

I Know Your Works

In a culture dominated by a theology of “faith only,” it’s easy to dismiss our works as not all that important. But the Lord sees it quite differently.

“*I know your works, your labor, your patience . . .*” (Rev. 2:2).

“*I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot*” (Rev. 3:15).



Seven times in these two chapters, Jesus says concerning a church, “I know your works.” Sometimes that was a good thing (Smyrna, Philadelphia); sometimes it was a bad thing (Laodicea); more often it was a mix of both good and bad (Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis). Whatever His message to each church, it was always predicated on the fact that *He knew their works*. His judgment on each church was righteous, because His knowledge of their works was complete and accurate.

This rhetorical formula holds lessons for us today, both as individuals and as a local church.

First, this tells us that *our deeds matter*. Modern Christianity has so fixated on the importance of the heart as the key component in our salvation—which is true—that it has drifted into a lethargic indifference regarding the value of behavior. The heart is indeed the root of our Christian life, but our outward works reflect what’s inside. Just as a tree requires more than just roots to be a tree, God expects His people to produce *fruit* in their lives. If there is no fruit, or the fruit is rotten, it’s strong evidence that the root is diseased or

dead (Jas. 2:18-26). There are many who “profess to know God, but *in works they deny Him*, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (Tit. 1:16).

Churches can also settle into a dull routine of going through the motions of religion, performing all the correct rituals, but neglecting so much of the vibrant action that the Lord requires of us as a faith community. Our works matter!

Second, this principle reminds us that Lord knows *all* our works, not just the ones we choose to put on display. Humans—and churches—are quite good at arranging our outward performance to project a positive image to others, while hiding the behaviors we don’t want others to see. But we can’t fool God. He sees the whole package, *everything*. He can see right through the little game we’re trying to play with our selective righteousness. If we really understood our transparency in the presence of an all-seeing God, it would humble us to our knees and drive us to clean up the hypocrisy in our lives.

Finally, turning the preceding point on its head, God also sees the good works that no one else sees. Humility requires that our good deeds not be paraded for personal glory (Matt. 6:1-7), so if we take our religion seriously, much of what we do will be behind the scenes, where few others can see it. At times, therefore, it can be disheartening to sacrifice for others and get no acknowledgment of the good we have performed. Churches may labor in difficult fields, seeing little results from their efforts. Why bother, if no one notices? Ah, but someone does notice! Remember, “*I know your works*.” Even if no one else notices, God sees and someday will reward. In the end, that’s more than enough.

One final thought: What Jesus says in these chapters about works should not be interpreted to mean that our works are the means of our salvation. Taken as a whole—and compared to a holy and perfect God—our works will always come up short. Even the best among us make mistakes due to ignorance or carelessness. That’s why we need the grace of God, demonstrated in the death of Jesus for our sins. Consequently, we will never reach a point where we can boast to God or others about our righteous works as proof of our salvation. Our works alone cannot save us (Tit. 3:4-5). But they *can* condemn us, if we do not take them seriously.

— David King