

Good Works with Good Intentions

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The 16th century Reformation can be summarized as a debate between faith and good works. On the Protestant side, there was an emphasis on faith, going so far as to say *sola fide*. In order to be saved, one must have faith in Jesus Christ. There is nothing else we can do to find salvation. On the Catholic side, there was an emphasis on good works. While faith was still important, doing works of charity, prayer, and penance also carried a lot of weight in being saved. Overtime, the two-faith and good works- became mutually exclusive.

One of the key scripture passages for the Protestant Reformers was Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast.” As Catholics, it is important for us to acknowledge this. We cannot merit, win, or gain salvation through our good works. We cannot persuade God to save us through good behavior. Salvation is a pure gift that comes from God through Christ, least anyone may boast. We seemed to miss that point along the way. However, once that is firmly established, as Catholics, we are right in calling attention to good works. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive.

In our Gospel today from *Matthew*, speaking to his disciples about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world, Jesus says, “just so, your light must shine before others, *that they may see your good deeds* and glorify your heavenly Father.” In other words, yes, do good works for all to see; be like a light on a lamp stand! “Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when

you see them,” as the prophet Isaiah urges. The key question to be aware of, though, is this: what are the motivations or intentions behind my good works? Good works can be done for very good reasons, but they can also be done for very bad reasons.

Wanting recognition, needing to be needed, and trying to prove ones worth are bad intentions for doing good works. Honestly, God is not impressed and these selfish motives will not save us. In fact, they will continue to condemn and trap us. While all of us like to think we have pure motives, that is unlikely. All of us have mixed motives.

As suggested by our Gospel, a tool to help us discover what our motivation really is is to ask ourselves: ‘where do I want the glory directed?’ If the glory is directed towards ourselves, that is an improper use of good works. Perhaps this is what the Protestant Reformers were reacting against in the Catholic Church. But, if the glory is directed to our heavenly Father, sincerely and authentically, that is advancing the Kingdom of God. That is our salvation.

Martin Luther himself actually had a more balanced view of faith and good works. As he said in his *Freedom of a Christian*, “our faith in Christ does not free us from good works, but from false opinions concerning good works.” (Dillenberger, *Selected Works*, 81)

Good works are extremely important as long as they come out of the desire to give glory to God.

What are my intentions or motivations behind doing good?

May we have both faith and good works, for “then our light shall break forth like the dawn, and our wounds shall quickly be healed; our vindication shall go before us, and the glory of the Lord shall be our guard.”