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THE PROOF TEXTS OF THE CATECHISM WITH A PRACTICAL COMMENTARY.

THE THIRD ARTICLE.

(Continued.)

GOOD WORKS.

Advisedly the Catechism asks: "What is a good work in *God's sight?*" Works that appear great and good in the sight of men, in the sight of God may be nothing but "shining vices." Such are all so-called good works of unbelievers, Hebr. 11, 6; Rom. 14, 23. Augustine's dictum, "*Omnis infidelium vita peccatum est,*" expresses a deep theological truth.

The Catechism answers the question: "What is a good work in the sight of God?" thus: 1. The *subject* of good works is *a child of God*, John 15, 5. 2. The *source* is *faith*, John 15, 5. 3. The *rule* is the *Ten Commandments*, Matt. 15, 9. 4. The *purpose* or *aim*: a) *the glory of God*, 1 Cor. 10, 31; b) *the benefit of the neighbor*, 1 Pet. 4, 10.

John 15, 5: *I am the Vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing.*

The purpose of this text is to prove that only "a child of God" can do good works.—The passage is taken from our Lord's Farewell Address. He speaks to His *disciples*, to Christians: "*I am the Vine, ye are the branches.*" Between them and Him there is a relation as intimate as that between the vine and its branches. A striking similitude this, since Palestine abounded in vineyards, a similitude that frequently occurs in the Old Testament (Is. 5, 1—7; Ps. 80, 8—16; Jer. 2, 21, *et al.*), hence was familiar to Jewish people, the new application of which would readily find lodgment in the minds of His disciples.

In order to get the full force of v. 5, the preceding verses, 1—4, should be read. "I am the *true Vine*," ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή, *i. e.*, I am the *real*, the *genuine* Vine. I really and truly give what is emblematically represented by a vine. As the vine imparts life and nourishment to all the branches, large and small, so you, my disciples, have received, and still receive, life from me. How did this intimate relation come about? The husbandman, my Father, v. 1, has grafted you in me. By what means? Through the Word: "Now ye are clean *through the Word* which I have spoken unto you," v. 3. Through the Word ye have come to faith in me, through it ye are cleansed, ye have forgiveness of sins, 1 John 1, 7. Ye are in me, now "*abide in me*," v. 4. Remain united to me by a living faith, and ye can and will bring forth "*fruit*," v. 2, "*more fruit*," v. 2, "*much fruit*," v. 5.

In v. 5 the Lord emphatically repeats the thoughts of the preceding paragraph. "*I am the Vine, ye are the branches.*" What follows from this? "*He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same*" — οὗτος = he and no other — "*bringeth forth much fruit.*" The branch, cut from the vine, is severed from the source of its strength and nourishment; it must die. Just so only he who is united by a living faith to Christ can bear fruit, can be productive of good works. "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me," v. 4. "*Without me,*" χωρὶς ἐμοῦ, separate from me, "*ye,*" my disciples, "*can do nothing,*" absolutely nothing that is pleasing to God. Capacity, capability, to perform good works comes from Christ.

The text is rich in truths pertinent to the *locus* in hand. We shall tabulate the most important.

1. *Christians only can do good works.* This is shown above. They only are "His workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works," Eph. 2, 10.

2. *Christians do good works, they bring forth "fruit," "more fruit," "much fruit,"* vv. 1—5. The righteous is like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season, Ps. 1, 3; cf. Acts 9, 36; Rom. 16, 12; Matt. 25, 35 ff.; John 5, 28, 29.

3. *Good works flow from faith as their source.* "*The same,*" οὗτος, *he and no other, sc., "that abideth in me, and I in him, bringeth forth much fruit."* Only they "which have believed in God" are and can be exhorted to be "careful to maintain good works," Tit. 3, 8; 1 Pet. 2, 12; 1 Thess. 4, 3; Eph. 2, 10.

4. *Good works are performed only in the power of Christ, of God.* "Abide in me" — "the same" — "without me ye can do nothing." Christ, God, is the Author of good works; the Christians are but the instruments through which He performs them. "It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do according to His good pleasure," Phil. 2, 13; cf. Rom. 16, 12; 15, 19; 2 Cor. 3, 5. — The Christian is not a clock, which,

if wound up, runs for a certain length of time. He is rather an electric light, which shines so long as the power is turned on. Shut it off, and all is darkness. The "power" of the Christian life is Christ, faith in Christ, abiding in Him. "*Without me,*" separated from me, and the result is? "Ye," *my disciples,* "can do—nothing." Hence, all honor and praise for these good works belong to Christ.

5. *Good works are not laborious productions, but "fruits."* As it is natural for a good tree to bring forth good fruits, so it is self-evident that a Christian through his intimate connection with Christ should produce "fruit." Cf. Gal. 5, 22; Matt. 13, 8. 23.—But we must observe that the Catechism says a good work in the sight of God is "whatever a child of God does, speaks, or thinks *in faith,*" etc. The Christian is, as it were, a composite being, part spirit, part flesh. And "the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary, the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would," Gal. 5, 17. To the Romans, St. Paul writes: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." Hence it comes about that "the good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do." But the Christian can say: "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." Cf. Rom. 7, 17—19. Whatever comes from the flesh is sinful. Perfect sinlessness is unattainable in this life, 1 John 1, 8. In the Christian there is a constant warfare between the flesh and the spirit; but the spirit dominates in him, Gal. 5, 24.

6. *The means through which God operates in the Christians is the "living Word,"* 1 Pet. 1, 23. This truth can be gathered from our text also. The exhortation is: "Abide in me." When do we abide in Him? "If ye abide in me, and *my words* abide in you," etc., v. 7. Tit. 2, 11. 14.

7. Since only "*the same*" who abides in Christ Jesus can do good works, since "*without me,*" as Christ says, even "*ye,*" my disciples, "*can do nothing,*" v. 5, and since persons must be "*created* in Christ Jesus unto good works," Eph. 2, 10, it is plain that *unbelievers cannot do good works.* The ap-

parently good works of unbelievers are comparable to the wriggling of a dead frog whose body is connected with an electric battery. The frog goes through all the motions of one seemingly alive, but still he is nothing but a dead frog. *Fiat applicatio.* The so-called good works of unbelievers are but caricatures of the truly good works of Christians.

“Although nature is able in some sort to do the outward work (for it is able to keep the hands from theft and murder), yet it cannot work the inward motions, such as the fear of God, trust in God, chastity, patience,” etc. (*Augsburg Conf.*, Art. 28.)

Matt. 15, 9: *In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*

The “*commandments of men*” to which the Lord here refers are “*the traditions of the elders,*” v. 1. These consisted of explanations, applications, and additions to the Law of God made by learned expounders of the Scriptures among the Jewish people. Begun at about the time of Ezra, they accumulated as the years went by. Transmitted at first by word of mouth from generation to generation, they were finally collected in what is known as the Jewish Talmud. These “*traditions of the elders,*” man-made precepts, the scribes and Pharisees taught, must be punctiliously observed, being equal in authority with the Law of God itself; aye, if the traditions and the written Word of God clashed, these traditions took precedence of the Word of God: the traditions must be kept, the Word of God disregarded.

Christ tells these blind leaders of the blind that their traditions were but “*commandments of men*” which His disciples must not keep (cf. vv. 1. 9); that because of the traditions of *men* they transgressed the commandment of *God*, v. 3, hence sinned against God. By means of a concrete example, the Fourth Commandment, He proves that their traditions made “*the commandment of God of none effect,*” null and void, vv. 4—6. Hence, their whole religion—what was it?—hypocrisy.

With words of stinging rebuke borrowed from the prophet Isaiah, the Lord deals a crushing blow to the hypocritical traditionalists of that day and ours: "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying: This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. *But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*" Teaching commandments of men as binding as the doctrines of God is a lip and mouth service, a vain worship.

How strongly the Lord expresses the truth: the only works that please Him are such as He Himself has commanded! The only rule of works pleasing in His sight is the Decalogue.

The Pharisee was the Roman Catholic of that time. The Roman Catholic Church to-day makes the Word of God of none effect by her numberless traditions respecting fasts, holidays, pilgrimages, legends of saints, etc.

1 Cor. 10, 31: *Whether, therefore, ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*

Good works, this passage teaches, should have for their aim the glory of God. A Christian serves the Lord also when he eats and drinks and rests. He lives unto the Lord and dies unto the Lord. Sanctification includes the entire life of a Christian. — "*Magnum axioma!*" says Bengel of the present passage. Indeed, a great axiom this: Do all to the glory of God. — See Matt. 5, 16.

1 Pet. 4, 10: *As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

In the section from which this text is taken, Peter admonishes the members of the congregation to be faithful in the discharge of their duties. The various gifts which God has distributed among the Christians shall be used *for the benefit of each other and one another.* — The translation: "As every man hath received *the* gift" is inadequate since the definite article "the" is wanting in the original. The apostle says: "*As every one has received a gift.*" Gift, *χάρισμα*, is a gift

of grace, a gift of the Spirit. "As every one has received *the gift*" might give rise to the thought that there is but one certain, definite gift intended here which all Christians share alike. What the apostle does say is this: The grace of God is manifold; all Christians have gifts, gifts of grace; each Christian has a special gift. The one can teach, the other exhort, a third, rule, etc. Cf. Rom. 12, 6—9. Again, in the congregation there are various offices for which certain members have been elected on account of their fitness. These gifts which the Christians have received they are to use for the benefit of all. The special gift which one Christian has received before others he is not to put in a napkin. He is to remember: it is a *gift*; God has given it to him for a special purpose. He is to use it, not for his own person only, but for the good of others, for the benefit of the whole congregation. — The *truth* expressed by the apostle is: You have received a gift; the *exhortation* is: "Minister the same," the gift, "one to another." Upon this thought all stress lies here: Be faithful in the use of the gift you have received, so that others may be benefited thereby and the congregation be edified. — The next clause intensifies this thought. "Minister the gift one to another," says the apostle, "*as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*" The emphasis lies on the word "*good.*" God is the Lord, the Christians are but "stewards." The Lord will one day, "at the end of all things," v. 7, demand: "Render account of thy stewardship," Luke 16. This the Christians are to bear in mind and be *good, i. e.,* faithful, stewards of the manifold grace of God. — Next, the apostle enumerates two gifts: 1. "If any man *speak*"; 2. "if any man *minister,*" and again inculcates faithfulness in speaking and in ministering, v. 11a. Then he adduces the ultimate end of his exhortation: "*That God* in all things *may be glorified* through Jesus Christ," etc., v. 11b. Thus the text yields two points relevant to the doctrine under discussion: Good works should be performed a) for the benefit of the neighbor, b) for the glory of God.

Springfield, Ill.

LOUIS WESSEL.

(To be continued.)