

The Holy Spirit and Good Works

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Preacher: Bob Akroyd

[0 : 00] There's a skill in a biographer who can capture a scene that at one moment might seem insignificant, trivial, and yet that scene can be very revealing.

My great subject of study is Abraham Lincoln. I will read biographies of Lincoln. I'll listen to podcasts. But I had never heard this particular story. When Richmond fell, the capital of the Confederacy, the next day President Lincoln traveled to Richmond, which was an hour and a half, two hours maybe, and he's touring the fallen city, the Confederate capital.

And it was said that he stopped because he heard the cry of cats, kittens. And he looked and he saw two very small kittens kind of on the side of the road.

And he leaned over, picked them up, and then he turned to one of the many soldiers with him and said, soldier, make sure these cats are looked after.

The reason why I wanted to share that story is it reminded me of a quotation of Lincoln. Lincoln's very quotable. But he once said, I care not for a man's religion whose dog and cat are not the better for it.

[1 : 18] Those cats in Richmond were the better for his religion. Now, you might have pets, you might not have pets, but the idea, I think, is obvious here.

If you have a faith in Jesus Christ, if you are a follower of Jesus, that faith should transform everything from the biggest to the smallest of details.

So if you have pets, your pets should be the best cared for pets, cats and dogs, because you're a Christian. Your neighbors, your neighbors should be delighted that you're a Christian because of your kindness and your compassion and your consideration.

We here on the south side, we should be, the neighbors should be thankful. We've got a church here. And there's not just a church. These are people that are kind.

These are people that are compassionate. These are good people. And they make the neighborhood better. Now, when we look at the book of Titus, short book, three chapters, ten times Titus talks about good or specifically good works.

[2 : 25] Ten times. He tells us who is qualified. He tells us who isn't qualified. But it seems to me that Paul is telling Titus good works matter.

Your works matter. If you're a parent, how you treat your children matters. If you're a child, how you treat your parents matter. If you're a student, how you interact with your classmates matter.

A neighbor, you know, whatever the relationship is, your faith in Jesus should make a difference. A positive difference. I care not for a man's religion, whose dog and cat are not the better for it.

Now, we often think, as Protestants, when we think of good works, we think bad. We are not saved by good works. Right? That's true. Very true.

But is that all we want to say? Because that's not all that the Bible says. The Bible says that good works are the fruit of a new life, of a new heart.

[3 : 27] Or as Martin Luther, if we are Protestants, and Martin Luther certainly was, good works do not make a person good. But a good person does good works.

So, today our theme is the Holy Spirit and good works. And we couldn't have chosen any better passage than Titus. Titus chapter 3 and verses 3 to 8.

Because good works are the key that unlocks this short letter. I mentioned in the first reading that there was a problem in Crete.

There was a sin problem in Crete. There's a problem in Edinburgh. There's a problem in Scotland. There's a problem in the United States. Wherever you're from, Indonesia, Canada, fill in the blank, there's a problem.

And it's a big problem. In particular, in Crete, one of the Cretan authors put it this way. That Crete has an absence of wild beasts.

[4 : 27] But that absence was more than supplanted by the presence of its inhabitants. Such was the nature of the place and such was the nature of the people.

And Paul, in his description, liars, evil, broods, lazy gluttons, he says the conclusion is detestable, disobedient, unfit for doing anything good.

These are not the kind of people who are going to do good works. These are not the kind of people who are capable. These are not the kind of people who are interested. These are not the kind of people who would just naturally be kind, caring, compassionate, loving.

So that's the problem. Sin creates a massive problem. Sin creates a problem in our minds. We don't think the way we should think.

Sin creates a problem in our hearts that we don't feel or respond the way we should respond. And sin governs our lives. So the things that we should say yes to, sin says no.

[5 : 32] And the things that we should say no to, sin says yes. And it doesn't seem, therefore, to be a very cheery topic. And chapter 1 closes on this note.

These people are unfit. They're unqualified. They're unable. They're unwilling. And they simply are not going to do that which is good. And you would think, you stop there.

But no. This is exactly the kind of people. Exactly the kind of people that Jesus Christ came into this world to seek and to save. He did not come on a mission to make good people better.

And this is one of the fundamental problems, I think, is that many people, many people who don't go to church, many people who aren't Christians, if asked, they would probably say that we are good people who want to become better.

Well, that's just not the case. Because I'm not good. I'm not good and neither are you. And if the message of the gospel is how can we become better people, we're going to have a problem.

[6 : 41] Because I can't make myself a better person, nor can you make yourself a better person. Collectively, we don't have the wherewithal to do this. But I know someone who can.

I know someone who can change. And I know someone who can change you and me, not externally, the clothes that you wear or the external words or actions.

But I know someone who can change your heart. And that's where chapter 2 comes in. Because there's a problem and there's a solution. And the solution, verse 11, for the grace of God has appeared.

The apostle Paul doesn't tell us about the birth of Jesus. But the apostle Paul has verses like this which tell us what the arrival of Jesus means.

The arrival of Jesus means that there's a welcome mat. There's a welcome mat out and the door is open. The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

[7 : 39] It's an open offer. Open invitation. If you're not a Christian here today, you are invited by God to believe in Jesus Christ. More than invited, actually, you're commanded by God to believe in his son.

So there is an open invitation. The welcome mat is out. But notice in verse 12 of chapter 2, you go from all people to us. All us.

It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions. And to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age.

So to those who respond, to those who accept, to those who believe. This morning I was preaching earlier on that magnificent text in John chapter 1, verse 12.

But to those who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. And as a child of God, you are now able to say no.

[8 : 40] Previously you said yes. Absolutely. I'm in for that. But now you're able to say no. Worldly passions, ungodliness. No thank you. That was the old me.

I'm not interested in that anymore. But the opposite is also true. What you used to say no to, you now want to say yes to. So you see, the Christian life is profoundly a balance.

Yes and no. Not just no. And if you find yourself describing the Christian life only negatively. I'm a Christian and I don't.

I'm a Christian and I don't. I'm a Christian and I don't. Well what do you do? What do I do? And why does it make a difference? Why does it make a difference for good?

So we say no and we say yes. Instead of living lives that are without control. We want to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.

[9 : 36] But why are we doing this? Well we're doing this for two reasons. We're doing this first because Jesus has come. He's come on a mission to seek and to save the lost.

And that mission which was mission impossible became possible. He did the impossible. He set the captives free. He forgave the sinners.

He took upon himself the sin and the guilt and the shame. So that we might take upon ourselves the goodness, the righteousness and the holiness. That's impossible.

But not for him. But notice verse 13. We live in the light of verse 11 which is the incarnation, the arrival. Verse 13 tells us that he's coming back. So you and I are living between two bookends.

Now we often think that the two bookends of our life are birth and death. Well yes, 1966 in my case. I don't know when. But you know, these are the bookends of our lives. Yes and no.

[10 : 34] They are the chronological bookends. But if you're a Christian you have two theological bookends. The arrival of Jesus and the return of Jesus. He has come and he's coming.

So therefore we live this new life in light of what he has done. And in light of what he will do. And if anyone ever tells you that the Bible does not describe Jesus as God.

Well, you've got it here. Titus 2.13. Go tell your neighbors, wake your friends. While we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior.

Jesus Christ. Jesus is a human being. Fully human. Jesus is God. God in the flesh. I don't know how that's possible. But he does. Fully God.

Fully human. One person. He does the work of God on behalf of human beings. Because he's one of us. And he's not one of us. He gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness.

[11 : 38] And to purify for himself a people that are his very own eager to do what is good. You know, as a kid, you tend to hear the same phrases.

Parents tend to repeat themselves. Or my parents tend to repeat themselves. One of the things my dad always said is, you kids think that money grows on trees. Well, yeah.

As a kid, you kind of do. Mom and dad have an infinite supply of money. And when you need money, you go to somebody who has an infinite supply of it. Now, of course, nobody has an infinite supply of money.

But by comparison, if you're a kid and you've got pocket change and your parents seem to be wealthy, you ask them for money. We have one who has all power.

We have one who has all resources. When we come to God, everything that we could possibly need, he has. And he has to such an extent.

[12 : 41] You see, I just don't know how he does this. Because if I were to give you, as I'm a generous person, if you say, Bob, I'm finding it a bit tough this month. I give you 100 pounds.

Now, I'm 100 pounds poorer. You're 100 pounds weaker. Richer. If God gives or when God gives, God has a way of giving and he never is impoverished.

God has a way of working and he's never fatigued. I don't understand how that's possible. Because every illustration that I give you, if I give you something, I don't have it, but you do.

This word redeem is pay a price. He pays a price for us. And it's a high price. And yet, he's not impoverished. It's a high cost, but yet he doesn't become poorer.

I don't know how that's possible. But he has all resources. He has all wisdom. He has all power. And he has come to purify for himself a people that are his very own.

[13 : 46] And notice, eager to do what is good. Ah, now Titus. There's hope for you, Titus, in Crete. There's hope for the people of Crete. Remember, these were detestable, disobedient, unfit for doing anything good.

The gospel enters the equation. Jesus enters the equation. And the unfit for doing anything good can become those who are eager to do what is good.

And that reminds us that the gospel, the message of Jesus, the late Tim Keller put it this way. The gospel is not just the ABCs, but it's the A to Z of the Christian life.

It is inaccurate to think that the gospel saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying hard to live according to biblical principles. It's simply not possible.

You and I need Jesus. We need the gospel to become Christians. We need the gospel to continue as Christians. And we need the gospel to make it home. Because if it comes down to you or me, that's when we're in trouble.

[14:51] Our effort, our strength, our wisdom is completely inadequate. We cannot start the Christian life. We cannot continue the Christian life. And we cannot conclude the Christian life.

It must be Jesus, beginning, middle, and end. So there's a problem, and there's a solution. But where does the Holy Spirit fit into the equation?

How does the Spirit enable this change to happen? Because we read in chapter 2 of what Jesus does. He gives himself.

He gives himself. He gives his life. He gives his life as a ransom for many. He gives himself to redeem us from wickedness and to purify for himself. So notice that a purified people are now eager to do what is good.

But the theme that we are focusing on is the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 3 and verses 3 to 8, we read that together.

[15:55] Notice first, and this is important. At one time, we too. You see, the Apostle Paul could say, Titus, these are bad people.

You know it. I know it. And he could say, look, they. They are disobedient. They are detestable. They. But actually, Paul says, Titus, we.

We too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved. When we are honest with ourselves, and when we present the gospel as a message that we need as much as those who do not yet know Jesus, I tell you, something powerful happens.

The barriers begin to come down. There's an honest discussion here because I am not telling bad people how God could help them. I'm telling people how God has helped me.

That the only thing I have to offer is to say, I once were where you were, but I am there no longer. Not because of who I am, but because of who Jesus is. So the Apostle Paul's use of we too.

[17:01] This is what we were like, Titus. This is what our lives were like. Exactly like the Cretan people. There is no difference. This is what we were like. But the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared.

He saved us. Not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

John Wesley put it this way. He said, if there are any truths that are fundamental to the Christian faith, they are doubtless these two. Justification and regeneration. Justification, that which God does for us.

And we see that here, the cross. And regeneration, that which God does in us. And Paul uses two words that are huge here.

The first word that he uses is rebirth. He puts two words together to make a word. So sometimes, you know, we can do this in English as well.

[18:01] I remember a friend of mine was doing a project on phobias. And I didn't even know this was a phobia. But the Latin word for otter is lutra. And the Latin word for phobia or fear is phobia.

So if you never knew it, lutrophobia is the fear of otters. I don't know who's afraid of otters. But if you are, you've got lutrophobia. But what we've just done there is we've taken two root words and we've put them together.

Paul does that here. He takes one word which is called palin. Well, actually, Jesus used the word before. But he takes this word which is a composite word. Palin means again.

Genesis means beginning. And he says this is what happens when the Holy Spirit shows up. This is what happened when the Holy Spirit comes to work. You have an again beginning.

Genesis, what happens in Genesis? God creates something out of nothing. What happens when the Holy Spirit comes into a person's heart and life? He creates something out of nothing. He doesn't work with inherent goodness.

[19:00] He doesn't work with qualities and characteristics and make them better. No. There is no holiness. There is no righteousness. There is no goodness. There is no life. The Holy Spirit comes and creates something out of nothing.

Where there's death, there's now life. That's what again beginning means. A whole new start. And if that wasn't enough, the next word that's used is renewal.

It's one of these words which means like from the top of your head to the tip of your, to the top of your head to the bottom of your foot. A complete transformation of the person for the better.

That's what the Holy Spirit does. He meets dead people and he makes them alive. He transforms us from top to bottom. So that.

So that having been justified, we might become. We have been justified by his grace. We might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. So we're going to glory. We're going to heaven. [19 : 59] But we're still here. We're going to heaven, but we're here now. What now? What do we do? This is a trustworthy saying, says Paul. And I want you to stress these things so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. Doing what is good. There is no clearer preacher than Martin Luther on the subject of justification.

We are justified by faith alone. Not by anything we do. But Luther said this. God does not need your good works. But our neighbor does.

Good works make a difference. Good works make a difference in your home. Good works make a difference where you work. Good works make a difference in your neighborhood. Good works make a difference here in church among fellow believers.

Good works. So let me just make it simple. So tomorrow, you're going to have all different types of encounters tomorrow. You go into a shop and you meet with people.

[21 : 07] Somebody helps you at the checkout. Somebody answers a question for you. At the end of that interaction, does that person want to see you again? Does that shopkeeper want you to be part of their customer again?

Or do they say, I hope I never see him again. I hope I never see her again. And you may say, well, what's the difference? Well, I think there's a big difference. Because if we are commending Jesus, We commend Jesus, of course, with the words that we speak.

But we commend Jesus by the lives that we live. Kindness. Compassion. Gentleness.

Consideration. Thoughtfulness. Care. What you say.

How you say it. What you do. And how you do it. Good works are excellent and profitable for everyone. Now, we don't need Martin Luther. The Apostle Paul is crystal clear on justification and salvation.

It is not what you do. It's what Jesus does. But knowing what Jesus does. And knowing what the Spirit has done. We are to live lives that are new. We do what is good.

[22 : 12] We avoid what is bad. We live lives that are changed. Not by ourselves. But by him. So think. Think about each day.

Think about each interaction. Think about each conversation. Are you commending Jesus by what you say? Are you commending Jesus by how you say it? Are you commending Jesus and his gospel by the life decisions that you make?

Because you see this transformation. The Cretans were unfit for doing anything good. The gospel enters the equation. They become eager to do what is good.

And we're then told that we have a people who are now devoted to doing what is good. Is that going to be our epitaph?

I don't know what these people believe. But they seem dedicated to doing what is good. I don't understand this message. But there's something about him. And something about her. And something about them.

[23 : 12] And it makes me want to know what that message is. Why do they live? Why do they speak? Why do they act? Why do they react? Why do they react? The gospel message comes to us.

Detestable. Disobedient. Unfit for anything good. And the gospel makes us eager and devoted to doing what is good. The spirit meets us in death.

And gives us life. The spirit meets us in our incapacity. And gives us divine. The divine presence within us. God takes up residence in our hearts.

That is the extent of the problem. The problem of human sin is such. That in order to solve the problem. God sends his son on a rescue mission.

Which costs his life. And God sends the Holy Spirit. Which takes up residence in the human heart.

That's how big the problem is. Because that's how big the solution is.

[24 : 09] But when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts. Watch out. Because old habits begin to die. New habits begin to form.

New desires. New goals. New motivations. A new focus. A new destination. New direction. Not because of us. But because of God. What God is able to do.

D.L. Moody. The great evangelist. Who preached. He preached in person to a hundred million people. He said the world does not understand theology. Or dogma. But it understands love and sympathy.

Now the world needs to hear theology. The world needs to hear the dogma. The world needs to hear the big story of Jesus. But will they hear it through the lips of people who care?

Will they hear it through the actions of people who love? Because I guarantee you. If we take seriously our commission as followers of Jesus.

[25 : 13] Opportunities will inevitably follow. Why? Why do you live? Why do you speak? Why do you act? Why don't you react like everyone else reacts?

The gospel creates a new heart. The gospel creates a new life. The Holy Spirit resides now within us.

And when the Holy Spirit resides in us. He is able to change. To transform. And to renew. Think of President Lincoln picking up those small kittens.

Entrusting them to a care of another. I care not for a man's religion. For whom his dog and cat do not benefit. What is the value of our religion?

What is the meaning of our religion? Unless it is transformative in each and every relationship of which we are a part. That our family is better off.

[26 : 11] Our friends are better off. Our neighbors are better off. Our colleagues and co-workers are better off. And the random people we encounter in the streets. Are a little bit better off. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in my heart.

And the Lord Jesus died on my behalf. That is the power of the gospel. To change hearts and lives. And a changed heart. And a changed life.

Is a powerful testimony. To Jesus Christ and him crucified. Let's pray. Father we ask that you would hear us. Help us. That you would do us good.

That this again beginning. Would be the experience. The common experience of each one of us. Lord.