



Pastor Michael O'Neill
January 8, 2017

God's Accomplishes

Ephesians 2:4-10

1. Handiwork for good works.

- Romans 1:20; Ephesians 4:11

2. Good works equals greatness.

- Matthew 5:19, 14-16, 6:1, 18:1-5; James 2:18b;
Romans 5:5

3. Greatness is our command and commission.

- Matthew 22:35-40, 28:18-20; Romans 12:1-2;
Ephesians 4:11-13

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Celebrating Partnerships: God's Accomplices

My dad always said, "You have to have the right tool for the job." And he's right! The right tool in the hand of a skilled worker can accomplish so much more and can build things so much better. That idea is exactly what someone had in mind when they created this tool. This tool was built and sold by Stanley tools between 1888 and the 1930's. There are other companies that make them today, but this was the original. I will be so very impressed if someone here can tell me what this tool is and what it does. In fact, I tell you what – I'll give you this candy bar if you know what it is and what it does. Any ideas? This is called a "Stanley Odd Jobs #1." This picture is a little misleading, because there is a wooden ruler that slides into the back of it. But it has a compass for drawing arcs and circles, it scribes wood, it is a level, a straight edge, it has a 45 degree angle and a 90 degree angle marker, depth gauge, and it does a bunch of other things too. Having this tool nearby when you need it would certainly be the right tool for the job! Of course, if you don't know what it is or how to use it, it won't do you much good.

I'm saying all of this to make a point: even God agrees that he needs the right tool for the job, or in our case, he needs the right person for the job. God has determined that he can't carry out the work of advancing his Kingdom on this earth without people. He wants to carry out that work through *you*. And you are exactly the right person for the job! You might not think so about yourself. Maybe your experiences in life have told you that you are not good for anything; if that's so, then that is because you weren't in the hand of the master craftsman – God. God knows *exactly* the best way to use you in this world and you are exactly the right person for the job, because he created you for the job.

We are starting a series for the month of January called "Celebrating Partnerships." We want to discover how God wants to work in and through each of our lives and through our church in our community and even around the world. And we are going to celebrate that on January 29th with a banquet for everyone right after our morning worship.

There are also going to be some exciting additions to our time together: our team returning from Guyana will share their experiences with us, and we will get to meet and hear from Brother Westley and Sister Anne – two of the amazing leaders from our partner church in Victoria, Guyana. I can't wait for you to meet them! And on the 29th I am going to share a very exciting announcement with you!

So we want to begin today by exploring what it means to partner with God.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, there is a place where he says something really interesting in chapter two. You can turn there in your Bibles or

smart phones or just see it up here on the screen. Starting with verse four, Paul writes:

“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:4-10, niv)

Paul is showing us that without God we are totally and completely lost because of our sin. He says that we are dead in our sin. You understand what he means, right? He is saying that because of sin we will all physically die at the end of our lives (God never intended for us to die physically). But we are also presently spiritually dead. Without Christ, that part of us that was created to be in tune with God, to be in resonance with God, to be partnered with God, is severed from God and dead. And even though it is our fault that we are that way, there is not a single thing we can do to change it.

But God loves us so much that he could not stand the idea of being apart from us, of watching us live well below the spiritual poverty level, of facing eternal death in separation from him after we die, so he did what we couldn’t do for ourselves; He sent Christ to die in our place. We were like a prisoner on death row – the sentence had been given, and without some kind of pardon we were simply waiting for the death penalty. But he sent his sinless Son to die in the place of sinful men and women to secure the pardon for our sins and to set us free from death row! “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved!”

So Paul is quick to point out that there wasn’t anything we could do to save ourselves; there is no single good work and no accumulated pile of good works that would tip the scale in our direction. Paul then makes the point he’s been leading to. He says that we are “God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” I want us to see this because this is talking about the foundation of our partnership with God and God’s partnership with us.

I want us to look at this idea of...

1. Handiwork for *good works*.

This is a fascinating piece of writing by Paul. The Greek word that he uses for “handiwork” or your Bible might say “workmanship,” the Greek word is “poiema” (poyaymah). There is an English word that we get from that – it’s the word “poem.” Paul used this word only one other time – in Romans 1:20 – to describe how God’s creation is poetic testimony to his existence. Now Paul extends God’s poetic

creativity to include us – men and women. It is as beautiful as classic poetry – or even hymnody – that God would love us so much to create us and then create a way to redeem us and restore us through Christ’s death and resurrection. But the poem doesn’t stop there; God’s creativity doesn’t stop there. The work of God doesn’t stop when we get saved or become Christian – it continues on through our growth in Christ and through what we do. God’s poetry is not just free form prose or improvisation. You see the poem that God is writing is intentional and is designed for a purpose: *to do good works*. This is what it means to partner with God in his work. Remember, Paul’s already told us that our works have nothing to do with the *cause* of our salvation, but they have everything to do with the *consequence* of our salvation.¹ Our good works don’t save us, but our salvation does result in good works.

We are not saved just so we can be rescued from hell. That would make salvation a cheap form of fire insurance. God has rescued us with a more productive purpose in mind – to do his good will in this world. A call to God is a call to serve.

You are the right person for the job. No one can do what God wants to do in this world through you. If you don’t live out your Christian faith in obedience to God, then the work God wants done in this world through you won’t get done. That’s how special you are. God’s plan is very specific. One author says, “He is the one who created us, and therefore He is aware of the individual strengths and abilities we possess. In addition, God graces each of us with spiritual gifts that complement our abilities and enable us to better serve both Him and others (see Ephesians 4:11). One of the necessary tasks of the redeemed is to determine what good works God has created and empowered us to do.”² When we carry out good works as a worshipful response to the love of God in our lives, we are God’s poetry.

You see...

2. Good *works* equals *greatness*.

There’s a lot of talk in our culture today about achieving greatness, whether it’s in sports or business or even altruism or societal impact. Greatness is the stuff of motivational talks, books and posters. Our culture thinks greatness is achieved when someone reaches celebrity status or wins enough games or gets enough degrees or money. But God measures greatness by *goodness*, because goodness glorifies God. When we obey God’s Word, we find greatness:

“Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:19, niv)

¹ Mark A. Holmes, *Ephesians: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997), 79–81.

² Ibid

Remember that we are God's poetry – that when we allow God's workmanship to be displayed in us by our good works – like the right tool for the job – people will see God's love in us and be drawn to him through our lives. Jesus said:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16, niv)

It's important that we make sure we understand that there is a very important difference between faith and works. While they are two sides to the same coin, I want to reiterate again that works are the *result* or *response* to salvation but they are not the *cause* of salvation. No amount of good works will make God love you more. No lack of good works will make God love you less. But when you become a Christian, you begin being formed into the character of Jesus Christ, who loved everyone – even those he disagreed with – and served all that he was able to. So you too will begin to do good things for others out of love.

Works are not the *means* of our salvation, but the *evidence*. I want to make sure that we don't get the cart before the horse. Salvation comes not because of works, but rather works come because of our salvation, as we read in the book of James:

“Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.” (James 2:18b, niv).³

The evidence of our faith is a growing Christ-likeness in our actions.

But, if we do good things in order to make ourselves look great, our works are not good and we are not great at all. Jesus said:

“Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1, nlt)

Greatness in the Kingdom of God does not come in our own self-achievements; greatness is measured to the degree that we do good things for others. Really, what we are talking about is not how great *we* are, but how great we make *others*. We are great when our focus is on the goodness of others for the sake of God, not the greatness of ourselves. Jesus had this very conversation with his disciples:

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’” (Matthew 18:1-5, niv)

³ *ibid*

So as we humble ourselves like a child and make it our ambition to love others in response and obedience to the love of God in Christ, we are becoming like Christ, which is *great*! Because you see, God is love. Remember – because God loves us he saved us, and now we are saved to love others by the Spirit who is within us. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.” (Romans 5:5, nlt)

We become like Christ – selfless in doing good things for others – and the greater Christ is in us, the greater we are.

Is this making sense? I want to be careful not to create in your mind the thought that you have to do good works to be saved or to be acceptable to God. But I do want to be sure we understand that if you are saved, the Spirit of God within you is dying to get out through you to love others. And to the extent that you stop pursuing your own greatness and start to obey God and love others, you are becoming great in God’s Kingdom. That is what partnership with God is; that is the point of God’s command to us and his commissioning of us...

3. *Greatness* is our *command* and *commission*.

When it comes to partnering with God on his mission in this world, we’ve learned that we are God’s handiwork for good works, and that when we carry out those good works for him we are considered great in the Kingdom of God. So what *are* those good works? What is it we are supposed to do, actually?

I’m so glad you asked! Because there are two “greats” in the Bible – two great things that Jesus has told us to do. They are called the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Let’s start with the Great Commandment:

“One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap (Jesus) with this question: “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?” Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:35-40, niv)

That’s the Great Commandment. Jesus said that all the law and the prophets hang on these two commands. What he meant was that if we will obey these two equally important commands, we would fulfill everything that the Law and the Prophets say – in other words, all God’s instructions in the Old Testament. So the first part of this command is critical: Loving God Supremely. In all we do, we are to do it out of our love for God. Remember that our good works draw attention to God’s work in us, which brings glory to God, which is worship. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:1-2 that when we do that, we are really worshipping God with our lives.

But Jesus said that there is a second commandment that is just as important as loving God, and that is loving people equally. People matter to God – we matter to Him so much that he paid the absolute highest price to buy our freedom from death and sin – the life of his One and Only Son. There is no higher price he could have paid for us. So we, as his church and his people, naturally ought to have the same priority for people that God does. That’s why we will love people as much as we love God, by doing what we can to meet the needs of people in West Valley, by welcoming them as friends no matter where they come from or what their life circumstances are. We will accept them. That’s why we will care enough to help them meet Jesus.

So that’s the Great Commandment – to love God supremely and to love people equally. That’s a huge part of our good works in partnership with God. But there is another “great” thing for us to do, and that is the Great Commission. The Great Commission is Jesus’ last command to his disciples and to us, after he was resurrected from the dead and before he rose into heaven. The Great Commission is the words Jesus wanted ringing in our ears until the day he returns for us. This is that Great Commission:

“Jesus came and told his disciples, ‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18-20, nlt)

This is called great because it comes from Jesus and it’s a co-mission because he is empowering us and commanding us to carry out His mission with him – it’s a co-mission, a partnership with God. Now there are two key parts to the Great Commission. The first is to tell people about God’s love. Jesus said we are supposed to make disciples. We are to introduce people to Jesus Christ so that they might come to know him and become a follower, or a disciple, of his. Notice that Jesus didn’t tell us to make *decisions* – we are to make *disciples*. For too long the church has been concerned about making decisions – getting people to the altar or to a crusade and getting them to say the right words of a prayer to accept Jesus into their heart, and that’s it. Here’s the problem with that kind of perspective: many times our approach to telling people about God has turned into a sales pitch and trying to “seal the deal,” instead of our having genuine care and concern for developing disciples. There’s a big difference between decisions and disciples.

The second important part of the Great commission is to teach people to grow in their faith. Making disciples means that people are growing; that they are actively following Jesus and doing the things that Jesus has told them to do. It means that people are growing deeper and higher in their faith, learning and living in all the great things God has for them.

So those are the good works that we are to be doing that will make us great in the Kingdom of God. And guess what? The good works that we are to do in partnering with God in this world is what makes us great, so that is our church’s mission statement:

Introduce people to Jesus Christ
Equip people with a faith that works
Live as people with purpose

That's it! That's what God has called us here for, and that's what this church is determined to do, and we'll do it until Jesus comes back. Let me take a few minutes to explain what these are, because these should be the good works in Christ that we are determined to do:

In that first statement we have the first part of the Great Commission and the second part of the Great Commandment. The first part of the Great Commission tells us to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel. Make disciples of all men." We do that by *introducing* people to Jesus Christ.

Look at that first word with me: "introduce." We could have used different words there: "*win* people to Jesus." "*Convert* people to Jesus Christ." "*Evangelize* people to Jesus Christ." But we chose the word "introduce" on purpose. Here's why: if you are an unchurched person in our community, how do you think you will feel if we told you it is our goal to "win" you, or "convert" you, or "evangelize" you, or worse yet, "proselytize" you? You would be offended. But the word "introduce" puts our work into the right context: it is about a relationship with Jesus. Yes, I've met Him; I know Him! He is an amazing, powerful, personal, rescuing, healing, resurrected, living God, and I am graced to know him personally. He is the love of my life and the Lord of my destiny. I know how great, kind, loving, forgiving, and powerful he is, and I'd like nothing better than to introduce you to him. I'll tell you all about him! BUT: *I* don't convert you. *I* don't save you. HE does. So if I introduce you to him, I'm confident that you will find the same things about him to be true as I have. The choice is yours whether you accept him or not. But I'm going to make sure I've introduced you. And so will you, because that is our good works – it's what we were handcrafted by God to do in this world – the right tool for the job.

But this simple statement also reflects the second part of the great commandment: to love people equally. Because the way we introduce people to Jesus is by loving them. Loving them enough to accept them where they are at. To develop genuine friendship with them. To do whatever we can to meet their needs. Because they are not going to believe that Jesus is real until they see him and his character in us. And they won't see it until we are willing to meet their needs in whatever ways we can. That's why we encourage you to get to know your neighbors. Love them. Look for ways you can help them.

The next part of our statement simply says, Equip people with a faith that works. This reflects the second part of the Great Commission: to learn and grow in our faith. Now, as before, we chose those words on purpose. It's the church's job to equip each person with the learning and resources they need to accomplish that ministry. That's why the Bible says:

“And he (God) gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13, esv)

The church equips people to carry out ministry so that we can all mature in our faith. It’s all of our jobs to learn and grow. That means we will grow into and obey everything Jesus tells us.

Now notice that we also use the phrase, “equip people with a *faith that works*.” We chose those words for two reasons: first, because this faith we have in Christ really works, doesn’t it? It is real and this life of faith really does do what God said it would.

But there’s something else in that statement: if you have this faith, you will work; you will obey it and love people; you will do good works.

Do you see that? If we have faith, we work – we work to meet the needs of people. So this also reflects the second part of the Great Commandment – to love people equally.

Finally, see that last phrase: Live as people with purpose. This is the challenge to live our lives on purpose; to live out what Jesus commissioned us and commanded us to do. That means that we will worship God with our lives and meet the needs of people around us, whether churched or unchurched. That means we will introduce people to Jesus and teach people to grow in their faith. We will do everything intentionally toward greatness.

So to make it easier, we’ve simplified our mission into three words, which sum up what it means to partner with God, what it means to do good works, what it means to be great: Love. Learn. Live. That’s it! We Love God and love people enough to introduce them to Jesus. We grow and teach others to grow in their faith; we’ll learn by equipping people with a faith that works so we can grow together. And we will live out this faith, on purpose, for the sake of the Kingdom of Christ.

This month we are celebrating partnerships – certainly our church’s partnerships locally, regionally, and globally, and I’m excited about all that it means. But I wanted to start by making sure you understood: none of this gets accomplished because you simply attend a church that does these things. Greatness gets accomplished because you personally, partner with God – with your life – toward greatness. And then, when we all come together to carry out that mission, God can do great things through our church. We are all in this together, and it starts with each of us.

When we partner with God through the “great” things we do, there will be many, many expressions of that. For sure, there is one way we all can be great: we are asking you to pray and consider partnering together with the church toward greatness by making a promise to give support in some significant way toward the work of mission in the church in this coming year. That’s what these passports are for. Take it, begin praying about it, and we will ask you to turn this in at the end of

the month. Because giving is one way that we all partner together to partner with God to do great things here locally, regionally, and around the world.

Worship team, come back to the platform, and as they do, let's pray.

Pray, sing