

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XVI

(Reading: John 15:1-17; James 2:14-26)

How We Show It's Him Living In Us

One of the hardest questions to answer as a Christian is the one which asks us why there are good people in society who are not believers. We can even be told that such people show a lot more kindness than many church members do. And then isn't it amazing how they can quote you some bad examples of those belonging to a church?

Of course, what these people are saying is that doing "good" is what helps people. But that falls down because what might help most people doesn't necessarily help all people.

Others will say that "good" people are those who want to help. This means they're concerned for the individual. But how many of us don't know the limitations of the well-meaning person?

So what we can say to those challenging us about not doing good is to ask them what "good" really is – which is exactly where the Westminster Confession of Faith helps us here. In four questions we will look at doing good the good way - God's way!

What Is Really Doing Good?

You see, first of all, we ask, WHAT IS REALLY DOING GOOD? It's a fair question. Because after having disputed what is commonly called "good" you need to wonder if anything any person does is really "good" at all!

This is where Article 1 gets right to the point. It states, "Good works are only such as God hath commanded in His Holy Word." This is what Deuteronomy 6 verse 25 means when it says, "if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness." Thus one requirement for a truly good work is that it must be in conformity with the revealed will of God.

And this is also where Article 7 helps us also. It states that good works have to come from "a heart purified by faith." In the confirming words of Hebrews 13 verse 8, "We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way." So a second requirement for a truly good work is that it comes from a good conscience.

Adding these up brings us to those words the Lord Jesus spoke to that Samaritan woman in John 4 verse 24. For in describing what made up the best "good" man can do - which has to be the worship of God Himself - He said that it had to be worship in spirit and in truth. Therefore worship that is from our hearts and according to God's Word.

Having defined what good works are, the Confession also tells us what good works aren't.

Because there are many who think they're doing good when they're not.

You'll find them with a religious bent. That was what Saul of Tarsus was like. He was the crusading zealot doing whatever he could to wipe out the early Christians.

Like many Pharisees, Saul thought it was by following man-made rules that he was doing good. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And how many aren't on that highway right now!

This is where we especially need to sit up and listen. For more and more within Christianity nowadays it's people's sincerity which is what counts. "They are so genuine" people say. But they

don't say how it is genuinely wrong! Oh, no, that kind of judgment would be the worst kind of crime! And all the while more and more people are going the wrong way.

It is true that people do things that help others. The rich man funds a new wing for a hospital building. But then he could afford to because of the way he's been a ruthless business man. Even amongst thieves there's a code of honour.

And, yes, we are better off because people do have a conscience. But that's only because of God's providence. In the words of Matthew 5 verse 45, He makes the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

And God holds them accountable when they do those so-called "good" things. Since they aren't done for God's glory they are still "sins", or as Augustine calls them, they are "splendid sins". Because while in one way they are splendid yet in another way they are still sins. And what is splendid in them comes from outside that person while the sin is all his own!

Where Is It Really Doing Good?

So having seen what really doing good is, we next need to ask, WHERE IS IT REALLY DOING GOOD? This is our second question.

You see, most Christians would agree that you have to do good works. But not all of them put it in the right place.

This happens when believers think that it's what they do that gives them credit with God. But that couldn't ever be. Article 2 clearly tells us that by doing good works we become what we already are.

Now, what we already are He has worked in us by saving faith. So doing good, then, is what the Lord Jesus is doing in us.

When you look at this tremendous list in Article 2 it's clear it's because of what we are in Christ. This is what's happening when we're walking the pathway to heaven. As the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 2 verse 10, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

That means the place you'll see that you are doing good works are those places where you've been. Because then you'll see that it's the Lord who's brought you to where you are right now. That's the trouble when Christians look for a certain type of experience. For when they do that inevitably it becomes something they have to do. And that can't be good! But let it be something which God has done and what He'll keep doing, as you are obeying His Word from your heart, and it's all good!

That's the example Abraham provides in James chapter 2. After mentioning Abraham's righteousness in offering up Isaac upon the altar, verse 22 says, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did."

How Is It Really Doing Good?

Wherever you see a believer living humbly with his Lord there is someone really doing good. And it's there that you begin seeing the answer to the third question. This question asks, HOW IS IT REALLY DOING GOOD?

Early on we looked at the difficulty with defining what "good" is humanly speaking, because what is good for some may not be good for others. And while you might be really concerned for doing good from your heart it could be sincerely wrong. So whichever way you look at doing good in

this world's perspective there's always going to be bad in it. It can never be perfectly good. And because of that it can never turn out good.

What you can do, however, is not to look down but up! This is what Articles 3 till 5 turn our focus to. For "good" can only be "good" when it is done by "the Good"!

This is what we read of in John 15. In the simple picture of the vine and the branches, Jesus says that's it's only in being connected to Him that we can do good. There He says in verse 5, "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

God doesn't regenerate our souls and leave us to do what we can do in our own strength. He's only just begun with us! And so now He's bringing to completion what He's begun.

It's because we're in this life and so still short of glory that means what we do is still stained with sin. The Confession is clear with Scripture's teaching on this in Article 5. And wasn't this what the apostle himself confessed in Romans chapter 7? There Paul says in verse 18, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."

Paul finds what he does constantly stained with sin. But notice that continuous desire he has to do God's will. A true believer won't use the fact of sin as an excuse to give in to sin. As 1st John 3 verse 9 says, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."

Nor will a true believer wait until he feels led to do the things of God. When Paul in Romans 8:14 says that "those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God" he's speaking about a continuous process the Spirit is doing in us.

We now we are far from perfection this side of heaven. And so any one who teaches it could be otherwise has got something terribly wrong. In fact, they will lead God's people astray.

John warned against such people in his first letter chapter 1 verse 8. There he wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But that's exactly the situation the framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith were up against. And indeed it's still what we're up against today. Especially with the present day Pope in Rome!

Yes, the Roman Catholic church preaches that saints may not only be able to do perfect good, but do it in such an abundance that it is able to be used by others. Pope John Paul II often promoted this through his advocacy of Mary. He believed that worshipping her gains access to a huge warehouse of good that she has. A goodness you can get through many other saints, too, including soon Mother Teresa!

This is where Article 4 fits in. There can be no doubt what it specifically addresses. We particularly see it with that word here which to some may have sounded like a type of agricultural practice, because "supererogation" are the good deeds done by the saints of the Roman Catholic Church in excess of the requirements of divine law.

This teaching couldn't be more clearly against Scripture. The loud and clear testimony of the prophets and apostles is how far short we fall of God's righteous standards. Every one of us can only be saved by grace through faith.

That's what Jesus meant in Luke 17 verse 10 in talking about our duty. He said that when we have done everything we were told to do we can only say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

G. I. Williamson says about this, "The marvel is not that the works of believers are so 'great' but rather that they accepted and rewarded at all." If with Isaiah we have to say that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6) how is it that they're called good works at all?

The answer is that we have union with Christ. And just as you yourself are accepted by God because of our union with Him, though we are sinners and imperfect, so it is with what we do.

Why Is It Really Doing Good?

This is where Article 6 comes in. For now we consider the fourth question. Now we look at WHY IS IT REALLY DOING GOOD?

Well, WHY IS IT REALLY GOOD? I mean, it doesn't give us any credit for good. In fact, Article 6 makes it quite clear that the only good is Christ's good.

This is really good, however, because it's of God. In fact, the word "good" comes from the word "god". It originally meant what is godly. And it's only in rediscovering that connection that it is what it's meant to be.

This is what we answer when we live humbly with our Lord. This is why the master replies to his servant who has been busy working for him in Matthew 25 verse 21, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Is that the way you live? Are you a true servant looking to please your master?

A specialist once told a man and his wife, "Your son John is afflicted with deafness. There is nothing I can do for him. But I want to tell you that you are blessed among parents. In helping John, you can lead a wonderfully interesting life!"

You know, we will have wonderfully interesting lives as we lovingly and sacrificially serve the Lord. This is exactly what Jesus Himself showed us. As He said, in the words of Matthew 20 verse 28, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

And as we do that we will never be ashamed of anything. No Christian who sincerely served ever had one regret!

We have considered four vital questions: 'What is really doing good?', 'Where is it really doing good?', 'How is it really doing good?', and 'Why is it really doing good?' There are four answers we can now give. But all those four really add up to one. That's the answer your life gives!