

## Introduction

It seems fitting on Labor Day weekend to discuss the subject of work. We are going to look at a passage that presents a Christian should approach the matter of doing good works. There will be three specific attitudes that the Christian should be steeped in: be zealous, be ready, and devote oneself to good works. Let's look at each one.

## Text

### A. A people...zealous for good works.

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,<sup>12</sup> training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, <sup>13</sup> waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, <sup>14</sup> 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.*

We get our English word “zealous” from the Greek word used here—*zelotes*. To be zealous is to be driven, to be passionate for whatever it is that has captured one's heart. A person who is zealous for good works does not regard those works as a duty; they regard good works as a privilege, as a joy. Doing good works is fulfilling. Doing good works make their day; indeed, makes their life meaningful.

Doing good really is its own reward for those with this zeal. They really do believe that it is better to give than to receive. They are like the man who sat me down to tell me the story of the positive change in two troubled girls, the result of the ministry that he helps to lead. He could hardly contain his excitement. You would have thought he was describing a terrific play by his favorite football team.

So, we are to be zealous for good works. We must, furthermore, be ready.

### B. To be ready for every good work.

*<sup>15</sup> Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you. Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, <sup>2</sup> to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.*

I was zealous to be a good groomsman in my sister's wedding. The wedding director met the groomsmen in the narthex of the church and instructed us clearly on how to carry out our duties in escorting ladies into the sanctuary. As soon as she finished her instructions, a young woman walked into the narthex and right past us into the sanctuary. We stood

there flatfooted sheepishly as the director looked at us with her “what happened” stare. We had been well instructed; we were desirous to do our duty; we just weren’t ready. The woman came before we expected anyone. Being young, she was probably a bit shy and so walked by quickly. We were not ready for the unexpected. We were not alert.

And so it happens in life. Yes, we want to do good, but timing and circumstances trip us up. If the opportunity could just wait tomorrow. If the good deed could just be a different type of good deed. If we could be asked to help someone else. But Christ’s followers are to be ready anytime under any circumstances to do good works. That is why we need always be in ready mode—submissive to authorities, whoever they may be; never speaking evil of anyone regardless to whom we are speaking; avoiding quarreling, being gentle, showing courtesy. If we allow ourselves to think, speak, and act sinfully, then we will not be ready to do the good deed when God places the opportunity before us.

Be ready to do good deeds. To be ready, then, we must be devoted to good-deed doing.

### **C. Devoted to good works.**

*<sup>8</sup> 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. These things are excellent and profitable for people. ... <sup>14</sup> And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.*

Note that phrase in verse 8: “be careful to devote.” What is being said is that we must make the doing of good works a matter of serious study and concentration. Doing good works is something we must think about, pray about, give strong attention to. We need to think ahead of time about what good we may do. We need to examine ourselves to see how we have been doing.

What kind of people are like that? They are the ones who react quickly to opportunities to help. They are always opening doors, giving up seats, carrying things, picking up trash. They are the ones who send cards and notes unexpectedly. They are the ones who remember your birthday, who seem to know when you need help. They are the ones who have made a point of being ready to do good, who have trained their minds to think in terms of good works—good, practical deeds.

Being careful to be devoted to doing good works does not come naturally to most of us. And so, the final exhortation is in verse 14: we must “learn to devote [our]selves to good works.” There are some people to whom doing good comes naturally. It’s just the way they are, and they would be miserable if they were not doing something for others. For the rest of us, we need to learn. But how?

We should be learning from the many admonitions and examples in Scripture. We can perhaps learn the easiest by watching our brothers and sisters who have mastered the art of doing good works. It is easy enough to spot them, and we will often comment to one another about them. Along with admiring them, why not learn from their example? Spend

time with them, asking them about the things they do. They won't like talking about themselves, but they will like talking about the people they help, as well as the good deeds, because everyone likes talking about what they have zeal for. Better yet, join them in a good-deed outing.

Probably the most effective means of learning is praying. I learned that from a good-deed-doer. He prays each day that the Lord will give him an opportunity to do a good deed. I've learned to pray differently: "Lord, make me see the opportunity you give each day." My problem is alertness, which if I must make confession, is probably connected to lacking the degree of zeal I ought to have. All the more, then, I need to pray daily and learn from the experts.

So, let's review. What is to be our attitude toward doing good deeds? We are to be zealous for doing good works. We are to be ready to do good works. We are to be careful to be devoted to doing good works, taking the time to learn to devote ourselves to doing good works.

## Lessons

It sounds like a lot of work! I play recreational tennis and for the first time took three lessons. I learned that I hold the racquet wrong, swing wrong, use wrong footwork, and position myself wrong. It can all be corrected if I spend hours practicing. Can you guess how much practice I will be putting in? Not much. Why? I like tennis; I am not zealous about tennis. I do not wake up every day thinking about tennis. I am not devoted to it.

But if the truth be told, I am not all that zealous about good works either—more than tennis, but not on the level of real good-works-doers. There are some with the spiritual gift of doing works. And yet, doing good works is not an option for the follower of Christ, who taught his disciples "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. 5:16). The apostle Paul wrote the Ephesians: "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

God expects us to do a good job of doing good works. How then do we get pumped up—become zealous for good works—so that we will devote ourselves to the cause? It comes down to discarding the wrong perspective and having the right perspective.

1. Number one, don't link good works to salvation. I've been listening to *Little Women* on audio. At some point one of the girls expresses this philosophy, that one can hope for heaven if she works hard at being good. I do like all the lessons the girls are learning, but this type of moralism goes against what our passage is teaching. Look at verses 4–7:

*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through*

*Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

God saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness. Our good works had nothing to do with salvation. We were saved by good works: the good work of redemption accomplished by our Savior Jesus Christ and the good work of applying that redemption by the Holy Spirit.

No, do not link good works to salvation but do link them to reward. Jesus talked this way: Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven (Matt. 5:12).

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matt. 6:4).

What the use of reward indicates is that the good we do is seen by God and that it matters to him. Our good deeds do not go unnoticed. Indeed, because of such faithfulness, we can anticipate the glorious greeting, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Doesn’t such a perspective stir the zeal for good works?

2. Here is another perspective. Do not link doing good works to guilt: “Don’t you see what your heavenly Father has given up for you?” “Is this how you are going to repay your Savior for what he has done for you?” “Don’t you feel ashamed for the little you have done?”

The problem with such a perspective is that it belittles the work and purpose of God in creating and saving us. God did not save us to make us indebted to him. He saved us so that we might fulfill our destiny—to glorify and enjoy him. That is the idea presented in 2:14. Jesus “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.” We are redeemed—set free—from the bondage of lawlessness and are being purified so that we might become zealous for good works. Far from having a heavy debt of guilt laid upon us, we are freed to do what we were created to do, to be what we were meant to be.

And so, do link doing works to gratitude. Yes, God did give a costly sacrifice for us in giving us his Son. Jesus did do an arduous, painful work for us. But they gave nothing, did nothing begrudgingly. All that they did, all that they now do, they have done so out of love and out of the joy that it gives them. And so, don’t spoil their good work with guilt-ridden efforts to pay them back.

3. Here is another perspective. Do not link doing good works to duty. Ought we to do good works? Is doing so not our duty? Well, yes, it is our duty to do good works out of obedience to God, and yet, let David teach us. He writes in Psalm 40:8, “I delight to do your will, O my God.” If we must link doing good works to duty, then link it to a joyful duty. Let us be the children who excitedly raise our hands when the teacher asks, “Who will help me?” because it is an honor to be chosen. Let us be the child who happily obeys her mother because she loves pleasing her. And we will be such if keep before us the love of our God and Savior for us.

4. Let's move on to perspective number four. Don't confine doing good works to doing a job, but, rather, see the bigger picture. There is the story of the three masons. A traveler asked the first mason what he was doing. He replied crustily that he was laying brick, as anyone could see. The man asked a second mason working further down what he was doing. That mason replied in a similar tone that he was building a wall. At the end of the wall was a third mason working cheerfully. The traveler asked him the same question. His happy response was that he was building a cathedral to the glory of God. When you see the bigger picture you have greater zeal for the seemingly small role that you play. Your good work is part of building the glorious kingdom of God.

5. Which leads to the next perspective. Do not measure your good works by earthly standards. You will become despondent at how little you do or arrogant by what you seemingly accomplish. Rather, trust your good works to the measure of God. Understand that God's means of measuring does not fit our calculations. Jesus gives insight.

The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. Matt. 10:41–42)

“These little ones” are whoever the world considers to be unimportant. But they are very important in God's eyes. And though a cup of cold water may seem to be a small deed, it is nevertheless noteworthy to God. There are no little people in God's sight. There are no small deeds by his measure if those deeds are done for him. That is the point of Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats. Whatever is done for the least of his brothers is what is done for Jesus.

Your good works may very well be small works—folding church bulletins, running errands, taking food, making a phone call, writing a note, holding a door open—but in the peculiar way that God measures good works, he considers each deed to be of high value. You may think those you help to be un-newsworthy—perhaps some children, a couple of shut-ins, a few old veterans, the shy neighbor. And yet each individual is a person made in the image of God. They belong to him, are known by him, are valued by him, and he values what we do for them.

6. We are getting near the end. Do not compare your good works with those of others. This is related to the previous point. The slight difference is that you are not measuring the good works but yourself against others. The truth is that there are good-works doers who truly have the gift of helps, and they are going to run rings around you. Worst of all, they are going to be humble about it!

Don't compare yourself but do learn from them. Pay attention to how they help others—the good spirit in which they do good works, how they make the people they help feel comfortable receiving help, how they honor their Lord by their attitude and service.

Learn to see good works and the people served from their perspective. They really do see in each person a cathedral. They really do work from the motive of glorifying God. That is why no small deed is a small deed; no little person is a little person.

Finally, learn from Jesus. He gave the motive for his good work for us. He reveals it in an interaction with his critics:

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matt. 9:10–13)

God desires mercy, that we, his people, be people of mercy. It is mercy that moved him to send his Son; it is mercy that moved his Son to be our physician even though we were but sinners.

Learn this mercy; for the more you understand it; the more you grasp the mercy shown to you, the more you will be possessed with zeal to do good works for the love of your neighbor and for the glory of God.