Living to Do

Believers should look for opportunities to do good works as acts of worship.

Two months after my wife and I got married, I was driving home after working a twelve-hour shift at my job in a mall store. It was about 9:30 on a Saturday evening, and I was cruising along a dimly lit stretch of road at a pace I thought was within the speed limit. My wife didn’t have to work on Saturdays, but I did. So I was ready to get home and see her again.

Suddenly, flashing lights appeared behind me from out of nowhere. I slowed down to let the police car come around, but to my dismay it stayed behind me. Quickly realizing that I was the officer’s target, I pulled over on the shoulder of the road and stopped. A minute or so passed—it seemed longer—before the officer got out of his patrol car and approached my vehicle. My memory is sketchy now, but I am fairly certain I was not reminding myself to heed the apostle Paul’s counsel to submit to governing authorities.

After looking at my license and asking if I knew the posted speed limit and how fast I was driving, the officer scanned my car with his flashlight and then politely asked me to step out and follow him to the rear of my vehicle, a 1965 Chevrolet Nova in bad need of a paint job. My mind raced with anxious thoughts about what else I was about to be ticketed for. But to my surprise, the officer began to joke with me about being a newlywed and being in a hurry to get home. I wondered how he knew that about me—until he shined his flashlight on the rusted trunk of my car. There in faded white shoe polish were the still legible words “Just Married.”

After a little more ribbing, the officer sent me on my way with only a verbal warning to stay within the speed limit. I do not know what prompted the officer to act with mercy that evening, but I know that his kindness impacted me for the good. I thanked God, and I obeyed the speed limit the rest of the way home.

In this session’s Bible passage, we will be reminded that Christians are saved by God’s grace alone and not by our works—not even our good works. Nevertheless, those who have been saved are to be ready for and devoted to doing good works that honor our Savior and Lord (Titus 3:1,8,14).
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

TITUS 3:1-15

Paul began chapter two with a command for Titus to “proclaim things consistent with sound teaching” (Titus 2:1). Next, Paul gave guidance on how different generations and genders in the churches were to conduct themselves as believers (2:2-10). He concluded the chapter by reminding believers of the proper motivation for their conduct (2:11-14) and by emphasizing his call for Titus to teach with authority (2:15).

Paul began chapter three with a call for Titus to remind the believers of Crete about how they should conduct themselves in the unbelieving world, specifically in relation to the governing authorities (3:1-2). Paul reminded believers that they too were once characterized by rebellious behavior (3:3-4). The Christian’s holy behavior was grounded in God’s salvation, specifically the transformation believers experienced in Christ (3:5-7).

As Paul neared the conclusion of his letter to Titus, he returned to the issue of combating false teaching. The believers of Crete needed to reject the false teachers’ approach of endless quarrels in favor of being devoted to doing good works. Moreover, the believers as a spiritual community needed to reject a divisive person who stubbornly refused to repent (3:8-11).

Paul ended the letter with brief instructions related to future ministry plans. He urged Titus to travel to Nicopolis once a replacement had arrived on Crete. He also encouraged the churches to support two ministry coworkers. Finally, Paul again exhorted the Cretan believers to devote themselves to good works, thereby ensuring they would have fruitful lives (3:12-15).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOOD DEEDS (Titus 3:1-2)

VERSE 1

Remind them to submit to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work,

Titus 3:1-2 comprises one sentence in the Greek text. In these two verses, Paul addressed the issue of proper Christian conduct in relation to people and institutions outside the church. Believers must not try to wall themselves off from contact with the unbelieving world. Christ commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations, to be in the world but not of the world.
What does an “in-but-not-of-the-world” approach look like? First, in such an approach believers willingly **submit to rulers and authorities** (“principalities and power,” KJV). Paul already had addressed the matter of submission in the context of church life. Here he is likely referring to submitting to civic, or governing, authorities. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul detailed what submitting to governing authorities included: affirming their God-given role, obeying the laws, paying one’s taxes, and showing proper honor to those in authority. In 1 Timothy 2:2, Paul exhorted believers in Ephesus to pray for “kings and all those who are in authority.” Paul expected the Cretan believers also to submit to the authority of their civic rulers.

Second, the believers of Crete were **to obey**. Probably this directive was meant to be understood as an extension of the command to **submit to rulers and authorities**. In other words, believers were to obey the laws established by the civic authorities. We should remember, however, that Christians have a moral responsibility as well to take a bold stand against ungodly laws or authorities who seek to command people to commit evil acts. The apostles Peter and John defied the Jewish authorities who commanded them to stop preaching about Jesus (see Acts 5:28-29). Believers owe their highest loyalty and obedience to the Lord God.

Third, Paul (through Titus) exhorted believers **to be ready for every good work**. Essentially, Paul wanted the Christians of Crete to be good neighbors and good citizens. Their consistent displays of kindness, honesty, genuine concern, and assistance on behalf of others would present a powerful testimony of the gospel’s life-changing impact. This command was a repeated emphasis in Paul’s letter to Titus (see 2:14; 3:8,14). Indeed, Ephesians 2:10 reminds us that as believers we were given new life in Jesus Christ for the express purpose of doing good works for His glory.

**VERSE 2**

to slander no one, to avoid fighting, and to be kind, always showing gentleness to all people.

Believers must not think that biblical commands such as **slander no one** refer only to relationships with other Christians. The Greek word rendered **slander** (“speak evil,” KJV; ESV) refers to speaking—publicly or privately—in such a way that unjustly demeans, denigrates, or brings into disrepute another person. Paul may have especially had in mind a warning about speaking evil of rulers and authorities, but by the end of verse 2 he was clearly focused on Christians’ behavior toward **all people**.

The command to avoid **slander** had a close connection to the directive **to avoid fighting** (“be no brawlers,” KJV; “be peaceable,” NIV). Paul used the
word rendered *fighting* in 1 Timothy 3:3 to describe behavior that church overseers were to avoid. It was behavior that characterized false teachers.

As much as believers needed to avoid *slander* and *fighting*, they needed to adorn their lives with kindness and courtesy toward others. The Greek word translated *be kind* (“gentle,” ESV; “considerate,” NIV) can also mean “be fair or equitable.” The term emphasizes willingly forgoing one’s rights or privileges for the benefit of another. The term rendered *gentleness* also can mean “meekness” or “humility.” The Greeks did not consider *gentleness* to be a virtue, but Christian teaching recognized it as an integral part of the Spirit’s fruit in a believer’s life (see Gal. 5:23).

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Works” on pages 1668–1669 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. How would you explain to a new believer the importance of doing works? What cautions would you give to help a new believer avoid a legalistic view of good works?

**BASED ON HIS MERCY** (Titus 3:3-7)

**VERSE 3**

*For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another.*

The word *for* connects this section to what Paul said in verses 1-2. Paul often encouraged believers to remember their lives before believing in Christ to help them fully appreciate the greatness of God’s transforming grace in Christ. In addition, remembering the darkness, confusion, and ugliness of being lost can help believers relate compassionately to unbelievers with whom they have contact. Thus, Paul reminded the believers of Crete that all Christians—he included himself and Titus in the word *we*—were once in bondage to sin and displayed the kinds of attitudes and conduct that sin produces.

Paul identified several characteristics of life apart from God’s transforming grace in Christ. While some of the characteristics seem to especially reflect the sinful behavior of the false teachers, all of them well describe humanity’s fallen condition. The first three characteristics deal with a corrupt world view: *foolish, disobedient,* and *deceived.* Unbelievers’ refusal to embrace the truth about God leads to their corrupting God’s Word and constantly falling prey to the devil’s twisted thought control (see 2 Cor. 4:4).
The next characteristic borrows from the imagery of slavery. Ignorant of the truth of God’s Word, unbelievers find themselves enslaved by various passions and pleasures. That is, they become slaves to human desires that have been perverted by their sinful nature. They selfishly pursue what feels good rather than what is true and right. Next, the life apart from faith in Christ is characterized by living in malice and envy. The Greek word translated malice refers to a mean-spirited, vicious attitude. The idea behind the word envy is a lack of contentment that results in desiring what others have. It is similar to the sin of covetousness.

The final characteristics that Paul listed demonstrate how all the previous ones eventually infect and poison relationships. People become hateful and detesting of one another. The Greek word rendered hateful (“hated by others,” ESV; “being hated,” NIV) can also mean “loathsome” or “despicable.” Such a person detested others and thereby was detested by others.

VERSE 4

But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared,

Paul next contrasted the state of humanity apart from salvation with God’s merciful action in bringing salvation to those who believe. Titus 3:4-7 comprises one long sentence in Greek built around the words “he saved us” in verse 5. Verse 4, an introductory clause, describes the timing of God’s initiative to provide salvation: when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared. The Greek word translated kindness can also be rendered “generosity.” The phrase kindness of God ultimately is a reference to Jesus Christ (see 3:7), but Paul may have wanted to especially stress to the Cretan believers God’s loving-kindness for providing a way of salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews.

VERSE 5

he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Paul emphasized throughout the Letter to Titus the importance of the believer’s producing good works as a result of being saved. Here, however, Paul underscored again that believers are not saved by works of righteousness ... but according to his mercy. We are created anew in Christ Jesus for the purpose of doing good works, but it is only by grace through faith that salvation can be received.
Bible scholars have debated Paul’s intended meaning in the second half of verse 5. The discussion usually revolves around two questions. First, what exactly did Paul write? In other words, the grammatical construction of the words is not altogether clear. Second, to what does the term washing refer? The phrase through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit could refer either to one action with two dimensions or to two separate actions. If the latter is the case, then the phrase by the Holy Spirit likely connects only with the word renewal. Paul would thus have been describing on one hand the act of being made new by cleansing from sin and on the other hand a separate renewal produced by the Holy Spirit.

In my view the first understanding is more likely the case. That is, the phrases washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit are not two separate activities but rather two ways of describing the same action. Salvation in Christ is not only a thorough cleansing from the guilt and power of sin but also the renewing of life (a new birth) when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the believer. In either view, however, the emphasis is the same: he saved us. We did not and could not save ourselves.

Some Bible interpreters have suggested that the term washing referred to the act of baptism. However, this particular Greek word appears only here and in Ephesians 5:26, where it refers to spiritual cleansing, not the act of baptism. Paul likely had the same emphasis in mind here in Titus 3:5. The cleansing of forgiveness opens the way for the Holy Spirit to give believers new life.

VERSES 6-7

He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life.

Paul identified the Holy Spirit as the One whom God poured out … on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. This statement echoes the language of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, promising that in the last days God would pour out His Spirit on all people (see Acts 2:17-21). Paul likewise painted a word picture of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—working in perfect unity to provide the way of salvation through Jesus Christ the Savior.

Paul concluded his extended statement by emphasizing the purpose, or goal, of salvation in Christ. Believers are justified by his grace. Our right standing before God depends solely on God’s grace, not on any good works we might do. Further, by depending on God’s grace and receiving Christ alone as Savior, we become heirs of God with the hope of eternal life. We receive forgiveness and new life now; we will inherit eternal life when Christ returns!
VERSE 8

This saying is trustworthy. I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed God might be careful to devote themselves to good works. These are good and profitable for everyone.

The words this saying is trustworthy appear five times in the Pastoral Epistles (see 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). The saying itself may appear either before or after the words, depending on the context. In the case of Titus 3:8, most Bible commentators conclude that the trustworthy saying refers to what Paul wrote in verses 4-7—that is, believers are saved not by their “works of righteousness” but by God’s grace in “the washing of regeneration and renewal” through faith in Jesus Christ.

In verse 8, Paul urged Titus to insist on these things. The Greek word translated insist means “to speak confidently.” False teachers were corrupting the gospel with legalism; Titus needed to consistently teach the true gospel of salvation by grace through faith. At the same time, he needed to emphasize that those who have believed God are to be careful to devote themselves to good works. Believers have been set free from sin’s guilt by God’s forgiveness. That freedom, however, was not a license to keep on sinning. Rather, it was the gift of a new life in which good works are no longer a legalistic burden but are good and profitable for everyone. That is, the believer’s good works were a grateful, gracious benefit to others in Jesus’ name, not a futile, self-centered effort of works-salvation.

VERSE 9

But avoid foolish debates, genealogies, quarrels, and disputes about the law, because they are unprofitable and worthless.
Staying focused on the true gospel and urging the Cretan believers to devote themselves to good works would help Titus (and the believers) avoid foolish debates, genealogies, quarrels, and disputes about the law. These were the approaches and results of the false teachers that were dividing churches and ruining families.

Titus’s coworker Timothy was battling some of the same issues in the Ephesian church. Paul used the phrase foolish debates with the additional adjective “ignorant” to describe the situation in Ephesus (see 2 Tim. 2:23). Paul instructed Titus also to avoid genealogies. This warning probably referred to the kind of misuse of these family lists in which false teachers constructed fanciful myths about individuals in the genealogies. The term rendered quarrels refers to sowing discord and strife among believers. Again, Paul used the same Greek term to describe the unhealthy debates occurring in the Ephesian church (see 1 Tim. 6:4).

The Greek word translated disputes could refer literally to a violent physical altercation. Perhaps, however, Paul used the term here figuratively to describe heated verbal arguments over interpretations of minute details in the law of Moses or to an inappropriate, legalistic emphasis about the law. In 1 Timothy 1:7, Paul described the false teachers in Ephesus as those who wanted to be teachers of the law but who did not understand what they were talking about.

Titus was to avoid all these types of conduct since they were unprofitable and worthless—the exact opposite result of believers’ genuine good works. The false teachers’ approaches and results did no one any good. The way to ensure meaningful, fruitful Christian lives was for believers to shun fighting and dissension and to devote themselves to good works.

**VERSE 10**

**Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning.**

Paul ended this section of verses with instructions on how to deal with a divisive person. The Greek word translated divisive is the root from which the English word heretic comes. Projecting the meaning of a contemporary English term back onto its ancient Greek root word is not wise. Paul was obviously not aware of the English word’s usage and thus was not influenced by its meaning. In Paul’s day, the Greek word referred to a person who caused divisions or factions within a group. On the other hand, the activity of divisive persons—whether or not the divisiveness rises to the level of being heretical—has historically been a problem churches have had to deal with.

Two features in Paul’s instruction concerning divisiveness stand out. First, offenders needed to be confronted. Paul’s mention of a first and second warning meant that mature church leaders were to confront disrupters about
their erroneous doctrine and/or improper conduct. The confrontation was to be firm and yet gracious, done with the goal of spiritual restoration (see Titus 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). Second, Paul instructed Titus to work with patience. If an offender’s divisive behavior was not resolved after the initial confrontation, mature church leaders were to make a second attempt. Only if the second intervention also failed to bring about the offender’s repentance was the church to reject (“have nothing more to do with,” ESV) the individual. Paul did not specify what such rejection involved. However, at least it probably meant disallowing the offender from having any teaching or other leadership role in the church congregation. It may also have included shunning the offender. In 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul mentioned by name two men whom he had “delivered to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.” Probably this action involved having nothing more to do with men and making no further efforts to correct and restore them to Christian fellowship.

VERSE 11

For you know that such a person has gone astray and is sinning; he is self-condemned.

Paul’s instructions regarding how to deal with a divisive person were based on three facts. First, the offender had gone astray (“is subverted,” KJV; “warped,” ESV; NIV). This Greek term describes someone who refuses to embrace what is true and morally sound. Such a person had rejected the sound gospel teaching that Paul and Titus delivered to the churches. Second, such a person was, in fact, sinning. Sin requires repentance, and repentance was not forthcoming in the false teachers. Third, the unrepentant, divisive person was self-condemned. Such an offender’s steadfast refusal to accept correction and persistent teaching of things contrary to the true gospel effectively meant that he had condemned himself. The church’s rejection simply confirmed the sad verdict.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Matthew 18:15-17. How do Jesus’ instructions in that passage compare with what Paul counseled in Titus 3:10-11? Why do you think so many churches today have difficulty in adopting and/or practicing a biblical process of church discipline? What are some ways your church motivates believers to engage in good works in Jesus’ name?