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Why Titus?

In these pages, you will find seven practices that can help your church be zealous for good works and thus be that city on a hill Jesus talks about in His Sermon on the Mount. We've seen the fruitfulness of each of these practices at work in the life of our local congregation. But I didn't discover these practices through extensive field research; I didn't glean them from interviews with megachurch pastors; and I didn't find them by visiting some of America's fastest growing congregations. Instead, I discovered all seven of them in an unlikely place, the Bible. In fact, in one book of the Bible—Titus.

You may be wondering, *Why Titus?* Surely there are other books of the Bible that are more relevant to the ministry of the church, like Acts or the Pastoral Epistles. 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 Romans, or the same awe-inspiring imagery as the Revelation. Why Titus, then?

The reason is simple: Titus is designed to help the church become zealous for good works. And zeal for good works is what Jesus envisions for His followers if they're going to be that city on a hill. Jesus says to His followers,

“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)

This is what Jesus envisions for His people. And this, I'm sure, is the aspiration of every person reading this book—that your church would embrace and embody this high calling, to let the light of our lives, as individuals and as communities, 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? How do we faithfully fulfill our responsibility to let the light of our lives shine before others?

Here is where the book of Titus comes in. 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? The answer may surprise you: zeal for good works. In fact, I think we get to the heart of this book with three simple observations about good works in Titus, three observations that will help you

understand this book and help your church take the next step toward being a city on a hill.

GOOD WORKS ARE EVERYWHERE IN TITUS

The first observation has to do with the presence of good works in Titus—namely, that good works are *everywhere* in Titus. Read through the letter, and you'll notice that “good works” serves as a steady refrain. In 1:8, for instance, we read that 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 charged 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), to be “careful to devote themselves to good works” (v. 8), and to “learn to devote themselves to good works” (v. 14). And these are only the references that *explicitly* mention good works.

Good works also appear in the two key passages of the letter, 2:11–14 and 3:3–8, which are 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*. (2:11–14, emphasis added)

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*. (3:4–7, emphasis added)

At the heart of the book of Titus are two passages that center on good works.

Good works also show up in the beginning and end of the letter. The beginning and end of any piece of communication often reveal the intention of that communication, whether it's an email, an eighth-grade term paper, or a New Testament epistle. Notice the closing charge of the book of Titus, the next-to-the-last verse: "And let our people learn to devote themselves to *good works*, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful" (3:14, emphasis added).

And take a look at the opening verse of the letter, which serves as a thematic statement for the whole. There we find

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*” (1:1, emphasis added). Here, “godliness” means 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 exposition of Titus *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 central to the concern of this New Testament letter. Good works are everywhere in Titus.

GOOD WORKS ARE *ESSENTIAL* TO AUTHENTIC FAITH IN TITUS

However, as we probe a little further into the book of Titus, we see that it doesn’t simply mention good works but also makes an important claim about good works. Specifically, 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. Good works must always accompany true faith.

Look again with me at the opening verse of the letter: “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 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 to further the faith

of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth *that leads to godliness*" (emphasis added). The point is: 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 basically 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 *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 at 1:16. There, Paul is warning of false teachers, and so we have a clear negative example or contrast to this point: "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works." That's a damning statement to make, isn't it? It cuts to the heart of the message of this book: the necessity of good works in the life of the genuine believer.

Where does this insistence upon the necessity of good works in the life of the believer come from? It comes from an understanding of the gospel, and more specifically, from an understanding of the gospel as *the gospel of good works*.

That may sound jarring to 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, or perhaps you've heard someone speak

that way. It's a glorious truth, to be sure, one that is stressed emphatically in Scripture!

Yet in safeguarding the *ground* of the gospel, we can inadvertently downplay the *goal* of the gospel. 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 is not to leave us as we are, unchanged. No, the gospel has a goal. This the Bible is equally insistent upon. Listen to how Scripture balances this:

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. (Eph. 2:8–10, emphasis added)

[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. (2 Tim. 1:9, emphasis added)

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 3:4–8, emphasis added)

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*. (Titus 2:11–14, emphasis added)

Do you see in these passages the twofold and indeed paradoxical relationship of the gospel to good works? On one hand, we are saved not *because of* good works; on the other, we are saved *for* good works. That's the twofold nature of the gospel's relationship to good works. The gospel is the gospel of good works. Good works are 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 rather essential to authentic faith.

**GOOD WORKS ARE *EVANGELISTIC*
IN THEIR THRUST IN 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. We need to make a third and final observation, and it concerns the purpose of good works in Titus. *In Titus, good works are for the sake of outsiders; good works are evangelistic in their thrust.*¹

A number of years ago, I preached through the book of Titus at our church. I was encouraged to see our congregation catch the vision that good works are evangelistic. Shortly after the series concluded, I was approached by several godly women in our congregation who were stirred by the preaching of the Word and wanted to engage our community of Oak Park more intentionally with the gospel. We met to pray about and discuss what that might look like. In due course, we proposed to start an emergency clothes closet for the homeless living in and around our community. We called it The Closet, and it became one of the most fruitful ministries of our church, serving hundreds of clients in need and commending the beauty of the gospel in the process. Meeting practical needs in our community opened the door to countless opportunities to share the love of Christ in both word and deed, whether through a brief conversation, presenting the hope of the gospel, or praying for God's grace and blessing. The members of our faith family were making good on the vision of Titus as they were becoming more and more zealous for good works.

What we experienced at the ground level is a steady theme in Titus. Yet let me demonstrate this from just two places. In chapter 2, we find instruction on the various ways in which different church members ought to carry out a life of good works: older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled; older women 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 verse 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 verses 7–8, called to “show [themselves] in all respects to be [models] of good works, and in [their] teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot 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 verse 10, where we read that 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.” Just imagine what a difference it would make if Christians lived in such a way that their lives did not detract from the gospel, that their lives did not detract from the gospel but commended it. Surely, we would find the church’s “credibility gap” lessen considerably—and the world would take notice.

Paul continues the 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” (vv. 1–2).

The lives of Christians, Paul is saying to Titus, must be exemplary within their community. He 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” (v. 8). And he adds the important next sentence: “These things [that is, good works] are excellent and *profitable* for people” (emphasis added).

What’s Paul saying? That the good works of the church are profitable for people. How? Not only by blessing their lives, but also 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.

In Titus, good works serve a vital 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, either detracts from the gospel or attracts people to it—and what makes the difference is good works. Do we unsay with our lives what we say with our mouths? Or do our lives attract outsiders to the grace of God found in the gospel?

With Titus, we have a timely and practical evangelistic manual for the twenty-first-century church. This New Testament letter is designed specifically to help us organize

and educate for more effective gospel outreach. That truth brings us full circle, to our calling as churches to be that city on a hill that Jesus describes, to be a community that lets our light shine before others so they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven.