



TRUTH IN LOVE

Shedding Light on the Word of God

GOOD WORKS

Matthew 5:16

*Let your light so shine before men,
that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

Do you ever have problems with what Jesus says? I do. Jesus says some things that are very difficult to understand—and even more difficult to apply. Some have experienced this troubling fact about the difficult teachings of Jesus and written entire books about them. One book, called *Hard Sayings of the Bible*,¹ has helped me understand some of Christ's words, but recently I've begun to think that there are no *easy* sayings of Jesus. The more I understand who Jesus was, and what He taught, the more I struggle. Some might get depressed at this and quit studying, but the right approach is to get excited, realizing that no matter how much one learns, there will always be more. Such an approach also keeps one humble. The hard sayings of Jesus are difficult, but the time and effort they require are worth the trouble.

Jesus' words in Matthew 5:16 are among this category. His words here are very troubling to me. First, Jesus tells people to let their **light so shine before men...that they may see your good works**. But over in Matthew 6:3-4, Jesus seems to contradict Himself when He says that 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." How can we do good works in secret so that others may see our good works?

Thankfully, as with most difficult passages in the Bible, the answer is found in the context. In the second half of 5:16, Jesus says that our good works are to be done so that men will **glorify your Father in heaven**. Good works are to be done for the glory of God, and not for our own glory. When we do good works, it is inevitable that men will sometimes observe what we do. Even if nobody else sees us, we cannot hide from those people we are serving. So ultimately, the issue Christ is driving at is our motivation. "While Jesus is opposed to doing good works publicly for one's own honor, He exhorts His disciples to do those good works publicly for *God's* honor."²

But the solution to that problem only leads to a bigger one. Jesus says that when we do good works, and others see them, they will glorify God in heaven. Have you ever seen this happen? These words of Jesus don't seem to be true to life, and what we see actually happening in the world. I have been around a lot of unbelievers, and watched how they react to the good works of believers and I have yet to see or hear one unbeliever glorify God for the good works of a believer.

Typically, a believer who does good works before unbelievers either receives praise or scorn. In the first instance, it is not God who gets the praise, but the believer. The unbelieving world looks at the benevolent believer and holds him or her up as a paragon of virtue and a good example of what "religion" can do for a person. Such believers are not differentiated from the Mormon, Buddhist or Muslim who also perform good works. In such situations, God does not get the praise, but religion does, and specifically, the person who follows that religion.

But sometimes the opposite happens. The believer who does good works before men is often accused of being "hypocritical," "holier-than-thou," or "a goody-two-shoes."

Rarely, however, does an unbeliever praise God for the good works of a believer. I'm not saying it doesn't happen; I just can't think of a time when I've seen it. When an unbeliever sees the good works of a believer, their response is typically *not* "Wow! Praise be to God!"

Since our experience doesn't seem to match what Christ is teaching, there are at least five possibilities about what Jesus is actually saying. The first two options see Jesus as talking about something that happens in the future. In these two views, either Jesus is talking about the good works that are done during the future Millennium and not during this age (cf. Isa 61:11; Jer 31:10-11, 31-34), or Jesus is talking about what unbelievers will say about our good works when they face judgment (1 Pet 2:12). Both options are plausible.

However, I am always uncomfortable explaining away Christ's words so that they only apply to a future age. Developing such a habit would allow us to dismiss many of Christ's words as not applying to our own lives. And while there are promises that can be applied only to the future, such cannot be the case here. Jesus wants His disciples to know something about their good works before others who see them now, in this life.

So the third option is that Christians are not doing good works in the right way. Some have suggested that if we did better good works, more good works, the right kind of good works, or said the right thing when we did good works, unbelievers would praise God. Those who hold this view claim that when we do good works for unbelievers, we must make sure the person knows we are doing it "in Jesus' name" (cf. Mark 9:41). We do this by

saying “Jesus loves you” or by sharing a gospel tract, or something similar. Others argue that we need to do good works without any strings attached or hidden agendas (like getting them to come to church).

The problem with such a view is that it makes good works so legalistic. In such thinking, you have to do the right kind of works, in the right amount, to the right people, in the right way, and with the right words, for them to *really* count. This excessive legalism about good works cannot be what Christ had in mind.

The fourth option, suggested by Martin Luther, is that Christ is primarily talking about the good work of evangelism, and the related good works of teaching and preaching the Word of God.³ As unbelievers hear the gospel and believe in Jesus for everlasting life, they glorify God in their conversion. This is certainly a strong possibility. Even our good works of serving unbelievers can have evangelistic effects so that occasionally they come to us and ask, “Why are you like that? Why did you respond so graciously? Why did you help me when nobody else would?” Then we can share the message of life with them. But as much of a possibility as this option is, it seems too much of a stretch to say that Christ only has the good work of evangelism in mind. So that leaves us with the fifth and final option.

The final option is that we have completely misunderstood what Christ is actually saying. Typically, this is exactly what happens to the hard sayings of Christ. Most of Christ’s difficult words are misunderstood and misapplied by most people. If you noticed, all four of the previous views believe that Christ is talking about good works toward *unbelievers*. But the text doesn’t say that, does it? Christ is talking about *good works before men*. These *men* are not just anybody, but points back to “all who are in the house” of Matthew 5:15. We learned in our study of that verse that this is a reference to the community of God’s people, or more specifically, believers.

What is Christ saying? When we do our good works, it is not so an unbelieving world can praise God, for that doesn’t happen. Rather, good works are to be done for believers and among believers so that believers can praise God. And this is exactly what happens all the time in churches that love and care for hurting members of their own congregation.

We all want our lights to shine. We all want to bring glory to God. Jesus says the best way to do this is to serve our fellow believers. Buy your pastor a book, and put a “thank you” note in the cover. Go spend time with the grieving family that just lost their mother to cancer. Go mow the lawn of the man who broke his leg at work. Offer to take some high-school kids out for lunch. Ask an elderly lady if you can do her food shopping for her (and pay for the groceries yourself). The opportunities to let your light shine are endless. And as you do your good works before others in the house of God, God’s glory will shine brighter as well, until your church truly is a city on a hill which cannot be hidden.

¹ Walter C. Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996).

² Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 175.

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 61.

Family and Ministry Update

by Wendy

October was filled to the brim with acorns—yes, acorns. The girls discovered that oak trees have tons of acorns in their branches this time of year, and I believe we have enough acorns to feed 1000 squirrels! We go to the park and pick as many as our buckets can hold, then bring them home and do as many crafts and activities with these acorns as two little girls can think of. Mommy had a good idea or two as well. They “baked” with them, making muffins, pies and cakes. We opened them and fed them to squirrels. We made crafts with them (if you have any ideas, please send them in). What a blast we have had with such a simple blessing from God. I will never look at acorns the same way again. He truly did make this entire world for our pleasure. If you lose sight of that, go play with a child in nature, and they will teach you again the joy of God’s creation.

In other news, Kahlea is crawling and discovering the many wonders of her sisters’ toys. Taylor is still loving dance class and teaching Selah to dance. Selah is finding new things to jump off of each day. We’re starting to get into a home-schooling routine as preparation for next year. The girls are doing school pages and crafts. Jeremy is finishing well on the race of 18 credits this semester, along with working 24 hours a week, and preaching at least twice a month. He recently got another article published in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* which he is excited about. Thank you for your prayers regarding his busy schedule.

We are all eagerly awaiting the arrival of Grandpa and Grandma from Illinois for Thanksgiving. May your Thanksgiving truly be blessed as well, filled with all the good and gracious gifts of our heavenly Father.