



THE GOSPEL OF GOOD WORKS

Titus 1:1 - 4

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This morning we are beginning an eight week series on the book of Titus. Some of you, however, may be wondering: Why Titus? Surely there are other books of the Bible that would make for a more exciting sermon series. After all, Titus doesn't share the same passion and intensity as, say, Galatians, or the same drama and intrigue as 1 or 2 Corinthians. Nor does it contain the same lofty theological peaks as, say, Romans, or the same amount of awe-inspiring imagery as the Book of Revelation. Why, then, a series on Titus?

The reason for Titus is simply this: *the message of Titus is well-suited to help us live out our particular calling as a church.* But what is our particular calling as a church? Well, you will recall two months ago we heard Jesus say to us as a church: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16).

That's who we are, then, *a city on a hill.* That's our calling as a church. And to let the light of our lives, as individuals and as a body, shine before others that they may see our good deeds and glorify God. That's our responsibility as a church. But how do we, practically speaking, live out that calling; and how do we faithfully discharge our responsibility to let the light of our lives shine before others?

Here is where the message of Titus comes in. For if we want to be who God is calling us to be, we need to hear and heed the message of the book of Titus. But what is the message of Titus, you may now be wondering? Well, we've already tipped our hand with the title to this sermon series: *Zealous for Good Works.* So it's a pretty safe bet to assume that the message of Titus has something to do with good works. And indeed it does! In fact, I think we can get at the heart of the message of this book with three simple observations about good works in Titus. These three observations will, in turn, not only help you understand the heart of this book, but also how it will serve to take us the next step in our desire as a church to be a city on a hill.

The First Observation: Good Works Are *Everywhere* in Titus

The first observation has to do with the presence of good works in Titus: namely, good works are *everywhere* in Titus. In fact, the mention of good works is a steady refrain throughout the letter. For example, in 1:8 an elder is to be "a lover of good." In 1:16 false teachers are said to "profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work." In 2:7 Titus is to show himself "in all respects to be a model of good works." In 2:14 Jesus is said to have purified us that we might be "zealous for good works." And in Chapter 3 Christians are called "to be ready for every good work" (v. 1), "careful to devote themselves to good works" (v. 8), and to "learn

to devote themselves to good works” (v. 14). And those are just the references where mention of good works is explicit!

Good works also appear in the two key passages of the letter. The two key passages are to be found in 2:11-14 and 3:3-8, which are both widely recognized to be central to the theological concerns of the letter. Interestingly, in both passages, good works provide the punch-line.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for *good works*.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to *good works*.

At the heart of the book of Titus, then, are two passages which have at their heart reference to good works; indeed, the doing of good works serves as the point or punch-line of both passages.

It is also worth noting that good works show up in both the top and the tail of the letter: that is, at both the beginning (top) and the end (tail) of the letter. Notice the closing charge of the letter, the next to the last verse, in 3:14: “And let our people learn to devote themselves to *good works*, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.” So much for the tail. How about the top of the letter? Look with me at the opening verse of the letter, which serves as a thematic statement for the whole. There we find, as you might have guessed by this point, an implicit reference to good works: “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with *godliness*.” That is, with a life of good works, as Paul will go on to explain throughout the rest of the letter.

So you can see that in entitling this series *Zealous for Good Works*, we are getting at the very heart of the message of this letter. Call it the theme or melodic line of the book, if you like. Either way, good works are obviously central to the concern of this New Testament letter; good works are everywhere in Titus.

The Second Observation: Good Works Are *Essential* to Authentic Faith in Titus

However, as we probe a little further into the book of Titus, we realize that Titus doesn’t just mention good works, but makes a very important claim about good works. Specifically, and this is my second observation, the book of Titus insists that good works are *essential* to authentic faith. In other words, if there is faith, there must be good works.

To grasp the truth of the gospel means to live a life of obedience. Or good works must always accompany faith.

Look again with me at the opening verse of the letter, which serves as a thematic statement for the whole: “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness.” That is obviously the ESV rendering of the verse; the NIV interprets the expression so as to draw out the point more explicitly: “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth *that leads to godliness.*” Either way, the point is this: authentic faith in God and a genuine knowledge of the truth inevitably leads to godliness, or to a life of good works.

Or take another look at 3:8, where Paul says: “This saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.” Titus, Paul is saying, you must insist on these things, these gospel verities I’ve just mentioned in 3:4-7. Why? So that those who have embraced them by faith may be *extra diligent to devote themselves to good works.*

As a third example of this theme of the necessity of good works in the life of the believer, look with me at 1:16. There Paul is warning of false teachers and so we have a good negative example or contrast to this point. Paul warns: “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.” Now that’s a damning thing to say, isn’t it? And it cuts to the heart of the message of this book: the necessity of good works in the life of the genuine believer.

But let me ask you: where does this insistence upon the necessity of good works in the life of believer come from? It comes from an understanding of the gospel. It comes from an understanding of the gospel as *the gospel of good works.*

That may sound somewhat jarring to some of you. We don’t often use ‘gospel’ and ‘good works’ in the same sentence, much less the same phrase—unless it is by way of contrast so as to say that the gospel is *not about* good works. “It’s not about how many good works you’ve done,” you might say to someone. “We’re saved by faith, and *not by* our good works.” Perhaps you’ve spoken that way; perhaps you’ve heard someone speak that way. It’s a glorious truth, to be sure! And one that is stressed emphatically in Scripture!

Yet, brothers and sisters, in safeguarding the gracious ground of the gospel, we can inadvertently downplay the *goal* of the gospel. For, you see, while the ground of the gospel is grace, the goal of the gospel is good works. What God has done in Christ is grace, sheer grace. There is nothing you can do to add to it; it only needs to be received by faith. But the purpose of this grace in our lives, friends, is not to leave us as we are and thus unchanged. No, the gospel has a goal. This the Bible is equally insistent upon. Listen to how Scripture, then, balances this:

Ephesians 2:8-10 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.

2 Tim. 1:9 [God] saved us and called us *to a holy calling*, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

Titus 3:4-8 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God *may be careful to devote themselves to good works*.

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a *people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*.

Do you hear in these passages the twofold and indeed paradoxical relationship of the gospel to good works? On the one hand, not *because of* good works; on the other hand, *for* good works. That's the twofold nature of the gospel's relationship to good works. The gospel is the gospel of good works: not the ground, but the goal of the gospel. For the knowledge of the truth of the gospel leads to godliness, and we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for the very purpose of good works. And that is why the book of Titus, as well as the rest of the New Testament, can insist that good works are not optional, but essential to authentic faith.

The Third Observation: Good Works Are *Evangelistic* in Their Thrust for Titus

So good works are everywhere in Titus. Good works are also essential for Titus. But if we stopped here with these two observations, as important as they both are, we would miss the *thrust* of the book. There is a third and final observation we need to make, and it concerns the *purpose* of good works in Titus. Here let me be brief and to the point: *in Titus good works are for the sake of outsiders; good works are evangelistic in their thrust*.¹

This is a steady theme in Titus. But let me demonstrate this from two places. Look with me at Chapter 2, where interestingly enough we find instruction on the kind of character of life of good works that ought to characterize different members of the church: older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled; older woman are to be reverent; younger men are to be self-controlled, and so on. But notice the *purpose* behind living this way. On the one hand, negatively speaking, a life of good works does not *detract* from the gospel. We see this in 2:5: younger women are to live such exemplary lives that "the word of God may not be reviled." So too younger men are, as Paul says to the young man Titus in 2:7-8: "Show yourself in all respect to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot

¹ Among commentators, Fee, in particular, has stressed this point, p. 11, 12. Cf. Robert Wall for a similar assessment of the purpose of the letter, though arriving at this conclusion from a study of its place within the Pauline corpus as a whole.

be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.” On the other hand, positively speaking, a life of good works *commends* the gospel. We see this in 2:10, where slaves are called to be “well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

Paul continues this theme of good works for the sake of outsiders into chapter 3, where, speaking of the church’s conduct in its community, he says to Titus: “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (3:1-2). The lives of Christians, Paul is saying to Titus, must be exemplary within their community. He then reiterates this by way of summary just a few verses later: “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works” (3:8). But then he adds the important next sentence: “These things [i.e., good works] are excellent and *profitable* for people.” That is, the good works of the church are profitable for people. How? By not only blessing their lives, but by beautifying the gospel of God’s grace. Thus good works are excellent, as Paul says, in themselves; but they are also profitable for people’s souls, whether their impact is felt immediately or not.

So we’re reminded, friends, from Titus that good works serve a critical purpose: an evangelistic purpose. Good works, of all sizes and shapes and varieties, serve to adorn or commend the gospel. The kind of life we live, both as individuals and as a church, serves either to detract from the gospel or attract people to the gospel – and the difference is good works. Do we unsay with our lives what we say with our mouths? Or are our lives attractive to those outside the Christian faith; rather, do our lives attract outsiders to the grace of God found in the gospel?

Conclusion

To sum up, then, we’ve seen that good works, first of all, are *everywhere* in Titus. We’ve also seen that good works are *essential* to authentic faith and to a right understanding of the gospel: “knowledge of the truth leads to godliness.” And, thirdly, we’ve seen that in Titus good works are *evangelistic* in their thrust; good works serve to adorn or enhance the gospel.

So, brothers and sisters, with the book of Titus we have a very timely and indeed very practical *evangelistic manual* for the twenty-first century church. This is a New Testament letter specifically designed to help us organize and educate for more effective gospel outreach. Which brings us full circle, right around to our calling as a church to be a City on a Hill, a community that lets our light shine before others, that they may see our *good works* and glorify our Father who is in heaven.

Amen.