

Acts 10:36-43

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Today is a special day in the life of Bon Accord, of our congregation, as has already been mentioned after the sermon, and as part of this morning's service we will be ordaining a number of men as elders and deacons of the congregation, tasked with the serious responsibility of leading and serving within and from the congregation. Now in the course of the process that has been followed to identify, to elect new office bearers, new elders and new deacons, I've been asked by a number of folk a very simple but important question, or more than one question, but very related questions. So for example, one very simple question that was posed to me was what do elders do, or what do deacons do? In fact, more than one of those who will be admitted to office this morning asked me that very question, and it's a very sensible question to ask.

If you're considering who would be suitable for the task, if you've been asked to become an elder, a deacon, it does make a lot of sense to have some idea of what is involved. Those are the kind of questions that were posed to me. And there are, of course, a number of specific duties that correspond to elders and deacons. But ultimately, what ought to characterize elders and deacons, indeed all believers, all disciples of Jesus, is that we should be, in the words of the text that we're going to be considering this morning, we should be eager to do what is good. There in verse 14 of Titus chapter 2, Paul challenges Titus, encourages Titus to be eager to do what is good, or to be zealous for good works.

And as I've just commented, Paul here is writing to a young leader of the church called Titus, and he's giving him instructions as to how he should conduct himself as a leader of God's people.

But it's also clear from verse 15 that the expectation is that Titus will, in turn, teach all the believers under his care to conduct themselves in a similar fashion. Notice what Paul says there in verse 15. These, then, are the things you should teach, those things that I've just said to you.

Among them, this call, this challenge to be eager to do good, zealous for good works. And he's saying that should be true of you, but I want you also to teach that to the believers, that they too would be marked by this characteristic, by this trait, that they are eager, that they are zealous for doing good.

[3 : 0 5] And so, the call is to Titus as a leader, but it is then, in turn, a call to all of God's people. You are called, as an elder, or deacon, or disciple, to be a, if I can use the expression, a do-gooder.

What you do matters. Now, we've been celebrating just in the very recent past the 500 years of the Reformation, and quite rightly, we've been focusing on the solas of the Reformation, you know, sola fide and sola gratia, not by works. We're not saved by works. We're not saved by doing good.

And quite rightly, we've been reminding ourselves that that is so. Salvation is a gift that we receive from God, not something that we earn or merit. And we must always remind ourselves of this and be mindful of it. But though that is true, as disciples of Jesus, what we do matters. I was just thinking about this in the light of some of the recent scandals surrounding accusations of sexual harassment and assault that have been leveled at any number of celebrities. And one line of defense that has been employed by some of those accused has been the claim that their conduct, and I quote, is not reflective of who I am. I don't know if you've heard that expression used. By some of those who have been accused, and it would seem conscious that there is an element of guilt, and so this is their line of defense. Well, what I did, it's not reflective of who I am. That's an interesting thing to say.

One of the celebrities who has employed this language is Dustin Hoffman. The very words that he used when accused by one of his accusers are responding to the accusations. And it is, of course, nonsense.

It's nonsense. What you do is reflective of who you are. You can't say that what I do isn't reflective of who I really am. Well, that's simply not the case. What you do is exactly what reveals who you really are. This is axiomatic in a biblical understanding of identity. What is it that Jesus said? Of his disciples, by their fruits you will recognize them. You will know who they are by what they do. And so what we do matters. We are what we do. What we do is not the totality of our identity, but it is central to our identity and especially to revealing our identity. If not to establishing our identity, certainly to reveal our identity. What we do reveals who we are and whose we are. And what are we to do?

[6 : 13] Well, Paul tells Titus, and he tells us that we are to do what is good. We are to be eager or zealous for good works. In the Greek, in which Paul wrote this letter, the word works appears in the sentence.

And so I think it's best to keep it in the translation. In the passage that we read, the phrase that Paul used is translated, eager to do what is good. That captures the sense of what Paul is saying. But he does use the word works. And so an expression like eager to do good works or zealous for good works, I think it does greater justice or is more strictly in accord with what Paul challenges Titus with. That is what we are to do. We are to do good works. We are to be zealous or eager to do good works. And I want to spend just a little time this morning exploring what Paul has to say about this distinguishing feature of Christians, of disciples of Jesus as those who are eager to do good works. What can we say about these good works? Well, let me just suggest a few things. The first thing that I want to highlight and to stress is that these good works are grounded in the grace of God.

God's grace is the soil from whence they grow and blossom and appear. If we take, verses 11 to 14 there in Titus chapter 2 as a self-contained gospel presentation, which is really what they are. It's one sentence in the original from verse 11 through to verse 14. Then if we take that as a gospel presentation, where does it begin? Well, it begins with the grace of God.

Verse 11, for the grace of God that brings salvation and then all that follows. It begins with the grace of God. And where does it end? Well, it ends with a people eager to do what is good, zealous for good works. It begins with the grace of God and it ends with a people, a redeemed people, God's treasured possession, eager, zealous to do good works. This is the outcome or the end product of God's grace applied savingly to men and women. What is this grace of God that Paul is speaking about?

Paul tells us that this grace is seen in the appearing of Jesus. God's grace takes concrete and visible form in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When Jesus appeared, God's grace appeared.

[9 : 00] In the language of John in the first chapter of his gospel, we beheld his glory. The word became flesh and we beheld his glory full of grace and truth. Now we're approaching Christmas and we think about Bethlehem and the stable and all that is familiar in the coming of Jesus. And Jesus may well have appeared in an unlikely fashion and location, born to Mary in a manger in Bethlehem. But he did not come empty-handed. He appeared bearing the gift of salvation. For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. Our lives and our good works as disciples of Jesus Christ are grounded in the grace of God. We are saved by God's grace. We are saved that we might do God's works. Those good works that as Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Ephesus works that God has prepared in advance for us to do. So if your life is in a measure adorned by good works, thank God for His grace.

For it is by grace alone that you have been enabled to live such a life and to do those good works. So these good works that we are to be eager to do, they are first of all grounded in the grace of God. A second thing that I think we can draw out from these verses that conclude with this call to be eager to do what is good, to do good works. The second thing we can say is that these good works are evidence of our redemption. You know, in verse 14 we're told that Jesus gave Himself for us. The glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own.

Jesus gave Himself for us to be able to do good works of God. Jesus gave Himself for us to be able to be able to do good works of God. Jesus gave Himself for us to be able to do good works of God. Jesus gave Himself over to death on our behalf and in our place. But why did He do so? For what purpose? Why did He die? Well, He died in order that He might redeem us.

And this redemption that we are the objects of is, if you wish, two-sided. We're redeemed from slavery to sin, from wickedness, to use the language of the passage, saved from being a slave to sin, to wickedness.

Jesus, redeemed from that. But redeemed for freedom in Christ that our lives might be lives marked by purity and holiness, that which was impossible to be true of us in the absence of God's redeeming action on our behalf. And so God, in the person of His Son Jesus, redeems us. But how do we evidence, how do we demonstrate that we have been redeemed, that God has done this work in us? Well, the evidence of it is the good works that we exhibit. The evidence is that we are, in the language that Paul uses here, a people eager to do what is good, zealous for a good works. Our good works don't redeem us, but they do demonstrate that we are redeemed. You know, the question is sometimes asked, and I'm sure you've heard this question posed in different contexts. You know, if you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? And it's maybe worth just pondering on that for a moment. And maybe if I could just apply it to some of those present this morning, if you were accused of being an elder, would there be enough evidence to convict you? If you were accused of being a deacon, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Our good works, this desire, this eagerness to do that which is good, is evidence of God's work, of God's redeeming work in our lives. I think there's another thing we can say about these good works that

[13 : 29] Paul is encouraging and urging Titus to be characterized by, and that is that these good works reveal the family likeness. Paul tells us that as those redeemed by Jesus, we are, to use the language here in the passage, a people that are His very own. It's beautiful language that he uses, that what God has done in and through Jesus is purchase for Himself a people that are His very own. Of course, this is language that is steeped in the language of the covenant that God has made and established with His people in the Old Testament. It echoes the covenantal language that we find in Exodus 19, where God describes His people as a treasured possession. A treasured possession. This is the language that Paul is using here. This is the picture that Paul is painting. A people who are God's very own people, treasured by God.

We are brought into God's family. We are adopted into God's household. We are treasured as the apple of His eye. We belong to God the Father, but we also belong to Jesus. Indeed, in the passage that we're giving thought to, that the His of His very own refers to the one who gave Himself for us. It refers to Jesus. Notice there in verse 14, who gave Himself for us, that's obviously speaking about Jesus, to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own. It's still speaking about Jesus. Jesus is still the subject of the sentence. It's Jesus who gave Himself for us, and it is to Jesus that we belong.

We are His very own people. We belong to Jesus. But how do we demonstrate? How do we show? How do we reveal?

How is it evident that we belong to Jesus? How do we reveal the family likeness, if we can pose the question in that way? Some of you may remember, I think he's just retired. I think he had his final two or three years were spent playing in the MLS in the USA. But some of you remember Kaka. He was World Player of the Year a few years ago, you know, before Rinaldi and Messi just took possession of that status. But Kaka, some of you will recall that after maybe winning a tournament, a World Cup, he would have underneath his Brazil top a t-shirt. And the words in that t-shirt were, I belong to Jesus. I belong to Jesus. And all power to him for being willing to testify to his Christian convictions and his commitment, his commitment particularly to the person of Jesus. But the clothing that provides definitive evidence of who we belong to is of a different caliber than a t-shirt that we can put on. And I'm not decrying that for a moment. But the clothing that definitively identifies us is of a different kind. Paul, when he writes to the believers in Colossae, in chapter 3 of that letter in verses 12 to 14, this is what he says to them and what he says to us, therefore, as God's chosen people, as God's treasured possession, as those who belong to God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves, not with a t-shirt, but with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Now, what has that got to do with the good works that Paul is speaking of here in his letter to Titus? Well, the good works that Paul would have members of God's family be characterized by are works of compassion. They are works of kindness.

They are works of humility. They are works of gentleness. They are works of patience and works of love. These are the works, the good works that we are to be eager to be about doing, zealous for these good works.

[18:08] The more we are clothed and adorned by such good works, the more we will resemble Jesus, the one we belong to. The one who Peter tells us, and we read in Acts chapter 10, the one who went around doing good. He went around doing good.

What an interesting way of describing Jesus. We know of all that he did, the momentous significance of his redemptive work. And yet, when Peter is describing Jesus, he thinks it right and fitting to describe him in that way. Of course, he doesn't just say that, but he begins by speaking of him in that way, as a man who went about doing good. Let's just read again that one verse in Acts chapter 10 and in verse 38, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.

There's two things that strike me about what Peter says. If we can just for a moment focus on that verse that we've just read. The first thing that strikes me is how proactive the language is.

Jesus went about doing good. Jesus wasn't reacting to need. He didn't say, oh, well, if somebody comes to me and asks for help, well, I'll help. You know, I'm here, I'm available. No, he went about doing good.

Isn't that the direction of travel? You know, this is proactive. He's taking the initiative. And that is what is to characterize us. We're not to be those who say, well, yeah, if somebody asks for help, you know, I'll do what I can. You know, I'm available. I'm willing if required. No, he, Jesus went about doing good. If we are to show the family lightness, if we are to demonstrate that we are part of that family, we are part of his treasured possession, a people that are his own, then that ought to be true of us also, that we go about doing good. The second thing that strikes me is how this activity of Jesus was preceded by the Father anointing Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power.

[20 : 25] Now, if that was necessary for Jesus, how much more for us, that we might know what it is to be filled with the Holy Spirit and with power, that we might be enabled to go about doing good, zealous for good works. So, let us show the family lightness by going about doing good, but let us also be ever resting on God and asking that God would fill us with His Spirit and with power. Just a couple of other things I want to say about these good works that Paul speaks about. And the penultimate thing I want to say is this, that these good works are tokens of our love for Jesus. The word translated eager, or in other versions of the Bible translated, or other translations of the Bible translated zealous, I think that word is helpful to just pause and consider for a moment. One who is zealous is one who is stirred to action by a strong emotion or affection. One who is zealous is one who is deeply committed to something or to someone, or one who is a committed follower or admirer of someone, somebody who is zealous. Now, all of these things apply to the believer's relationship with Jesus.

And one consequence of this is the way in which our good works will flourish or wane will be in direct proportion to our love for Jesus. As love wanes, good works will also wane, as surely as day follows, night. We will, little by little, perhaps imperceptibly, we will lose something of our zeal and passion as our love for Jesus wanes. And of course, the reverse is true. The more we love Him, the deeper our love, the greater will be our zeal and our eagerness to do the good works that Paul is encouraging us to do. You know, Paul, as he writes to the believers in Galatia, recognizes the danger of, and I use his language, becoming weary in doing good. He's writing to believers, and he's saying, you know, even as believers, you know, there's always that danger, there's always that tendency of becoming weary in doing good. And that is effectively what happens as our love for Jesus wanes or grows cold. I think the word zealous also points to the spirit or manner in which we will do good works. And the NIV chooses to focus on that in the use of the English word eager, eager to do what good works. We are to do that which we are called to do with a sense of excitement and privilege for the elder or deacon or disciple whose love for Jesus is growing and deepening. Doing good is not a chore or burdensome duty, but a delight. I was just reading in preparation for today, the questions that will be posed to those who are going to be admitted into office this morning.

And the final question that is posed is interesting in terms of the vocabulary that it uses. It says this, do you accept the office of an elder or deacon of this congregation and promise through grace, grounded in grace, faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully to discharge all the duties thereof?

Isn't it interesting that in the question that that word cheerfully is included? And I think it reflects that the language that Paul uses here, that as disciples of Jesus, we are to be eager for good works. We are to be excited about doing good, that which pleases God and is a blessing to others.

Good works of kindness and compassion and gentleness and patience and love, zealous, eager to do that which we are called to do. In fact, it's interesting that this little section of Paul's letter to Titus, verses 11 to 14, that we've read is marked, even in the language used, by the rightful place of excitement in the Christian life. You know, we are excited by Jesus and His saving work. We are excited by His appearing, by His coming to save us. We're also excited at the prospect of His coming. Indeed, the very language that Paul uses here in verse 13, where he speaks of, while we wait for the blessed hope, that the sense of that verb wait is to wait with eager anticipation, with excitement. We're excited at who Jesus is and what He's already done. We're excited at the prospect of His coming. We're also to be excited or eager to do the work in the here and now that Jesus has given us to do. So we don't only look back and say, well, isn't it wonderful how He came? And isn't it wonderful what He did on the cross and that He rose again?

[25 : 47] That's so exciting. And, oh, isn't it wonderful that He's going to come again? So in the past, it was exciting, and in the future, it'll be exciting, but in the middle, it's just a bit dull. No, in the middle, it's to be exciting as well, as we are eager, zealous to do that which He calls us to do.

How will you, and if I address myself to the elders and deacons in particular, how will you become an effective elder or deacon marked by good works? Do you need to go on a course or read a book or get with the program, whatever the program might be? Now, no doubt there's a place for these things. There's a place for training. There's a place for instruction. There's a place for studying those passages of the Bible that describe the duties of office bearers. Of course there is. But the bottom line is that you need to love Jesus, and the more you love Jesus, the more useful you will be in His service, the more characterized you will be by these good works that are to mark you. The more you love, the more eager you will be to do good works for Him and like Him. But let me just close with one final thing that we can say about these good works, and simply this, that they are beautiful in the sight of God and others.

The word translated there in this expression that we've been focusing on, eager to do what is good, is a word in Greek that can have quite a broad translation, and it's a function of the context, what is the appropriate word. So it can be, as it is here, quite helpfully translated good, but in other contexts it's translated with the English word beautiful. As I said, I think on this occasion good captures what Paul has in mind. But of course these good works that we are to do are also beautiful. They are beautiful in God's sight. Even the most mundane good work is pleasing and beautiful to God. And it's good for us to remember that. Maybe when we are called to do something which seems very tedious and mundane and repetitive, and we think nobody is even aware that we're doing it. Remember that to God it is beautiful. That good work is a beautiful work in His eyes.

These good works are also to be beautiful to others. This letter that Paul writes to Titus is about challenging believers to live in such a way as to make the gospel attractive to others.

We didn't read verse 10, but notice what Paul says in verse 10, that the immediate context is instruction to slaves, which may seem very bizarre to us. But the interesting thing is what Paul identifies as being the reason why they are to behave in the way that they are being urged to behave.

[28 : 47] And we pick up the reading there in the second half of verse 10. So that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive, beautiful, appealing.

That is why they are to be obedient. That is why they are to be loyal. That is why they are to do good. That they would make the gospel attractive. That they would draw others to the truth.

We live in a drab and dark world where sin rears its ugly head in any number of ways and circumstances. And our calling, your calling, is to bring light and love and beauty into the darkness.

And you can do that as you live your life, eager to do good, eager to do beautiful works. I'm grateful to God for all those who today will be ordained as elders and deacons of our congregation.

And I'm grateful for all of God's people, His treasured possession who belong to this congregation. But may it be true of us all that we are all grounded in the grace of God as evidence of our redemption.

[30 : 03] And as a token of our love for Jesus, may we evermore reveal the family likeness as we go about our lives, eager to do good works that are beautiful in the sight of God, of God's people and those around us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your Son. We thank You for His appearing. We thank You for the salvation that He has brought for us.

We thank You for His redeeming work on our behalf. And we thank You for the great purposes that You have for us, Your people. And among them, that we would be a people marked or characterized as eager to do that which is good, zealous for good works.

We fall short. We fall short in great measure. But we pray that You would be the one who would ever be filling us with Your Spirit, ever granting us that power that is needed, ever helping us to love Jesus more, that as we do so, our lives would be marked in the manner that Paul describes, that we would be disciples of Jesus Christ, eager to do good works.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.