Good Works #1

I get a kick out of some of my former insurance clients lamenting the loss of privacy from the power of the current digital world. I’m asked regularly, “How do they (the government, the insurance companies, the scammers, etc.) know my address and phone number?” The answer is that privacy (as far as we’ve known it) is pretty much a thing of the past. Some whistleblowers have testified that our own government records and stores every call made and all e-mails. With the abundance of video surveillance, much of our lives are also visually recorded. In other words, “Smile, you’re on Candid Camera!”

Now let’s set the whole picture. Do you realize that evil spirits can see you too? There’s a certain group of them called familiar spirits that study people so that they can imitate them for future possible seances. Say for instance, if someone goes to a psychic/medium and wants to conjure up the “spirit of the dead Frank Sinatra”, no one gets fooled by the impersonation if the spirit speaks with a Texas accent! Some evil spirits have studied Sinatra so that they can perform a plausible fake. The same is true for all of us. Does that scare you? If so, you have been blissfully unaware of the spiritual arena in which we live. We are all under spiritual surveillance. Privacy? Gone! In fact, it’s never been here. It’s a fantasy.

Guess who else sees and records all we do?

 Heb. 4:13 Revised English Version

And there is not a creature unexposed before him, but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Of course, God sees all. He also records it for the future when each of His creations must give an account of themselves. (By the way, He has fulfilled even man’s “privacy laws” by disclosing that He’s been listening and recording each of us long ago - and not for “training purposes”!).

 Rev. 20:12

And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged out of the things that were written in the books, according to their works.

Scared? If you’re a Christian, you shouldn’t be. This judgment is not for the Church of Grace but for those who never accepted Christ’s substitutional death on their behalf. Why is this?

 John 5:24

 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever is hearing my word and is believing him who sent me has life in the age to come, and does not come into condemnation, but has crossed over from death into life.

Each of us who have accepted Christ “does not come into condemnation but has crossed over from death into life”. Nevertheless, God records all Christian’s lives too and we’ll be judged by Christ for rewards after the Rapture.

 2 Cor. 5: 9,10

And so we [addressed to Christians] also make it our aim, whether at home or away from home, to be pleasing to him.

For we [Christians] must all appear and be exposed before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be repaid for the things done in the body, according to what he has made a practice of doing, whether good or evil.

Every person will stand before Christ and give an account of their life. For the ones outside Christ, eternal life and death are in the balance. For those of us who have already passed unto life because we accepted Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, eternal rewards are in the balance.

The “Book of Life”

Revelation 20 says all things we do are written in the book of life. Now we know that “the book of life” is not literal, but a cultural reference to ancient scribes recording all the actions of a king for posterity. If this revelation came now, perhaps God would tell the apostle John “and the computer servers were accessed which recorded each word and action of each life, and the dead were judged out of the things recorded.” You want privacy? When you make your own universe, you can make it with “privacy”. Until then, we must play by God’s rules, and He says figuratively “Smile, you’re on camera going into my servers, which will be accessed later to judge the quality of your eternity.” Really? You mean God is really paying attention to us?

 Ps. 33:13-15

 Yahweh looks from heaven. He sees all the children of men.

 From the place of his habitation he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth,

 The creator of their hearts; he understands all of their works.

The Bible declares that God is absolutely paying attention, despite what evil people may think.

 Ps. 10:4, 11, 13

 The wicked person, in the pride of his face, does not seek God. “There is no God” is in all his thoughts.

 He says in his heart, “God has forgotten. He hides his face. He never saw it.”

 Why does the wicked person spurn God and say in his heart, “You will not hold me accountable”?

Just because God does not intrude in everyone’s life moment by moment does not mean that He doesn’t notice or care. On the contrary, He has revealed repeatedly that He’s not only watching, but also recording. Has it hit you yet? “Recording” means that He can also “hit the rewind button” one day and play it back again.

Once I witnessed to someone who became belligerent towards God and the gospel. He told me that he didn’t believe in God. I told him that thankfully God believed in him or else he would cease to be! He told me that he didn’t believe in the future judgement. At that moment God showed me that a “tape” of this encounter would be used at this person’s judgement as proof of God’s love to him and that he had a chance to believe the gospel, but chose not to. I saw him in the future as a small presence before God pleading that he never had a chance to believe and then a “video” of our encounter was played publicly. He became silent and then said “Oh, yeah. Damn!” Then, what he said happened - he vaporized.

The Second Death

 1 Pet. 1:23

 for you have been born again—not from corruptible seed but from incorruptible— through the living and enduring word of God.

Martin Luther said, "Born once, die twice. Born twice, die once." When a person confesses Jesus as lord and believes that God raised him from the dead, they get ‘born again”. Our first birth is due to our parents. The second birth is when God becomes our Father and gives us His spirit. If a person is only born once – just physically and not born again from God by incorruptible seed, then they will die twice – one at the end of their physical life and then once again after the future resurrection of the unjust. This is called the second death.

 Rev. 20:6, 21:8

 Blessed and holy is whoever has a part in the first resurrection, over these people the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him 1,000 years.

 But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and the sexually immoral, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Utter destruction. Oblivion. And despite some lousy theology, God’s not happy about it.

 2 Pet 3:9

 The Lord is not slow in fulfilling his promise, as some consider him to be slow, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to be destroyed but for everyone to come to repentance.

God wants everybody saved and a part of His family, but it’s not up to Him – it’s up to them. He paid the ultimate price of His dear Son’s death – which He was forced to witness (how unspeakably horrible!) Free will means freedom to choose a path and the results that come from that path – whether it’s beneficial or detrimental to the individual choosing. God backs each person’s choice – even if it’s against His desire for creation and His love for the person individually. God is just and righteous.

Man Pleaser or God Pleaser

One of the greatest blessings regarding learning the truth about “privacy” is that it enables us to be set free from being a “man pleaser”. I used to care what people thought of me. No, let me rephrase that. I used to care too much about what people thought of me. Too many times I have acted and spoken in a way to be approved by others and not offend them. I would adjust my behavior to their liking, disregarding God’s standards. Recently, the morning after former president Trump was shot, I was buying something at a drug store and remarked something about the attempted assassination. The clerk declared out loud to everybody in line that he thought it was a staged campaign stunt! I immediately said to him in front of everybody, “What is wrong with you? Staging a high-powered rifle shot ½ inch from his skull? That is the stupidest and craziest thing I’ve heard in a while!” He was insulted – and needed to be.

It seems we are surrounded by people projecting insanity everywhere we look almost daily. At the Olympics, some thought that drag queens re-enacting the last supper would enhance this “world class” event. How nauseating! Later I heard the rationalization that “love is love”, in other words, if someone has sincere feelings of attraction to someone else, their actions, words, dress, etc., should be excused. One problem. The Bible says that “sin is sin”.

 1 Cor. 6: 9-11

 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor passive homosexual partners, nor homosexuals,

 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor the verbally abusive, nor swindlers, will inherit the Kingdom of God.

 And such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were made holy, but you were declared righteous in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of our God.

I can hear those with the pro-drag queen mindset saying to me, “That’s so Judge-y!”. Well, yes that’s ‘judge-y’ because God will be the judge! In the Olympics, the participants compete according to rules. If you break the rules, you cannot win. Is that ‘judge-y’? Sure. It’s their Olympics games and their rules. So, it is with life. Life and the human body are God’s design, so it’s His rules. Want to win? Obey the rules and you can. Disobey the rules and you won’t be “inheriting the kingdom of heaven”. Sincerity doesn’t count if you’re cutting across the oval track to get to the finish line quicker. You’ll be disqualified and won’t inherit any medals because the Olympic judge will get “judge-y” and disqualify you!

Now am I condemning homosexuals and the LMNOP community? No, I’m repeating what God says – sinners won’t inherit His kingdom. The answer is to repent of sin and make Jesus our lord, believing that God raised him from the dead. Then, Christ takes our punishment for our sin upon himself. He is the perfect sacrifice for our perfectly awful choices and rebellion against God. Praise God for His wonderful mercy and grace!

It’s simple. God hates sin but loves the sinner. There are two almost contradictory aspects of his nature – justice and grace. He wants to bless everybody because of His love, but because of free will, He can’t force His love on someone if they don’t want it. A person must choose Jesus’ free offer of pardon for their sin, or they must pay for the sin themselves. Can God pardon gays? Sure, He will also pardon thieves, greedy people, alcoholics, abusers, swindlers and even politicians! God loves people – like crazy! But He must also allow people to get what they want. If they don’t want God, He must allow them to get what there is beside God – nothing! And that’s what those who get the second death get – nothing - at all – forever.

 Eccl. 9:5,6

 For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything, nor do they have anymore a wage, for even the memory of them is forgotten.

 Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, have already perished, and they do not have anymore a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.

Calling sin “love” doesn’t make it so, just as calling abortion, “healthcare” doesn’t make it so either. The only thing that really matters is not what you or I think, but what God thinks. It’s His reality, not ours. He made everything to have a family. If someone doesn’t want to be a part of His family, that’s OK. They don’t get “Act 2”, only “Act 1”. In other words, they get the first birth by God’s grace and their parents works. The quality of their lives depends on their decisions. Then they die. That’s “Act 1”, figuratively speaking. Then if they are born again, they get “Act 2”, eternal life – the quality of that life being determined by the quality of their works during “Act 1”. Let’s say they don’t get saved… not good! They get to give an account of their life without Christ as their substitute for sin. In other words, they must pay for their own sins against God in light of the gift of life God graced them with.

 Romans 6:23

 For the wages of sin is death, but in union with Christ Jesus our Lord, the free gift of God is life in the age to come.

Everybody dies from the first life (unless they are saved and Christ returns during their lifetime). The real question is, do you die again as payment for your sins or will you accept Christ’s free gift to you by making him your lord? If you do, you get born again and only die once, whereas those who reject Christ will only be born once and then, die twice.

The Long View

Once you realize this, you realize that although the things of this life are important, they are not nearly as important as the next life, which will last … for – ever! Think about that. Forever. I know a year seems like a long time, and a decade is a really looong time. What about 50 years? That’s a really long time, don’t you think? Not to me. We celebrated our 50th anniversary of high school graduation a couple of years ago. Time flies by. One of the favorite people in our fellowship just celebrated her 90th birthday this spring. We still have a few clients over 100 years old. Boy, that’s seriously old! Really? The US is almost 250 years old. Martin Luther was 500 years ago. Jesus was about 2000 years ago. Abraham was about 4000 years ago. Adam and Eve were about 6000 years ago. Now that’s a long time! Really?

 “When we’ve been there (with Christ) 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise then when we first begun.”

John Newton’s “Amazing Grace”

Do we want rewards in this life for 1 hour, 1 day, 1 year, 10 years, or for eternity? This is a daily question we answer. We are faced with regular decisions that pose choices about which difficult consequences we want to endure … and what rewards we want to enjoy.

I can hear someone saying, “What are you talking about?” I’ll explain. Each of us gets 24 hours in a day, 7 days in a week, etc. What do we do with that time? We spend some of it making a living. What is the benefit? We avoid homelessness, hunger, nakedness and shame. What are the drawbacks? We invest a good-sized chunk of our lives (our limited lifetime and energy) into surviving. We also spend time watching TV, reading, playing games, etc. What’s the benefit? We relax and recharge our batteries. This is good. What’s the shortcoming? Are we storing up rewards for eternity by doing these activities? I know for me there is a certain amount of downtime I need to renew my strength and focus, but after too much time, I’m being lazy. Why? Because as, our wonderful brother Kevin Porter always reminds his readers, “Remember dear ones, we must be about our Father’s business.” God has given us His spirit, not to just have, but to use. He wants an R.O.I. – a business term meaning “Return On Investment”. He’s given us a body, soul, spirit, and time. What are we doing with it? For those who give God a return on the investment He put in us, He grants eternal rewards. Let’s get them!

Good Works #2

Eph. 2:8-10

 For by grace you have been saved through trust, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God,

 not as a result of works, so that no one can boast.

 For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them.

We were not saved by our works, but by God’s grace through Christ’s works. Now, once we’re saved, God wants us “to do good works” and “walk in them”. From a redemption standpoint, a Christian has nothing more to achieve after salvation. Christ did it all. But after redemption, what are we to do? With free will, we can do anything we want, but God wants us to do projects with Him. He promises us rewards as we do good works with Him and for Him.

 1 Cor. 3:10-15

 According to the grace of God that was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But let each one be careful how he builds on it.

 For no one is able to lay a foundation other than the one that has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ.

 But if anyone builds on the foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, straw—

 each one’s work will become plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire itself will test each one’s work, and show of what kind it is.

 If anyone’s work that he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

 If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but it will be like escaping through a fire.

Christians get to build God’s projects that He has for each of us while we build our own future rewards for eternity. If our works in this life are not built on Christ, they will burn up at Christ’s judgement of us, but we ourselves will survive. Why? Because WE HAVE eternal life, remember? Spiritually worthless works will get destroyed, but we can’t be. For instance, let’s say that someone cheats me in a business transaction. My reaction could be two ways. Firstly, I could get raging mad and respond angrily to them, threatening them. Where is the reward in that? I might “feel” better because I “stood up for myself”. Let me ask you, “What would Jesus do?” Would he respond with rage and threats? No. He would respond like Gal. 6:1 says:

 Gal. 6:1

 Brothers and sisters, if a person gets entrapped in some transgression, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, watching out for yourself so that you also will not be tempted.

Jesus would respond in spiritual meekness – meekness to God and the offender. He would ask God how to restore the offender while he tried to resolve the business problem. God is invited in and blessings result. This approach is the good works of Ephesians 2:8-10. In this approach we may have to exercise longsuffering with emotional discipline, but it will be rewarded one day. The other approach is not based on Christ and will be burnt up for eternity. Was there any reward in the “non-Christ” approach? Sure, there is emotional release from the anger and satisfaction in standing up for yourself. How long do those rewards last? Minutes, maybe hours…? How long do the Christ-centered approach rewards last? You know… forever!

Every situation each day allows us both approaches – to walk by the spirit or to walk “right by” the spirit!, i.e. walk by the flesh. The flesh way rewards us for a little while, whether it’s emotionally, physically, financially, or socially. The spiritual way will ultimately reward us in this life by experiencing God’s faithfulness to His promises and in the future at Christ’s judgement.

The Heart of Good Works

Something to keep in mind – our heart when we do works for God. It’s a big differentiator between good works and just plain old works. Jesus describes it like this:

 Matt. 6:1-4

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ in front of people in order to be seen by them; if you do, then you have no reward stored up with your Father who is in heaven.

Therefore, when you give to the needy, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets in order to be praised by people. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

so that your charitable giving is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will repay you.

Works get rewarded. Good works get rewarded by God in heaven. The guy who gives to a charitable cause so that he can have a reputation as “Mister Giver” gets his reward from his self-promotion. He forfeits any eternal rewards because of his “heart” while doing the work. Do you know who are the biggest godly givers? No, you don’t! Because they make sure it’s private – between them, God and the recipient. They don’t want their left hand (the hand of cursing) knowing what their “right hand” (the hand of blessing) is doing. Are you familiar with the ancient custom of the “hands”? At Jesus’ time when people defecated, they cleaned themselves with any available water and a cloth with their left hand, never the right. Because of the primitive conditions, people ate with their right hand, never the left for obvious reasons. This custom meant that someone who used their left hand in a public setting was, in essence, saying “Poop on you!” It was considered a curse.

When Jesus said. “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” it idiomatically meant to not let your corrupt flesh – the old man nature – the selfish and destructive part of us that messes everything up – interfere with the good works done to bless God and others. The attitude with which we do works for God and others determines whether they are good works which will be rewarded or just works selfishly done to benefit ourselves in this life.

Rewards

Now some Christians are not taught about eternal rewards. They believe in a kind of spiritual communism or equity, in other words, equal outcomes. They think that everyone will receive the same thing in heaven. Is this true?

 Ps. 62:12

 Also to you, O Lord, belongs covenant faithfulness, for you will repay a person according to his work.

 Rom. 2:6

 who will repay each person according to his works

The principle that God will reward a person according to their work is stated dozens of times throughout scripture. This should not be controversial. We see the same principle in our everyday experience. An elementary school kid playing baseball is not paid because anyone can approximate his performance. A pro baseball player is paid millions because he can hit a 95 mph fastball 400 feet surrounded by 30,000 screaming distractions. One is rewarded zero and the other richly because of their work. The reward is the reason the players practice in school for years, then in the minor leagues for years and then hone their craft daily. If the rewards for all their dedicated work and sacrifice were nothing, who would volunteer for the long and costly training? The same is true spiritually. God rewards us for our works, not someone else’s.

 1 Cor. 3:8

 Now the one who plants and the one who waters are one, but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

The person who “plants” the gospel in someone’s life and the one who “waters” the gospel in someone’s life are “one”, in other words, on the same team working toward the same end. Now let’s say that Fred witnesses to his fellow worker, Sally, one day and plants the gospel seed in her heart. A couple of months later, Sally confides to her cousin, Karen, that she has been feeling down and defeated in life. Karen suggests that she give her life to Christ and let him lead and bless her. Sally does. Karen takes her to fellowship and begins undersheperding or disciplining her. Sally is super blessed and goes through some growing pains but Karen “waters” the seed through some dry spells and Sally spiritually matures.

Now at the judgment seat of Christ for the Church, who gets rewarded? Fred will get rewarded some because according to his labor he witnessed some to Sally. Karen gets rewarded a lot because according to her labor she discipled Sally many times for months. What about Stewart? Wait, who’s Stewart, you ask? He’s the guy that also worked with Sally but never witnessed or discipled her. According to his labor he gets zip for this situation. Forever. Ouch! Now Stewart may be accumulating rewards for labors elsewhere, but he sure “walked through the raindrops” on Sally. Perhaps he’s putting his labors in video gaming, or nutrition, or politics, or another of the many things that are not “Christ-centered”. These are the things that will be burnt up at Christ judgment for the church because they are not built on Christ.

Do you notice that it says that we’re rewarded according to our labor, not the results? Fred gets rewarded despite Sally not getting saved immediately. Karen will get rewarded despite Fred planting the seed. We are responsible and rewarded for what we do for Christ in whatever situation we find ourselves. The results are not in our control, but the labor itself is. Do you see it? Just as we are responsible for the quality of our lives in this life, we are also responsible for the quality of our eternal lives. This reality needs some serious contemplation from each Christian. It reminds me of a story…

“A wealthy man once hired his new son-in-law to build him a house. The man told his son-in-law that the house was going to be a surprise for his wife for their 40th anniversary, and he did not want him to spare any expense in building it. The son-in-law was already a stingy man who made his living with substandard service

, doing everything as cheaply as possible. He charged his father-in-law for all the best equipment, lumber, roofing, plumbing and anything else he could think of while he only used the cheapest and even second-hand materials he could find. When the time came to present the finished home to his in-laws he was absolutely stunned when the father-in-law presented the home to them as a wedding gift! He shockingly realized that he had only selfishly cheated himself and made a third-rate home for his own family.”

This is similar to what us Christians do if we selfishly live our lives without doing good works for Christ. We are missing the blessing of walking with God and seeing Him work (as we work) and building an eternal beautiful home to dwell in for eternity.

Now some of you are getting your hackles up, “Hey, you are focusing on works, not grace!” That’s right, I am. Did you notice that in the verses I shared, God does that too? Why is that? Because salvation is by grace – no doubt. But after that…what? We sit on our butts spiritually until Christ returns? We certainly could do that (and many do) but that is not what God exhorts.

 Eph. 2:8,10

 For by grace you have been saved through trust, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God,

 For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them.

What part of us was created in “Christ Jesus”? Not body and soul - that was a gift from our first parents. Our holy spirit is the gift from God “created in Christ Jesus to do good works”.

Good works are “good” because of grace, God’s gracious involvement. I hope you don’t think grace ends at salvation! In some ways, it’s almost like it begins.

 Col. 2:6

Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to walk in connection with him.

How did we receive Christ? By trusting God and Christ’s grace. That’s also how we walk as Christians – by trust and grace. God prepared us to do the good works by enabling us with His spirit and then graciously leads us in His inspired projects. Take for instance the book of Colossians, is that a “good work” of Paul? Certainly! Was God involved? Of course, “Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by holy spirit”. It was a partnership – God inspired and Paul wrote. Like all other good works in scripture, we see God and a human partnered for success.

The exhortation for Christians to do good works is right out in the open, available for everyone to see and obey. I agree that too many people are hung up on their works and worthiness for earning salvation. But having said that, what about works after salvation? God knows we don’t have to do any works for our salvation to be secure. So, in order to get us (who don’t have to do anything anymore) to do some things for Him, He promises to pay us. What? Rewards. Why? It’s to pay us back for the times our flesh wants to do nothing, but we work for a Christian cause anyway. It’s for those who ignore their distaste of evil and witnesses to those enslaved in it. It’s for those who want to start judging the world early, but acknowledge “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” and instead love and witness to those who deserve judgement now. It’s for those who face ridicule from standing up for God’s standards without answering evil with evil. It’s for those who pray consistently for others and stand spiritually in the gap, shouldering the burden of others. It’s for those who give to the ones called to be the spiritual tip of the spear in the world. It’s for those who faithfully do what God has put on their heart despite the obstacles and grueling journey to fulfillment. It’s for those who continue faithfully despite an imperfect body, or family situation, or financial position or other ‘impossible’ hindrances.

If it’s easy, people do it without a reward. The reason God promises a reward is because we put off fulfilling our own desires or shoulder an unpleasant burden now, for a payday later.

I’ll tell you another aspect of eternal rewards that amazes me. In the clubhouse once after playing golf with a member of a popular band, a song came on the radio and he said, “Drinks are on me!” I asked, “Why is that?” He answered, “Because that song playing now will pay me royalties for the amount of our drinks!” I asked again, “Why is that?” He explained that royalties were paid to the recording players of a band whenever their music was used on the radio or TV or a movie. “Do you mean you play a song once, it gets recorded, and they pay you forever for it when it’s used?” He said “Yep!” I responded, “I’d like to get involved in that action!”. And later I did. Some forms of insurance are paid like that, but instead of it being called ‘royalties’, it’s called ‘residuals. (In fact, ‘residuals’ allow me to write this and many other things for Christ and the saints.) How’s that sound? Do one thing right and get rewarded forever? That’s what God promises with eternal rewards. It’s forever ‘royalties’! And who controls how much we get? We do!

 1 Cor. 3:8b

 each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

Two questions: 1. What do you want for eternity? 2. What does God want you to do to get it?

Don’t know? Ask Him.

 Eph. 2:10

 For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them.

He made you for good works. He’ll tell you what they are. Once you know, get walking. Don’t quit until you’re at the clubhouse, picking up the royalties, where Christ will have a proud smile and hug for those who were faithful.

