



BECOMING ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS: READINESS

Titus 3:1-7

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Introduction

How could an insignificant Jewish sect end up conquering the entire Roman world? How did the tiny Jesus movement in the end transform Western civilization for two millennia? In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark explores this question. One of the more fascinating chapters in the book deals with how the earliest Christians responded to plagues and epidemics.

In AD 165 and then again in AD 251, a massive plague swept through the empire, leaving a massive death toll in its wake. There he describes the two epidemics that hit the Roman world in the third century. They were devastating in their impact. And they were disorienting for both the political and religious leaders of the day.

The Christian response, however, was quite different. A church leader named Dionysius, writes of the Christian response:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected with others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.¹

What helped transform this insignificant Jewish sect into a transforming force was readiness. The earliest Christians were ready for every good work. As they saw needs around them, they responded with grace.

This passage of Scripture touches on an important aspect of being zealous for good works: readiness. Zealousness for good works first requires readiness for good works. Before we can be a people that radiates the love of Christ through lives transformed by his grace, we must be ready.

Readiness is an attitude. It's about being mentally disposed to respond with grace when opportunity arises. It's about being available, prompt to react when you see a need that the love of Christ can address. Mothers exude readiness when they're helping their children cross that next hurdle in his or her development, whether it's learning to sit up or walk. Outfielders exude readiness when the batter steps up to the plate. They're ready to respond.

Look at readiness in this passage: the call to readiness (vv. 1-2), the threat to readiness (v. 3), and the source of readiness (vv. 4-7).

¹ Cited in Rodney Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 82.

The Call to Readiness: Our Civic and Social Responsibility (3:1-2)

The first point comes from the opening two verses of this passage, where we find *the call to readiness*. We are to be ready for every good work in two ways: we are to be ready in our civic responsibilities (v. 1), and we are to be ready in our social responsibilities (v. 2). We are to be ready to bless other people with good works.

We are to be ready for every good work in our *civic* responsibilities. When it comes to being a citizen within a community, Titus is to remind the Christians in Crete that they are “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work” (v. 1). You’ve heard of civil disobedience; this is a call for civil obedience. Civil obedience is to be the basic default position for the Christian. Romans 13:1: “Let every person be subject to governing authorities.” Or 1 Peter 2:13: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.” This does not, of course, mean blind subservience to any and everything a government might do since our allegiance is ultimately to God and not to man. But it does mean that Christians are on the whole to be good citizens, not political agitators or rabble-rousers or troublemakers. Instead, we are to be actively engaged in the life of our community so that we can be “ready for every good work.”

We are also to be ready for every good work in our *social* responsibilities: that is, we are to be ready to do good, not harm, to those with whom we live and work, those we see out on the street or at the park or in our schools. This passage says we are “to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (v. 2).

We’ve all met quarrelsome Christians, and they’re not usually very pretty people. Quarrelsome Christians are those who – you get the feeling – are glad they’re saved and glad others aren’t! They’re generally grumpy and easily upset by most everything that happens. “The world’s going to hell in a hand-basket,” is their mantra. “Turn or burn,” is their bumper sticker. *Rambo*’s their favorite movie because they’re pretty sure John Rambo was a Christian. These kinds of people are just looking for a fight, preferably with some surly pagans, so they can stand up for Jesus. They like to argue with non-Christians: like to put people in an apologetic headlock to see if they can’t get them to say, “Uncle!”

Christians cannot be like that. Rather, we are to be good neighbors. To be sure, this is not a call to be weak-kneed or wimpy: to be a kind of Mr. Christian milk-toast. Instead, it’s a call to exhibit a remarkable kind of self-control and strength: the kind of strength Jesus Christ exhibited as he interacted with the poor and the oppressed, the blind and the lame, the sick and the sinner.

In short, a Christian is to be a good citizen and a good neighbor. We are to be exemplary in our civic duties and social responsibilities. We are to be ready for every good work, whether it is in serving the needs of the society in which we live or the neighborhood in which we live. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles of Israel: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7). For this adorns the doctrine of God our Savior.

The Threat to Readiness: Our Disdainful Attitudes (3:3)

So that’s what we’re called to: a readiness for every good work. That’s both our civic and social responsibility—and one critical way in which we live out our calling as a City on a Hill in Chicago.

But there are *threats* to readiness, aren't there? There are impediments to readiness, things that make being ready for every good work more difficult, and indeed sometimes impossible. There are, friends, certain attitudes that we as Christians can have that really undermine readiness.

What are some of these attitudes that undermine readiness?

One is *ignorance*. We are simply unaware of the needs and opportunities around us and therefore fail to be ready for every good work. Or we may recognize the needs and opportunities, but we don't know how to meet them. Ignorance can thus stymie readiness for blessing and serving others.

Another threat to readiness is *fear*. We may see the needs around us and even recognize them as good gospel opportunities, but we're for whatever reason fearful of stepping out to meet the need: fearful of what it might cost us, fearful of how others might respond.

A third threat is *disdain*. Disdain is that subtle feeling of superiority toward others—feeling smug because you see yourself as better than others, feeling slightly exalted over others because of who you are or who you've become or what you've done or not done.

Now disdain is an understandable attitude for a Christian to have. First, the gospel actually changes you. When you embrace the gospel, your life is transformed by the gospel. You are transferred from darkness to light and your life follows suit as well. And while at first you're just delighted that God's moved powerfully in your life and you are ready to share your faith with anyone who will listen, over time things change. We become less enraptured with the graciousness of God's salvation, and increasingly preoccupied with the sinfulness of those around us. Secondly, much of what goes on in the world apart from Christ is foolish and disobedient to God and God's word. And as believers who love God and love God's word, we see it and are rightly grieved by it.

But disdain is an ugly attitude nonetheless. John Calvin explains disdain in these words:

If there are any faults in others, not content with noting them with severe and sharp reproach, we hatefully exaggerate them. Hence arises such insolence that each one of us, as if exempt from the common lot, wishes to tower above the rest, and loftily and savagely abuses every mortal man, or at least looks down upon him as an inferior.²

More importantly, for our purposes, is to realize that disdain is deadly. It kills zeal for good works. *When we feel disdain toward someone, it's next to impossible to serve that person.* And, friends, when we feel disdain toward whole groups of people, it's also next to impossible to serve that group of people. An attitude of disdain is deadly for a Christian because it kills zeal for good works. Yet we as Christians so often struggle with feelings of disdain toward other people.

Now, I believe this passage addresses this attitude of disdain. Notice the flow of thought. Verses 1 and 2 call for readiness. Verse 3, then, introduces the reason why we ought to be ready for every good work. And what is that reason? "For we *ourselves* were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another" (v. 3). Be ready for every good work (vv. 1-2), because of who you were (v. 3). In other words, the reason to be ready for every good work begins, interestingly enough, with *a reminder of who we once used to be. The rationale for readiness*

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.4.

starts with remembering who we were. As if to say: if you want to be a good citizen and a good neighbor, a force for good in your community, you must remember where you came from: the pit from which the Lord dragged you out and saved you.

So rather than looking with disdain on the sin and rebellion and foolishness of the world around us, we ought to let it serve as a mirror in which we see our own reflection before we met Christ or apart from Christ. And then let that drive us deeper and deeper into the grace of God's salvation in Christ, rather than higher and higher into our own sense of self-righteousness.

There's nothing uglier than a smug Christian: a Christian who looks with disdain on sinners. In fact, it's a contradiction in terms. A smug Christian is a Christian who does not understand the grace of the gospel. A self-righteous Christian is a Christian whose heart has not been plowed by the tender mercies of God in Christ.

Here, as in all things, Jesus Christ himself is our supreme model. For Jesus never looked with disdain on sinners. Jesus had compassion on sinners; he did not despise them (Mark 6:34). Jesus did not speak evil of sinners; he rebuked the evil in their lives (John 7:53-8:11). Jesus did not quarrel with sinners; he quarreled with Satan, who takes people captive to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26). Jesus was not harsh with the spiritually sick but gentle, as he, as the Great Physician, extended his healing touch (Luke 8:40-48). Jesus was not gruff or rude or curt or impatient with the lowly, but showed perfect courtesy toward all people—indeed even to his enemies! In fact, Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

The Source of Readiness: God's Gracious Salvation (3:4-7)

But how do we deal with disdain in our hearts? And how do we become ready for every good work? This leads to our third point: *the source of readiness, which is God's gracious salvation.*

Like every right attitude in the Christian life, readiness for every good work comes from being rooted in the gospel. Our being ready for every good work depends upon us being rooted in God's gracious work in Christ.

There are few verses in the Bible that underscore the gracious character of God's salvation. In these densely packed verses, we get a wonderfully succinct summary of the whole of salvation—a mini-systematic theology on the doctrine of salvation. We see the source, the basis, the means and the goal of salvation. And it's all about grace!

These verses unpack for us the gracious character of God's salvation in Christ.³ And they begin where they ought: with the *source* of our salvation—which is ultimately the gracious character of our great God. “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us” (v. 4). God sent his Son into the world not because the world is so special, but because God is so gracious. We often get this wrong. We often go to a verse like John 3:16 and think that it's because God “so” loved the world that he decided to save the world. But friends, that's not the point of that verse. The point of that verse is to explain the

³ Here I am indebted to John Stott's fine exposition of these verses; see *Guard the Truth*, pp. 202-06.

way in which God saved the world: by sending his own Son. God loved the world in this way: namely, he sent his own Son to die for the world. The point is simply this: salvation is rooted in God's character, not the lovability of the world. God didn't send his Son to save the world because the world is so loveable he couldn't live without us. No, he saves as an expression of his *goodness and loving kindness*. Not our worth or value, but God's goodness and loving kindness.

Paul continues to press home this point when he speaks of the *ground* of salvation in verse 5, "not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy." God did not save you because of who you were. Nor, however, did he save you because of who you would become. Some of us have come to believe that we were a 'good catch' for God. We harbor the secret feeling that God knew what he was doing when he saved you because of how great you would become for God.

We see the grace of God's salvation in the *means* of salvation. God saved us by the most gracious of means: "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (v. 5b). Salvation is not merely an external thing; something that happens outside of you, in heaven or in the mind of God. Salvation includes God doing something within us as well. And this further underscores the graciousness of the whole thing. God renews us by giving us his own presence, his Holy Spirit. And, as verse 6 reminds us, he was not miserly in giving us his presence. No, he poured out his Holy Spirit richly upon us—all of grace!

Finally, we see the gracious character of God's salvation in the *goal* of salvation. You see, we are not only, as verse 7 says, "justified by his grace," but God justifies us for a purpose. As if the free justification of God were not enough in itself, God has more and more grace to give. He justifies so that, as verse 7 goes on to say, "we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

So we see the utter graciousness of God's salvation. The source, the basis, the means, the goal—it's all of grace. Sheer grace! "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" (Eph. 2:8-9). And this gracious salvation serves to make us ready for every good work by effectively undermining our arrogance because salvation's not our doing but God's; empowering us for service through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives; and, by offering us sure and certain hope that frees us up to give generously and love radically.

Conclusion

Where to begin? The simple answer is to begin right where you are. Tim Keller offers sage advice: we must stop, look and listen. Stop: put the break on the busyness. Look: open your eyes to the people around you. Listen: listen to other people, what they're struggling with, wrestling with, worried about; and listen to God, what he might be saying to you.

And when you stop, look, and listen, it's amazing what you will begin to see and hear all around you. You'll begin to notice needs everywhere, opportunities galore to display the goodness of God in and through the good works that flow from God's gospel.

If you do, you will notice a multitude of needs. There is a college student who has had to drop out of school for lack of funds. Over here are numbers of elderly folk without sufficient support from children, who need transportation, friendship, and other aid. Turn in another direction and listen hard. You will hear single parents, divorced and

widowed people, struggling financially and emotionally to be “both mother and father” to children. . . .

Now see the families temporarily in need because a mother or father is sick or injured [or out of work]. Other families struggle under more permanent disabilities; one has a mentally retarded child, another has a father forced to retire early due to a severe back ailment, another family has a mother with Alzheimer’s disease. Then there are the terminally ill – families struck by cancer, leukemia, and other such maladies.⁴

May God help us to stop, look and listen – so that we might be ready for every good work!

Amen.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Mercy Ministries*, p. 127.