



BECOMING ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS: LEARNING

Titus 3:12-15

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Introduction

In his book *The Hole in Our Gospel*, Richard Stearns, the President of World Vision, describes his transforming trip to Rakai, Uganda, in August of 1998. There he movingly describes an encounter with a Ugandan also named Richard, though his story was very different from Richard Stearns'.

His name was Richard, the same as mine. I sat inside his meager thatch hut, listening to his story, told through the tears of an orphan whose parents had died of AIDS. At thirteen, Richard was trying to raise his two younger brothers by himself in this small shack with no running water, electricity, or even beds to sleep in. There were no adults in their lives—no one to care for them, feed them, love them, or teach them how to become men. There was no one to hug them either, or to tuck them in at night. Other than his siblings, Richard was alone, as no child should be. I try to picture my own children abandoned in this kind of deprivation, fending for themselves without parents to protect them, and I cannot.

I didn't want to be there. I wasn't *supposed* to be there, so far out of my comfort zone—not in that place where orphaned children live by themselves in their agony. There, poverty, disease, and squalor had eyes and faces that stared back, and I had to see and smell and touch the pain of the poor. That particular district, Rakai, is believed to be ground zero for the Ugandan AIDS pandemic. There, the deadly virus has stalked its victims in the dark for decades. Sweat trickled down my face as I sat awkwardly with Richard and his brothers while a film crew captured every tear—mine and theirs.

Just sixty days earlier, Richard Stearns was the CEO of Lenox, America's finest tableware company, producing and selling millions of dollars in luxury goods. He writes of his life as a high-powered corporate CEO:

I lived with my wife and five children in a ten-bedroom house on five acres just outside of Philadelphia. I drove a Jaguar to work every day, and my business travel took me to places such as Paris, Tokyo, London, and Florence. I flew first-class and stayed in the best hotels. I was respected in my community, attended a venerable suburban church, and sat on the board of my kids' Christian school. I was one of the good guys—you might say a "poster child" for the successful Christian life.

But God got a hold of Richard Stearns life and birthed in him what our passage calls a devotion to good works.

But how does that happen? How does a high-flying corporate executive like Richard Stearns become devoted to good works? Or how does someone like you or me become devoted to good works?

Our passage today tells us how.

For several weeks now we have been reflecting on how God creates a people who are zealous for good works. We began where we ought to begin: with the gospel, the gospel of good works. We also considered the importance of biblical preaching and godly leadership and good teaching in creating zeal for good works. Two weeks ago we saw the importance of readiness: being ready for every good work; and last week the importance of focus: keeping the main thing the main thing.

Today we come to the final passage in this series on Titus, and today we turn our attention to the final word. “And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (1:14).

We see this is Paul’s closing instruction, his final appeal, his parting shot, if you will, to Titus and the churches in Crete. We see Paul’s desire for the churches: that they not be unfruitful but fruitful. That they not live humdrum, half-hearted lives, but lives that abound with good works and advance the gospel, lives like Richard Stearns.

Learning By Doing

We also see how this happens. It happens by learning. We avoid unfruitfulness by learning to devote ourselves to good works. “And let our people *learn* to devote themselves to good works” (1:14).

Devotion to good works requires learning. It does not happen automatically. Devotion to good works is not your default setting. You don’t come preprogrammed with a devotion to good works. Instead, devotion to good works is something that must be cultivated; it must be learned.

But we learn to be devoted to good works not by studying good works or by signing up for a class on good works or by reading books about good works. We don’t learn to be devoted to good works in that way: through an analysis of good works.

Instead, brothers and sisters, we learn to be devoted to good works *by actually doing good works*. In fact, the force of the verb here translated “learn” is more “to learn through practice,”¹ to learn through experience. We learn devotion to good works, then, by doing good works. Devotion to good works comes through our own first-hand experience of good works.²

Of course, this principle applies to virtually every area of life, as well as in every area of the Christian life. Praying develops devotion to prayer. Reading your Bible develops devotion to reading your Bible. Giving develops devotion to giving. Serving develops devotion to serving. Praising develops devotion to praising. In each case, we see the devotion follows the doing.

So, too, devotion to good works; it follows the doing of good works.

Vern Hendrickson was a great example of this principle. Vern was a member of this church for over forty years, and for most of that time he served as our receiving treasurer. Nearly four decades of faithful service and devotion to good works. In fact, the Thursday before the fourth of July weekend, Vern was in for payroll day, then went for a root canal, but then returned to

¹ Marshall, p. 345.

² Quinn, p. 267: “The learning urged here is no abstract, theological systematization. It is learning charity by acting charitably.”

the church to finish signing checks. Vern was devoted to good works. But he had learned to be devoted to good works over many years of faithful service.

Interestingly, Jesus Christ is also an example of this principle. You may be surprised to hear that the Bible says that Jesus learned through experience, through doing. At least this is what the writer of Hebrews says: “he learned obedience through what was suffered” (5:8). Although he was the Son of God, he learned obedience through the experience of suffering. Even though he knew all things, he nevertheless learned first-hand what it meant to obey the Father through suffering.

So, too, we must, like Jesus, learn to be devoted to good works through doing good works.

Good Works & Urgent Needs

But what are good works? What makes a work a good work?

Ironically, during the course of this series on being zealous for good works we have not paused to define good works. Many of you have asked me about good works.

How about this for a definition: *Good works are human acts that meet gospel needs in the name of Jesus Christ.* First, good works are human acts. They are not primarily dispositions or feelings or thoughts but actions. Second, good works meet gospel needs. Good works address those needs that are exposed by the gospel; in other words, they serve to advance the gospel. Third, good works are done in the name of Jesus Christ. “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 10:31). Motivation is critical, and what makes a work a good work is the motivation to do it in Jesus’ name, in a way that brings honor to him.

Of course, this definition is broad enough to encompass good works of every size and shape and variety: from the mundane to the magnificent, from the humble to the Herculean. And that is right and good and biblical.

This passage does, however, specify that we are to learn to devote ourselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need. There are many needs. But this passage says we are to prioritize urgent needs. But which are the urgent ones, and which the not so urgent ones? And is it possible that I could think that something is an urgent need when God doesn’t see it that way at all? Or, conversely, is it possible that God thinks something is an urgent need, when I don’t think it’s urgent at all?

A few months ago I had lunch with a fellow Oak Park clergy member. Over the course of the conversation this person asked whether we as a church would ever be interested in partnering together on some community projects. I respond that we were certainly open to that sort of thing, but asked what this person thought to be the urgent needs in the community. This person replied: affordable housing. Now affordable housing may well be an urgent need, but before embarking on something like that we would want to prayerfully consider whether that is an urgent gospel need or not.

What, then, defines an urgent need? Well, here is where the other verse in this passage help us.

In the original Greek of this verse, there is an “also” (*kai*). It would have been helpful to have included the “also” in the translation of this verse. It would have read: “Let our own people *also* learn to devote themselves to good works.” What this does is clarifies that what

Paul instructs Titus to do in 3:12-13 are expressions of what he instructs the churches to do in 3:14. In other words, just as the churches of Crete are to learn to devote themselves to good works to help cases of urgent need, so too this is what Paul instructs to do: devote himself to good works to help cases of urgent need.

In 3:12-13 Paul offers a variety of instructions about travel plans. But this all serves the single purpose of advancing the gospel. In other words, he's not interested in Titus joining him in Nicopolis for the winter to go snow skiing! No, he's deploying and redeploying Christian workers all over the Mediterranean for the sake of the advance of the gospel. In fact, we see Paul's intentionality and missionary urgency coming through in these closing instructions. Paul calls Titus to join him in Nicopolis. Nicopolis was a large city located in Western Macedonia on the Adriatic Sea, no doubt ripe for gospel outreach. There was no church in that city. It was also a strategic city. From there Paul could advance the gospel in Asia Minor. "This Nicopolis was an ideal location for Paul to continue meeting people and spreading the gospel."³ Furthermore, it would have been a good base of operations for him as he sought to advance the gospel further west to Spain.

Paul says that Titus is to ensure that Zenas and Apollos receive a good send off so that they lack nothing. The New Testament writings put great stress on the importance of a good send off for Christian workers. See Acts 15:3; Rom. 15:24; 1 Cor. 16:6; 2 Cor. 1:16; 3 John 6. It certainly included all kinds of financial and material support: food, clothing, travel arrangements and companions. But these send offs also included prayer and fasting (see Acts 13:3; 20:36-38; 21:5-6). This presupposes that Titus would extend to them hospitality while they were in Crete. It also, of course, means that Titus is to see to it that they leave Crete not lacking anything they need. This would certainly have included financial and material support and other practical helps. The term is always used of Christian missionary efforts (cf. 3 John 6). As one commentator has noted, this is "a delicate allusion to the underwriting of their expenses."⁴

What, then, defines urgency? The gospel does. Good works that address cases of urgent need are those that advance the gospel.

But does this mean that only missionaries or pastors or other Christian workers can do good works? No, because these are not the only ways in which the gospel is advanced in the world. Do you remember, for example, the word to slaves in 2:10. They are to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior by living exemplary lives in their work-world. There is an urgent need to advance the gospel in the marketplace. So learn to devote yourselves to good works in the marketplace.

A Few Encouragements Along the Way

Now we must remember a few important things about learning by doing or learning through experience.

First, this kind of learning takes time. It doesn't happen over night. It happens gradually.

Second, learning through experience requires patience. This is true of virtually all learning, but especially learning to devote yourself to good works.

³ Mounce, p. 457.

⁴ Quinn, p. 267.

Third, this kind of learning will inevitably be painful. Most learning is painful. It takes effort. It can be frustrating and fatiguing. All the more so learning devotion to good works. It will be painful because we will be learning something that doesn't come very naturally to any of us: we are learning to be devoted to *other people* and *not ourselves*.

Finally, this kind of experiential learning is best done in community, with others who are going through the same process and where you are praying together.

Conclusion

One of the things that happens when you work through an entire book of the New Testament like Titus is that you begin to develop a vision for your own church. As we conclude this sermon series on Titus and the call to be zealous for good works, let me tell you that I have a dream. It is a dream first articulated by a hero of mine in the faith, John Stott. It's a dream of a serving church.

I have a dream of a church which is *a serving church*—
which has seen Christ as the Servant
and has heard his call to be a servant too,
which is delivered from self-interest, turned inside out,
and giving itself selflessly to the service of others,
whose members obey Christ's command to live in the world,
to permeate secular society, to be the salt of the earth
and the light of the world,
whose people share the good news of Jesus simply,
naturally and enthusiastically with their friends,
which diligently serves its own [community],
residents and workers, families and single people,
nationals and immigrants, old folk and little children,
which is alert to the changing needs of society,
sensitive and flexible enough to keep adapting its
program to serve more usefully,
which has a global vision and is constantly
challenging its young people to give their lives in service,
and constantly sending its people out to serve.
I have a dream of a *serving* church.

Now that is a great dream for a church! That's my dream for *this* church. Is that your dream too? If it is, and if we can continue to pull together as a single, unified Body, there's no telling what we might do – or, I should say – what God might do through us.

Calvary Memorial Church! You are the light of the world. Let, then, your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Amen.