

OpenTheo

#104 Are good works evidence of saving faith?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What are 'good works' and are they evidence of saving faith? What about Muslims who do better 'works' than Christians? Is it ok to 'show off' our good works on social media? And what is a healthy approach to work as a career? · Support the show – give from the USA or UK & Rest of the world

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello there and welcome back. It's Justin here once again with the show brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online, SBCK and Premier Unbelievable.

I'm head of Theology and apologetics for them. Today works and work, i.e. doing good as a sign of our salvation. Is that something Tom endorses or not? What about showing off our good deeds on social media? And of course the question of work itself as a career.

What's a healthy attitude to that kind of work? Those sorts of issues being discussed on the show today. Thanks to Davis Donny who got in touch to say, "Great podcast. I like NT Wright's writing but listening to the discussion helps it sink into a different part of my brain." Thanks Donny and please if you can rate and review us on your podcast provider it helps other people to discover the show too.

If you want more from the programme ask NT Wright.com is a good place to go and just one more thing before we get into today's show. Some exciting unbelievable live events

coming up soon and in a few months. Firstly, ask Philip Yancy anything on the 1st of March you can register free to be part of the audience for a live Q&A with one of the most significant voices in the Evangelical Church over the past few decades.

And we're about to open ticketing for Unbelievable the Conference 2022. It's on Saturday the 14th of May live from the British Library in London but you can attend from anywhere in the world. Very exciting theme this year.

God unmuted helping the church to find its authentic voice again. For that event and our Philip Yancy ask anything event Unbelievable.live is the place to go and there's a link with today's podcast. For now on to today's show.

Well today on the show we're asking your question on works. Good deeds and when are they something that we should strive for or how should we balance that against the idea that we're not obviously saved by our good deeds necessarily. This has sort of come up in various ways in your theological work.

Tom when it comes to justification and the new perspective and so on. But we'll see how these intersect along the way with that sort of theology. Will in New Jersey is wanting to ask about what exactly good works entail.

He says what does the Apostle Paul mean when he talks about good works given the fact that good works are evidence of saving faith and that we will be judged on the basis of the presence or absence of them. It seems important to clearly understand what they are. Clearly serving in a super kitchen is good work.

I'm exhausted and drained all of the time from my workload. What about when you just try to apply in a bay the word like consciously treating another person the way you'd want to be treated. Resisting temptation applying faith and trusting in the midst of a tough situation.

Could you give me some clarity as to what good works really are biblically speaking. Will says as a side note I'm an introvert who gets incredibly drained being around people. I'm a martial arts instructor who teaches back-to-back classes all week long.

I interact with roughly 300 people every single day. I take off Sunday when I go to church in half of Saturday and quite frankly the last thing that I want to do with my time is to be around yet another group of people and spend a spending quality time with my family. Which makes it really hard to be part of a community group.

I only say this in relation to wondering if not being in a community group is a strike against me in terms of evidentiary works. There's quite a lot in that question but obviously Will has got, obviously believes that there is a place for works as evidence of saving faith but feels a bit guilty that because his job is so demanding he doesn't get to do things that would obviously be man of, you know, obviously tokens of that sort of

good works in the world and so on in our community settings. So any thoughts for Will here? Quite.

My heart goes out to him. I mean when I read that bit about an introvert that gets drained and yet interacts with 300 people every single day I thought oh my goodness please at the weekend find a quiet place where you can lie down in a dark room or just read a book or something and yet being with your family absolutely fine. It seems to me that by doing your job in so far as martial arts is a good thing for people to do which I assume it is then you're doing plenty.

Don't feel under any obligation whatever to go out and stand in a soup kitchen. There's plenty of extroverts like me who have to sit at a desk half the day or by themselves and are eager to go out and meet people and be with them and that's fine. So play to your strengths and don't feel guilty about not doing the things which from that point if you don't come naturally.

Now of course there are plenty of passages in the New Testament which make it clear that though we are justified by faith the final judgment of God will be on the totality of the life that's been lived not that we have to be perfect in the sense of fulfilling moral commandments all the way down the line but Paul says in Romans 2 those who by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality God will give eternal life. It's seeking for it by patience in well doing but well doing comes in a whole multiplicity of styles and types. There's a problem here though about the difference between good works in the sense of here are the moral things we should do and the immoral things we shouldn't do and how am I doing on that scale and the good works which is a regular phrase in the first century in Paul's world which means that if I have the time if I have the energy if I have the money I ought to be trying to do things which are good for the community.

Good works in Paul's day often meant people who would do public building who would have enough spare cash for whatever reason to be able to put up a public library or something like that it was it was being a benefactor to the community now being able to build a library all by yourself well I know one or two people have done that actually but that's unusual but the soup kitchen or the helping hand or in our day going and visiting people in hospital or in care homes or whatever all sorts of things an entire range of possibilities these are not moral good works in the sense that it's keeping the Ten Commandments or something like that it is allowing the goodness of God which has filled you to overflow to others as and when and how that's possible and if you've got a family not least a young family they are the primary responsibility and being with them and giving them quality time in so far as you can that is hugely important and it's always dangerous then for Christians to think oh no no I must be out in the community doing this and that and the other and there's the people at home thinking well we never see this father or mother who whoever they are that that's that itself is a bad work if you get

to that point it seems to me and I say this to myself because it's always a matter of balancing obligations out so will be kind to yourself yeah I mean obviously there's a fear here as well from will that you know as he says I'm wondering if not being involved in you know community activities soup kitchens whatever strike against me so just for the benefit of those who might be thinking is Tom saying that we have to somehow earn our salvation through good works what where is the balance here because that might be what some people hear when you say we'll be judged by the totality of our lives live well I'm simply there reflecting what Paul says in Romans 2 in 2 Corinthians 5 in Galatians 5 anyone who wants to see how those work should go and look at those passages and see Paul says in Galatians 5 6 what counts his faith working through love and there's a huge confusion here which we're not going to get into now about the meaning of the word justification itself in Romans and Galatians over against the meaning that that word has been given particularly in the 16th and subsequent centuries within Protestantism that's an entire question for another time but the crucial thing is that the justification by faith doesn't mean now that I've said a prayer now that I've believed in Jesus I can go out and rob a bank or sleep with my neighbor's wife or whatever it is and of course it doesn't mean that and if you think for a split second that it might read Romans 6 for goodness sake shall we therefore continue in sin the grace may abound absolutely not how can we possibly do that and you need the whole of Romans 1 to 8 not just a few verses from Romans 3 to get the full picture and that includes Romans 2 1 to 16 and it includes particularly Romans 12 about being transformed by the renewing of your mind so that the behavior which then follows is that of the renewed person and if that's not going on Paul would have a look and say go read 1st Corinthians 10 and see what I think about people who think they can slide through just because they've said a prayer or whatever so it's pretty it's pretty important and it doesn't mean that we are earning our salvation absolutely not our salvation is the gift of God notice in Ephesians 2 what Paul says by grace you say through faith that not of yourselves it's God's gift not of works lest anyone should boast because we are God's artwork created in Messiah Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in and I don't think that's just behaving yourself morally I think it's the outflowing of the goodness of God through his people into the wider world as the sign the evidence there is not so much presenting evidence before God that I'm faithful it's presenting evidence before the world that God is good and loving and wants to reach out and embrace the rest of the world with that love so I hope that's clear yes really helpful. Andrew from Louisa's Yana has slightly shorter question which is simply is a Muslim family that lovingly runs an orphanage doing more to advance the kingdom of God than the average church going Christian. Yes I mean there's all sorts of interesting echoes in this question and I want to say the kingdom of God advances in all sorts of ways God moves in many many mysterious ways including through many people who may well not acknowledge him may well not actually have a personal living relationship with him but this is what the older theologians used to call common grace that God works in and through the world in and through people of all sorts to do good things which are really honoring to God and in the Bible there are plenty

of examples of people who do God's will even though they're not quite aware of what's happening.

Cyrus in the Old Testament is the classic example I know that's been abused recently in some political contexts but it remains important and the idea then of the average church going Christian who is perhaps not advancing the kingdom of God I'm not sure what that's what that's actually about yes some Christians do go to sleep on the job but actually simply by being a prayerful Christian in your own situation and by your own vocation you are being part of God's kingdom project and I'm not sure it's hugely helpful to say hmm this person is measuring 2.5 on the kingdom scale whereas that one's 3.7 or something and I don't think that's how it works at all. If the questioner is meaning do you then have to be a Christian does it really matter because a good Muslim family could do it I want to say how much more should a Christian who knows the love of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus be on the alert for the opportunities and the vocational possibilities of being a kingdom person but hallelujah when other people are doing things which likewise reflect the goodness of God whether or not they know it in the way that we claim to. Now social media has often become a bit of a loan of contention and I know that you don't indulge much yourself personally in social media but lots of people do and lots of people actually find things like clips from this show and other bits of your teaching and preaching on social media but the danger of course of social media is that it can become a bit of a shop window for our lives and we like to dress them up and show off and that's the concern that Doug from Kentucky in the USA has he says I grew up in church in the age before cell phones and social media I was taught that a person shouldn't toot their own horn when doing a good deed or act of kindness or charity.

In Matthew chapter 6 verses 1 to 4 it seems Jesus is teaching us the very same lesson but all over social media we see people posting photos and videos of themselves good doing good deeds helping others acts of kindness etc. On the one hand it seems it's rather vain especially if the people who post these are after likes and comments and attention. On the other hand I've heard people say they do it to inspire others to do the same to do a good deed show kindness to others and so on.

If by posting a video of you helping a homeless person inspires a hundred others to help a hundred more homeless people is that going against what Jesus talks about in Matthew chapter 6. Thank you in advance for your response and thank you for the podcast. So what do we think Tom people who like to sort of you know show off on social media the good things they're doing could it could it be for a good cause ultimately what do you think? God can use all sorts of things in the ways that he wants to but just as I am rather horrified when I hear about people taking photographs of the breakfast they're about to eat and then putting that on social media. It just seems to me what sort of a society we're living in when that's a sensible thing to do.

In the same way I do think that Matthew 6 is really really important and no doubt when

this is the passage about when Jesus saying when you're giving arms when you're giving money to the poor don't sound a trumpet in the streets to look at me because the people who are doing that and I assume there's a bit of a caricature in that what Jesus is saying the people who Jesus is critiquing could easily say well we're just setting a good example this is what everyone should do. So I don't buy that argument at all and in the back of this there's Proverbs 27 2 a famous line Proverbs 27 verse 2 which says let another person praise you and not your own lips a stranger and not your own your own mouth. In other words if there is praise to be God then somebody else ought to be doing that.

If somebody happens to notice you doing something that's good creative helpful looking after the poor whatever well they may or may not say about it that's not your business that's up to God and that person whether that gets noise abroad. My sense is that fairly soon people do realize who in their society are actually doing good things helping others etc. People get known for that they don't have to advertise the fact and if they did advertise the fact it seems to draw away from it because interestingly humility is one of the virtues which wasn't a virtue in the ancient world at all.

There is a humb humility about Jewish teaching but the Greco-Roman world you know you had to toot your own horn no one else is going to do it for you so if you look at whether it's Cicero or Seneca or anyone let alone the emperors they're always tooting their own horn and the Christians because they are followers of Jesus they actually inculcate humility and anyone who is tempted to do the showing off things should read 2 Corinthians where Paul deconstructs the whole honor-shame system of the ancient world and puts the cross of Jesus at the centre of it that's what it's all about. Absolutely I hope that's helped in some way Doug certainly I think that there's a huge danger of social media kind of bringing out sometimes the worst parts of our character which can be very prideful and self-indulge and everything else but it can be a great blessing as well it's so important though isn't it that we don't sort of cave in to the sort of you know the ways of the world often which are about you know trying to get one up on our neighbour and so on but yeah great to have you questions thank you very much for them maybe we'll just squeeze in one more healthy attitude to work Tom from Marco in Belfast who says thanks for the podcast particularly appreciate how nuanced Tom's answers are he always allows for space to think deeply and widely about Tom's blushing at this point Marco so I'll move on from the praise I would love for Tom to elaborate his view on what a healthy theology of work should look like for faithful Christians it seems to me that finding value in one's work is something that glorifies God can be quite hard shouldn't every Christian be involved in ministry or some sort of quote unquote soul saving activity how can working a secular job be as meaningful as that okay what do you think yeah yeah there's some wonderful lines from C.S. Lewis in some of his writings about this when when I think there's an essay of his called good work and good works actually his collected essays have got a lot of this kind of gritty wisdom because of course if you look at the church over history the vast majority of faithful Christians have not done whether

it's called soul saving or anything else like that have not been in frontline ministry have not been preachers teachers etc. The vast majority of ordinary Christians have had very humdrum often very painful lives doing very ordinary jobs if any often within the home etc.

and how to find value in that and meaning in that you need a strong theology of the goodness of the present creation and of the ways in which the present creation which we constantly have to look after and maintain whether it's in the home or in the gardener in the fields or whatever that maintaining of God's good creation is part of enabling creation to praise God which creation is meant to do that's actually revelation for it's in lots of passages where humans have as their basic vocation to look after God's world. God's world is not simply the world we can touch and see at the moment but the present world that we live in in which we work is meant to be a signpost towards God's complete work so this is why George Herbert's famous hymn is so important who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine in other words it may look trivial the world may say oh you're just a servant sweeping up the room who cares about that but actually part of tidying I know you can see my study behind me which is anything but tidying but part of cleaning part of washing part of just serving the ordinary needs of the household or of the street where you live or the city where you live the ordinary things that have to be done are part of making God's world a place of beauty a place of delight a place of refreshment insofar as that's possible some jobs of course are not about that at all a C.S. Lewis cited as a job which really didn't have this about it the person who puts up an advertising hoarding on which someone else is going to put up an advertisement persuading people to part with their hard-earned money for something stupid and trivial that they shouldn't be buying in the first place and he says yeah there's really not a lot of glorifying of God in in that whole sequence of thought but this is a matter then for society to say how can we work to try to make sure that as many people as possible are doing things in their lives which are honoring to God by being creative and respectful within the present world as a sign of God's ultimate purposes for his eventual new creation. There's something in that George Herbert poem isn't there about that clause which makes drudgery divine.

That's right. The servant with his clause makes drudgery divine absolutely drudgery can be. Yeah yeah absolutely yeah whatever you do do it to the glory of God as Paul says so.

Exactly. Exactly. Thank you very much really really helpful thoughts as we've talked about work and works as well in today's show thanks for being with us Tom and we'll see you again next time.

Yes indeed. Thank you for being with us today next time we're looking at the theology of death. How does John's gospel deal with death? What Paul's understanding of death is it an enemy or a mercy from God and is physical death a result of the fall.

These and more questions will get answered by Tom next week. You can receive news from the show by registering over at askentiright.com and ask a question too once you're registered and just a reminder to go to unbelievable.live to register for our upcoming live webinar with Philip Yancey that's on the 1st of March and check out the ticketing for our unbelievable conference in May. It's going to be fab again unbelievable.live and the link is with today's show.

Thanks for being with us and see you next time.

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