

The Fruitfulness of Good Works

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[0 : 00] Well, very good afternoon. Very good to see you this rather damp Wednesday lunchtime. And you are very welcome indeed as we gather together to sit under God's word that we might be changed and so adorn the gospel in our lives. And so as we meet together, we begin by looking at God's word. So do turn with me to Titus. This is our final visit to Titus on Wednesdays.

And Titus chapter 3 we'll be looking at this afternoon in verses 12 to 15. You'll find on page 999 in the church Bibles. That's Titus chapter 3. And we're just looking at the final little section here from verse 12. So let me read that.

When I send Artemis or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. Do your best to speed Zenos the lawyer and Apollos on their way. See that they lack nothing. And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works so as to help cases of urgent need and not be unfruitful. All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all. This is the word of the Lord. Now in a moment we'll be thinking about these verses together, but before we do so, let us pray. So let us come to our Father and pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, as we gather together, please would you speak to us that we might receive the food of your holy words.

Father, would you take your truth, would you plant it deep in us? Would the light of Christ be seen in our lives today? Would it be seen in our acts of love and in our deeds of faith? Please would you speak to us, Father? Would you fulfill in us all your purposes for your glory? And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now I don't know about you, but I'm often tempted to skip over or skim read the end of Paul's letters at times. I don't know about you, but that's how I often see them. He'll often mention a few people that I don't really know about. I'm not really sure it's relevant to me. That's what I think. But let me encourage you, let me encourage all of us to listen in this afternoon, not to switch off, because in these few verses at the end of this short letter, we have the essence of what the whole thing has been about. Paul's whole purpose in writing this letter is to bring about in the lives of the Christians there on Crete, fruitfulness. He wants to see, chapter 3, verse 14, people who are devoting themselves to good works, a church family that is committed to living out the implications of the gospel, living good and profitable lives in the home and in the wider world. And in doing so, they will adorn the gospel to the watching world. Now, we've seen this theme already, haven't we, in the letter? Why does Paul repeat himself? Well, in part, he really wants them to get it. He wants us to get it.

[4 : 18] He's already mentioned this idea of living out good lives, good works. He's mentioned about eight times already. It's one of the key and central things that he needs the church in Crete to grasp.

But more than just repeating it, more than just hammering home the point, there are one or two new things mentioned here that he hasn't mentioned before. Notice in verses 12 and 13, Paul mentions people, particular people, particular people, named people. He hasn't done that so far in the letter. Good works are linked to particular people here. It's as if Paul is giving us an illustration as to what sort of good works are expected.

And also notice the corporate nature of the letter. Look at the very last sentence. Grace be with you all. This letter is not just all application to the pastor or the potential pastor. It's a letter intended for the whole church. No one can wiggle off the hook. This is a letter for everyone, the whole church, then and now. So we're going to spend a few moments looking at these closing verses.

And then I want us to step back for a minute. This is our last Wednesday in the letter. And it'll be good just to think about some of the key headline implications from the letter as a whole, just to remind ourselves of what it's all been about. So firstly, we're going to look at verses 12 to 15 and three points. Firstly, good works don't come naturally. Look again at verse 14. Paul says to Titus, let our people learn to devote themselves to good works. Good works do not come naturally to us, do they?

Paul didn't say, let our people do good works. He inserted two key words, learn and devote.

[6 : 29] Doing good works is not going to happen by accident. It's something that you and I have to learn. Doing good works does not happen by accident. You and I need to devote ourselves to the task, learning and devoting. And this is an idea that Paul has come back to again and again in the letter.

He knows that good works don't just spontaneously appear out of thin air, especially in a place like Crete. Titus needs to, chapter 2, verse 1, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

The grace of God, chapter 2, verse 12, trains us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. Remind them, Titus, chapter 3, verse 1, to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be ready for every good work.

Chapter 3, verse 8, insist on these things so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. Again and again, Paul outlines the need for these things to be taught, to be learnt.

They don't just happen by accident. Pastors are to teach their flock what good works look like. The gospel itself trains us. Pastors are to remind you to be submissive, to be ready for every good work.

[7 : 57] Doing good works, living the sort of life that will adorn the gospel, does not come naturally. That's almost too obvious to say, isn't it?

We know that. We know that children are not born ready to do good works. They're born ready to misbehave and drive their parents up the wall. Good works do not come naturally.

So you and I, we are to learn that which accords with sound doctrine. Devote yourself to doing good.

Devote yourself to the sacrificial service done for others. Not just sporadic acts of kindness, but a deliberate and intentional doing good to others over the long term.

And that comes with devotion to the truth. Remember Paul's big idea at the start of the letter. The truth leads to godliness.

[8 : 59] Good living doesn't emerge out of nowhere. It comes as the truth works in our hearts and transforms us. So there's our first point.

Good works don't come naturally. Secondly, good works are not carried out by the few. Paul's instructions for doing good are not just aimed at Titus.

They're not just aimed at pastors. The whole church is in view. We noticed earlier the corporate nature of this letter. And all the way through the letter, it is godliness and good living of the church as a whole that Paul is eager to see.

And here again in chapter 3 verse 14, it is the church as a whole that is in view. Just look again. And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works.

Our people. That's a reference to all the believers, true believers on Crete. All who have believed in God. It's not just the one or two do-gooders that are to do the good works that Paul expects.

[10 : 10] Not at all. It's the whole church. It's everyone. Good works are just to be the norm. Rather than the exception of the few.

Is your church known for the sort of good works that adorn the gospel? Or is it known for a handful of busybodies who do all the good stuff, who do all the heavy lifting?

Are you pulling your weight in the life of the church family? Or are you happy for someone else to do it because they're younger or seemingly less busy or just have fewer stresses than I do?

Good works are not carried out by the few. They're done by all of us. It's all of our responsibility. But what exactly are the sort of good works that you and I are to be doing?

This is our third point. Good works are not done in the abstract. Good works are not done in the abstract. What do I mean? Well, Paul doesn't leave us hanging, trying to guess what he means by good works.

[11 : 25] He's already outlined something of what is involved in chapter 2, looking at the home life and chapter 3, looking at life in the public sphere. And here, at the end of the letter, he puts some flesh and blood into the picture for us.

He mentions a particular people in verses 12 and 13. And he gives instructions as to what is to happen to them. Look again at verse 12. Paul is going to send either Artemis or Tychicus to Crete in order that Titus might be freed up to go and meet Paul at Nicopolis.

Good works means sending people to certain places for the sake of gospel ministry. This was an expensive, time-consuming thing to do.

Today, it's expensive to travel, isn't it? But not quite as time-consuming. We can be on the other side of the world in a day. Travel around first-century Europe took a long time.

But they were prepared to do it. Are we prepared to send people to other places for the sake of the gospel? It may mean losing good people.

[12 : 36] It may mean opening up our wallets. Good work also means friendship. Paul is eager for Titus to come and winter with him at Nicopolis.

He wants to spend time with him, to hear how things have been going on Crete firsthand, to talk, to be face-to-face, friendship. Good works means hospitality and generosity.

Verse 13, the church on Crete had clearly been hosting this lawyer called Zenos and Apollos. And Titus is to send them on their way and to see that they lack nothing for their journey.

Hospitality. Welcoming these people into their homes, feeding them, making sure they lack nothing for their onward journey. And again, this sort of thing is inconvenient.

It's costly. Good works mean being inconvenienced. Are you willing to be inconvenienced? Are you willing to pay up, to show hospitality to people, to give them what they might need?

[13 : 52] Good works means helping cases of urgent need. Verse 14. Think about the situation on Crete. Think about life back then.

The sort of urgent need that they would have been aware of would be the ones right in front of them. A neighbor who's been bereaved. A family member whose income has suddenly disappeared for whatever reason.

What are the real and urgent needs among the people that you rub shoulders with week by week, day by day? Does someone need a meal cooked for them? Does somebody need an invitation round to your house for a meal one night?

Does a young couple need a babysitter for an evening? Does someone need a card with a word of encouragement? Good works aren't done in the abstract.

Good works involve real people. Good works involve meeting real needs. So will you look around you? Look at the people that you sit next to at church.

[15 : 03] Look at those that you live alongside. That you work across the desk from. What sort of needs do those people have? How can you help them?

And in so doing, adorn the gospel. Three key points about the good work Paul expects to see in the true church and amongst true believers.

Good works don't come naturally. Good works are not carried out by the few but the many. And good works are not done in the abstract.

But in real lives, providing real help. Now this is our final Wednesday in the letter. And I thought it might be helpful just to step back for five minutes.

And think about some of the key ideas in the letter. Some of the key headline implications for us. As we leave this letter for the time being. So four headline things from the letter.

[16 : 10] Some of this will be familiar. But it bears repeating. Firstly, the truth leads to godliness. The truth leads to godliness.

This is the strap line of the whole letter. Back in verse 1 of chapter 1, you get Paul's foundational theology. Theology that informs the whole letter. And it is simply this.

Knowledge of the truth leads to godliness. Godliness. There's a link. The truth leads to godliness. Godliness has no other source than the truth.

Transformed lives come through the truth. But do you really believe that? Do I really believe that? It's quite easy to agree with the statement.

It sounds good. But do we really believe it? Does how I live reflect the fact that I profess this to be true? Think about evangelism.

[17 : 12] If we really believe that the truth leads to godliness, then we would want our friends and neighbors to be exposed to the truth. That means getting them along to church or to an event where the truth is going to be spoken about.

Or it means opening up the Bible with them. Only exposure to the truth is going to bring about transformation in your friend's life. Only the truth can do that.

Now that's a challenge, but it's also greatly reassuring, isn't it? It's not down to you. It's exposure to this, the truth. That is what transforms.

Think about youth work in the church. If we really believe that the truth leads to godliness, then the main focus of the youth work ought to be the truth.

Slowly, patiently, over the long term, teaching the truth. Not something else. Not something flashy. But the truth. That's the first thing.

[18 : 19] The truth leads to godliness. Secondly, what is taught really matters. What is taught really matters. When we grasp the first point, that the truth leads to godliness, we very quickly realize that what is taught is really very important indeed.

Now, you'd expect a preacher to say that, wouldn't you? Teaching is important. But I'm not saying that because I think it's important. I'm saying it because the apostle Paul, inspired by the Spirit, says it's important.

It's the very first thing he tells Titus to do. The thing he spends the whole first chapter on. Get the teaching right, Titus. Get the teaching right. Get the right man in the pulpit.

The teaching directs the whole life of the church. It's not just some side show to keep us entertained for half an hour on a Sunday morning. Teaching really matters because teaching the truth leads to godliness.

So to turn a blind eye to false teaching, to turn a blind eye to untrue teaching is foolish. But more than that, it's dangerous.

[19 : 33] Think about how seriously Paul takes the threat of false teaching in the letter. To ignore it will lead to disaster. That's the second key headline.

What is taught really matters. Thirdly, the necessity of saying not nice things. The necessity of saying not nice things.

It's nice to be nice, isn't it? It's just nice. And who doesn't want to be nice? The apostle Paul would not be considered nice.

I wonder how many churches in Scotland would tolerate him. Just look at all the negative language he uses in the letter. He talks about rebuking people. He says that the testimony about Cretans being lazy and gluttons is true.

He describes false teachers as being detestable. Unfit for any good work. That's not very nice. Remember last week, that talk about warning divisive people twice and then having nothing more to do with them?

[20 : 46] Some would consider that horrible. Not nice at all. And yet, the willingness to say stuff that is not nice is crucial. A failure to address the false teaching there on Crete.

A failure to warn divisive people would have led to the collapse of the church on Crete. If Paul had failed to mention these things, these not nice things, then there would have been no adorning of the gospel.

So pastors today need to be prepared to be not nice. I apply this to myself first and foremost. I love to be thought of as nice.

But if that is what drives me, then I'll not be prepared to tackle what needs to be tackled. I'll let divisive people go unchallenged. I'll permit folk to read books that are dodgy because I'm worried what they'll think if I tell them what I really think.

What do you look for in a pastor? What do you expect from your minister? Niceness?

[21 : 59] Or an unwavering commitment to the truth? And a willingness to be unpopular if the need arises. That's the third thing.

The necessity of saying not nice things. Fourthly and finally, good works are central to the Christian life and witness.

Good works are central to Christian life and witness. You can't miss Paul's insistence on living the sort of life that adorns the gospel in this letter, can you? Believing certain things about God must lead to a life changed and observably full of good works.

Sacrificial service of other people. It is these good works that make the gospel beautiful to the watching worlds. Our task of mission, our task of evangelism, is about what we say and how we live.

Lives that adorn the gospel. That is central to this letter. It's what Paul wanted to see in the lives of the Christians there and here in Glasgow.

[23 : 15] Now as we close, let me read some words from a slightly unexpected source. Former deputy leader of the Labour Party, Roy Hattersley. He made this observation when out with some Christians on the streets of London.

So let me read what he said. It was an article in the Guardian that he made these comments. Let me read this. The arguments against religion are well known and persuasive.

That's according to Roy Hattersley. Yet men and women who believe are the people most likely to take the risks and make the sacrifices involved in helping others.

Good works, John Wesley insisted, are no guarantee of a place in heaven. But they are most likely to be performed by people who believe that heaven exists.

The correlation is so clear that it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand. It ought to be possible to live a Christian life without being a Christian.

[24 : 21] Yet men and women who, like me, cannot accept the mysteries and the miracles, do not go out at night with the Salvation Army. The only possible conclusion is that faith comes with a packet of moral imperatives that, while they do not condition the attitude of all believers, influence enough of them to make them morally superior to atheists like me.

The truth may make us free. But it has not made us as admirable as the average captain in the Salvation Army.

That's Roy Hattersley. An atheist who could see lives that adorn the gospel. Lives that adorn the gospel.

That is what Paul wants to see in the church today. Will you be one who is committed to the truth and to living the life that goes hand in hand with that truth?

Lives like that will adorn the gospel for the watching worlds. Let me pray. 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.

[26 : 03] Father, thank you for your word to us this afternoon. Thank you for this reminder that we, in light of all that you have done, in light of the great and glorious gospel, that we are to live lives that adorn that gospel.

Help all of us to see the need to live good lives. It does not come naturally. But by your spirit at work in us, it is possible.

So please help us to trust you. That our lives might indeed make the gospel beautiful. To our friends, our family.

To our neighbors. We ask this for the growth of your kingdom and the glorification of your name. And we ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.