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Practical Christianity

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THE Christian is a responsible person. God addresses to him "words and commands which never can be addressed to anyone else, and which are quite without power and meaning to all who are not 'in Christ'" (*Christ our Sanctification*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones). The Lord has undoubtedly put a difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, as He put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel. (*Exodus xi. 7.*) The Christian is expected to be "a doer of the Word", to "go the second mile", to "turn the other cheek", to forgive "until seventy times seven".

In theological language "we are justified by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone" (*Commentary on St. James*, Alexander Ross, p. 55). A living faith manifests itself in good works. Someone has said, "We are justified before God by faith and we are justified before men by works". The world justifies the Christian by his life. Our Lord subscribed to this standard of judgment when He said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (*St. Matt. vii. 20*). When the world sees Christ-likeness in the Christian it is attracted towards Christ, when it fails to see Him in His followers it is often repelled. "These Christians," Nietzsche wrote, "must shew me they are redeemed before I will believe in their Redeemer". Alan Stibbs sums up the New Testament emphasis on "Good Works" when he says, "It is in the performance of our duty to others that our ethics, so to speak, come out into the light and are most plainly seen of men. It is by our good works that we are called to let our light shine" (*The Whole Duty of Man*, A. M. Stibbs, p. 5). St. Paul underlines the teaching of the Master when he writes to the Ephesian Christians, "By grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast, for we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (*Eph. ii. 8-10*). Salvation is "not of works" but "unto good works". When, through His goodness and mercy, we are converted to God, we are not immediately translated to heaven, but we continue in the world to fulfil the purposes of God.

It is by good works that the presence and reality of a living faith are demonstrated. Electricity, for example, is not seen save through the mediums of light, heat and power. We go into a dark room and immediately the presence of electricity is demonstrated when we switch on the light, plug in the radiator, and turn on the radio. The world of nature supplies further illustrations of an important biblical truth. A tree is known by its fruit. The label, the gardener, the appearance of the tree may tell us that it is a Cox's Orange tree, but until we see the fruit we may not be convinced. The tree which produces leaves, when the Master expects to find fruit, gives Him no pleasure but merits His judgment. (*St. Matt. xxi. 19.*) The tree is perfected by its fruit. So, "faith bears within itself the seed which

will come to fruition in good works" (*The Churchman*, Dec. 1950, p. 222).

It has sometimes been said that if Christianity is not practical it is not Christianity. In this respect our Lord has left us an example to follow. His whole ministry was spent in being a neighbour to those in need. "He went about doing good" (*Acts x. 28*). Evangelicals in the Church, in particular, have sometimes been in danger of forgetting the practical side of the Christian faith while concentrating on its spiritual content. We have been so concerned to declare that the Gospel is spiritual that we have tended occasionally to neglect the social aspects of the faith, and demonstrate to the world that it is intensely practical. Faith and good works belong to each other, and what God hath joined together let no man put asunder.

If faith is the right sort it will reveal itself in right conduct. This principle is abundantly shown in both Old and New Testaments. Abel believed God and offered unto Him a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. (*Gen. iv. 4*.) Noah believed God and built an ark for himself and his family. (*Gen. vi. 22*.) By faith Abram, when he was called by God to leave his father's house, obeyed, and went out not knowing whither he went. (*Gen. xii. 1*.) By faith, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God. (*Ex. ii. 11*.) By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she received the spies with peace. (*Jos. vi. 22*.) When Andrew and Peter believed on Jesus they straightway left their nets and followed Him. (*St. Matt. iv. 22*.) When the Samaritan saw that he was healed of his leprosy he turned back and gave thanks to Jesus. (*St. Luke xvii. 16*.) Zacchæus received the gift of salvation and immediately offered to make restitution to any he had wronged. (*St. Luke xix. 8*.) When Saul of Tarsus was dramatically converted to Christ on the road to Damascus, straightway he asked, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" (*Acts ix. 6*.) Lydia opened her heart to the Lord and her home to the Apostles. (*Acts xvi. 14*.) The Macedonian Christians, having entered by faith into all the spiritual riches that are in Christ, shared their material benefits with their less fortunate brethren in Jerusalem. (*II Cor. viii. 2*.)

The teaching of the New Testament on this subject is perfectly clear. I am not saved by works but I am saved "unto good works". I have been born again by the Holy Spirit. I am a child of God. I am to grow up and go on to spiritual maturity. It was because the Corinthian Christians were still babes in Christ when they ought to have been working men which brought forth Paul's stinging rebuke of that Church. (*I Cor. iii. 1f*.) The new birth is not the end of the Christian life but only the beginning. I am not to remain a babe in Christ but to grow up into the fulness of the stature of Christ, unto a full-grown man. (*Eph. iv. 13*.) I am a baptized Christian. Therefore, I am to reckon myself "dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord" (*Rom. vi. 11*.) I am no more the servant of sin but the servant of God. I am "Under New Management". I have been bought with a price. I am Christ's. Therefore, I must become what I am; so must you.

It is significant that the New Testament describes the status of

Christians in terms of action. For instance, Peter writes, "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as *good stewards* of the manifold grace of God" (*I Peter iv.* 10). Paul also lays emphasis upon the practical side of Christian living. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a *workman* that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (*II Tim. ii.* 15). In this same chapter he uses military, husbandry and athletic metaphors to describe the Christian life. "Thou therefore endure hardness as a *good soldier* of Jesus Christ" (*II Tim. ii.* 3). "If a man also *strive for masteries*, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully" (*II Tim. ii.* 5). "The *husbandman* that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits" (*II Tim. ii.* 6). "Now being made free from sin, and become *servants* of God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (*Rom. vi.* 22). Jude also in his short epistle presents an active description of the Christian life. "Ye, beloved, *building up* yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God" (*Jude* 20, 21). Stewards, workmen, athletes, husbandmen, servants, builders, such are some of the terms the Holy Spirit chose to describe the character of the members of the Christian Church in the New Testament; there are not a few in the Christian Church of the twentieth century who seem to think that God has called them into His vineyard just to eat grapes!

New Testament scholars, particularly C. H. Dodd, have drawn attention in recent years to the two "streams" of thought running through the Epistles. A distinction has been drawn between "Kerygma" and "Didache", that is, between the doctrinal and ethical sections in the Epistles. St. Paul, it has been pointed out, writes about some particular Christian doctrine, and then he says, "Therefore . . .," and then applies the doctrine to some aspect of Christian living. In his teaching method St. Paul followed faithfully in the steps of His Master, whose exhortations to godly living had their roots in the vital truths of Christian theology. *Romans xii.* 1f marks a division in the book. Chapters *i.* to *xi.* deal mainly with the doctrine of salvation from sin through the death of Christ. Theology is related to practical Christian living in the twelfth and following chapters, which begin with the exhortation, "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (*Rom. xii.* 1). The great Resurrection chapter in *I Corinthians* is rounded off with a practical exhortation to active Christian living. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (*I Cor. xv.* 58). Again in *Ephesians i-iii.* the Apostle rejoices in the exaltation of the saints in Christ and draws his conclusion at the beginning of chapter *iv.* "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." This scriptural truth has been well illustrated by Alan Stibbs. "Just as Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, became 'royal' on the day in which she was joined in marriage to her royal husband, and has since so obviously learnt to act 'royally', so we become 'holy' in status on the day on which we became joined to

the Lord Jesus, and this puts upon us the obligation to behave ourselves 'holily', or 'as is fitting among saints'" (*Eph. v. 3*).

One is unable to write on the subject of justification by faith and good works without referring to the apparent contradictions in the teaching of St. Paul and St. James. The contradiction is not real, and both views may be reconciled if we recognize that the terminology and the situation are different in both cases. "Faith" in St. James stands for intellectual assent or head-belief, whereas "Faith" in St. Paul's epistles means trust in a person or heart-trust. "Works" in St. James means Christian love and deeds, while for St. Paul it means the commandments and the fulfilling of the Law of God. St. James rightly says, "not by faith only," because he is thinking of faith as head knowledge. No one would agree more with St. James on this point than the Apostle Paul. St. Paul says, "by faith" (Luther added "alone"; though not in the text of Scripture it is surely in keeping with the truth of Scripture) because he is thinking of that sort of faith which trusts in Jesus as the only Sinbearer and Saviour. St. James would heartily agree with St. Paul's theology. Each emphasizes the same spiritual truth from a different angle. Professor R. V. G. Tasker, commenting on St. James ii. 24 says, "While it is faith that justifies, for James never denies this fundamental truth, faith is never static. Faith is a practical response to the divine initiative. It is an answer to a heavenly call, and the call is always a call to obedience. Therefore obedience, expressing itself in action, is the inevitable and immediate issue of faith" (*The Epistle of James*, R. V. G. Tasker, p. 70). We conclude that St. Paul would say, "We are justified before God by faith". St. James would say, "We are justified before men by works". Both are stating a truth of God which Jesus taught.

What are the "good works" which God expects of His people? It is plain from the Scriptures that they are not done by keeping ecclesiastical or monastic ordinances. Quite definitely they are not good works to earn merit. They are not rules of life, vows, or penances. The "good works", which God delights to see, are motivated by love, and not because of any obligation or duty to discharge. "Faith worketh by love" (*Gal. v. 6*), and the love does all the good it can to all it can. Such works as love, gratitude, obedience, forgiveness, loyalty, kindness, generosity, courtesy, patience, mercy, cheerfulness—these are well pleasing to God. So St. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honour preferring one another, not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing instant in prayer, distributing to the necessity of saints, given to hospitality" (*Rom. x. 10f.*). The Apostle writes to the Christians in Galatia in a similar strain, "By love serve one another, for all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'" (*Gal. v. 12f.*). And to the Christians in Thessalonica he writes, "Brethren, be not weary in well doing" (*II Thess. iii. 13*).

It was said of the Christians of the Early Church by their pagan contemporaries, "How they love one another". A description of that

love has been preserved in a letter written by Aristides to the Emperor Hadrian. "They love one another," he writes, "they do not refuse to help widows. They rescue the orphan from him who does him violence. He who has, gives ungrudgingly, to him who has not. If they see a stranger, they take him to their dwellings and rejoice over him as over a real brother; for they do not call themselves brothers after the flesh, but after the Spirit and in God."

Our Evangelical fathers stressed the importance of personal religion and devotion to God through Jesus Christ, but they were not indifferent to the social needs of their day as is sometimes suggested. True, they did not see the social problems of their time as large as we do to-day, but such spiritual giants as Wesley, Whitefield, Simeon, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, and Barnardo, to mention only a few, were the promoters of many lasting good works. Theirs was a "faith that worketh by love". "What Lecky describes as 'the new and vehement religious enthusiasm' issued in the Abolition of Slavery, the founding of the Church Missionary Society, the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the reform in factories, the establishment of Sunday Schools, the beginning of general education, prison reforms—to mention some of the outstanding results. As Dr. Overton well says, 'It was not only Evangelicals but Evangelicalism that abolished the slave trade. The doctrines these men held compelled them to do the work'" (*The Churchman*, Sept. 1950, p. 140).

Evangelicals to-day have entered into a goodly inheritance. Our privileges are immense, our responsibilities are great. Our work, if it is to be truly effective, must be both spiritual and social. Ours is a ministry which demands that we give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word, and to the serving of tables. Nothing less than this is required of us as Evangelical Churchmen. We offer our heartfelt thanks to God for our redemption in Christ in the words of the "General Thanksgiving", and pray that we may "shew forth Thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to Thy service". In the Collects after Easter and Trinity we ask for grace to "make us continually to be given to all good works" (17th Sunday after Trinity). The Article in our Book of Common Prayer, "Of Good Works," states theologically the teaching of Holy Writ. "Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's Judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit" (Article XII).

We rejoice in the scriptural doctrine of justification by faith. We know that Jesus Christ is our Saviour and that He has pardoned us and cleansed us from all our sins. There is therefore now no condemnation. Judgment has been passed on our sins and Another has paid the penalty of our transgressions. We are free; free to serve the Lord with a loving heart. One day we shall be called to give account of our stewardship. "As we have opportunity let us do good to all men, and especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (*Gal. vi. 10*).