

The Gospel Your Works Are Preaching

Susan Verstraete

In Corrie ten Boom's famous biography, *The Hiding Place*, she tells the story of her Tante (Aunt) Jans, a stern, commanding woman who lived with the ten Booms in their family home. Everything about Tante Jans was no-nonsense. She dressed in black from head to toe in a style that hadn't changed for decades. Her days were devoted to good works, from early morning to late at night. She even slept in her little office to make the best use of every spare moment. Tante Jans was known all over Holland and involved in dozens of projects—writing, speaking, forming clubs, and directing charitable efforts in the name of Christ.



Tante Jans did not slow down when she received the news that she was seriously ill. In fact, the fear of death seemed to drive her to heightened levels of activity. But at last the family received test results which indicated that Tante Jans had only about three weeks left to live.

The ten Boom family held a meeting to decide how to tell Tante Jans the bad news. Corrie's description of what happened next follows:

"We will tell her together," Father decided, "though I will speak the necessary words. And perhaps . . . she will take heart from all she has accomplished. She puts great store on accomplishment, Jans does, and who knows but that she is right!"

And so the little procession filed up the steps to Tante Jan's rooms. "Come in," she called to Father's knock, and added as she always did, "and close the door before I catch my death of drafts."

. . . "My dear sister-in-law," Father began gently, "there is a joyous journey which each of God's children sooner or later sets out on. And, Jans, some must go to their Father empty-handed, but you will run to Him with hands full!"

"All your clubs . . .," Tante Anna ventured.

"Your writings . . .," Mama added.

"The funds you've raised . . .," said Betsie.

"Your talks . . .," I began.

But our well-meant words were useless. In front of us the proud face crumpled; Tante Jans put her hands over her eyes and began to cry. "Empty, empty!" she choked at last through her tears. "How can we bring anything to God? What does He care for our little tricks and trinkets?"

And then as we listened in disbelief she lowered her hands and with tears still coursing down her face whispered, "Dear Jesus, I thank You that we must come with empty hands. I thank You that You have done all—all—on the cross, and that all we need in life or death is to be sure of this."ⁱ

The bad news about Jans' health wasn't the tragedy in this story. What broke her heart was the realization that her family saw her hard work and acted as if she was counting on it to earn favor with God. Her works had somehow preached a Gospel of human effort that she didn't believe.

I wonder (from the little that we know about Tante Jans) if her stoic personality and seeming lack of mercy and gentleness might have contributed to the family misunderstanding the motivation for her works. And I can imagine that she sometimes got so caught up in the work that it took on a life of its own—snowballing until she might not have consciously remembered why she began serving in the first place.

What are your good works communicating? We may not get the chance to correct misconceptions in the way that Tante Jans did. So let's be mindful as we work to keep pointing people back to the One who prepared the works for us to do (Eph. 2:10), who gives us the strength to labor (1 Pet. 4:11) and who set the example of humble service to others (Phil. 2:5-8).

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

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ⁱ Ten Boom, Corrie, *The Hiding Place*, (1992, Crossings Classics) pg. 36-37