

If we can't earn our salvation by good works, why even bother being good?

If you are asking this question, you have learned enough about Christianity to know that its big claim is that our relationship with God is secured (in this life and the life to come) not by good works but by freely receiving the grace and mercy of God. That claim is expressed well throughout the Bible, and particularly in verses like the following:

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. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (Titus 3:4-5a)

But if we are saved only by God's grace and mercy, then it is more than reasonable to ask why one should even bother doing good works. One simple answer to this question is that doing good rather than evil probably keeps you out of jail and likely earns you a whole lot more friends! Not a bad answer, but I think there are more compelling answers for the Christian:

1. Christianity is not just about getting "married." It's about enjoying the marriage. In other words, **if locking down a relationship with God is a good thing, why not begin enjoying that relationship now by doing those good things that please God?** God is willing to "put a ring on our finger" purely out of mercy and grace, but that says nothing about how we can enjoy our relationship with God once it has begun. Imagine getting married to a wonderful woman, and then having no interest in doing anything that pleases her from that day forward. You might remain married, but your relationship will fall way short of what it could be. And so it will be with God for those who have been granted the free gift of salvation but are unconcerned about doing good works.
2. When Christians talk about being saved, they don't just mean they are going to heaven instead of hell, they also mean they will be delivered from all the bad habits, addictions, and internal struggles that often mark our lives. Considering my own personal struggles, I think that is a pretty good deal! But what makes this an even better deal is that **we don't have to wait until we die to see the change that God will ultimately make in full.** In fact, we are told that for the believer the power of sin in our lives has been broken, and because it has, we can and should live a new kind of life (Romans 6:6-7, 12-13). If it is true that I don't have to be ruled any longer by the things in my life that ultimately bring me heartache, that ought to be incentive enough for me to quit doing the bad stuff that hurts me now and start doing the good stuff that often brings joy and freedom in the present life.
3. If Christianity is true and our eternal destiny is impacted by our relationship with Christ, we should desire that everyone turn to Christ so as not to experience an eternity apart from God. But I am sure you have noticed that **people tend to listen to what we have to say about life and God a whole lot more when we have a reputation of doing good to others.** I think that is why Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). So, a third reason to do good works, even if it does not earn us salvation, is because it can help other people be more open to turning to God and receiving the gift of salvation God offers them.

4. **While one does not receive salvation by doing good works, there is every indication in the Bible that the rewards we will enjoy in heaven are dependent on doing good** in the here and now. For example, in his letter to the first century church in Corinth, Paul wrote:

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

In other words, Paul says "The only foundation that a Christian can have is a relationship with Christ and that comes by faith alone, but that does not change the fact that in the day of judgment God will reward Christians for good works. If there aren't many good works to our name, we will still be with God throughout eternity but will miss out on the rewards that could be ours." That's why Paul writes elsewhere: "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do." (Ephesians 6:7-8). Paul's words are not novel; they simply echo the teaching of Christ who often spoke of rewards to those who do what is good (Matthew 5:11-12, 6:1-18, 19:29).

Since the early days of Christianity, people have questioned whether good works are really necessary since salvation cannot be earned (Romans 6:1). So the question raised here is not a new one by any means. But I hope you will agree there is as good an answer today as there was then—an answer that provides some compelling reasons to pursue good works even if salvation isn't dependent upon it.