

## Is The Christian Required To Do Works? (Part Six)

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The previous article laid a foundation to enable us to see more clearly why works are required. They have a direct connection to the fulfillment of God's creative purposes and our spiritual well-being. While it is certainly true that works cannot earn us salvation, they play many roles in our calling.

The apostle John writes in Revelation 20:12-13:

And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged *according to their works*, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one *according to his works*. (emphasis added)

Romans 14:11-12, written specifically to Christians, adds, "For it is written: 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us shall give account of himself to God." Since all are to be judged according to their works, what if one claiming to be Christian has no works to show when God clearly expects them? James 2:19-20 clinches the argument: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?"

This entire issue is actually quite simple. No amount of works can justify us before God. Justification by faith in Christ's atoning blood makes one legally free to access God and to begin a relationship with Him. However, from that point on, works are absolutely required for sanctification unto holiness—to the extent that, not only is one's reward contingent upon them, but also salvation itself. Will God reward one who can show no works at all, or provide salvation to one whose faith is so weak it produces bad works? Such a person would be totally out of place, unfit for living eternally in the Kingdom of God.

Ephesians 2:8-10 makes this reality even stronger. Even though we are saved by grace through faith, the very reason we are created is for good works that God Himself prepared beforehand for us to walk in. The gospel of the Kingdom of God provides the reasons for which works are required—the major one being to prepare us for living in God's Kingdom.

### Why Works?

God intended Israel's forty-year journey through the wilderness to prepare them for living in the Promised Land. However, even though Israel had the gospel preached to them and had godly leadership provided by the likes of Moses, Aaron, and Joshua, in their stiff-necked unbelief they refused to submit in obedience to God's commands. They thus failed to receive the necessary preparation for using the Promised Land rightly, becoming an eternal example of why works of preparation are needed (Hebrews 4:1-2).

Can we learn a lesson from their examples? When God brings us out of spiritual Egypt, He is not done with us yet. In fact, a great deal of spiritual creating within us remains to be accomplished

before we will be fit to live and occupy a working position in God's Kingdom. We are being created in Christ Jesus, created in His image. Can we honestly say we are already in His image when we are merely legally cleared of sin? Absolutely not! As great as this is, it is not the end of God's creative process. God is not merely "saving" us. His purpose is far greater than that.

The apostle Paul charges us in Hebrews 12:14 to "pursue peace . . . and holiness." Pursuing anything requires the expending of energy; it is often very hard work. Pursuing holiness especially goes strongly against the grain of the carnal, anti-God nature residing within us, leftover from following the course of this world.

Further, Paul adds that we must pursue holiness because "without [it] no one will see the Lord." It is true that, while we are justified, we are also sanctified. Being set apart is an aspect of holiness. However, the responsibility of pursuing remains because God wants our holiness to be, not a static state, but a dynamic, living, practical, and working part of our character. This character is built through experience after we have been given access to Him. We must seek and build it through cooperative association with and because of Him and our Lord and Savior.

A number of motivations exist for doing so. The first—a no-brainer—is because we love Him. Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Another motivation springs from friendship. Jesus explains in John 15:14, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."

Do we want to please God? Jesus remarks in John 8:29, "I always do those things that please Him." Do we want to be in God's Kingdom enough to walk His way of life entirely, regardless of what God may demand of us? Joshua and Caleb did on the journey to the Promised Land. Jesus declares in John 17:4, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." He paid a huge price, and He made it.

We are told to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in every circumstance because both of these are part of God's will (I Thessalonians 5:17-18). We are also to study "to present [ourselves] approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed" (II Timothy 2:15). Each of these is a labor that falls upon anyone who appreciates God for what He has done and for what He so generously and freely provides.

Do we want to witness for God, bringing Him glory by our labors of love? Is this not what all the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 accomplished? According to Hebrews 12:1, they constitute a great cloud of witnesses. Abel's work of faith still speaks (Hebrews 11:4); Noah's witness condemned the world (verse 7), and Abraham's faith drove him to seek "the city . . . whose builder and maker is God" (verses 8-10). Hebrews 11:39 declares that all of those named or implied in the chapter obtained a good testimony through faith.

They worked in various ways, and they will be in the Kingdom. Undoubtedly, God included in His Book the witness of the shining examples of their labors so that their lives might prod us to do likewise in our own.

### **Down to Specifics**

If one is truly being sanctified, it will show itself in a habitual respect for God's law, most specifically the Ten Commandments. Many specious arguments have been devised to convince people that God's law need not be kept for salvation. These arguments are specifically aimed at

denying the Christian responsibility of keeping the Sabbath, despite Jesus and the apostle Paul keeping the Sabbath as examples to all.

Was it not our sins that made it necessary for God to give us grace for forgiveness? Is not *sin* defined in I John 3:4 as transgressing God's law? Does it not defy logic that God would allow His sinless Son's life to be taken, grant us an unearned, unmerited pardon, and then permit us to go right back to sinning as a way of life? Perhaps one who has been taught thus should reread Hebrews 10:26-31.

Contained in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is an exposition of the very spirit of the Ten Commandments, showing that His followers have a more thorough and expansive responsibility to keep them than they ever had before conversion. He even admonishes us not to think that He has "come to destroy the Law or the Prophets" (Matthew 5:17). At just this point in His message, He launches into His expansion on the Ten Commandments.

Similarly, the apostle Paul never made light of God's laws. He writes, God forbid that we should break them and continue in sin (Romans 6:1-2). Do those calling themselves Christian really think that idolatry, lying, hypocrisy, thievery, murder, and adultery have God's approval? He does not approve of breaking His Sabbath either. We must labor not to break them so that we do not lose what our Lord and His Father have so generously and freely given us.

Habitually endeavoring to do Christ's will is a hallmark of one striving for holiness. He understands that Christ's teachings were given for the express purpose of promoting holiness because holiness is what pleases our Father in heaven. Is that not what our life is to be devoted to? In I Peter 1:16, the apostle quotes Leviticus 19:2, where our God commands, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." It is foolhardy indeed for one to neglect to make practical use of Jesus' teachings, especially those given so plainly and clearly in the Sermon on the Mount.

Will not one committed to glorifying God follow Jesus' example when opportunities present themselves to do good, lessening the sorrow and pains of those around him while increasing happiness and well-being? Will he not exude peace, revealing a caring nature that always looks for ways to make others' lives a bit easier? A truly sanctified person will not exhibit a self-righteous, holier-than-thou, hard-as-nails attitude that cares nothing about whether others sink or swim. A sanctified person will perform good works.

Some works are more passive than those just mentioned, but we must develop and perform them nonetheless. Of the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, three of them—longsuffering, gentleness and meekness (KJV)—are more or less passive qualities that express godly traits. We must work to become more patient and forbearing with the weaknesses of others. Peter recalls of Jesus, "[W]hen He was reviled, [He] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (I Peter 2:23). In this same context, he commands us to "follow His steps" (verse 21).

In the Lord's Prayer, we are reminded of our need to forgive those who trespass against us (Matthew 6:12). Immediately after this, Christ emphasizes how important this work is by telling us that, if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us (verses 14-15)!

Are we given to quick, cross tempers; sharp, sarcastic tongues; or disagreeable, easily offended attitudes? These are hardly godly attributes. It takes considerable work to overcome their presence in one's character.

We must never be ashamed of reaching for high standards of righteousness in our quest for holiness. Just because others do not seem to care is no excuse for us to lower our aim. For example, we cannot allow ourselves to be content with just keeping the Sabbath, somehow thinking that we have pleased God. Much of what passes for religion these days is perfectly useless when compared with the earnestness of God crying out in His Word for us to flee from the wrath to come (see Matthew 3:7; Romans 5:9; I Thessalonians 1:10). How do we flee from this wrath? By submitting to God. Can a person in danger flee in slow-motion or by standing still?

### **Where Does Holiness Begin?**

Holiness starts in one's relationship with the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Justification through God's merciful act of grace opens the door of access to Him, as well as the door to the Kingdom of God. Justification is entirely an act of God, a legal action on our behalf that we accept by faith because He does not lie. Others do not easily discern our justification, since in most cases it has no outward manifestation.

While sanctification unto holiness begins at the same moment as justification, it is a progressive, creative, time-consuming work of God within us. Unlike justification, sanctification cannot be hidden because it appears in our godly conduct. By it, a witness is made that God dwells in us. Where there is no holiness, there is no witness to glorify God.

So we see that justification and sanctification are two separate matters. They are related—indeed, they cannot be separated—but we should never confuse them. If one partakes in either, he is a partaker of both, but we should not overlook the distinctions between them.

Christians cannot take sanctification for granted. We must pursue it until we are assured that we are sanctified. Our course is clear: We must go to Christ as forgiven sinners, offering our lives to Him by faith, crying out to Him for the grace we need to enable us to overcome all the flaws in our characters.

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 4:19, "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." The same apostle adds in Ephesians 4:15-16:

. . . but, speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Close communication with Christ is the source of the perception, motivation, and energy to discern flaws and overcome them. It is a biblical principle that whatever God requires, He provides what we need to accomplish it. Thus, we are to draw from this inexhaustible well and be renewed every day in the spirit of our minds (verses 23-24). In John 17:17, on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus asked the Father to sanctify us by His truth. Will God not answer that prayer, especially when we desire to be sanctified to be like His Son? He most certainly will answer it so that our sanctification will continue.

Perhaps a word of caution is in order, and with it an admonishment that we also ask for patience. Growth does not always come quickly. In addition, as we grow in knowledge, at the same time we

become more perceptive of our flaws. The more we know, the more flaws we see, and this can become humiliating and discouraging. The humility it produces is good, but the discouragement is not so good if it halts our growth.

Paul faced this, writing of it in Romans 7, but he most certainly did not let it stop him. By the time he finishes his discourse, he declares resoundingly that he knows he will be delivered by Jesus Christ. Sinners we are when we begin, and sinners we find ourselves to be as we continue—we will be sinners to the very end. Salvation is by grace, is it not? Our absolute perfection will not occur until we are changed "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (I Corinthians 15:52).

While reaching for God's holiness, we should not let our goals ever be anything but the highest. We should never let Satan convince us that we can be satisfied with what we are right now.

Paul exhorts us in Philippians 3:12-15:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

Earlier, this article emphasized the importance of works because we will be judged according to them. Works are not unimportant! One of the kindnesses of God is that, even in this life, they pay off. This does not mean that we should work for God and holiness in order to be rewarded for them. Nonetheless, a general biblical rule is that God blesses for obedience and curses for disobedience. If this were not true, Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28, and many proverbs would not be in the Bible. Generally, sanctified people—those striving for holiness—are among the most contented and happiest of people. They have a sense of peace and well-being that unrepentant sinners cannot have due to it being a blessing from God.

Psalm 119:165 reads, "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble." Proverbs 3:17, in which wisdom is personified, Solomon says, "Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." Jesus adds in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." In contrast, Isaiah 48:22 reminds us, "'There is no peace,' says the Lord, 'for the wicked.'"

### **Now Is Our Time**

In Ecclesiastes 3, Solomon lists a series of activities, showing that there are times when one should be done and another not done. However, is there ever a time when we should not be holy? Can we at times throw "caution to the wind" and behave any way we desire? Are we allowed to "let our hair down" for short periods in terms of our conduct and witness? Is it allowable to forget for a time our duties to God and man or our goal of being in the Kingdom of God? Can we occasionally take a vacation from our labors to become holy and evermore in Christ's image?

These questions touch all of us regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, position, or years in the church. Holiness must concern us whether we are rich or poor, learned or uneducated, young or old. There is

not only no time when one should be unconcerned about holiness, but there is no person, no matter who he or she is, who should be unconcerned about it.

David, in Psalm 10:4, observes a difference between the righteous and wicked: "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts." We live in a busy and alluring world. Admittedly, there are numerous distractions, each with its attendant pressures, assaulting us from every angle. We must make choices to control the use of our time, and we must never allow God and holiness to slip from the overall highest priority.

Of what does holiness consist? Is it the accumulation of religious knowledge? Many people have labored long to research material for commentaries and other tomes on religious subjects, but does that accumulated knowledge translate into holiness? After three and a half years with Jesus, Judas had undoubtedly accumulated much knowledge, but it did not stop him from betraying his Master. Would Jesus, the Holy One, have betrayed Judas?

The Bible shows that many had long contact with truly godly people, yet never became holy. Joab had an almost lifelong association with David, but he remained a scoundrel to his dying day (I Kings 2:5-6, 28-34). For years, Gehazi served Elisha, but he ended up cursed because of greed (II Kings 5: 20-27). Paul reports that Demas had forsaken him because he loved the world (II Timothy 4:10). The rich young ruler, who appears to have been moral and respectable in conduct, asked Jesus what he should do to have eternal life, yet his rejection of His counsel proves that he was not holy at the time (Matthew 19:16-22).

Were the Jews made holy due to their claim that the Temple of the Lord was in the capital of their nation and God dwelled there (see Jeremiah 7)? Does this equate to some taking comfort because they are "in the church" and are therefore holy? Later Jews claimed that Abraham was their father, and that they had "never been in bondage to anyone" (John 8:33). They were indeed "related" to someone of renown who was holy, but this did not stop Jesus from telling them that their spiritual father was Satan the Devil!

Demographic categories may play their parts in one's sanctification, but none of them guarantees or makes one holy on its own merits. Holiness is not transferred via a group. Each must work with God on achieving it himself.

John Charles Ryle gives the following definition in his book, *Holiness*:

Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God, according as we find His mind described in Scripture. It is the habit of agreeing in God's judgment, hating what He hates, loving what He loves, and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word. He who most entirely agrees with God, he is the most holy man. (p. 34)

We must understand more to appreciate more fully what he wrote. Ryle's is only an overall definition because he reveals as he continues that it defines only the overall mindset, foundation, and trigger of the holy person's conduct. Holiness includes both one's mindset and conduct. What good is a mindset without the conduct to give evidence of it?

To paraphrase Ryle's conclusion, a holy person will strive to shun every sin known to him and to keep every known commandment whether required physically or in spirit. He will have an enthusiastic desire to perform God's will combined with a greater fear of displeasing God than

displeasing the world. Paul writes in Romans 7:22, "I delight in the law of God according to the inward man." David, too, says, "Therefore all Your precepts concerning all things I consider to be right; I hate every false way" (Psalm 119:128).

Why will this combination of attitude and action exist? Because the holy person will be striving to be like Christ. He will labor to have Christ's mind in him, as Paul admonishes in Philippians 2:5. He will deeply desire to be conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). Thus, the holy person will bear with others and forgive them, even as Christ bears with and forgives us. He will make every effort to be unselfish, just as Christ did not please Himself, sacrificing Himself for our sakes.

The holy person will endeavor to humble himself and walk in love, as Christ served and made Himself of no reputation. The holy person will remember that Christ was a faithful witness for the truth, that He came not to do His own will but His Father's. He will deny himself in order to minister to others and will be meek and patient when receiving undeserved insults. On the other hand, Jesus was bold and uncompromising when denouncing sin yet full of compassion toward the weak.

The holy person will separate himself from the world and be instant in prayer. Christ would not even allow His closest relatives to stand in the way of doing the work He had been given to accomplish. In sum, the holy person will shape his life to walk in the footsteps of His Savior, as the apostle John advises in I John 2:6, "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."

God expects us to do plenty of works as He creates practical holiness in us. But there is much more still.

### **What a Holy Person Does**

Moses was a holy man, as well as meek (or humble, NKJV) above all men on earth (Numbers 12:3). He did not rise in a fiery anger when accused but bore with it without striking out at his accusers. Rather than taking vengeance, he pleaded with God in their behalf. David, another holy man, set a fine example when cursed by Shimei during Absalom's rebellion (II Samuel 16:5-13). He bore the cursing with an even temper and looked within himself, thinking that God allowed Shimei to curse ultimately to benefit him.

An individual who strives to imitate the outstanding examples in God's Word will exercise self-control and self-denial. He will labor to put to death the fleshly desires that tempt him so strongly and frequently. Jesus warns that we are not to allow ourselves to become weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life (Luke 21:34). The apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 9:27, "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."

Did not Jesus pursue love and brotherly kindness? The holy person will thus endeavor to observe the Golden Rule in his associations with others. He will speak of them as he wants others to speak of him. He will especially be full of affection toward his spiritual brethren, their property, their character and reputations, their feelings, and their spiritual lives. Does not Paul say, "He who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8)?

This means that the holy person will abhor all lying, slandering of another's reputation, backbiting, cheating, and dishonesty. He will be open and aboveboard in his dealings with others. There will be no conspiracies to take advantage of others. He will accept loss rather than allow himself to be

offended enough to take revenge against another. The holy person will strive to make his attitude and approach toward others adorned with beauty. He will be a walking example of I Corinthians 13.

He will disdain staying idle all day long. He will not be content with doing no harm; rather, he will try to do good. He will strive to lessen the loads others are carrying and to relieve their misery. Acts 9:36 says of Dorcas, "This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did." The apostle Paul was like-minded, writing in II Corinthians 12:15, "And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls. . . ."

The apostle John writes in I John 3:3, "And everyone who has this hope [of being like Christ and in God's Kingdom] purifies himself just as He is pure." A holy person will pursue purity, dreading all filthiness and uncleanness of spirit and avoiding anything that might draw him into it. He will be like Joseph, who fled from the temptations of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:13). A holy person will be warned by David's example and will flee when temptation arises.

We can learn much about these things from the ceremonial law. In them, if a person so much as touched something that had been designated unclean—like a dead person—he immediately became unclean in the sight of God. A holy person learns of these things and accepts the spiritual instruction.

The holy person will abide in the fear of the Lord. This is not a slavish fear filled with terror for the fear of punishment, but the deep and abiding respect for God of one who wishes to live as if he were always before the face of a Father whom he loves deeply and desires to please with all his being. Nehemiah, a holy man and a governor of God's people, was a fine example of this. As governor, he could have required them to support him. Previous governors had done so, but Nehemiah would not, writing, "But I did not do so, because of the fear of God" (Nehemiah 5:15).

As a child of the faithful God (Deuteronomy 7:9), the holy person will strive after faithfulness in all his duties and relationships. He must do this because he has higher motivations in life, and because of his relationship with God, he has more help than others. Paul commands, "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:23-24).

Holy persons should aim at doing everything well. In fact, Christians should be ashamed of allowing ourselves to do anything ill. Of Daniel it is reported, "Then these men said, 'We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God'" (Daniel 6:5).

Practically, this means that we should strive to be good husbands or wives, good children, good supervisors, good employees, good neighbors, good friends, good in private and public, and good in business. Is this asking too much? Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: "And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?" (Matthew 5:47).

We should be able to see that the holy person will seek and practice spiritual-mindedness. He will have his affections entirely on things above (Colossians 3:1-2). He most certainly will not ignore the responsibilities of this life, but his grip on these things will be loose compared to heavenly things. His treasure resides in the spiritual realm, and this is what drives his life. He will live life as a stranger and pilgrim, knowing full well that he is traversing a training ground in which his character is being built and tested to see where his heart and loyalty lie.



The holy person measures the value of everything in the light of whether it will draw Him closer to God and to the image of Christ and will make a positive, glorifying witness. Holy people think as David does in Psalm 119:57, "You are my portion, O Lord; I have said that I would keep Your words." He adds in Psalm 63:8, "My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me."

None of these things completely wipe away the fact that sin still dwells in all of us. We still, as Paul expresses in Romans 7:24, carry about "this body of death," but the holy person is not at peace with this. He fights the sin, never giving up, while keeping his eyes on fulfilling his mission and entering the Kingdom of God. The hope of the gospel drives him on. Because of the gospel, he has this opportunity, and he does not want to let it go. He knows God is making him fit to live in His Kingdom, and he wants to cooperate with Him so he will be prepared to do his part when that occurs.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the mind of one who considers himself religious and a Christian but denies the importance of works. It is so obvious that God requires them. It is for this very reason that we have been created and made part of Christ. We know that God is full of mercy but is also just. His judgment is unerring, and He always acts in His people's best interest. Because this is so, He would have to disqualify anyone unfit or unprepared to live in His Kingdom since it would be in his or her best interests. Such people would be utterly miserable living there—nobody there would have anything in common with them!

Perhaps the apostle Paul has given us in Titus 2:11-14 as fine a description as is available of what has happened to those whom God has called:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.