

Doing what is good

Reading: Matthew 19:16-22 “...*what good thing shall I do.....*”¹

Introduction:

The young man in the above reading seems to be someone who was interested in spiritual matters. He wanted eternal life, and he understood that in order to achieve that goal, he was required to live in a particular manner. When the opportunity presented itself, he asked Jesus the all-important question, “*What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?*” Jesus responded by quoting several of the Old Testament commandments², and saying that he (the young man) needed to keep them.

But it seems that the young man felt that there was more involved, because having already obeyed those commandments, he still felt that something was missing. So Jesus told him to “...*go sell what you have and give to the poor....*”. When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful, “...*for he had great possessions.*”

This encounter, along with a similar one in **Luke 10:25-29** that led to the parable of “The Good Samaritan”, raises the issue of how we view God’s Word. Given the young man’s response to what Jesus ultimately told him to do, it would appear to me that he was prepared to obey the commandments, but when God wanted him to go “deeper”, doing something that called for great personal sacrifice, well, then that was another matter.

I suspect that some people in the religious world today view God’s Word as a minimum “to do” list, *i.e.* they justify their lives solely on the basis of “*I do this, and I don’t do that, just like the Word of God says.*”, but seek to do no more. Now doing what God says that we are to do, and not doing what God says we are not to do, is a good thing, and I am not minimising the importance of that (**Luke 6:46; John 14:15; I John 5:3**)³. But is that all there is to it? Is the sum total of our Christian life just a matter of using God’s Word as some sort of checklist to make sure that we have “*ticked all of the boxes*”?

In this lesson, I want us to consider two different approaches that can be taken towards the Word of God, and draw some application for us.

LESSON

1) The approach of the Pharisees

a) The Old Covenant was very prescriptive

Under the Old Covenant, God gave the children of Israel many, prescriptive commands and instructions, some to a very high level of detail. These commands covered such areas as;

- the building of the Tabernacle (**Exodus 26:1-37**)
- the contents of the Tabernacle (**Exodus 25:10-40; 27:1-19; 30:1-10**)
- the garments to be worn by the Priestly (**Exodus 28:1-43**)
- the many types of sacrifices (**Leviticus 1-7; Numbers 28-29**)

¹ All quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

² Commands taken from **Exodus 20:12-16** and **Leviticus 19:18b**.

³ Nor am I advocating that we go beyond what is written when it comes to unauthorised religious practices. – **1 Corinthians 4:6** “...*not to think beyond what is written....*”

– **2 John 9** “*Whoever transgresses.....*” *i.e.* “*goes ahead / beyond*”.

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- clean and unclean foods (**Leviticus 11:1-47**)
- health regulations (**Leviticus 13-15**)
- various social and moral laws (**Leviticus 18-20**)

These commandments were not just arbitrary or indiscriminate – they had a purpose. They were to make them aware of what sin was (**Romans 7:7**). They were there for their spiritual guidance until “*the Seed*” (Jesus), the Messiah, should come (**Galatians 3:19, 24**). They were there also for their physical well-being and prosperity (**Deuteronomy 28:1-14**). And so God told the children of Israel that they were to diligently and carefully observe “...*the commandments of the Lord your God...*” (**Deuteronomy 6:17, 24-25**), and also to teach their children to do likewise (**Deuteronomy 6:1-9**)⁴.

b) The Pharisees

One group of people who are often renowned for their strict observance of the Law were the Pharisees.

- they even set up rules of their own as a “protective barrier” around what God had commanded (*e.g.* **Mark 7:8**)⁵.

They went to great lengths to make sure that they observed even the smallest details⁶. Now there was nothing wrong with keeping the Law in every detail – after all, that is what God had commanded (**Deuteronomy 6:1-2**), and not one “*jot*” of the Law was going to pass away “...*till all is fulfilled...*” (**Matthew 5:18**). Jesus Himself obeyed the Law perfectly, for He was without sin (**Hebrews 4:15**).

However, in their focussing on just obeying the Law, they missed something just as (if not more) important. They missed what God was also teaching them through His Word – things like “...*justice and mercy and faith...*” (**Matthew 23:23**); things about Jesus (**John 5:39-46**); things like humility and compassion (**Matthew 23:5-12; 14**). As a result, they became “*blind guides*” to the house of Israel (**Matthew 23:16a**); they rejected the Prophets and the Messiah (**Matthew 23:34; 27:1**), and made the “...*word of God of no effect...*” (**Mark 7:13**).

- their interpretation of “keeping the Sabbath” was more important than showing compassion to the sick (**Matthew 12:9-14**).
- observing their rules about “Corban” were more important than helping your parents (**Mark 7:10-12**).

Now using the case of the Pharisees is probably an extreme example of people seeing God’s Word simply as a “book of rules”. But they illustrate the point that we can focus on just one area, and miss out on other things that are just as important.

- a case of “*not seeing the wood for the trees*”, so to speak.

⁴ Some of these laws had very severe punishments if broken – *e.g.* **Leviticus 18:29; 20:10; 24:16; Deuteronomy 21:18-21**.

⁵ In fact, they gave their own rules more importance than what God had said (**Mark 7:9**).

⁶ In **Matthew 23:23** we see that they paid the tithe due even on the plants, “...*mint and anise and cummin...*” Tithing was part of the Law – **Leviticus 27:30, 32; Numbers 18:24; Deuteronomy 12:5-6, 11; 14:22-29**.

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2) Seeking to do Good

a) Obedience is still required

While not as prescriptive as the Old Covenant, the New Covenant also contains many commands and instructions about how we are to live our daily lives for Christ – for example **Ephesians 4:25-6:9**. And just as obedience was required under the Old Covenant, so it is under the New (**2 Thessalonians 1:8; 2:15; 3:14**). In fact, our obedience is a measure of our love for God (**John 14:15; 1 John 5:2-3**). Jesus Himself said, as part of the great commission, that the apostles were to teach disciples of all nations to “...*observe all things that I have commanded you...*” (**Matthew 28:19-20**).

We know that we won't obey perfectly – God knows that as well (**1 John 1:8, 10**), and our salvation is not dependant on perfect obedience – we ultimately rely on the grace of God (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). But that does not mean that we can afford to take an indifferent attitude towards what God has commanded us (**Luke 6:46; Romans 6:1-2, 15**) – we need to be doing our best to please and obey Him (**Colossians 1:10**).

b) Example of Jesus

But more than simply obeying the commandments and instructions, we are to set our eyes on Jesus - He is our example (*e.g.* **Ephesians 5:2; 1 Peter 2:21**), and like Paul, we are to imitate Him (**1 Corinthians 11:1**). In fact, we are to be like our Father in Heaven (**Matthew 5:48; Ephesians 5:1**), the source of all that is good (**James 1:17**).

- imitating Jesus is to imitate the Father, because Jesus is the image of God the Father **Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3a**

When you look at Jesus' life in the gospels, it was one of continually doing good – whether it was feeding the hungry (**Matthew 14:15-20**), healing the sick (**Matthew 9:35**), teaching the lost (**Matthew 9:35-36; Mark 4:1f.f.**), associating with those rejected by society (**Matthew 9:9-13**) – even doing good to those who came out to arrest Him (**Luke 22:50-51**). In fact, even when He was suffering on the cross, He was still doing good;

- He asked His Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him (**Luke 23:34**).
- He ensured that His mother was taken care of (**John 19:25-27**).

There were occasions when Jesus took time out for Himself (**Matthew 14:13, 23**), and there were times when He was alone with just His disciples (**Matthew 13:36; 17:1; 24:3; John 18:2**) and friends (**John 12:1-3**). But when opportunities presented themselves, He did good works for the benefit of others.

c) The commands are centred around “doing good”

When we imitate Jesus and seek to do good, then we can see the commands and instructions from God in their rightful context. For example;

- When God says, “...*whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two...*” (**Matthew 5:41**), He is asking us to do a good thing – someone benefits from our sacrifice.

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- When God says, “...*Forgive one another...*” (**Ephesians 4:32**), He wants us to do it because forgiving others is a good thing. Consider the outcome when people refuse to forgive one another.
- When God says, regarding our speech, “...(say) *what is good for necessary edification...*” (**Ephesians 4:29b**) He wants us to talk that way because talking that way is a good thing – it is the type of speech that builds people up, and encourages them, and “...*imparts grace to the hearer...*”.
- When God says, “...*hold fast to the pattern of sound words...*” (**2 Timothy 1:13**), that is a good thing (verse **14**), “...*because many false prophets have gone out into the world...*” (**1 John 4:1b**), and our salvation is at stake.

Conversely,

- When God says, “...*Do not lie to one another...*” (**Colossians 3:9**), He says that because lying does not produce a good outcome – lying leads to mistrust, anger, disappointment, false hopes, - it can even endanger the lives (physical and spiritual) of others (**John 8:44**).
- When God warns us against gossiping (**1 Timothy 5:13**), it is because gossiping is not a good thing. Gossiping is designed to embarrass and ridicule people; it is meant to put people down, rather than to build up.

Application:

Doing good is something that we are commanded to do (**1 Thessalonians 5:15b; Titus 3:1, 8**). There will be times when it won't come naturally, so we need to work at it. At the core of doing good is having the right heart and the right mind (**Matthew 12:35**). It involves setting our mind on things above (**Colossians 3:1**), seeking to be like Christ (**Galatians 2:20**), thinking about things that are “...*true...noble...just...of good report...*” (**Philippians 4:8**).

And our doing good is not to be directed just towards those who are our friends, or to those who can repay us in kind someday (**Luke 6:33-35**). Read **Matthew 5:44**,

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”

and consider the practical application of this verse.

When confronted with a situation that requires you to say or do something, ask yourself this question, “*What is the good thing to say or to do here?*” – not “*What would I like to say?*”, or “*What do I feel like doing?*”, but “*What would Jesus say or do?*” or “*What can I say or do that will achieve something good and positive here - what would be beneficial for the other person?*”

Sometimes the good response may involve a personal sacrifice (**1 Corinthians 6:7; 8:13; 1 Peter 2:18-20a**), but “...*this is commendable towards God...*” (**1 Peter 2:20b**), “...*knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord...*” (**Ephesians 6:8**).

We have been “...*created in Christ Jesus for good works...*” (**Ephesians 2:10**). Yes, we need to stick with and obey the commandments of God. But we also need to look to the good that lies behind the commandments, and seek to do good whenever we have the opportunity (**Galatians 6:10**).