

**“But you, be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded!”
(2Chron 15:7)**

✠ Lecture XI: Works in The Orthodox Concept ✠

Due to their misunderstanding of the meaning of grace, Protestants teach that salvation is by faith alone and that good human works play no role in the process of salvation. Moreover, they teach that evil works will not cause a believer to perish! These heresies are primarily supported by the misinterpretation of the Holy Epistles of St. Paul to the Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. In what follows we shall, by the grace of God, examine the types of works mentioned in Holy Scriptures:

✠ Types of Works:

a. Evil works:

Such as murder, adultery, idol worshiping, robbery, etc... Holy Scripture calls them ‘works of the flesh’ (**Gal 5:19**). This type is obviously condemned and if a believer commits any evil work **and does not repent**, he/she will be punished more than the unbeliever who does the same, “Of how much worse punishment do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?” (**Heb 12:29**), “He who does wrong will be repaid for the wrong which he has done, and **there is no partiality**” (**Col 3:25**). (More details in Lecture VI: Would a believer perish?).

b. Dead works:

A) These are good works **done by believers** for the wrong reasons. These are works, which are good in themselves, such as fasting, praying, giving alms, etc... but are done to call attention to oneself and to be praised by people. Selfish motivation turns good works to dead works. The solution is not to cease fasting, giving or helping but to turn from the sin of self-glorification, “when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret” (**Mt 6:3-4**) → Also fasting and praying (**Mt 6:5-18**). Likewise, good deeds void of love are considered dead, “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing” (**1Cor 13:3**). Again the answer is not to stop the work but to repent, “I have this against you, that **you have left your first love**. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and **do the first works**” (**Rev 2:4-5**).

B) The ‘good’ works **of the unbelievers** are considered dead because they are void of faith. Some of the Gentiles were actually doing very good deeds before becoming Christians, like Cornelius who was “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (**Acts 10:1-2**). St. Paul did not want those Gentiles to boast and think that God offered them salvation as a reward of their righteousness, he said, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and **not of yourselves**; it is the gift of God, **not of works, lest anyone should boast**” (**Eph 2:8-9**), “Not by works of righteousness which we **have done** (before believing), but according to His mercy He saved us” (**Titus 3:5**). Directly after the above verses St. Paul said, “We are His workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus for good works**, which God has prepared **that we may walk in them**” (**Eph 2:10**), “... these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should **be careful to maintain good works**” (**Titus 3:8**). There is no contradiction between these verses because St. Paul is talking about two different types of works.

C} The works of the Law: Some of the Jews who became Christians were obsessed with Judaism and developed themselves as teachers, they taught that the Gentiles **must** keep the works of the Law of Moses; circumcision, Sabbaths, new moons, etc... “And some men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘**unless you are circumcised** according to the custom of Moses, **you cannot be saved**’” (Acts 15:1), “Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘it is **necessary to circumcise them** (the Gentiles), and to command them to **keep the Law of Moses**’” (Acts 15:5). The first Church council mentioned in (Acts 15) rejected this heresy. St. Paul, being the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; 15:12; 18:6; Gal 2:7), took it upon himself to clarify this point in his Holy Epistles:

- “A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ... we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” (Gal 2:16)
- “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” (Rom 3:27-28)
- “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God. For what does Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Rom 4:2,3). → St. Paul also used the life of our father Abraham as an example of justification without the works of the Law of Moses in (Gal 3).

Interestingly, St. James who was not trying to refute any Judaic attitude in his Holy Epistle, uses **the same example** of the life of our father Abraham to stress the importance of good works, “Was not our father **Abraham justified by works** when he offered Isaac his son on the alter? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him righteousness’. And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only” (James 2:21-24). → St. James also uses the example of Rahab (Jam 2:25).

There is no contradiction between St. Paul who said that our father Abraham was **not** justified by works and St. James who said that he was indeed justified by works because each apostle is referring to **a different type of works**; St. Paul is talking about the works of the Law and St. James is referring to the good works of the believers. Noticed that both of them quoted the same verse from the Old Testament (Gen 15:6) to make their point.

It is important to distinguish the outer works of the law from the spirit of the Old Testament commandments, for our Lord Jesus Christ did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17), He also said, “unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20). Therefore, St. Paul said, “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, **we establish the law**” (Rom 3:31).

c. Good Works:

These are deeds which are both good in themselves and done for a good purpose: to glorify God, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). These works play an important role in our justification (Jam 2:24-25) and are strongly related to faith (Jam 2:14-26). We can quote literally hundreds of Holy verses that speak about the importance and efficacy of good works like prayer, fasting, loving, giving the poor, etc... actually, the whole sermon on the Mountain (Mt 5;6;7) is a strong refutation to those who preach salvation by faith ‘alone’. **In fact there is an entire Holy Book called the Book of Acts (Works)!**

✠ **Good works are evidence of being children of God:**

- Our Lord said to the Jews who boasted vainly of being children of Abraham, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham” (**Jn 8: 39**), therefore, works are evidence of son-ship.
- “If you know that He is righteous, you know that every one who practices righteousness is born of Him.” (**1Jn 2:29**)
- “Whoever is born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” (**1Jn 3:9**)
- “We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.” (**1Jn 5:18**)
- “He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God.” (**3Jn 11**)

✠ **Good works are fruits necessary for salvation:**

- “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (**Jn 15:8**) → “That they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (**Mat 5:16**) **Fruits=Works.**
- “Let our people also learn to maintain good works to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful.” (**Titus 3:4**)
- “... That you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work...” (**Col 1:10**)
- “If I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor” (**Phil 1:22**)
- “... That I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles” (**Rom 1:13**)
- St. Paul called giving to the poor a fruit, “Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain.” (**Rom 15:28**)
- St. John The Baptist said, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (**Lk 3:7**). So the people asked him, “What shall we do then?” He answered, “He who has tunics, let him give to him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise” (**Lk 3:11**) **Fruits=Works.**
- There is no salvation without these fruits of good works, “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (**Lk 3:9**), “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away” (**Jn 15:2**).
- “For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.” (**Rom 6:20-22**)
- “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another, even to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the passions of sins which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.” (**Rom 7:4-5**)
- “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (**Eph 5:11**)

- (**Lk 13:6-9**) → **The parable of the barren tree**
- (**Lk 8:11-15**) → **The parable of the sower**
- (**Mt 25:14-29**) → **The parable of the talents**
- (**Lk 19:12-27**) → **The parable of the Minas**

✦ Judgment will be according to works:

- “You are great in counsel and mighty in works, for Your eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of man, to give everyone **according to the fruit of his doing**” (Jer 32:19)
- “... You render to each one **according to his work.**” (Ps 62:12)
- “God will bring **every work** into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.” (Ecc 12:14)
- The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who **have done good**, to the resurrection of life, and those who **have done evil**, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (Jn 5:28-29)
- The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each **according to his works.**” (Mt 16:27)
- “Every idle word men speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned.” (Mt 12:37)
- “We must **all** appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that **each one** may receive the things done in the body, according to what **he has done**, whether good or bad.” (2Cor 5:10)
- “... in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one **according to his deeds.**” (Rom 2:6)
- “If you call on the Father, who without partiality judges **according to each one’s work**, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear.” (1Pet 1:17)
- “I will give to each one of you according to your works.” (Rev 2:23)
- “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give everyone **according to his works.**” (Rev 22:12)
- “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on ‘yes’, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors and **their works follow them.**” (Rev 14:13)
- “... The dead were judged **according to their works**, by the things which were written in the books.” (Rev 20:12)
- The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them and they were judged, each one according to his works.” (Rev 20:13)

→ If salvation depends on faith ‘alone’, then how come God’s judgment is according to works? Why isn’t judgment in the last day according to faith ‘alone’?

✦ The relation between Faith & Works:

- a. Faith is dead without good works → (Jam 2:2,17,20)
- b. Faith is made perfect with good works → (Jam 2:22)
- c. Faith is manifest by good works → (Jam 2:18)
- d. Justification is by both Faith & good works → (Jam 2:21-24)

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have (good) works? **Can faith (alone) save him?** ... Thus also **faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead.** But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works (if you can), and I will show you my faith by my works. ... Do you want to know, O foolish man, that **faith without works is dead?** Was not Abraham our father **justified by works** when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and **by works faith was made perfect?** ... You see then that **a man is justified by works and not by faith only.** Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also **justified by works** when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so **faith without works is dead also**” (Jam 2:14-26)

✠ The essence of good works:

Good works are actually a gift from God; “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which **God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**’ (Eph 2:10), “For it is God who works in you both **to will and to do** for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). If we accept the work of the Holy Spirit within us, we may say with St. Paul, “**we are God’s fellow workers**” (1Cor 3:9).

In this case, our Lord will say to us, “come you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me” (Mt 25:34-36).

St. Paul encourages us to do good works saying:

- “Whatever you do, do it heartily **as to the Lord and not to men**, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” (Col 3:23-24)
- “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that **your labor is not in vain in the Lord.**” (1Cor 5:58)
- “Each one will receive his reward according to his own labor.” (1Cor 3:8)
- “God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.” (Heb 6:10)
- “This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm **constantly**, that those who have believed in God should be **careful to maintain good works**. These things are good and profitable to men.” (Titus 3:8)
- “Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” (Gal 6:9)
- “**Do not forget to do good** and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb 13:16)

If we are deceived and believe that faith ‘alone’ will save us and as a result slacken and are not zealous to do good works, the Lord will say to us, “depart from Me you cursed, in to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angel; For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not cloth Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me” (Mt 25:41-43). Notice that those people did not do any evil deed but their problem was the **lack of good works**. Indeed, “To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is a sin” (Jam 4:17).

✠ In a Nutshell:

Our Lord emphasized the importance of works when He said, seven times, “I know your works” (Rev 2:2,9,13,19; 3:1,8,15).

There are several types of works:

- a. Evil works
- b. Dead Works (for self glorification, w/o love or faith, outer works of the Jewish law)
- c. Good Works → evidence of being children of God
 - Fruits necessary for salvation
 - Basis for Judgment
 - Response to the grace of God

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Salvation in The Orthodox Concept*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.