attention to what is happening around us! Who are the virtuous people today? In government? In education? In faith?

I believe this is one most crucial aspects of church’s mission: among whom do we find God’s grace in *full performance-mode*? Among whom do we see God’s grace at work? Who is bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit? What churches?

For if, as Paul says, we are saved by grace (which we are), and if, this is God’s good gift to us, not earned by us (which it is), then how are we showing such goodness, such grace to others? How are we letting others know what God is doing in us? If God’s grace is God’s handiwork in us (which we believe it is), then how are we living in ways that show it?

Christian Ethics 101

In many respects, this is really what Christian ethics is about: the reason we as Christians are to act the way we are to act is to show the world the kind of God we worship and serve.⁵

The apostles Peter and Paul tried to make this connection again and again in a very pagan environment. They tried to communicate that the God who had acted in Christ, out of sheer love, for sake of the world, is the same God who also created us for good works (Ephesians 2:7, 10).⁶

In a world of multiple gods, this was not an easy “sell.” It never is.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See William H. Willimon, *The Service of God: How Worship and Ethics Are Related* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 31-32.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

Do we show honor to Zeus, or do we follow Aphrodite? Zeus promises revenge. Aphrodite pleasure. Do we worship Caesar and the state, or do we worship Christ and his kingdom? One promises political power, the other reveals that true living is sacrificial.

During the Enlightenment, different kinds of ethical viewpoints began to emerge in the West about what is good and how we are to act. One thinker, by the name of Immanuel Kant, in particular, said that we do not need God to tell us what to do or to tell us what is good. Rather, all we need is a set of rules or principles derived from human reason and experience.⁷

The problem with this view was that it did not convey an overarching sense of purpose. It could also be very abstract. For example, do we act out of a sense of duty regardless of circumstances, or do we act in ways that take into consideration all kinds of forces that affect us? Are we to act in ways that promote the greatest happiness for the greatest good and not worry about the weakest left behind, or are we to find ways of promoting the well-being of all?⁸

And what happens when we disagree about the principles themselves? That can also be a problem. For example, “just war theory” may be valid about what is considered a way to act, but what happens when we cannot agree on whether a particular conflict passes the test or not? And who decides?

Just because we have rules and principles does not mean we will agree on how we are to use them, or what they are for.

Perhaps as Methodist we may want to keep in mind the three simple rules that are to help us:

Methodism’s Simple Rules

1. Do no harm
2. Do all the good you can
3. Stay in Love with God/or Practice Faith⁹

⁷ See Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translation by James W. Ellington, Third Edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Press, 1993), 30.

⁸ See Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness*, 47,

⁹ The most popular expression of the three simple rules in the Methodist tradition comes from Bishop Reuben Job’s little book, *Three Simple Rules* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008).

The reason we follow these rules is not because they are more rules to burden us, but because they can assist to become more like Christ. In their proper place, they strengthen our lives and help us to become spiritually fit.

It is very similar to a growing tree: the life of a tree courses through the membranes that channel that life from the roots to the leaves to the fruit. But the tree also needs bark to protect and guard that life to keep it flowing. Without the bark, the sap would either drain away or dry up, and the leaves and fruit die.¹⁰

In the same way, the rules and disciplines of the Christian faith help to protect the life of the Spirit and keep it flowing into all the different parts of our lives. Hence, the practices of prayer, worship, serving others, fasting, receiving Holy Communion. It's all a part of the movement of God's grace in us. After all, it was Jesus who said that a good tree bears good fruit (Matthew 7:17).

We don't do these things because we are obligated. We do them – hopefully – out of gratitude (Ephesians 2:6). We do them as a response to what is growing in us: Jesus' own life!

Because it's really all part of God's handiwork. It's all part of God's glorious work, of God's new creation. A piece of work like no other!

All because of grace. All because of God's free gift, given to us so that we may share it with others and so be drawn together to the One who inspires it in the first place and who calls us to pursue together it to the end.

May it be so!

¹⁰ Graham Tomlin, *Spiritual Fitness*, 48-49.