

Beautiful Works

Text: Colossians 3:9-25; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 32

Speaker: Rev. Angus Stewart

Colossians 3:9–25 teaches that believers, having put off the old man and put on the new, are to live in the beauty of holiness. Lord's Day 32 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* opens the third section on thankfulness, asking why those redeemed by grace must still do good works. It begins: "Since then we are delivered from our misery, merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still do good works?" (Q. 86).

Some think they must merit heaven, or lessen purgatory's flames. Others seek men's approval. Some do good merely to feel good. But Scripture says if the motive isn't right, it's not a good work at all. Even sacrificing all one's possessions or suffering martyrdom is evil if done without the right heart. God sees the motive before He sees the act.

A good work must be: 1) according to God's law, 2) out of true faith, and 3) unto God's glory. These three are inseparable. Everything done by an unbeliever is sin (Rom. 14:23). The Greek words for "good" in the New Testament can emphasize either moral uprightness or attractive beauty. Here, good works are emphasized as *beautiful* works – done by those who are made beautiful in Christ, from renewed hearts, as tokens of gratitude.

By Whom?

Only a person spiritually renewed by the Holy Spirit can perform beautiful works. Jesus said, "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7:18). That is, the *nature* of the tree determines the *fruit*. A totally depraved sinner cannot perform even one good deed, for all his deeds are dead works. Hebrews refers to "dead works" that must be purged (Heb. 6:1; 9:14). They are dead because they issue from a spiritually dead heart.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." So, first God creates us anew in Christ, then we walk in the good works He has appointed.

Colossians 3:10 says the believer has put on the new man, "which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." This image of God is spiritual beauty. God is lovely in holiness and truth; to be renewed after His image is to become spiritually beautiful.

Psalm 53:5 says of the wicked, "God hath despised them." Many verses call the unregenerate an "abomination." They are spiritually repulsive in His sight. But the elect are conformed to Christ, the image of God. Romans 8:29 says, "Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." That Son is "altogether lovely" (Song 5:16). Psalm 45:2 says of Christ, "Thou art fairer than the children of men."

Ezekiel 16 describes how God beautifies His people: "My comeliness, which I had put upon thee." So also in Colossians 3:12-14, we read, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God... bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering... and above all these things put on charity." These graces flow from the renewed nature. They are not natural; they are Spirit-wrought.

Ephesians 4:24 says believers are created "in righteousness and true holiness." Together with Colossians 3, we see that the image of God consists in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. God looks at His people, sees the fruit of His own handiwork, and calls it beautiful.

I Peter 3:4 speaks of a believing woman adorned with "a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." Spiritual beauty far surpasses outward appearance. It is incorruptible. This image is also called "glorious." II Corinthians 3:18 says we are being transformed into Christ's image "from glory to glory." Sanctification is a transformation into increasing degrees of spiritual glory.

Though we feel ugly, though the work seems small, the image is real. The glory may be in the bud now, but the blossom is coming. Because we are good trees by grace, we bring forth good fruit.

Out of What?

Why must we do good works? Lord's Day 32 answers: "Because Christ, having redeemed and delivered us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit after His own image; that so we may testify, by the whole of our conduct, our gratitude to God for His blessings" (A. 86).

The believer does good works not to earn favour, but to show thanks. Only the regenerate, who are renewed after Christ's image, can do this. The unregenerate are not in God's image. To say they are is to say they are beautiful and capable of beauty, which contradicts total depravity. Psalm 53 says their works are vile: "there is none that doeth good" (v. 1).

The idea of *grace* is also crucial. Grace means charm, beauty, or favour. Even in English, we speak of "graceful" movements or "gracious" words. I Peter 2:19 says that suffering patiently for righteousness is "thankworthy" – literally, 'this is grace with God.' That is, God sees such endurance and calls it beautiful.

There are four senses of grace in Scripture: 1) Grace as an attribute of God – His eternal loveliness in Himself; 2) Grace as God's favour – His favourable attitude toward the elect in Christ; 3) Grace as power – the Spirit's work in making us new; 4) Grace as gratitude – the believer's thanks to God.

Romans 7:25 says, "I thank God through Jesus Christ." Literally, "grace to God." The believer, changed by grace, returns grace in the form of thanks. Grace flows from God, transforms the believer, and returns to God in praise. And this grace is always particular – never general, never common. It flows from eternal election, works irresistibly, and produces unique fruit.

There is no grace for the reprobate, no saving influence outside of Christ. The world teaches otherwise, but Scripture teaches this. Colossians 3:17 says, "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him." That thanks is the root of all good works and words.

As What?

Believers perform good works *as* beautiful expressions of grace. Colossians 3 continues with practical examples in the Christian home: wives, husbands, children, and fathers.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord." That submission, done in thankfulness, is beautiful. Rebellion is ugly. A nagging, bitter wife is an eyesore – not only to neighbours but to God.

"Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them." A loving husband is a beautiful thing. A bitter one, keeping score of faults, is spiritually hideous. The excuse, "I'm not the loving type," doesn't fly. You must become the loving type.

“Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.” God delights in obedient children. Their beauty is not in their hair or their smiles, but in honouring their parents. Backtalk and sulkiness are ugly.

“Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.” Harshness ruins harmony. But a father who raises his children wisely creates peace. That peace is lovely.

The Christian home should be a sanctuary of beauty—grace shown in relationships. No strife, no bitterness, no quarreling. Not like the unbeliever’s house. Why? Because Colossians 3:10 says, “Ye have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.”

Lord’s Day 32 continues: “That so we may testify by the whole of our conduct, our gratitude to God for His blessings, and that He may be praised by us” (A. 86). So we are made beautiful, we perform beautiful works, and we return beautiful thanks.

Psalm 33:1 says, “Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright.” Praise is beautiful. Worship is called “the beauty of holiness.” The gold and artwork of the temple reflected this spiritual truth: that worship is to be lovely, just as heaven is beautiful.

Lord’s Day 32 adds one more reason for good works: “Also, that everyone may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof; and that by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ” (A. 86). Good works reassure us of our faith. They are evidence of God’s work in us. They also serve as a testimony to outsiders, who may, by God’s grace, be drawn to Christ.

God’s grace in election makes us the objects of His favour. Christ’s blood redeems us. The Spirit renews us. That work makes us lovely. That loveliness produces gratitude. Gratitude produces good works. And good works return to God as praise.

Thus: beautiful works by beautiful people, created in Christ, expressing thanks, confirming faith, and glorifying the God of all grace.

Our Father in Heaven, we thank Thee for Thy word. Help us, Lord, to remember it, so that we're not forgetful hearers who turn aside. We ask Lord God, that Thou would use it to encourage and uplift us and help us to battle against the flesh, and to bring forth to Thy praise good works for the honour of Thy great name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen