

**§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation**  
**Lecture 14**  
**The New Perspective on Paul**

It's so great to know that people from all around the world are joining us this morning for our Defenders class.

Last time I introduced the so-called New Perspective on Paul. Today we want to come to some assessment of the New Perspective. The claim of the adherents of the New Perspective, you'll remember, is that the traditional Protestant Reformers have seriously misunderstood Paul and that when we correctly interpret Paul we see that in fact he's not really saying anything all that different from what the Judaism of his day was saying, namely, you are saved by grace but then you stay in the covenant by means of doing good works.

A very penetrating critique of the New Perspective has been written by the New Testament scholar Robert Gundry. He writes an essay called "The Inferiority of the New Perspective on Paul" in his book *The Old Is Better*, published in 2005. Gundry doesn't mince words, does he? "The *Inferiority* of the New Perspective on Paul"! Gundry agrees with E. P. Sanders that the evidence of Palestinian Judaism shows that Jews had a strong emphasis upon obedience to the law as the way of staying in the covenant. So Palestinian Judaism was preoccupied with legal matters – how you apply the law to various situations, what the law really requires of you; extensive wrangling over the requirements of the law because this is the means by which one stays in the covenant with God. But Gundry denies that Paul has a similar emphasis. He writes,

Though obedience is integral and important to Paul's theology, along side Palestinian Jewish absorption in legal questions his comments on obedience look proportionately slight. Furthermore, they usually take the form of exhortations, not of legal interpretation, extension, and application.<sup>1</sup>

So what Gundry is saying here is that obedience is important to Paul. That is an integral part of Paul's theology – that having come to faith in Christ you now live a life of good works worthy of Christ. But Gundry says that it's very different from Palestinian Judaism. Paul isn't concerned about interpretations of the Jewish law, about how to extend the Jewish law to new situations that are not obviously covered by the law, wrangling over how the law is to be applied to this or that circumstance. Think of Paul's letters. You don't find anything like that in the New Testament epistles. Indeed, as Gundry says, Paul's comments on obedience usually just take the form of exhortations like "Put away all wrath, malice, slander, envy, and foul talk from your mouths"

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 200.

(Colossians 3:8); “Have this mind among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5); “put to death the works of the flesh but walk in the Spirit” (Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:16-18). These exhortations to holy living that Paul gives are very different from the sort of legal debates that characterized Palestinian Judaism. Think, for example, of the book of Galatians. In Galatians Paul does not think of works as the means of staying in the covenant. The whole emphasis throughout Galatians is that both getting in and staying in is a matter of faith in Christ. It is faith from beginning to end. Faith in Christ is the means by which we get into relationship with God, and it is faith in Christ that is the means of staying in relationship with God, not works of the law.

Gundry recognizes that Paul does require, of course, that faith be attended by good works. If you have genuine saving faith, then you will do good works. But he distinguishes Paul’s view from Judaism’s view in that these good works are not the *means* of staying in; rather they are the *evidence* of genuine faith. That’s the difference. Paul emphasizes the importance of good works not as *the means of staying in* the covenant. Rather, they are *evidence* that your faith is truly genuine. Here is what Gundry writes,

At the same time Paul demands good works, and Sanders appeals to this demand [in order to justify his interpretation]. But Paul’s un-Jewish extension of faith and grace to staying in makes good works evidential of having received grace through faith, not instrumental in keeping grace through works. . . . For him, then, getting in and staying in are covered by the seamless robe of faith as opposed to works with the result that works come in as evidential rather than instrumental.<sup>2</sup>

Do you understand what Gundry is saying? He’s saying that for Paul good works *are* necessary, but they are necessary as evidence of the genuineness of your faith. They are not necessary as the instruments by means of which you stay in the covenant. They are not the instrumental means by which you stay in the covenant; rather, they are evidential in showing that you really are in a saving relationship with God through faith. So Paul’s emphasis is very different from the Judaism of his day. For Paul, it is faith from beginning to end that enables you both to get into the covenant and to stay in the covenant, and good works serve an evidential purpose.

Gundry also recognizes that Paul does say that in the end people will be judged according to their works. Sanders uses these sorts of statements to argue that on the question of staying in the covenant, Paul holds fast to the Jewish mode of thinking, according to which avoiding evil works and doing good works are the condition of staying in the covenant even though they don’t *earn* salvation. So Sanders admits that these works don’t merit salvation. That’s not their purpose. Nevertheless they are the means of staying

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<sup>2</sup> Gundry, *The Old is Better*, p. 203.

in the covenant, and Sanders thinks that Paul believes that, since Paul says people will be judged according to their works.

But as Gundry points out, “The evidence Sanders cites from Palestinian Jewish literature shows overwhelmingly that good works are a *condition* as well as a sign of staying in.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, for the Judaism of Paul’s day the evidence shows overwhelmingly, Gundry says, that good works are not merely a *sign* that one is in the covenant; they are the *condition*, they are *how* you stay in the covenant. So he agrees with Sanders that he has correctly interpreted Palestinian Jewish literature in that respect.

But Gundry goes on to say, “It appears, however, that for Paul good works are only (but not unimportantly!) a *sign* of staying in as well as of getting in.”<sup>4</sup> So for Paul good works are not the condition of salvation; rather they are the sign that one is a *bona fide* member of the covenant. Gundry interprets 2 Corinthians 13:5 in this light: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves.” Gundry says this points to the evidential role of good works. You examine yourself to see if your life befits a relationship with Christ. Test yourself to see if your faith is genuine. This is pointing to the evidence of your good works, not the means or condition of salvation.

So, it seems to me that the key difference between Sanders and Gundry is that Sanders interprets these good works to be for Paul a condition of salvation whereas Gundry sees them as evidence of salvation.

How shall we understand this distinction between “condition” and “evidence” that is drawn here? It occurs to me that a bit of logic can actually be helpful in making sense of both Sanders’ view and Gundry’s insight. In logic, if you have a statement like “P implies Q” then P is a *sufficient* condition of Q. That is to say, the truth of P is a sufficient condition for the truth of Q. If P implies Q, then if P is true, Q is also true. That’s what it means to say P implies Q. The truth of P is a sufficient condition for the truth of Q. In turn, the truth of Q is a *necessary* condition of the truth of P. In order for P to be true, Q must be true. Why is that? Because P implies Q. P is never true without Q’s also being true, because P implies Q. So, in order for P to be true, Q also has to be true. Otherwise, you could have P be true all on its own and Q not be true as well. So in order for P to be true, Q must be true, which means that Q is a necessary condition of P. So in an if-then statement, P implies Q, P is a sufficient condition for the truth of Q, and the truth of Q is a necessary condition for the truth of P.

Perhaps you can already see where I am going with this. Consider the statement:

If one has genuine saving faith, one will do good works.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> Gundry, *The Old is Better*, p. 221.

This has the logical form of P implies Q. It is a conditional statement. If one has genuine saving faith, then one will do good works.

Now, what that means is that genuine saving faith is a sufficient condition for doing good works. If you have genuine saving faith then you'll perform good works. So a sufficient condition of doing good works is having genuine saving faith. But notice then that in a *logical* sense, doing good works is a necessary condition of genuine saving faith. You don't have genuine saving faith without also doing good works. So in a logical sense good works are a necessary condition of salvation, not because they contribute to salvation or because they are the means by which one stays in the covenant; rather, they are a necessary condition simply in the purely logical sense that genuine saving faith doesn't exist without being accompanied by these good works.

I think this can help us to put Sanders' and Gundry's views together. If I'm correct – and I think Paul would agree with this statement – then in a logical sense Sanders is right that good works are a necessary condition of salvation. Good works in a *logical sense* are a necessary condition of salvation. Nevertheless, Gundry is also correct in saying that although good works are a necessary condition of salvation they are not instrumental in bringing about salvation. They are not the *means* by which salvation is achieved. Rather, good works are the necessary *byproduct* or concomitant of saving faith. So even though they are a necessary condition of saving faith in a logical sense, nevertheless Gundry is right in saying that they are not the instrumental cause of salvation.

Gundry says, and I'll conclude with this quotation from his essay, "The question is not whether Paul taught the necessity of good works but whether such necessary works are evidential of salvation or contributory to salvation." Do you hear the distinction that is going on there? The question is not whether Paul taught that good works are necessary. They *are* a necessary condition of salvation! But that's not the issue. Rather, he says, the question is "whether such necessary works are *evidential* of salvation or *contributory* to salvation." Are they merely the *sign* of genuine saving faith or are they the *means* by which one stays in the covenant or finds salvation? Gundry concludes,

If Paul taught them as necessary evidence of salvation but not as a necessary contribution to it, then his teaching on works does not create an inconsistency with his teaching on justification by faith apart from meritorious works.<sup>5</sup>

So it seems to me that once we make the fine distinctions that we can logically, I think we can embrace the insight of Sanders that for Paul, logically speaking, good works are a necessary condition of salvation, but then we see with Gundry that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works consistently holds that the good works are neither

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

meritorious nor are they the instrumental means which contribute to salvation. Rather, they serve as necessary evidence of genuine saving faith on the part of the regenerate believer.

The next time we meet, we'll continue our discussion on the so-called New Perspective on Paul.<sup>6</sup>