

# Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 3

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## ***THE CHRISTIAN AND OBEDIENCE***

*Part 2 : Good works prepared in advance*

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Christian obedience, and in particular *good works*, is our theme. There is a fascinating verse in the letter to the Ephesians, which spreads much light on this topic.

*"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:10, NIV)*

### THE CONTEXT

❑ In the preceding verses, from the very beginning of the letter, the Holy Spirit gives some of the most remarkable revelation in all of the Bible. Paul writes, as perhaps nowhere else, on God's free grace in the Christian's salvation, and the immensity of his inheritance in Christ.

In 2:8-10 the Apostle comes to a conclusion. The point he wants to bring home is that everything is a gift of God's grace. From this follows, inevitably, that no one has anything whatsoever to boast in. This, of course, is the New Testament's testimony throughout (compare for example 2Tim 1:9). To deny this, is to deny an essential element of the truth.

❑ Apparently the Apostle then anticipates a question in the minds of his readers. *'Good, we will accept*

*that. But since we have been born again and recreated by the Holy Spirit, surely the ball is now in our court. It is now up to us to live holy lives. Cannot one say that this is **our** contribution to our salvation?'* The question is emphatically answered in Verse 10: Not at all! Even our good works are gifts of God's grace! When He saves a spiritually dead sinner (2:1-3), there is not a single grain of human merit involved. This is true of the initial phases, the subsequent life, and the final culmination. Let there be no uncertainty about this.

### A CLOSER LOOK AT EPH 2:10

❑ The Greek text reads literally: ***His** workmanship are we*. Every Christian is God's *creation*. Paul thus uses two words plus an emphasis to press home his point. Probably he has in mind the typical Biblical image of the potter and the clay. In fact, the Greek word for 'workmanship' could possibly also be translated as 'a work of art'. As a clay vessel can never claim a part of the potters honour, so the Christian has nothing to boast of.

Verses 1-6 describe a sinner's salvation as a resurrection from death, a redemption from slavery, and a deliverance from God's wrath. Here, in v.10, it is described as *creation from nothing* (compare also 2Cor 4:6, where regeneration is interpreted in the light of Gen 1).

❑ This is a creation 'to do good works'. The Greek construction is clear: God did this *in order that* good works should follow. He had a very definite *purpose*. Just as He created a vine to bear grapes, and a bird to fly, so He created Christians to do good works.

❑ But more is involved. Not only was it determined that the Christian should do good works, but the works themselves were *prepared in advance* - not only their general nature but also the details - the what, the where, the when, and the why!

❑ God prepared these works with a specific purpose in mind: that we should 'walk' (Greek) in them during our life on earth and in so doing, glorify Him, become active co-workers in the realization of His eternal plan - and prove the authenticity of our salvation.

\* The general character of these works was ordained. Through the centuries it has never changed. But, and this is important, it was also pre-determined exactly how they would find expression in every believer's life. It is necessary to individualise this truth, in order for Paul's argument to hold water. If he had only the general character of good works in mind here, a whole world of decisions and initiatives would continue to rest with the individual, and Paul's readers

would still have solid grounds for questioning his argument.

\* In order to ensure that his readers do not fall prey to the opposite folly, namely passivity and evasion of their responsibility to obey the Lord, the Apostle underlines the necessity to *walk* in these good works. This word is used in the New Testament to indicate a way of life (compare 4:17; 5:2, 8, 15). Now this has at least two very important practical implications:

Firstly, the practise of these good works is never something static; it implies *succession* and *progression*. And is this not exactly how we experience it? There is a start, and there is development. And every believer has his own path. We will return to this aspect later on.

Secondly, the Christian is *consciously and actively involved* in the performance of these good works. Man is more, much more than a vine or a bird. He is image bearer of God - especially so as a new being in Christ. These works therefore do not simply come automatically or mechanically. No! My whole being is involved: will, emotions, reason, abilities, experience, training, imperfections, personality flaws. My involvement is total. There are decisions, effort, toil, agony and ecstasy. Never does the Creator insult the crown of His creation by treating him like a machine. *No, He makes him responsible and accountable.*

## AN UNFAILING ACID TEST

❑ Paul's argument in this verse is quite straightforward: As God creates, a workmanship evolves, and this workmanship brings forth good works. True salvation therefore always manifests itself in good works!

*Good works do not save, but without them there is no salvation.*

\* Throughout the New Testament this truth is axiomatic. It is exactly what James teaches in his second chapter: there are many types of faith, but only one brings salvation - that one which is accompanied by good works.

John 3:36 is significant in this respect. First he puts it positively: faith in the Son brings eternal life. But when he states the converse, the apostle uses the word *disobedience* instead of *unbelief* which one might expect (The NIV unfortunately misses the point). To the Apostles, unbelief and disobedience were synonyms!

Over and over again the Word of God stresses that only those whose lives are marked by obedience to Christ, will inherit the Kingdom. And the reverse is equally true: those who live in disobedience and sin, will never taste eternal life. Compare for instance Matt 5:20; 25:31-46; Mark 10:23-31; Luke 6:46-49; 9:23-26; 13:23-28; 1Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Heb 12:14; 1John 2:29; 3:9-10; Rev 21:7-8.

\* This is the basis of one of the clarion calls of the sixteenth century Reformers: '*Sola fides justificat, sed non fides sola est!*' (Only faith justifies, but not faith which is alone).

This truth follows from the integrated unity of God's salvation in the life of each of His elect (see AH1). It is a process which always contains a certain number of elements, among them, without exception, sanctification, and perseverance in obedience and good works.

\* Let's be quite frank: *Here we have an unfailing acid test for true salvation and authentic Christianity.* It is therefore necessary for each one of us to examine himself again and again - honestly, soberly, maturely (2Cor 13:5).

Charles Hodge was right: *'The only proof of eternal election, is a holy and obedient life!'*

❑ Is the importance of good works as a *sine qua non* for salvation not exaggerated above? On the contrary! Nothing underlines its vital importance more than the fact that *one day God will judge us according to works*. No one less than the omniscient One himself will use it as rule for acceptance or rejection.

\* Note how strongly the Bible emphasises this: Matt 16:27; 24: 45-51; 25: 14-30; 31-46; John 5:28-29; Rom 2:6-11; 2Cor 5:10; 1Pet 1:17;

Rev 19:7-8; 20:12-13; 22:12-15. All the parables in Matt 24-25 (also 'The Ten Virgins') are governed by 24:42-44. The message of this immensely important discourse of the Lord Jesus Christ is this: *Live obediently and faithfully in the light of eternity - a day of reckoning is coming!*

\* How are we to understand this? Is the believer not justified on the basis of Christ's work alone? Certainly! It is the heart of the gospel! But, both justification and sanctification are indispensable elements of the integrated process of salvation (see AH2 for a discussion of these concepts). Because this is true, it follows that justification will of necessity be followed by sanctification (and thus good works). The latter is therefore the proof of the former. *And it is this proof that the Great Judge will be looking for.* So unbreakable is the chain of salvation, that His judgement will one day take only one thing into consideration: *Did this man or woman live a life of holy obedience and good works?* This one 'link' will assure that the rest is also present: inner regeneration, saving faith, unity with Christ - and, therefore, justification.

*Good works are the watermark of authenticity!*

The renowned author of the nineteenth century, J.C. Ryle, wrote: *"Evidence, evidence, evidence, will be the one thing wanted when the great*

*white throne is set ... I can find no evidence that will be admitted in that day, except sanctification."* (Holiness, p.23)

\* Many people have the idea that only unbelievers will be judged, and that other standards will apply to believers. This is not what the Bible teaches! Look at Rom 2:11 and 1Pet 1:17 in as many translations as possible. No favouritism! No double standards!

Never forget that Christ not only saves from the *guilt* of sin, but also from its *power*. One reason why a believer normally lives for quite a time before he goes to heaven, is to allow 'the watermark' to grow, and to finish the wedding-dress (Rev 19:7-8). The Holy Spirit uses my pilgrimage to prepare me for the Judgement-seat. And never will I be more thankful for it, than on that momentous day!

Surely it is no wonder that Peter says: *"... live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear."* (1Pet 1:17).

\* The question now arises: *Is there not something terribly unfair in this?* That God's elect will not be 'blue-eyed boys', is one thing; but is it fair that the millions who never even hear God's Word and Law, will be judged by it?

It is indeed true that not everyone receives enough revelation to lead on to true faith in Christ, but all people do indeed receive enough revelation

*to be culpable and accountable* (leaving aside the difficult issue of babies dying in infancy, etc.).

Firstly, God reveals Himself as the *Omnipotent One* throughout creation (Rom 1:19-20; Acts 14:15).

Secondly, He reveals Himself as the *Good Provider* in His general grace over all (Acts 14:17; Matt 5:45; Luke 6:35).

Thirdly, the demands of God's moral law are written in the hearts of all people. It may be tragically dim and twisted as a result of the fall, but the *universal phenomenon of human conscience* confirms its reality. The conscience is that faculty in man which moves him to do the things of the Law, and which causes the inner conflict between good and bad (Rom 2:14-15).

□ A fearsome responsibility rests on elders and preachers. They will one day answer to the Chief Shepherd of the flock (Acts 20:25-28; 1Cor 3:9-15; Heb 13:17; James 3:1; 1Pet 5:1-4). To *"... proclaim ... the whole will of God"*, is at the heart of their task (Acts 20:27).

*Salvation is by grace; on the basis of Christ's work alone; through faith; unto, and therefore according to works.*

\* Any gospel which proclaims less than that, preaches less than the full, and therefore true gospel. The

work of all three Persons of the Holy Trinity needs to be honoured. Salvation flows from the Father's eternal election. The Son is the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace. The Holy Spirit applies this salvation during the life-time of each of the elect. Wherever the full council of God is neglected, the church soon degenerates into something terribly dishonouring to God, and fatally deceptive to man.

□ Two errors of our day can now clearly be seen for what they are: 'different gospels'.

\* On the one hand there is '*easy-believism*' or '*cheap grace*', which plagues the church all over the world. And on the other hand there is, as always, an over-reaction. Let's call it '*difficult believism*' or '*expensive grace*'. Neither of these is Biblical - not by far. What we really have here is nothing but 'lawlessness', which teaches that even a faith which is without works, can save; and 'legalism', which teaches that something or other needs to be added to the work of Christ for salvation. (see AH2).

\* The true gospel is '*impossible-believism*', as it were. Nobody can believe unless he is regenerated; and even his faith (Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29; 2Pet 1:1), as well as his obedient life, are gifts of God's grace. The Bible

knows nothing of cheap or expensive grace; it trumpets only one message: *'free grace'*!

*But this grace, when it lays hold of a life, has unmistakable, far-reaching, and permanent God-honouring effects!*

### **EXACTLY WHAT QUALIFIES THOSE GOOD WORKS WHICH WILL PASS THE TEST OF GOD'S JUDGEMENT SEAT?**

□ Any responsible Christian, who is serious about his faith and eternal life, should now have one burning question: *What exactly is a good work?*

The Reformed fathers understood the vital importance of this question. This is clear from the fact that all of the great confessions of faith give it their thorough attention and come up with a unanimous answer properly founded on Scripture (1689 Baptist Confession 16; Westminster 16; Belgian Confession 24; Heidelberg Catechism 91).

But it is not necessary to consult human writings to find an answer; the Word of God, in fact our text, speaks out very clearly.

□ Eph 2:10 says at least two things in reply to the question:

\* *God himself prepared the works.* It was His initiative, and He determined their nature. But because

we are to do them, as human beings and not as machines, He revealed their definition to us in the form of Biblical injunctions.

\* *It is necessary for man to be born again before he is able to do such a work.* What does regeneration bring about in man?

Firstly, he receives *a new heart* (Jer 24:7; 31:33; Ezek 11:19-20; 36:26-27; 2Cor 3:3; 4:6; Heb 8:9-13; 10:16). From this heart, this centre of his personality, fruit grows which no natural man can imitate. And of necessity, these are good works, as God's laws have been engraved on his heart. These works, therefore, have a specific *source* - a heart overflowing with gratitude for salvation, and full of confidence that the Saviour will accept and reward them as sacrifices of praise (Heb 13:15-16).

Secondly, he has a *new purpose in life*. No longer does he live for himself, but God's glory is the passion of his existence. This, of necessity, determines how he channels his gifts, energy, resources and time.

\* This is exactly what the Lord Jesus teaches the Samaritan woman in John 4:19-24. The kind of worshipper the Father is seeking, is one who worships Him (with the whole of his life) *in spirit* (from his heart) and *in*

*truth* (according to His Word)<sup>1</sup>.

This is also the teaching of the confessions of faith mentioned above.

\* It is now clear that those good works which will one day meet the criteria of the Judgement-seat, are *unique*. Their qualifications are very specific. These are the essential requirements for a good work to pass God's test:

Firstly: It must be *what* He has ordered in the Word, done in *the way* He has prescribed.

Secondly: It must evolve from a *recreated heart*. Accordingly it will be, on the one hand, an expression of *inner faith and thankfulness* for salvation, and, on the other, have as objective *the glory of the Triune God* - the coming of His kingdom, the spreading of His gospel, the well-being of His church.

□ Unbelievers can do many good and excellent things, and indeed they do. We should respect them for it, and thank God for His general grace in

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<sup>1</sup> This interpretation follows from the context. 'Spirit' links back to v.20-21: not the externals of places of worship, but the inner integrity of the human spirit. 'Truth' links back to v.22: not the ignorance of the Samaritans, who only accepted the first 5 books of the Old Testament, but the full truth of God's whole revelation to man.

their lives. But one thing they can never do, by definition - that which will pass God's ultimate criteria.

\* But, much more important for us, is the fact that a Christian can be very active over a long period of time, and yet never do that which will be acceptable on the day of reckoning (compare for instance Matt 7:21-23). How much *'unauthorised fire'* has the church offered through the centuries! How many sacrifices *'contrary to His command'* are brought before Him in our day! (Lev 10:1-6). How often is the ark of the covenant set on a *new cart* (like the Philistines!), instead of having 'Levites to carry it with poles!' (2Sam 6:1-23; 1Chron 13:1-14; 15:1-16).

\* It is terribly possible that we could keep ourselves busy with all sorts of activities which are performed 'in spirit', but not 'in truth'. Zeal and sincerity as such are not enough; the question is whether they are in accordance with Biblical precepts. Or we might be spending much time and energy on something which can be exactly what the Lord commanded, but without our hearts being in it. Dead orthodoxy can never please God. Even more tragically, we can wear ourselves out doing what is neither Biblical nor sincere.

It is indeed imperative that we take stock frequently!

\* The *Regulative Principle* is rooted in the ground we have covered. It has guided the church for centuries, especially in ordering its corporate worship. Essentially this principle states that only those activities belong in a worship service which God has *explicitly commanded*. Today, however, the approach is rather to allow anything which He has not explicitly prohibited. *A moment's consideration must convince anyone that this makes a world of difference.*

□ A final question remains: *How dare I ever say that my works can be acceptable to the infinitely holy God? Yes, they might be Biblical; and they might come from my heart - but they are so terribly imperfect!*

Eph 2:10 has an expression which we have not as yet touched on: "... in Christ ...". The Father's grace comes to us "... in the One He loves ..." (1:6). I accordingly do not become a child of God because my works are acceptable. No, my works are acceptable because I am His child! He, after all, has himself prepared them for me - knowing my feebleness, even as born again person.

Because obedience and good works are not the basis of justification, but take place in the context of (imperfect) sanctification, they need not be perfect. Provided they have the hallmarks of authenticity, no matter how imperfect they may be in other respects, they please our heavenly

Father.

Every parent can understand this. How tender one's heart is towards one's own! How a father enjoys his toddler's attempts to assist him!

### HOW DOES ONE WALK IN GOOD WORKS?

□ The question can be interpreted more broadly (What, in general, is a Christian's responsibility to assure that he lives the way God wants?), or more specifically (What is my personal responsibility to ensure that I walk in those good works prepared specifically for me as an individual?).

Especially the last question - the whole problem of personal guidance - is for many a burning issue.

□ Let us deal first with the broader, the more general issue. Space only allows us to address one or two principles (the most basic, I trust). The immediate context, the letter to the Ephesians, is as good a place as any from which to glean some light.

\* The Apostles, almost without exception, structured their letters in a particular way, emphasizing a simple, yet vital principle. After the necessary greetings, they commence writing on the Triune God and His great salvation in Christ. The first parts of the letters, therefore, put forward the facts regarding redemption, and are doctrinal in nature. In theology this is

referred to as the '*indicative*' section of a letter.

Having done that, they then proceed with practical injunctions. *Because of* God's saving initiative in their lives, believers have a heavy responsibility to live in holy commitment and obedience to Him. *How* to do this, takes up the second part of the apostolic letters. This is referred to as the '*imperative*' section.

In Romans, for instance, the first 11 chapters are filled with profound doctrine, culminating in a sublime doxology. This is then immediately followed in chapter 12 by a practical summons - "... in view of God's mercy ..." (12:1).

The attentive reader will realise straightaway of what vital importance the order is. Build the indicatives on the imperatives, rather than the other way round, and you have the situation where salvation depends on human merit. This exactly is the difference between the true gospel and all false religions (including churchianity), which, without exception, depend on human religious virtue.

\* The imperative portion of Ephesians presents meaningful pointers when it comes to our broader question.

Paul obviously intends to start his imperative section in 3:1 (see NIV). But before he gets going, he wanders off into a portion of indicative teaching on the Gentiles. He tries

again in 4:1-3, but is side-tracked once more by a wonderful piece of teaching on the unity of the church. Finally he manages to start his practical application from 4:17. [More literal translations will show that he now endeavours to explain what it means to '*walk*' the Christian life. Compare 4:1; 17; 5:2; 8; 15.]

That New Testament imperatives are nothing but the unfolding of the practical implications of the Ten Commandments, is clearly demonstrated in 4:25-6:9. Note how Paul works with one commandment after the other: the *fourth* (6:5-9); the *fifth* (6:1-4); the *sixth* (4:26-27; 29-32); the *seventh* (5:3,5,22-33); the *eight* (4:28); the *ninth* (4:25); and the *tenth* (5:3).

He concludes the portion 4:17-5:14 with 5:15-17, especially v.17b: "... understand what the Lord's will is."

V.18 then gives the key to a life according to the Lord's will: *a life filled with, controlled and powered by the Holy Spirit!*

This verse, this key, dominates 5:18-6:9. In these verses the Apostle describes what life lived in the fullness of the Spirit looks like.

V.18-21 is *one* sentence in the Greek. It starts with two verbs, more specifically two commands, in v.18 (one positive, one negative). These are then followed by five present participles in v.19-21. These last verses thus describe a Spirit-filled life.

But there is more. V.22 does not

have a verb of its own. It presupposes the verb of v.21. And this clearly implies that 5:22-6:9 illustrates what mutual submission (v.21) - which is the result of the fullness of the Spirit - looks like in daily life. *It is a life lived in the interest of others, coming to expression, among other places, in the home and workplace.*

\* The answer to our more general question is therefore clear: *He who wants to live according to God's will, who wants to do good works which please Him, must, in the fullness of the Spirit, obey His Law - as it is amplified throughout the Scriptures, especially the New Testament imperatives.*

□ Now for the more specific question: *What is my responsibility in assuring that I walk in the good works God prepared for me personally?*

\* In Psalm 1 we read of two ways: the wicked way in accordance with the values of the ungodly world, on the one hand, and the righteous way in accordance with God's Law, on the other. The second lifestyle is clearly the one which pleases God, because His blessing rests on it (the more general answer above). But v.6 goes one step further: "... *the Lord watches over the way of the righteous ...*". "In other words", writes Prof. Sinclair Ferguson in his excellent little book, 'Discovering God's Will', "he

*guides them in the path of his blessings as they walk on the road of obedience."*

Here we have the most basic answer to our more specific question: *Those who live according to God's Law, according to His revealed will in general, are being guided - so that they can find their particular path!*

This truth is also found in Ps 25:9. Notice also in Is 58:6-14 how righteous living, as the condition, is followed by God's promises of guidance and blessing.

\* The book of Acts is full of incidents which illustrate this principle.

In Acts 15:36 Paul did the logical thing in terms of the Lord's commands. He proposed that they should go back and encourage those churches planted during the first missionary journey. A quarrel, however, made him leave without Barnabas (v.37-40). Then, according to 16:6-10, the Lord intervened sovereignly, which caused the second missionary journey to develop into something totally different from what Paul had foreseen - and his life and ministry were never to be the same again!

The Apostles ordered their lives and ministries in accordance with the Lord's commands. They did what they had to, they did what was right, they did the obvious. And they depended on God to intervene as and when He

determined, in order to lead them in the particular ways His providence had measured out for them. And this He did, even by means of their own failures and sin.

These interventions, in whatever way they came, never guided the Apostles contrary to the Lord's commands, but concerned the personal, detail application of these commands in their lives.

\* The answer to our second question is clear: *God's guidance comes to expression in my life as I prayerfully study His Word, think through its implications, make it my own, and live my life accordingly.*

I therefore discover *God's will for my life* - by being obedient to *His will for all believers!*

I am not to ask in the first instance: *'What is God's will for my life?'* I am simply to ask: *'What is God's will?'* - and then live my life accordingly. As I persevere in a life of principled obedience, a life committed to Biblical righteousness and truth, I can expect to, as it were, *walk right into those good works prepared specifically for me!*

\* Much more can be said about guidance, but this principle is basic, and its importance cannot be over-emphasised. It safeguards the Christian against a thousand shames and deceptions, and guides him on the road of consistency, dignity and

integrity. An inner peace will settle in him, he will persevere in singleness of purpose, and he will glorify his Saviour - *by walking in exactly those good works prepared for him personally!*

\* The obsession 'to hear God's voice', and to know 'His will for my life', outside Scripture, takes on epidemic dimensions in our day. It leads to unhealthy subjectivism, pathetic naivety, pastoral pains, and God-dishonouring scandals without number. And it steers the church away from the Word and the historical faith. This neglect of the *Sola Scriptura principle*, is doing indescribable harm!

## **A FINAL WORD**

The Word of God! Commit yourself to live according to it, in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ - prayerfully, soberly, sincerely, persistently - and see what happens!

*"Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him ..." (Psalm 37:3-7).*



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