

Grace and Good Works

One of the great tensions in the Bible is the tension between faith and works. If we're not careful, it's easy for us to overvalue one at the expense of the other. If we put too much emphasis on faith, we might find ourselves believing that our actions don't matter very much. On the other hand, if we put too much emphasis on obedience, we might find ourselves believing that we are responsible for our own salvation rather than trusting in Jesus to save us.

The Bible, though, doesn't really treat faith and works, obedience and grace, as opposites. Instead, they're complementary. God's grace motivates us to obey, and our faith stirs us up to good works. We can't properly glorify God without either, and we have to understand both. This evening, then, let's look together at a context from Titus that explores the connection between grace and good works.

Within this context, Paul first calls us to **GODLY CONDUCT**. Look here at Titus 2:15-3:2. The first thing we see here is a lesson not only for Titus, but for all preachers, and not only for the Christians in Crete, but for Christians in all places and times. Preachers need to preach with authority. Preaching isn't about cleverness and human wisdom and jokes. It's about the word of God, and only when we are proclaiming that word are we speaking with the authority of God. When preachers do that, though, if the congregation ignores them, it's ignoring God.

Paul continues to reveal that God wants us to be people who don't cause trouble, and because we don't cause trouble, we are ready for every good work. This starts with being submissive to the government. Even if the ruler is as rotten as the emperor Nero, even if the authorities are as corrupt as the Sanhedrin, unless they demand that we disobey God, we are responsible for honoring and obeying them. God needs servants, not malcontents and rebels.

Second, Paul says, we must make sure that our readiness for good works isn't nullified by our bad relationships with others. He tells us that we must be gentle and courteous toward others while avoiding speaking evil of them and quarreling with them. This is something that all of us need to consider, especially when it comes to our speech online. I don't want a show of hands here, but I want us all to think about it. How many of us, at one point or another, have spoken evil of a political figure on Facebook? How many of us have found ourselves bogged down in a political or a religious argument? In the midst of those arguments, how many of us have failed to be gentle and courteous?

What's more, we need to be sensitive to the distinction that Paul makes between good works on the one hand and quarrelsome speech on the other. It's easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that our quarrelsome speech is a good work, that somehow we're making the world a better place or advancing the kingdom by arguing with somebody. Often, we feel like we are. We sure got those people told! However, snark on Instagram or a 50-comment thread on Facebook is a far cry from

the humble service we see in the life of Christ. It's fine to talk about issues online, but we must beware of the times when our blood pressure starts rising and discussion turns into argument.

This might not be the easiest thing in the world to do, but it's the way that we ought to behave because of THE KINDNESS OF GOD. Let's read here from Titus 3:3-7. Yes, it's hard to be humble. Yes, it's hard not to get into it with others. However, it becomes a lot easier when we remember that we owe everything good about ourselves to God.

Look at the ugly description of our former selves in v. 3. We might reject the thought of applying this description to ourselves, especially if we were "raised in the church" and haven't ever really explored the deep things of Satan. However, when we do so, we dramatically underestimate the work that God has done in our hearts. Consider the people of the world around us. Isn't this exactly what we see, people who are consumed with envy and lust and hatred? Why would we think that in their situation, without the presence of God in our lives, we would be any better?

We are not saved because we deserve to be saved. We are saved because God is good and filled with lovingkindness. We are what we are not because of our own works, but because of His mercy.

In particular, the text cites two expressions of that mercy: the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Both of these are worth exploring in greater depth. Let's start with the washing of regeneration. The Greek word translated as "washing" here is *loutron*, which in its literal sense means "bathtub". Thus, in Biblical terms, that container of water behind me is the bathtub of regeneration. When we are immersed in such a bathtub, we receive new life.

Second, let's consider the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Let's be careful to read this one in context. According to v. 7, the Spirit is what takes us from having been justified by grace to inheriting eternal life. I don't think this is about the Spirit's work in our initial salvation. Instead, I think it's about renewal in the Romans 12 sense, which takes us from being conformed to the world to transformed. Certainly, the Spirit accomplishes this work through the word, and the text leaves open the possibility that the Spirit acts on us in other ways. Regardless, it is clear that God has made every provision necessary for us from the time of our salvation all the way through eternity.

On our journey toward the goal, Paul warns us to be wary of CONTROVERSIES. Let's continue our reading with Titus 3:8-11. This is a text that describes two kinds of Christians. On the one hand, you have the Christians who are careful to engage in good works. They're mindful of the greatness of their salvation, so they put their heads down and do the things that glorify God. Paul commends this. He says it's a profitable way to live.

On the other hand, though, you have the brethren who love to argue rather than do. They would rather spend hours quarrelling about some obscure point of doctrine that doesn't matter all that much, instead of spending five minutes helping somebody or building up the church. Paul's comment on this choice, as opposed to good works, is exactly the opposite. He says it's unprofitable. Indeed, it's worthless.

This raises an important question for all of us who are fascinated with God's word, as I certainly am. When some issue captures our attention, we always need to ask, "So what?" What difference does it make if I'm right about this? What difference does it make if my brother is wrong?

Sometimes, the answer is that it makes a huge amount of difference. If my brother is wrong about Matthew 19 and is in an unscriptural marriage, if I can't convince him to change his mind, he's going to lose his soul. At other times, though, the question makes no difference. For example, my dad liked to argue about whether the devil was a created being or not. That's an interesting question, I guess, but as far as I can tell, it does nothing to change my understanding of how he tempts us or how God expects us to resist him. As long as we get the resisting-the-devil part right, it doesn't really matter where he came from.

Such controversies don't have an effect on our eternal destinies, and we have to be careful not to get sucked into them. Otherwise, we might find ourselves in the class of people Paul condemns as stirring up division. If that's us, we will find ourselves contending our way right out of the church and into hell. It's the responsibility of every congregation to reject people like that.

The letter concludes with yet another summons to GOOD WORKS. This time, look at Titus 3:12-15. Even though good works has remained a theme through every context we've studied this evening, in each section, its application changes. So too it is here. Rather than talking about good works as opposed to unhelpful speech, here Paul is addressing the subject of good works to help those who are engaged in the best speech of all—the proclamation of the gospel. Zenas the lawyer and Apollos are coming to Crete, and it's up to the Christians there to make sure that they have everything they need in their work. If the brethren don't meet this need, Paul says that they will have proven themselves unfruitful.

This text offers us another opportunity to consider the importance of supporting gospel preachers. Frankly, here is one of the areas where I think we have a great advantage over the denominational world and even over some of our own brethren. Because we aren't tied to some regional office or some sponsoring-church arrangement, we're a very lean organization. We spend money on looking after our members and ensuring that we have a place to meet, but everything over that goes to the proclamation of the gospel. The congregation provides for Shawn and me in our local work here, and it supports preachers all across the globe as well.

Brethren, that's something that we can feel good about. Every time we put a check in the plate, we are contributing to the most important work that a human being can do: no bureaucracy, no overhead, just the preaching of the gospel. When we participate in this crucial activity, God sees that we are indeed bearing fruit for Him.

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