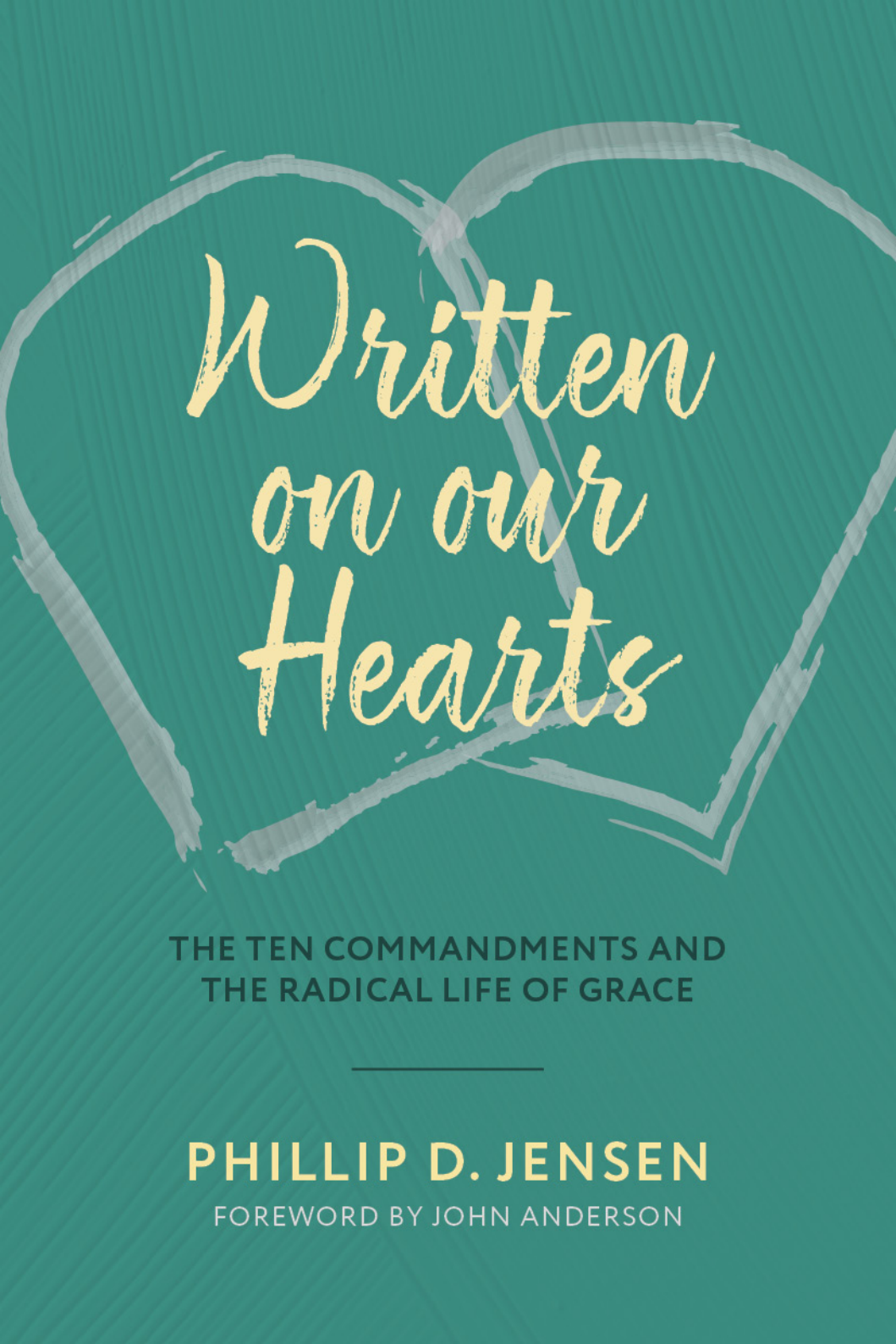




Written on our Hearts

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND
THE RADICAL LIFE OF GRACE

PHILLIP D. JENSEN

FOREWORD BY JOHN ANDERSON

The image features two overlapping hearts in a light gray, hand-drawn style. The text "Written on our Hearts" is written in a black, cursive script across the center of the hearts. The word "Written" is on the top line, "on our" is on the middle line, and "Hearts" is on the bottom line.

Written
on our
Hearts



Written on our Hearts

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND
THE RADICAL LIFE OF GRACE

PHILLIP D. JENSEN

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Written on Our Hearts

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For Peter, who taught that the law is the gift of God
to those saved by grace.

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FOREWORD

I love history, and I share with the renowned American economist and commentator Thomas Sowell the view that civilizations do not just fall out of the sky.

As he puts it, they must be painstakingly built, maintained, defended and, above all, understood. Without understanding, they will surely fail, and we haven't been paying the rent. As Sowell tartly puts it, the landlord always shows up sooner or later, and all the signs are here that he's at our door.

That which we don't understand, we will at best tend to ignore. At worst, we will come to despise the very things that give shape and form to our societies.

And so it is that the great thinker and writer Os Guinness warns that we are at a 'civilizational moment'. A civilization comes about when enough people hold enough values in common for long enough to create a recognizable entity, and there have been many of them down through the ages. Most of them are now relegated to the history books, or mere shadows of their one-time pre-eminence. The dynamics that gave rise to them ebb away, as their citizens lose their understanding of and appreciation of what they have and how they might retain it. Either they recover that understanding and energy and 'refuel the tank', or they find a substitute fuel, or they are relegated to the history books as so many before have been.

Often this has resulted in great pain and dislocation, and even conquest.

Our civilization, which we might refer to as the Christian West, is easily the most extensive, richest, and freest of those the world has seen to date, and while far from perfect, has afforded its citizens the longest and most comfortable of lives.

Furthermore, the West has been more generous than generally recognized in 'loving its neighbours', especially since the end of World War II. For example, Western science and know-how, deliberately extended to those in less well-off countries, has helped feed and enrich vast numbers of people across the globe, and until quite recent times saw the extension of democratic freedoms across much of the globe.

Yet today, we are divided, atomized and distrustful of one another and of the very institutions of freedom itself. Even worse, we have become both ignorant of and increasingly disdainful of the very beliefs that shaped the values that have underpinned our culture.

If it is the case that politics is downstream of culture, it is surely also true that culture is downstream of beliefs.

And we have—as Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it when describing the horrors of militant atheism in communist Russia and seeing a driftage in the same direction in the West—forgotten God.

Having largely airbrushed God out of our public square, we have made Government god—a task quite beyond it, since whatever its form it is, by definition, a construction of, and made up of, fallible humans. And when government fails, as it so often does, we despise it, to the point where in the West now, serious commentators—and many ordinary citizens—wonder whether we are becoming ungovernable.

We are looking, then, in the wrong places for the keys to living rich and meaningful and harmonious lives. We make a fatal mistake when we allow ourselves to become functionaries of the State—and perhaps an even worse mistake when, out of a sense of disappointment and betrayal, we become cynical and rebellious. As John Adams

so famously said, the American Constitution “was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other”.

Enter Phillip Jensen and this book on the Ten Commandments.

Written on Our Hearts is as fresh and relevant as the commandments themselves were when Moses recorded them. I found it deeply informative and wonderfully written—though challenging, because it requires real engagement. It is a solid and hearty meal, not a snack.

It powerfully describes what good actually is, and who determines what is good and bad. It sets out clearly the way in which we should understand that God’s purpose is to draw unto himself a people who will be his, and how he redeems them through Christ and Christ alone, in order that they might be good people who are zealous for him, one another, and all that is good.

Phillip builds in the reader an understanding that the commandments are not so much a fun-spoiling list of legal strictures, but actually the keys to meaning, purpose, and the ‘good life’ that we are offered in the restoration of relationships with our Creator and one another.

And because the nation is no more and no less than the sum total of its people, to the extent that we believe in and live out these truths, our society will be all the healthier.

In fact, the Ten Commandments provided the moral and belief framework that powered up our civilization. This book is a powerful reminder of that, surely, but it also provides a clear manual for refuelling ourselves and our society.

John Anderson

Deputy Prime Minister of Australia 1999–2005



PREFACE

“Ten Commandments: The new rules every traveller should follow”. This was the heading of an article in my morning paper.

The article was a collaborative effort of ten travel writers, each giving their insight on travel dos and don'ts. The article tried to use humour to soften the writers' judgemental moralistic commands.

As a Christian, my eye was immediately drawn to the reference to the Ten Commandments. The article commenced:

Most of us would agree that the Ten Commandments contain some sound advice. Irrespective of your religious persuasion, it's hard to argue with the premise that we shouldn't murder, steal, covet or lie.

Affairs are generally considered a no-no and, provided they haven't written you out of their will, you should always be nice to your parents.¹

These opening paragraphs, along with the rest of the article, indicate the current standing of the Ten Commandments in Australian society, or at least in the mainstream journalistic community.

1 B Groundwater, 'Ten Commandments: The new rules every traveller should follow', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 2024 ([smh.com.au/traveller/reviews-and-advice/ten-commandments-the-new-rules-every-traveller-should-follow-20240802-p5jyu5.html](https://www.smh.com.au/traveller/reviews-and-advice/ten-commandments-the-new-rules-every-traveller-should-follow-20240802-p5jyu5.html)).

- The Ten Commandments exist without religious or historical context—though they do commence with the archaic form “Thou shalt not”.
- They are not received as commandments, but as containing “some sound advice”.
- They are open for us to evaluate on the basis of argument.
- They can be reduced by common consensus to four (murder, steal, covet and lie). Two more receive qualified support: adultery is not wrong, just “generally considered a no-no”; honouring parents is reduced to being nice to parents and qualified (humorously) in terms of a proviso.
- Three commandments referring explicitly to God are omitted—though later in the article we discover that God (not the devil) is in the details, and that all gods and idols are to be “welcomed in”, except the deceptive and misleading graven imagery of Instagram.
- While there is no mention of the Sabbath day, there is one whole section on the importance of travellers taking time off to holiday.

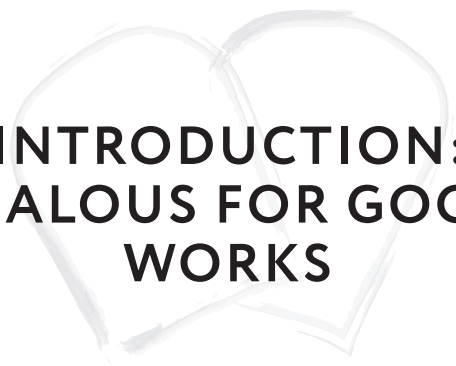
It is important that Christians have a sense of humour. The knee-jerk reactions of censorship or taking offence are the expressions of insecure people. I agree with most of the writers’ advice about how to be responsible guests in other people’s countries. The article’s religious presentation is a tongue-in-cheek form of shallow humour that increases readership and lightens the mood of moralism.

However, the article is indicative of modern Western ignorance and distortion of biblical truth, couched in the secularists’ usual flippant and disrespectful expression of sinfulness. The section of the article that refers to Adam and Eve is classic in its total lack of comprehension of the nature of sin—sin that the article, in fact, expresses and represents.

So, here in your hands is a book that focuses on the real Ten Commandments. In an age of scepticism, where the very notion of

commands from God has become fodder for comic relief, there is great value in exploring the meaning of the commandments in their historical, biblical, theological and personal contexts. I hope you enjoy thinking about them, for God's law is meant to be enjoyed. As the psalmist wrote:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps 19:7–11)



INTRODUCTION: ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS

Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:13–14)

Christians are reborn to be zealous—specifically, to be zealous for good works. It is a critical part of our *raison d'être*—our reason for being. The Bible describes the Christian life in these terms:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11–14)

The grace of God had already appeared when Jesus Christ “gave himself for us”. Now we await his reappearing—this time not in the shame of the cross, but in his divine glory.

Between these two appearances, Christians who are saved by God's grace are to be "zealous for good works". Indeed, Christians are redeemed from lawlessness and purified to be a people who belong to Jesus Christ and are zealous for good works. Therefore, good works are not an optional extra for Christian people; they are part and parcel of Jesus' work of salvation.

This creates two problems. Firstly, the modern world hates zealots. Secondly, salvation is clearly by grace alone—by our Saviour Jesus Christ having given himself for us. But how can we be redeemed from lawlessness without becoming law-keepers. And if good works are part and parcel of salvation, are we truly saved by grace alone, or is it grace plus works?

Let's think briefly about each of these problems.

Zealotry in the modern world

Zealots are generally not liked in our 'tolerant' multicultural Western society. They seem like extremists, and our society is against any form of extremism, especially religious extremism. We tend to associate religious extremists with violence, terrorism and warfare, or at least with irrational and obscurantist stupidity. Sadly, in the long history of Christianity, we can find examples of all these failings.

However, lumping all religions—and all religious zealots—into a single category is a fundamental misunderstanding of the world. It is an error generally committed by secularist people who profess 'no religion'. The differences between what people group together as 'religion' are far too great to create a singular meaningful concept. Furthermore, not all Christians are true to their calling. It is quite a false assumption that all who bear the name 'Christian' are acting Christianly (e.g. Matt 7:21–23).

Christians are to be zealous, but our zeal is to be for *good works*. And, presumably, if these good works are in fact *good*, they will benefit society. It may be prudent for Christianity's critics who complain

about interfering, do-gooding God-botherers to notice the vast contribution Christianity has made to the very foundations of Western society and to be thankful for the important social changes that Christians have brought about. It seems to have been this kind of recognition that recently led Richard Dawkins—famed atheist, and no friend of the gospel—to declare himself “a cultural Christian” who is “at home in the Christian ethos”.²

History is replete with people who initially were considered extremists, if not zealots, for their insistence on good works, and who in due time came to be seen as moral leaders of the world. While there are many differences between them, they all saw their commitment to Christ as their motivation for social action. One need only think of Martin Luther King Jr and Rosa Parks and race relations, Florence Nightingale and nursing, Henry Durant and the Red Cross, Lord Shaftesbury and child labour, Josephine Butler and the sex trade, Samuel Plimsoll and maritime safety, Arthur Broome and animal cruelty, and Granville Sharp and William Wilberforce and the slave trade.

This list could go on for several pages. Sadly, though, secular historians usually show either an ignorance or an intentional censorship when they discuss these great lives. If they mention them at all, they do it without reference to their Christian formation and motivation. Yet these social reformers, and countless others like them, were consistent in testifying that the gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus motivated and directed their actions.³

However, the foundations of Western society and the large social movements won by Christians are not the kind of ‘good works’ that

2 J Heathershaw, ‘Richard Dawkins wants to be a cultural Christian. But there’s no such thing’, *Premier Christianity*, 3 April 2024 (premierchristianity.com/opinion/richard-dawkins-wants-to-be-a-cultural-christian-but-theres-no-such-thing/17459.article).

3 The great difference between Christian zeal for good works and atheism’s failure to provide a satisfactory base for morality or understanding of good works is explored in appendix 2.

Paul had in mind in Titus 2; nor are they the kinds of ‘good works’ that will be our focus in this book. For Christianity is about little people—ordinary, unremarkable people whom secular history will not remember, but whom Jesus has rescued and whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated. These everyday Christians, anonymous to society but not to God, are “zealous for good works”. Their good works may not be seen outside their home or work or neighbourhood or wider family, but the way they live is different because of Christ.

Grace, lawlessness and good works

This brings us to the second problem: if Christians are “zealous for good works”, what is the relationship between grace and works?

The word ‘grace’ means ‘generosity’. The grace of God is his generous nature. Being saved by grace means salvation is not merited, deserved or earned, but is simply the generous gift of a generous God. Grace is not about our good works, but about God’s mercy. In this sense, grace is almost the opposite of good works (see Eph 2:8–9). This is highlighted further when we consider the notion of law-keeping: in struggling with the ‘Judaizers’ who wanted non-Jewish Christians to embrace Judaism, the apostle Paul used ‘grace’ as the opposite of law-keeping (e.g. Gal 5:2–6).

In our text from Titus 2, Paul wrote to his young protégé Titus about grace bringing salvation. He had left Titus in Crete to set the church in order in a society that was full of problems. Titus was to teach different groups within the church how to live as Christians. But while these people varied in age, sex and social standing, they all had the same experience of salvation by God’s grace. As Paul reminds Titus, “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for *all people*”.

It is a little strange to think of the abstract concept of ‘grace’ having *appeared* (v 11). But it appeared in “our great God and Saviour

Jesus Christ, who *gave himself for us* (v 14). It happened in a time and place, and it could be seen by all who had eyes to see and minds to understand. By giving his life as a sacrifice for sin, Jesus was exemplifying all that is meant by grace. You cannot be more gracious, more generous, than giving yourself as a sacrifice for sin, laying down your life not just for friends but for your enemies (see Rom 5:6–8).

The idea that Jesus “gave himself for us” is explained in two terms: “to redeem” and “to purify”.

To *redeem* is to purchase the freedom of slaves. This redemption was from the slavery of lawlessness. All lawlessness, whatever its form, held people in bondage until Jesus gave himself in his sacrificial death. We are not redeemed to return to the slavery of lawlessness—be it anarchy, self-determination, autonomy, cultural morality, or any other form of lawlessness. Somehow, the law is to play a part in our Christian life. This idea will form a key part of our explorations in this book.

To *purify*, meanwhile, is to wash clean—a desperate need for all who are defiled by their sinfulness. By giving himself in his death, Jesus washed clean a people to be “his own possession”. We are not washed clean so we can roll in the mud of defilement again.

“His own possession” is an unusual and striking phrase reminiscent of God’s claiming Israel to be his “treasured possession” when he gave them the law on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:5). As the Israelites were to live as God’s people in their moral holiness, so Christians are to live as Christ’s people in their zeal for good works.

But how does this work? We live by grace, not the law, but we have been redeemed from lawlessness and cannot return to lawlessness. So, are Christians to live by grace, or by law?

The question assumes a false dichotomy. The grace of God is not an amoral lawless generosity. Rather, it is “the grace of God” that trains us to “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age”. God’s grace leads to changed lives. We are saved by grace to live by grace.

But what of the law? There is nothing wrong with the law. Indeed, it is “holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12); the law is “spiritual” (Rom 7:14). The problem is not the law, but the sinfulness of the human heart, which is condemned by the law and yet thinks it can save itself by obeying the law. However, the heart that is saved and is being transformed by the grace of God finds great delight in the law and its transforming effect in our lives (Ps 19:7–11).

We are not saved by grace to live by law; rather, we are saved by grace *to live by grace*. Those who live by grace, having been redeemed from lawlessness, now delight in the law of God, which enables them to do the good works Christ desires of his people.

This book, then, is an exploration of living by the grace of God in a way that delights in the law of God in order to be zealous for good works.

To understand how we are to live as those redeemed from lawlessness and washed clean to be zealous for good works, we need to understand the rationale and motivation for doing good works. So, part I asks two fundamental questions: Why be good? and What is good? We will also look at the most famous example of Jesus’ teaching on “good works”, the Sermon on the Mount. This will lead us to parts II and III, where we look at our good works from the perspective of grace’s delight in the law of God, as seen in an exposition of the Ten Commandments.

In my previous book, I concluded with 34 appendices.⁴ To the relief of most (and perhaps to the dissatisfaction of the completionists), I am only providing two appendices with this book: ‘Living the cross-shaped life’, and ‘The inadequacy of atheism’.

4 *The Coming of the Holy Spirit: Why Jesus sent his Spirit into the world*, Matthias Media, 2022.

**PART I:
THE WHO, WHAT AND
WHY OF GOODNESS**



1. WHY BE GOOD?

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

One of the most famous minor events of Jesus’ life happened as he was walking towards Jerusalem to meet his appointment with crucifixion (Mark 10:17–31). A young man of great wealth asked Jesus: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v 17).⁵

It was a remarkable request that revealed so many things, especially about this man. He was wealthy, yet it was his wealth that stood in the way of what he sought. He was perceptive, yet his very question was built on an obvious contradiction. He was moral, yet his morality was of no value in inheriting eternal life.

Jesus told him: “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (v 21). We then read those tragic words: “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (v 22). This leads to the disciples’ amazement at Jesus teaching that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (v 25). The disciples “were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’ (v 26). Clearly, the rich young ruler was not the only one deceived by

5 He is usually known as ‘the rich young ruler’ because Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe him as being very wealthy, in Matthew he is called young (19:20), and in Luke he is called a ruler (18:18).

wealth. The failure to grasp that wealth can function as an alternative god still bedevils humanity to this day—especially in wealthy nations such as my own.

This wealthy young man was also confused about the concept of an inheritance. He was perceptive enough to know that he didn't have eternal life, yet he failed to notice the contradiction of 'doing' something in order to 'inherit'. It is a common folly, but inheritance is always a gift; it can never be earned. Many people have become enslaved to working for an inheritance, striving to win favour with the estate holder, only to discover that they are not included in the will. You can simply never work for an inheritance; by its very nature, an inheritance it is a gift.⁶

In his morality, this man was sufficiently perceptive to understand that his law-keeping morality was insufficient. He had kept all the commandments that Jesus mentioned, yet he still didn't have eternal life. He typified the Jews of the first century in his misunderstanding of the law, just as he typifies millions of people today who still assume that you must keep the Ten Commandments, or at least 'be moral', to inherit eternal life. So many today think Christianity teaches that 'morality leads to the reward of eternal life'. It is so sad. After two thousand years, so many people still don't understand why Jesus died on the cross. They still do not understand what redemption and salvation mean.

So deep-seated is this 'good works brings the reward of eternal life' view that even when people understand that Jesus' death pays for their sins, they still want to add their good works on top of that. Their good works are motivated by the desire to earn eternal life. It is such an insult to the sufficiency of Christ's death for sin.

Others, so committed to wealth and morality, think Jesus is answering the question of what to *do* with an additional commandment: "sell

6 In literature, Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* serves as a cautionary tale for those who would turn to the law to demand justice in an inheritance.

all that you have and give to the poor” (v 21), as if the way to the treasures of heaven is by voluntary poverty.⁷ Wealthy people who love money find it easy to remember this part of Jesus’ command; they find it at least offensive, if not unbelievable. But the real punch of Jesus’ command is in what follows: “and come, follow me”. The reason for selling all was not in the action itself, but in forming a new relationship. The rich man was to be fully committed to Jesus, for only in Jesus can anybody receive the inheritance of eternal life. Jesus’ teaching on full commitment to him was one of his consistent themes as he walked toward crucifixion in Jerusalem (Mark 8:34–38; Luke 9:57–62).

For Christians, eternal life is not based on *our* moral performance, but upon the saving power of *Christ’s* death and resurrection. This requires the right diagnosis of our profound immorality and impending damnation as the background to the amazing love by which God gave his Son, and Christ gave himself, for us (John 3:16; Eph 5:2). We are not good in order to be Christians or to be rewarded in the afterlife; we are Christians because of Jesus’ death and resurrection for us. We are not good in order to become Christians; we are good because we are already Christians. We are not good in order to become citizens of heaven, but because as Christ’s forgiven people, we are already citizens of heaven. For Christianity is a relationship with God that transforms life in the here-and-now, not a performance test to be rewarded or punished in the there-and-then.

It is crucially important to understand this basic teaching of the gospel to understand this book. Infinitely more importantly, it is crucial to understand this basic teaching of the gospel to share in the inheritance of eternal life.⁸

7 If this were true, it would create an obvious problem for the poor who have just been enriched by such a gift, for their only chance at eternal life would be to give it away to someone else!

8 If you know you need to spend more time considering this most central aspect of Christianity, I recommend Tony Payne’s *The Christian Gospel*, Matthias Media, 2023, or John Chapman’s *A Fresh Start*, Matthias Media, 1997. For a thorough outline of the gospel and further resources, visit twowaystolive.com.

In one sense, to ask Jesus to answer the questions ‘why be good?’ and ‘what is good?’ was to ask the wrong person. Or rather, it was to ask him at the wrong time. For the Jesus of the Gospels was not giving a discourse like Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, nor did he come to deliver a law code like Hammurabi or the Confucian writings. We know of Jesus as a great teacher because we know that he frequently taught in the synagogues of the Jews. But rarely are we given any extended discourse to know the details of his teaching. His two longest discourses as recorded in the Gospels are the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7),⁹ and the ‘upper room discourse’ where he prepared his disciples for his death and resurrection on the night of his betrayal (John 13–17).

Jesus was not a moral ethicist, but a controversialist and a disrupter. He did not come into the world to teach morality, but to save sinners (Luke 5:31–32; 1 Tim 1:15). He came to announce the gospel of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, and to challenge his nation to change their mind and their life by repentance. His parables are not allegories or fables of the good life, but challenges and confrontations with the truth of the gospel. His central message was about the kingdom of God, and about himself as the king who was to be rejected, crucified and resurrected. His call to the nation was to repent. His call to his disciples was to leave all and follow him.

When you see Jesus as the disrupter, you can understand how the man who taught his disciples to love their enemies (Luke 6:27) could also call upon them to hate their own families (Luke 14:26), or how he could tell a young man to give away all his wealth and follow him. Jesus’ primary task was not to lay out a considered ethical philosophy; it was to save sinners. This involved constantly challenging not only the sinfulness of Israel, but also the nation’s moral misunderstanding of the law. Saving sinners disrupted the whole system of life and thought of his contemporaries—and of humanity ever since.

9 See chapter 3 of this book.

So, if we are saved by Jesus rather than by being good, why bother being moral? We still have not answered the basic question of why we should be good.

Discipleship and disruption

Jesus' command to the wealthy young man was "come, follow me". Everywhere Jesus went, he disrupted people's lives. He called fishermen to leave their nets and follow him (Mark 1:17); he called the tax collector to leave his table and follow him (Mark 2:14); he ate with tax collectors and sinners, which offended the Pharisees (Mark 2:16). His call to discipleship was unapologetically extreme (Mark 8:34–38). People's lives were seriously disrupted when they accepted Jesus.

His challenge was not only personal, but also national. His confrontation with the leadership of Israel was sufficiently sharp that they unwittingly fulfilled their own Scriptures by handing him over to the Romans to be crucified (John 11:45–53). In a terrible and ironic statement of political expediency—and of unwitting inspiration—the high priest declared of him:

"It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him to death." (John 11:50–53)

Jesus disrupted the nation so profoundly that the leadership planned his death. But his disruption was far greater than even this would indicate, and far greater than they knew or expected. For the disruption would affect more than the land of Israel. It would impact Jews in the dispersion, but much more was to follow as the gospel went out to the nations. Jesus' disruption extended to the entire world.

But the real disruption that they failed to see was the supernatural one. For in his death, Jesus would indeed “die for the nation”. For Jesus died as the representative of the nation, as well as dying as the substitute for sinners. In Jesus’ death, the ransom for many was paid by the Lamb of God (Mark 10:45; John 1:29). And as if that were not enough, in Jesus’ resurrection the kingdom of God came into effect in this world, the Holy Spirit was sent to advance and complete Jesus’ mission,¹⁰ and the judgement of the world by one man was established (Acts 2:22–36, 17:30–31). After Jesus rose from the dead, life was never the same again. He had repeatedly foretold it, but it was too large a disturbance for his hearers to understand what he meant by it. Once it happened, they could talk of nothing else.

Throughout the record of the disciples’ evangelism in Acts, the resurrection is the one consistent message. Of course, you cannot have a resurrection without a death, and without the atonement there would be no resurrection (Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:16–18). To preach the resurrection is to preach the salvation won at the cross. But to preach the cross without the resurrection is to preach the failure of the cross. The emphasis in evangelism was clearly on the resurrection, rather than the atonement (e.g. Peter’s preaching in Acts 2:29–36, 3:15, 4:2; Paul’s preaching in Acts 17:3, 18, 31; see also Rom 1:4; 2 Tim 2:8).

This supernatural disruption changed the ordering of both the world and of individual lives. The world order was changed because there now was (and is) a man, Jesus, who continues into eternity as the appointed King of kings and Lord of lords. He now sits at the right hand of God as his Spirit brings all the world under his reign. This does not happen by the force of arms or the growth of economies, but by the Spirit’s persuasion as the appointment of the risen Jesus is announced. In other words, it happens by what we call

10 For much more on this point, see my book *The Coming of the Holy Spirit: Why Jesus sent his Spirit into the world*.

evangelism—the proclamation of the gospel. It seems to the world a weak, if not futile, activity to announce Jesus’ resurrection in hope of changing people’s lives. But under the Spirit of Christ, it has been demonstrated to be the most powerful transformation of lives, families and communities the world has ever known.

The transformation of life in the gospel is total. Like the disciples leaving everything to follow Jesus, so now people leave everything as new creatures living under a new Lord. Jesus had told Nicodemus, a Pharisaic ruler of the Jews, that he had to be “born again”.¹¹ And this is true not only for Nicodemus, for Jesus continued: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).¹² The disturbance to life that Jesus brings could not be greater than the experience of being born again. This is certainly how the apostle Paul saw it when writing about all Christians dying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:3–11; Col 2:20, 3:1–3).

Here is the life-changing motivation and empowering to be good.

But we need to dig even deeper. *Why* be good? Why not be religious or educated or powerful or rich or impoverished (like the young man Jesus met)? Why were the disciples compelled to go into the world as missionaries? Why preach the gospel? The observation that “you must be born again” still doesn’t answer the question ‘Why be good?’, let alone the follow up question ‘What is good?’

In one sense, ‘Why be good?’ can be answered by considering our salvation: Jesus’ death and resurrection have saved us *from sin*. It would therefore be reasonable to expect that we are to leave behind sin and pursue its opposite, which is presumably ‘good’. However,

11 Sadly, the hypocrisy of American politicians and televangelists has debauched this wonderful saying of Jesus, so that it has become almost a term of satire and abuse. But it was the clear teaching of Jesus, and must not be ignored or treated with embarrassment because of its misuse.

12 The pronoun in Jesus’ words to Nicodemus is singular, not plural, meaning that the general application to all people is still personal: “*he* cannot see the kingdom of God”. Anyone who is to see the kingdom of God must be born again in a personal way. By expressing this in the negative, Jesus allows no room for exception.

upon hearing of the full forgiveness Jesus has won for us without any contribution of our own, many people conclude that we may as well go on sinning, given that all sin is forgiven.

So, even though a Christian's life is totally recreated by the risen Jesus' Spirit as he brings us to new birth, why does this mean Christians must now be good?

“He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions”

Let us return to the rich young ruler. There is no sin in having money, yet this poor man was so rich that he couldn't let go of his possessions. We read that he appeared “disheartened”—appalled, dismayed, or shocked—at Jesus' statement, and so left in grief or sorrow. His problem was not money, but *the love of* money. For “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Tim 6:10). For as Jesus taught:

“No-one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matt 6:24)

As a servant, money is good. But as a master, it is a dreadful tyrant leading to all manner of evils. But the person who has turned from the love of money to follow Jesus cannot go on loving money. Repentance carries with it the notion of renunciation: you renounce the old in order to live differently in the future.

The particulars of what different people renounce in their repentance may differ, but the fundamental point remains the same. For the rich man who met Jesus, the issue was his wealth. For others, it may be adultery or family or self-righteousness or fear. The list of human priorities is as long and varied as humans. However, the fundamental concept of leaving all to follow Jesus remains the same. We read of Jesus:

Calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take

up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:34–35)

The call is to *lose our lives for the sake of Jesus and his gospel*. This is the great disruption Jesus causes in the lives of all who would be his disciple. It is to be born again. And to be born again is to die with Christ and to rise again with him in newness of life.

Any pastor could tell the stories of people's lives being totally transformed as the Holy Spirit has convicted them of the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection. Within the New Testament, nobody's life seemed to be more disrupted than Saul of Tarsus, the murderous persecutor of Christians who became the apostolic proclaimer of Christianity. And while his life as a missionary seemed slightly mad—involving beatings and shipwrecks, hunger and imprisonment—he explained it to the church in Corinth in these terms:

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor 5:13–15)

The love of Christ controlled his choices in life. And that love of Christ is explained in terms of Christ dying for all in such a way that he, Paul, had died also. This is the classic idea of 'dying with Christ'. But this idea is not just about Paul, but about any Christian. The life of every Christian is no longer for self, but for Christ—the one who died for them and was also raised again.

Here is the real beginning of the answer to 'why be good?' For if, motivated by Christ's love for us, we are to live for the risen Christ, then how does he want us to live? What will it mean for any Christian—and for all Christians—to live for Christ. How does Christ want those whom he has already saved to live for him?

The answers to these questions are all over the missionary letters to Christians that we call the epistles. Let's return to Paul's letter to Titus, which brings us directly to the notion of 'good works'.

"Zealous for good works"

Live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:12–14)

God's grace, which saves all manner of people, also trains God's people "to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives" as we wait for Christ's return. This leads to Paul's great reminder of Christ's *action* and Christ's *purpose*. Christ's action was to give himself in his death on the cross. But notice Christ's purpose and desire: he did this "to redeem" and "to purify a people for his own possession".

In the Old Testament, God rescued the nation of Israel out of slavery to make them his "treasured possession among all peoples" (Exod 19:5). Now, from around the world, in places like Crete—or wherever you are reading this page—Christ is cleansing a people for himself. And their characteristic is that they are to be "zealous for good works".

Here is the answer to our question, and here is what Christ wants for us: *good works*. For Jesus has died and risen again, and sent his Spirit to regenerate us, in order that we would be zealous for good works.

Goodness is not an optional extra of the Christian program; it is the intention, the end point, while we live in this world. Goodness is not something we can take lightly. It is to be our passion and compulsion, for we are to be *zealous* for good works. In fact, the Greek word translated 'zealous' is slightly stronger in its original form: it is

the singular noun ‘zealot’.¹³ We are to be “zealots for good works”.

Similar ideas are found in many other New Testament epistles,¹⁴ where Christians are taught how to live now that they have been born again. The motive consistently presented in these passages is the gospel that has been embraced—for good works are the consequence of having become a Christian, not the way to become one.

Furthermore, the way a person becomes a Christian—namely, the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit—is also the way a person continues to grow in Christ’s good works. For example, in a famous passage in Galatians 5, the work of the Spirit in the Christian is described in terms of the fruit he produces in us: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). This prompts us to start thinking about the answer to our next big question: ‘What is good?’

Here, then, is the great distinctive of Christian morality: it lies not so much in its content, but in its *rationale* and *motivation*:

- We are not to be good in order to be saved, for we cannot be good enough to save ourselves. If we could, we would not need to be saved.
- Such a view completely misses the point of Jesus’ death and resurrection. For he died to pay for our sin and has risen victorious over sin, Satan and death, to rule and to judge the world.
- Christ, our risen Saviour, has sent his Spirit into the world to proclaim his salvation to the nations through the preaching of the cross, and to regenerate individuals so that they may die to self and live for Christ.

And so, to live for Christ is to be one of his zealots for good works.

13 The Greek word is *zēlōtēs*.

14 For example: Eph 2:8–10, 4:17–24; Phil 3:1–13; Col 2:20–3:17; 1 Thess 4:1–8; Titus 3:1–8.