

CHAPTER XVI.

OF GOOD WORKS.

Section I.—Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intention.

EXPOSITION.

This section states what is necessary to constitute an action a good work, as considered in itself. It must be *such as God has commanded in his holy Word*. The law of God is the sole rule of man's obedience, and no action, how specious soever in appearance, can be properly called good, unless required by the supreme legislator. No command of man can make a work good, unless it be, at the same time, virtually or explicitly commanded by God. Those actions which have no warrant from the Word of God, but are devised by men, out of blind zeal, cannot be reckoned good works. On this ground Christ rejected those services of the Pharisees, which had no other authority than the traditions of the elders, or their own enactments, saying: "Who hath required this at your hands." And, on the same ground, those works of superstition and will-worship, which are only enjoined by the commandments of men, in the Church of Rome, must be rejected. "In vain," said our Saviour, "do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."—Matt. xv. 9.

Actions which God has not commanded cannot be transformed into good works (as is maintained by the Church of Rome), by the *good intention* of the agent. Many have pretended to act from a good intention, when they were acting in direct opposition to the revealed will of God.—1 Sam. xiii. 13, xv. 17-23. Men have thought that they were doing God good service, when they were committing the most atrocious crimes.—John xvi. 2; Acts xxvi. 9.

A work commanded by God is good, considered in itself; but something more is requisite to make it good as performed by us. And no action is a good work in the sight of God, except it be formally as well as materially good. What things are necessary to render a work formally good, may be learned from the subsequent sections of this chapter; but we judge it proper to state them briefly in this place. 1. They must be performed by a person who is justified by the righteousness of Christ, and renewed by his Spirit. 2. They must be done from a right principle—faith working by love. There must be faith or persuasion that what we do is commanded by God; and we must perform it from a respect to his authority.—Rom.

xiv. 23. There must also be a faith of the acceptance of our works only through the mediation of Christ. Our obedience must likewise flow from love to God.—1 John v. 3. 3. They must be performed in a right manner. They must be done in the strength of promised grace, and in dependence upon the righteousness of Christ for acceptance—in the exercise of gratitude to God for all his benefits, and under a deep sense of our own unworthiness. 4. They must be directed to a right end. Our works cannot be accounted good, except our chief and ultimate end in doing them be the glory of God.—1 Cor. x. 31.

Section II.—These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.

EXPOSITION.

Our good works cannot be profitable to God; for he is infinitely perfect and all-sufficient in himself, and no addition can be made to his essential glory or felicity.—Job xxii. 2, xxxv. 7. Neither can our good works have any influence upon our justification before God; for "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight."—Rom. iii. 20. For can our good works be the ground of our title to heaven, or to eternal life, for "eternal life is the gift of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord."—Rom. vi. 23. Still, however, the performance of good works must be constantly inculcated and earnestly urged upon all Christians; and they serve many valuable purposes. Hence the solemn injunction which Paul laid upon Titus, and in him upon all other ministers of the gospel: "This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works: these things are good and profitable unto men."—Tit. iii. 8. Several of the important uses of good works are here specified.

1. They are the *fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith*. An inoperative faith, which produces not the fruits of righteousness, is pronounced by the Apostle James to be dead.—James ii. 2, 6. Of a living faith good works are the native fruits, and they are the proper evidences that faith is unfeigned. "Show me," says the same apostle, "thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works." James ii. 18.

2. Good works are suitable *expressions of gratitude to God*. None can render any proper recompense to God for his inestimable blessings; but all Christians are indispensably bound to glorify him by a universal and cheerful obedience to his commandments; and their good works are, as it were, thank offerings to God for his benefits bestowed upon them.

3. Good works strengthen the assurance of believers. They both confirm their assurance of faith, and increase their assurance of personal interest in Christ, and his great salvation. "Hereby even do know that we know him," says the beloved disciple, "if we keep his commandments."—1 John ii. 3.

4. The good works of believers *edify their fellow-Christians*. Those who are careful to maintain good works become patterns to others, and stir them up to a holy emulation. Hence the apostle Paul informed the believers at Corinth, that their zeal, in contributing for the poor saints at Jerusalem, "had provoked very many."—2 Cor. ix. 2.

5. They *adorn the profession of the gospel*. Practical godliness is the brightest ornament of the Christian religion. Hence Christians are exhorted by the faithful discharge of the duties of their station and relation, to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things."—Tit. ii. 10.

6. They *stop the mouth of adversaries*. When professing Christians have "a conversation becoming the gospel," and are "ready to every good work," they recommend religion to others, silence the adversaries of the truth, and convince them of the injustice of those reproaches which have been cast upon the gospel, as having a tendency to licentiousness. "So is the will of God," says an apostle, "that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men."—1 Pet. ii. 15.

7. They *glorify God*. The more fruitful believers are in good works, the more is God glorified; for "herein", says our Lord, "is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit."—John xv. 8. By their good works Christians not only glorify God themselves, but may lead others to glorify him also. "Let your light so shine before men," says our Saviour, "that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."—Matt. v. 16.

8. Good works *are essentially prerequisite to an admission into heaven*. Though they do not merit everlasting life, yet they are indispensably necessary in all who are "heirs of the grace of life." Believers, "being made free from sin, have their fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life."—Rom. vi. 22.

Section III.—Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit to work in them

to will and to do of his good pleasure; yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

EXPOSITION.

In opposition to Pelagians, Romanists, and Arminians, our Confession asserts, that the ability of believers to do good works is not of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. It is to be carefully observed, that a supernatural habit, or vital principle of grace, is infused or implanted in the souls of all true believers, in the day of their regeneration, whereby they are disposed and enabled to perform acts of holy obedience. Ezek. xxxvi. 26, 27. But, notwithstanding this power or ability, which believers have received by habitual grace, there is required an actual influence of the Holy Spirit unto their performance of every single gracious holy act. Whatever furniture of habitual grace they may have received, there is an actual operation of the Holy Spirit in them necessary unto the actual gracious performance of every duty of obedience. This is confirmed—1. By the express declaration of our Saviour: "Without me ye can do nothing."—John xv. 5. Here our Saviour explicitly affirms that believers, who are made partakers of habitual grace, cannot of themselves, by virtue of any grace they have already received, or without new supplies of grace from him, do anything that is spiritually good or acceptable to God. 2. By the acknowledgement of Paul, speaking in the name of believers: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to think any thing as of ourselves: but our sufficiency is of God."—2 Cor. iii. 5. 3. By the prayers of the saints for new supplies of grace, to enable them to do the will of God. Paul prays on behalf of the Hebrews: "The God of peace make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight."—Heb. xiii. 20, 21. The necessity, and the efficiency of actual grace unto every acceptable act of holy obedience, cannot be more directly expressed. [Owen's Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit, book iv., ch. 6, 7.]

In opposition, on the other hand, to certain enthusiasts, who maintain that believers ought not to perform any duty in religion, unless the Spirit within move and excite them to these duties, our Confession asserts, that believers ought not to "grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them." This is so amply confirmed by the passages of Scripture to which the compilers of our Confession refer, that we feel it quite unnecessary to dwell upon it.

Section IV.—They, who in their obedience, attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate and to do more than God requires, that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.

EXPOSITION.

This section is levelled against the doctrine of the Church of Rome, respecting works of supererogation. That Church teaches, that besides those precepts which are binding on all, and which none can disobey without sin, there are "counsels of perfection" given in the New Testament, which men are at liberty to neglect if they please; and, therefore, those who comply with these counsels, perform more than they are bound to do, and have, consequently, a superfluous degree of merit, that may be transferred to others for their benefit. In the progress of the corruptions of that Church, it was taught and believed, that the whole stock of superfluous merit, arising out of the good works of those who comply with the counsels of perfection, is committed to the management of the Pope, to be parcelled out according to his pleasure, in such dispensations and indulgences as the sins and infirmities of other members of the Church appear to him to stand in need of. The enormous abuses of this discretionary power with which the Pope was invested, were the immediate cause of the Reformation. In opposition to this blasphemous doctrine, Protestants maintain, that there is not the slightest foundation in the Scripture for what the Papists call "counsels of perfection." This is evident from the nature of the commands which devolve upon all men. We are required "to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbour as ourselves."—Luke x. 27. What more can be conceived than is implied in these two commands? Works of supererogation have no existence but in the vain imaginations of ignorant and self-righteous men. So far are the most eminent saints from exceeding the measure of their duty, that they fall far short of what they are in duty bound to do. "In many things we offend all." "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." James iii. 2; 1 John i. 8. Our Saviour has taught us to pray daily that our trespasses may be forgiven; which necessarily implies that we offend every day.

Section V.—We cannot, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life, at the hand of God, because of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we

have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.

EXPOSITION.

This section is also directed against an error of the Church of Rome, which teaches that the good works of the saints are meritorious of eternal life. [The schoolmen in the Church of Rome spake of *meritum de congruo*—a merit of congruity; and *meritum de condigno*—a merit of condignity. By the former, they meant the value of good works previous to justification, which it was fit or congruous for God to reward by infusing his grace. By the latter, they meant the value of good works performed after justification in consequence of grace infused. These, although performed by the grace of God, were conceived to have that intrinsic worth which merits a reward, and to which eternal life is as much due as a wage is to the servant by whom it is earned.—Hill's Lectures, vol. ii., p. 301.] That we cannot, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life, at the hand of God, appears from the following considerations:—1. Our Saviour declares (Luke xvii. 10), that when we have done all those things which are commanded us, we are unprofitable servants, and have only done that which was our duty. 2. Our best works cannot be profitable to God, and therefore can merit nothing at his hand.—Ps. xvi. 2. 3. All our works, as they are good, proceed from the almighty agency of the Spirit of grace (Phil. ii. 13); and as they are not performed in our own strength, they can merit no reward. 4. Our best works, as they are wrought by us, have such a mixture of sin in them, that, instead of meriting anything at the hand of God, they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.—Ps. cxliii. 2. 5. Our best works bear no proportion to the inestimable blessing of eternal life (2Cor. iv. 17); accordingly, the reward is represented "as of grace, not of debt;" and we are directed to "look for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."—Jude 21.

Section VI.—Yet notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him, not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprouvable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.

EXPOSITION.

This section teaches us that the good works of believers, although not meritorious, are yet accepted of God, through Christ. Here it is only necessary to offer two remarks—1st, That our persons must be accepted, before our works of obedience can be accepted with God. "The Lord had respect unto Abel, and to his offering."—Gen. iv. 4. In accepting of his offering, God testified that he had respect unto his person; i.e., that he esteemed and accounted him righteous.—Heb. xi. 4. 2nd, That the best of our works are not accepted as they are ours, but only upon account of the merit and mediation of Christ. As our persons are "accepted in the Beloved," so our works are only "acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."—1 Pet. ii. 5.

Section VII.—Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both in themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing unto God.

EXPOSITION.

This section is again levelled against the errors of the Church of Rome. The writers of that Church hold that the actions of men in an unregenerate state can be so pure as to be free from all sin, and to merit at God's hand by what they call the merit of congruity. We have formerly made a distinction respecting good works, which claims attention here. An action may be materially, and yet not formally, good. Prayer, reading and hearing the Word of God, distributing to the poor, are actions materially good; but unless these actions are done by persons who are "accepted in the Beloved," and "created anew in Christ Jesus"—unless they flow from a right principle, are performed in a right manner, and directed to a right end, they are not formally good. Now, unregenerate men may do many things that are good, for the matter of them, because they are things which God commands, and of good use to themselves and others; but, as performed by them, they are destitute of everything that can render an action "good and acceptable in the sight of God." Explicit is the declaration of the Apostle Paul: "They that are in the flesh cannot please God."—Rom. viii. 8. To be in the flesh is to be in a natural, corrupt,

depraved state; and, as a polluted fountain cannot send forth pure streams, nor a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit, so they that are in the flesh cannot perform any work that is spiritually good and acceptable to God. Instead of pleasing God, and making them meet to receive grace from him, all the works of unregenerate men are sinful, and therefore deserve the wrath and curse of God. "All unconverted persons are said in Scripture to be sinners, or workers of iniquity (Ps. liii. 4); and their works, how advantageous soever many of them may be to themselves or others, are all, notwithstanding, represented as sins, in the account of an infinitely holy God (Prov. xxi. 4); for although many of them may be materially good, yet all of them are formally evil, and therefore they are an abomination to him."—Prov. xv. 8. [Colquhoun's Treatise on the Law and the Gospel, p. 333.] It must not, however, be inferred, that unregenerate men may live in the neglect of any duty which God has commended. Though their prayer, for example, cannot be acceptable to God, yet their neglect of prayer would be more sinful and displeasing to him. This neglect is always represented in Scripture as highly criminal: "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God."—Ps. x. 4. And as this is their sin, so the wrath of God is denounced against them: "Pour out thy fury upon the heathen, that know thee not, and upon the families that call not upon thy name."—Jer. x. 25.

In concluding this chapter, we would impress upon the reader, that the gospel is "a doctrine according to godliness." "The grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared to all men; teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." Nothing but the most deplorable ignorance, or the most determined enmity against the truth, could ever have led men to set the gospel and morality in opposition to each other, or to allege that the doctrine of grace tends to licentiousness. Such men know not what they say, nor whereof they affirm. It is by inculcating morality upon gospel principles that we establish it upon the firmest basis. "Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law." Though good works are excluded from bearing any meritorious influence in the matter of salvation, yet, as we have seen, they are of indispensable necessity, and serve many valuable purposes. Let it, therefore, be the study of all who "name the name of Christ" to be "fruitful in good works," that so they may silence the adversaries of the truth, recommend religion to all within the sphere of their influence, glorify their Father who is in heaven, and promote their own comfort and happiness.