

Walking in Good Works

Talk presented to Kenyon Friday Fellowship, October 18, 2002

When I was an undergraduate back in the 70s, there was a pamphlet that was called the Four Spiritual Laws. Now, I know it is still around because I was handed some last year at about this time when I was involved in an evangelistic outreach at a prison in Indiana. Maybe you've seen it. It's a little yellow pamphlet, and the first of the Four Spiritual Laws goes like this: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." As a junior in college I had a kind of mixed reaction to this idea. I thought, "well that's a nice sentiment, but there isn't much theology there. Sounds kind of fluffy to me—sort of like an advertisement for being a Christian."

Still, I have to admit that this idea was very appealing to me. Suppose that God does love me, and that as part of that love, he has a wonderful plan for my life? Like a lot of college students, I was thinking about this Big Question: What is the purpose of my life? I think that any reflective person has asked herself or himself that question at some point: What is the purpose of my life? Now that I've gotten older, that question is even more important than it was thirty years ago. You see, you're looking ahead at what seems a virtually infinite amount of time on earth, and you see lots of options and possibilities in front of you. I, on the other hand, am asking myself, "In the limited amount of time I have left here on this mortal coil, what are the priorities? How should I be investing my time?"

With these thoughts and questions in mind, let me read a very familiar passage from Ephesians, chapter 2. “For you have been saved by grace through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship in Christ Jesus, created for good works, which God prepared ahead of time, that we should walk in them.”

I used to focus much more on the first part of this passage—“You have been saved by grace through faith,” and I almost ignored the second half of the passage—“Created for good works that you should walk in them.” Now, I find this second half just as captivating as the first half. Isn’t this the answer to the Big Question—What is the purpose of my life? According to Paul in this letter to the Ephesians the purpose of your life, the reason you were created, is to do good works. It’s this idea of the good works we were created to do that I want to consider with you for a few minutes tonight. God does love you, and he does have a wonderful plan for your life—The New Revised Standard Version puts it this way—Created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. That is, as Christians we are to lead a life characterized by good works.

What does that mean? Does it mean to help others? To do justice? To love others? To forgive? To care for the widow and the orphan? To share our faith in God? To fill up that which is behind the sufferings of Christ” in Paul’s memorable phrase? Yes, all of these things, and all of them are discussed, emphasized, underlined, commanded in the Christian scriptures. What is the unifying theme in all of these good works that should be our way of life? What characterizes the good works we were created to do?

I think the answer is found in 2 Corinthians 5: 16- 6:1. Let me read it to you. “From now on ... we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a

human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors of Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with Him, we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain.”

The theme here, as you can see, is reconciliation, active forgiveness, redemption, making whole that which was broken, bringing close to God those who were separated from Him, binding up that which was injured. Here is the key statement: That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” That’s the grace part, just like in Ephesians 2:8. And here is the wonderful-plan-for-your-life part—“and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” This is for me one of the most arresting verses in the Bible. It says that God purchased the human race back at the cost of the life of Jesus Christ, and then entrusted to the very people Christ died for the responsibility for living out that message of God’s great redemptive love.

I think this is the key to understanding what those good works are that are to characterize our lives. They are works of reconciliation that we do as ambassadors of Christ on earth. They are works of hope, works of making human beings whole again, works of redeeming that which was lost. I think this is the answer to the question, What is the purpose of my life?

Now, that's the theology of the Big Question. The problem is actually living it out, actually walking in those good works of redemption. I have to admit that many times in my life my commitment to being one of Christ's ambassadors on earth has been pretty half-hearted. Two different kinds of problems got in the way. I am going to call one of them the beachcomber factor, and the Eeyore factor. You remember Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh. I'll come back to him. Let me start with the beachcomber factor.

I grew up in California, and my favorite thing to do was to go to the beach. I didn't get to do this very often, for two reasons. First, my rather large family lived about 2 and a half hours from the beach, near Fresno in Central Valley where it is hot, dry, dusty and flat (in every sense of the word—level, deflated, dull, and lacking carbonation). Second, my parents were from South Dakota, which meant that they were frugal and didn't want to waste gas driving to the beach, and also that they kind of liked territory that was hot, dry, dusty and flat—in every sense of the word. So going to the beach was a big deal, costly, and truth be told, kind of a questionable activity to folks from South Dakota.

But, I loved it—everything about it. The Pacific Ocean was vast, exotic, beautiful, and the people along the coast seemed really cool. Now, on the beach you could find these people called beachcombers. These were people who just lived hand to mouth by kind of collecting things from the beach like shells, starfish, abalone, really pretty green glass fishing-net floats that had floated all the way from Japan—or so my Dad told me—and then selling or perhaps eating these things. I was really drawn to this idea of the beachcomber because, well, his life was simple and carefree and he got to live by the ocean all the time. What could be better? What a wonderful plan for my life.

Here's the problem, however—the beachcomber was living life entirely according to his personal interests. For the Christian, the beachcomber factor is to respond to God's call to live a life characterized by good works by saying, in effect, "I don't want to. I've got things to do. I want to live life on the beach, by myself, enjoying the salt air, and the sun, and the surf, and the star fish, and the abalone." I have to admit, I am sometimes deeply in touch with my self-absorbed inner beachcomber, and he does not want to live a life of the good works of reconciliation.

What does the Bible have to say to the beachcomber factor? Well, here's Paul in Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect."

This passage always seems to me to put the idea of being a beachcomber for Christ right out of the picture. You just can't offer your body as a living sacrifice to God, and trundle off to the beach every day for a long walk on the wet warm sand. The beachcomber lives for himself, and represents no one but himself, so he doesn't much care what people think about his life. As an ambassador for Christ, however, as one entrusted with the message of reconciliation, we are always representing Christ. We simply have to care how our lives are lived, have to be pursuing those good works that God prepared beforehand for us to walk in.

But, there's another point worth making here as we think of the contrast between the beachcomber and the ambassador. What is that beachcomber really after? Is it starfish? Shells? No, he is after peace, inner peace. That is what everyone is after in one way or another. Most of us can't find it, so we find something to dull the pain of inner turmoil instead. The irony here is

that the person dedicated to living life for someone else's sake, for the sake of Christ, is also the one who finds what that beachcomber is really after—Shalom, the peace of God. At the risk of sounding too dramatic, let me put it this way—Peace does not come from living on the beach, but from living life on the streets, as Christ's representatives in the messy, fallen human world for which Christ died. "Peace I give to you," Christ said, "my peace I leave with you. Not as the world gives give I unto you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid." John 14:27. This is the source of peace—to know Jesus, and to serve him.

I said there were two impediments to living the life of good works for which we were created. The second one is what I will call the Eeyore factor. I have to admit that Eeyore is my favorite character in the A. A. Milne stories. I can identify with him. He feels sorry for himself a lot, doesn't think others think about him enough, doesn't think he's good enough. He just sits alone in a corner and, well, just sighs a lot as he contemplates how much better the other animal's lives are. If the beachcomber says to Christ's call to good works, "I don't want to, I have other things to do," Eeyore says, "I can't, I'm not good enough. Jesus wouldn't want to use me, because I'm just not very talented, or very smart, or particularly interesting. Other people would do the good works think much better than I could. Here am I, send them." Now, I don't want to trivialize this problem, for it can be a real impediment to living with a full realization of God's grace.

So, what does Jesus have to say to the Eeyores among us? Something quite startling, I think. Let me read from John 14 verses 12 through 15. "Very truly I say to you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

Now, does Jesus say here, “If you are good enough, you will do the works that I do?” No, he says, “If you believe in me, you will do the works that I do” (and these are the works of reconciliation) “and even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” Believe in me, accept my forgiveness, walk with me, let me fill you with my life, and I will empower you to do the good works you were created to do.

Now, if the beachcomber is really after inner peace, which comes through service to Christ, what is Eeyore after? What does he really want with his “I’m not good enough” routine? I think that Eeyore wants what I often want when I start acting like him. He wants to be reassured that he is worth something, that he matters, that his life is meaningful and noticed. In short, he wants to know that he is of value to someone. He wants to be loved. Where are the Eeyores among us going to find that kind of reassuring love, that sense of worth and value and meaning? Where does he find this kind of love. Let me read to you John 15:12—“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friend’s. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.”

A servant does not know what his master is doing—but we know what Jesus is doing. He is laying down his life for his friends, for you and for me. And this is the supreme work of reconciliation, the great work of redemption. Because Jesus did this, and because we as his friends understand what he was doing, we can do the same, and even greater works.

So, God does love you and does have a wonderful plan for your life. He created you to walk in the good works of redemption, to live a life characterized by such good acts of

forgiveness and reconciliation and justice and peace. But, we have to make our lives a living sacrifice to Him, to consciously choose to live obediently before Him. Let God answer that Big Question for you, What is the purpose of my life? The answer He gives you will take you out beyond yourself, beyond the I don't want to and the I can't and into the vast plan of God's redemptive love for the world.

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