

R12.2 January 2024 Blog Good Works

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”
(Matthew 5:16)¹

This has always been a life verse for me. It always seemed simple and straightforward, but recently I began to ponder how “good” is defined in the context of this verse. As I began to study I found that, depending on the translation, “good” appears in the Bible over 770 times, and there are between 48 and 52 different words in the Hebrew and Greek translated into the English word “good.” It is an adjective, an adverb, a noun; it is used in the singular and plural, as well as in the masculine and feminine. God observes His work in creation as “good” six times in the first chapter of Genesis, and once it is described as “very good.” Yet I was surprised to learn that “good,” as it relates to a thing or circumstance, is not defined in scripture. This may seem to be a trivial matter, but if I am committed to obeying God’s commands for His glory, understanding His expectation is paramount.

So, is the definition to be determined from my perspective? Throughout scripture we learn God is good, and we can glean by comparison that good is the opposite of evil, but does that mean I have to have a component of moral excellence about myself with respect to a particular deed for it to be determined good? The ultimate good work is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, so is sacrifice required on my part for a work to constitute a “good” one? Along the same lines, is there a minimum cost to me to do the good work, in time, money, or other value perceived to be given up, for a work to be considered good? If so, how do I know the sacrifice is sufficient?

Alternatively, is the definition dependent on the recipient, the person to whom the deed/work is directed? And if so, if the recipient does not give glory to God, does that mean the work I did was not good? Is the definition somehow dependent on the

¹ All scripture references in this blog are RSV unless otherwise noted.

perceived value of the time, money, or the magnitude or amount of the temporal benefit to the recipient?

I submit there are, in no particular order, a minimum of three basic components for a work to be considered “good” in the context of this scripture. One component is from the perspective of the one doing the work. It should be benevolent. The definition of “benevolent” includes both generosity and understanding. We therefore not only have to appreciate a possible need of another (understanding) but give of the time, talent, and/or resources God has given us (generosity). Certainly nothing in scripture requires my moral excellence, and though some perceived sacrifice may in many instances be involved, I see nothing mandating that for a work to be considered good.

The second component relates to the recipient. I submit for a work to be good it must have some temporal useful purpose for another person, regardless of whether it is recognized or even appreciated by the recipient. That said, I find nothing in scripture which requires the person to whom the work is directed to give glory to God. We can give glory to God when we do a good work. Someone outside the transaction can hear about it, or see it, and give Glory to God. Further, whether and how the recipient reacts it seems can never be determinative as man continually rejects God’s goodness, and that rejection doesn’t disqualify what God does from being good. As with the above, I also find nothing in scripture that requires some minimum value on a work, from another person’s perspective, as determining whether it can be called “good.”

The third and most critical component is motivation. Though we do works in the temporal and direct the specific act toward or for the benefit of another, and the recipient likely will obtain some earthly benefit, our agenda must be exclusively for God’s glory, not the other person’s glory, not for the praise of man, not to receive anything temporal in return, and not to feel good about ourselves. That said, is it wrong to feel good after we have done something for another? My view is no. I think the warm and fuzzy feeling, the deep pleasure felt within after doing something helpful for someone else, particularly if only God and the two of us know, or even if the one receiving has no idea from whom

the work came, is from the Spirit, and is derived from the knowledge we have done as the Master commands.

Hold doors open for others. Let people out in traffic. Pay for the meal of the stranger behind you in the drive-through line. Call, write, text, or visit a person in need of companionship. Change a tire for someone on the side of the road. Give someone a ride. Feed the hungry. Clothe the poor. The list is endless, but remember, we are called to be a light to the world so that God is glorified. So, “let your light so shine!”

Application:

- Do you view the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:16 as a command? If not, how do you characterize what He says/instructs in this passage?
 - I submit this is a direct command from Jesus.
- If it is a command, how are you seeking to fulfill the commandment, and how often? Are you missing opportunities to do good works because in your busy schedule you never see the person in need?
 - Purpose to look for these opportunities and ask God for both the vision and wisdom to recognize those in need He has brought into your path.
 - Read and meditate on Jesus’s teaching about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Do not be the priest or the Levite, be the Samaritan – “a neighbor” – and as Jesus commands, “You go, and do likewise.”
- Do you forgo helping others even when you recognize a need because helping at that moment will be inconvenient, or because you reason that someone else will come along?
 - The road of sanctification is fraught with missed opportunities. Seizing them requires developing a deliberate and conscious attitude that helping others you see in need is, at that moment, more important than whatever else you have going on, or wherever else you feel you need to be.