

Equipped for good works

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[0 : 0 0] So, our last session. Well, no, that's not quite true. Sermon tomorrow morning is our last session.

! I just was suddenly thinking that Judy might take that home today and say, hey, by the way, you're on tomorrow. Paul thought it was the last session today. But it's such a joy, isn't it, just working through these verses and seeing these privileges that are ours in Christ.

And this session I want to talk about being equipped for good works. Equipped for good works. We've reflected on the incredible kindness of God, the love of God for us. We have seen that word grace come again and again.

We've seen that it's not of us. It is all of the Lord. So much so that in these verses of chapter 2, these early verses, Paul again, just out of his enthusiasm, repeats himself.

It is not by grace you have been saved. It's not by grace you have been saved. Not by works lest anyone should boast. So it has all been about Christ. It has all been about God. And I don't know whether you've noticed this as we've gone through, but he hasn't talked about us at all, other than that these are the blessings we have.

[1 : 4 2] He's not said what you and I are to do. He hasn't said that, you know, we could... He hasn't even said, so next time you go to church, make sure you worship God. I mean, he hasn't said anything about us and what we are to respond with. It's all been about what God has done for us in Christ.

And actually, that continues right the way through until the end of chapter 2 at least. But then we are left with this question, really, aren't we, after we've heard these passages.

We have to ask a question that actually the psalmist asks in Psalm 116, verse 12. Let me just read it to you. The psalmist says, after reflecting on the loving kindness, the mercy of the Lord, he says, How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?

And that's where we're left after these amazing verses we've been reading. So how can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?

It's the psalmist. It's us as well, isn't it? How are we to respond to grace? How do we avoid taking God's grace for granted?

[3 : 0 3] What can we do for the Lord? It's not of yourselves. It's a gift from God, he says.

No one can boast. You've been saved through faith. Paul stresses it's not by work, so works are out of the way, aren't they? What can we do?

And yet, the strange thing is that our response will be with good works. Our response will be with good works.

So, my second point there, we're created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Look at verse 9. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

It's sort of like there's a sudden turnaround here. Now, Paul says that we must understand that our whole new nature in Christ, our whole reason for existence, now as Christians, is to do good works for God.

[4 : 04] We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works. And yet, the incredible thing as we read this passage is that even when we are doing these good works for Christ, because we're Christians, we still can't boast.

Because, he goes on, look at the end of the verse, where God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to do.

Third point. God prepared good works in advance for us to do. Even our good works are given us by God's grace.

That's a staggering thing, isn't it? When you ask, how can I repay the Lord? The ultimate answer that Paul doesn't give us here, the ultimate answer is you can't.

But, God in his grace has said, you can do good works for me and I'll help you do them. God prepared them.

[5 : 15] You know, there are times when I feel I'm completely ruled by my diary. I keep it on my iPhone. By the way, were we supposed to start this or did somebody start the recording?

Okay, good. I keep my diary on my iPhone. It automatically syncs with my wife's diary on her iPhone. That's really so she can keep an eye on what I'm doing, you understand.

She puts things in my diary as well. And even in retirement, there are times when I think, you know, things haven't changed very much. It's still pretty busy.

And we all know life can be very busy. You've worked to do. Children to look after. Maybe visiting a family. So much goes on in all our lives. So we need to look again at this verse in chapter 2, verse 10.

And just let it sink into our thinking. Assuming I'm genuinely seeking to do what the Lord wants me to do.

[6 : 29] Assuming that by faith I am living in Christ. Paul has been enthusiastically encouraging us to count our blessings in Christ.

And as he draws this section to a close, he says, Oh, and in case you wanted to respond to all this outpouring of God's grace, you should know that God has graciously in Christ created you precisely to respond to God's grace by doing his good works, which are by grace.

It's an amazing way of thinking. Oh, and even more than that, lest you should say, I can't really do anything good for the Lord, or I'm no good, or I'm not like that wonderful Christian.

In his grace, God has prepared beforehand works precisely made for you and fitted for you. So application.

What does this do for us? Well, first it tells us that in God's eyes, his people do have significance. There is significance in who we are.

[7 : 51] Not a significance we can boast about. Not a significance born of how wonderful we are, or anything like that. But there is significance in who we are.

I've met so many Christians who feel they're no good to anyone, and certainly not to God. It's a sad fact of life. I hear men and women, young and old, with a very low view of what they are capable of.

They feel they're worthless. Very little seems to change after they've become a Christian. They're grateful to the Lord that he died for them, and that they are now saved.

But they still have such a low view of their own place in God's kingdom. Now, I really want us to hear this very carefully and clearly.

Boasting is out, and some Christians really need to hear that. Especially some preachers need to hear that. Boasting is out as a Christian.

[8 : 59] But it is also sad to encounter Christians who are prepared to say that they are worthless, and feel they're of no value.

For to them, Paul is saying that in Christ, by God's grace, you do have significance. You are a child of God, loved by him.

In fact, if it is sinful to boast, it must also be sinful to deny this great truth, you are God's workmanship. Think about it.

How can we say to our creator, you created something worthless in me? Paul says we are Christ's workmanship.

So there is significance in who we are, because we are in Christ. But it also means there is significance in what we do.

[10 : 00] Created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Think of this. The Almighty God saves us by his grace, and he doesn't need you or me to do anything at all for him.

Theologians put it this way, no necessity can be laid on God. He doesn't need anything. Anything at all. And certainly not anything you and I can give him.

There's no need in God. And yet, in his amazing grace, simply because he loves us, he involves his people in his purposes and his plans.

He uses even us. He uses even me. I wonder, can you say that right now, yourself, as a Christian?

Perhaps you came here thinking that God doesn't use you, like he uses someone else. Perhaps you constantly compare yourself with other people, and in your opinion, you're always the loser.

[11 : 15] It happens a lot in church, you know. People look at others, maybe sitting in the row in front, and sort of say to themselves, oh, I'm not a Christian like they are, or oh, I wish I was such a good Christian as that person, or whatever.

Do you know, I soon discovered, just as a general truth in life, that there were always people around who were better than me, and cleverer than me. It's a humbling lesson when you're a student, when you're a child, when you're at college, when you're a pastor, when you're a preacher, whatever you're doing.

I'm sure you all know that. The older you are, the more you realise that, of course. It may be thoroughly and altogether humbling, really, as it should be.

There are always people better than us. But God, through his apostle Paul, speaks to us all, and he says, God is saying, I'm not comparing you with anyone else.

For I have chosen you, and I have loved you, and I have redeemed you, and you are my workmanship. In me, you have your identity, for I have loved you.

[12 : 32] In me, you will achieve all that I want you to achieve. After the facts of salvation themselves, surely this is one of the most wonderful blessings we could possibly have, that the almighty God should stoop to allow us to participate in his plans, and that he should enable us to do that.

It is an extraordinary teaching. I'm so deeply thankful that God has prepared my way, and my way through life, in front of me.

Now, I haven't always known where he is leading me, or us, as we've been in ministry for so long together. There have been times in my life, our lives, when I've asked, why am I doing this?

God, why have you got me here? I made a little bit of a joke about being an archdeacon for two years in Exeter. Now, don't get me wrong, I truly believe that some wonderful men and women are called to be archdeacons.

Okay? That's their calling, and they can glorify God, but it wasn't me. And I remember one awful evening, sitting in the dark, in the pouring rain in our car with Sharon, and just bursting into tears, and saying, this isn't me.

[14 : 00] What are we doing here? And we had felt very much God had called us to this job. And I had that month, just completed chairing, in one month, my 30th meeting.

I think I had chaired 15 PCCs in vacancies. I had chaired, for those of you who understand Anglican things, the DAC twice, which is the most awful thing you can imagine.

And that's the one that decides whether or not you can move your chairs around, and all that sort of stuff. And it had gone on and on and on. As I say, some people are called to that level of administration.

God blesses them, and so on. And I just thought, what on earth? And we began to look, and see whether God might be moving us on. And he did, actually, fairly quickly.

We ended up moving to the States. But, I look back on that time, and I say, really, did you prepare that work for me, in advance?

[15 : 11] And Sharon will look back with me, and she'll say, you know what? If we hadn't had that job, we would never have gone to the next one.

And in the next one, we went to the States, where God used us in a wonderful way. But most exciting of all, it was where, under the preaching there, my mother-in-law became a Christian, at the age of 83.

And we wouldn't have got there. Now, I have to say, it's not that easy. I still look back at that time, and I say, wait a minute, Lord, did you really need to take me through those two years, to get me to that point?

But I think Sharon's right. We had come out of a wonderful church. We had prayed, Lord, what do you want us to do with our lives? We'd done that, through our lives, every six years or so, we've spent real time saying, what next, Lord?

Do you want us to move? Do you want us to stay? And we had done that once, at Hartford, up in Cheshire, and we had stayed for another six years, and we were doing it again, and then we decided we were going to stay.

[16 : 25] But we had said to ourselves, as we looked at ourselves, and asked God to lead us, we'd actually said to ourselves, are we so comfortable here? I mean, in God's amazing grace, we had seen over 200 people in five years come to faith.

I mean, it was, it was really good. And we said to each other, are we so comfortable here, that we couldn't hear God calling us? And then the bishop wrote and said, would you come and do this job?

And it was a very attractive job, the way it was spelled out on paper. But it just wasn't me in the end. Can God use us? Are there always times when we can see God using us?

No, there aren't. And yet, and yet, it is wonderful, for he has prepared our lives before us, that we may bring glory to him.

But there's more for us to see here. Good works follow grace. I think this is important for us. Do other people, because we need to know what we mean by good works.

[17 : 35] Do other people do good works? People who are not Christians. And yes, they do, in the way in which we normally use that word. They do.

I know there's a, a lot of concern about, uh, Islamists in this day and age. Did you know that Islamic charities give more to the poor and help more people worldwide than all the Christian charities put together?

They do, at a human level, using the words as we would normally use them, they do good works. And in God's common grace, we can say, thank you, God.

People are being fed where perhaps Christian people can't even get in to feed them. Thank you, God. But are they good works in the sense that Paul is talking of them here?

That's the issue. And what we find is that good works in this context are the works that God wants you to do and has prepared for you.

[18 : 47] and they are the works that are done with the intention of bringing glory to God. In other words, as Christians, we might use those words, good works, in two different ways.

There's the good works of the person who doesn't know and love the Lord, but when we use them in this context, we're thinking very specially of being in Christ and of knowing that God has things for us to do for him that he has prepared for us in advance.

Those are good works. So what do those works look like? Well, we can look on a bit in Ephesians or through many passages in Scripture.

Look on, if you will, to chapter 5, verse 1. The Apostle Paul is beginning to apply all that he says and he says, be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.

You see how he's picking up the themes we've been talking about. And live a life of love. We've been talking about that just as Christ loved us. This is all from chapters 1 and 2.

[19 : 58] And gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Be imitators of God. This is the application. Those verses draw all the themes together.

We are dearly loved children. We're children who are to follow our Father in his ways. When I first arrived as vicar in Hartford up in Cheshire, I went, because I was told by my church wardens I should, I went to visit an elderly woman who was one of those, forgive me if you're one of those as well, but she was one of those who you would mostly see pulling aside the neck curtains and looking to see who was walking along the street.

So I go in and I have, and she says, oh vicar, do come in, have a cup of tea. She'd been a faithful member of the church for years and years and years. Lovely woman. And she said, oh vicar. So I said, do call me Paul, which was a real shock to that lot.

I said, call me Paul. So she said, oh I don't know I can do that, vicar. But eventually she did. She said, Paul, do you have a blonde haired son?

So I said, yes, how did you know? This was, we were very new. And she said, oh well, I see him walking to school because he walks like you. Pulled the neck curtain back and watched the children go along.

[21 : 27] The school was four doors down from her. And I thought, I'll tell you, ever since that day, I felt conscious about the way I walk. But isn't that what Paul has in mind here?

That somebody should be able to say as they look at us, as they see us walking, as they see us talking, as they see us living in this world, that they should be able to say, what's your father like?

Or they should be able to understand that we're showing something of our heavenly father, that we are imitating him, that we walk like him, that we have the patience he has and the kindness.

And this comes back to another of those teachings which I touched on yesterday, but it just blows my mind again. You remember I said that in Genesis chapter 1, we are told that we are created in the image of God.

And we're sent out, Adam and Eve had everything gone well. They were to go out into the earth and they were to populate the whole world with God's image. So any creature of any sort looking at a human being would see something of a reflection of God.

[22 : 56] God's image of God but it didn't happen because of sin. And so part of what's going on here is that we find in Christ that becomes possible again.

And that's what he means when he says be imitators of God. Why? Because as you do that, as you begin to do the very works that God wants you to do, you become the reflection of him to this world that you should be.

In other words, you fulfill and you begin to sense in yourself that you are fulfilling what you were originally created to be.

A person who would image God. Let me take that a step further. You know why images and idols were so awful in God's eyes for the Israelites?

the thing that they rediscovered at the Reformation. You remember when they tore down statues and all that sort of thing.

[24 : 00] The reason is theological. It isn't that necessarily that people want to worship the idol or the statue or something like that. It is that God has his images through the whole world.

That was always God's intention there would be images everywhere. But not images of stone. Not images of glass. Not pictures even of saints.

That his image would be us. That's what we were created to be. So if you say well don't you believe in images the answer has to be for a Christian I absolutely believe in images.

We're made in the image of God and we carry that out by being imitators of God. And we do that and this is staggering. we do that by following what God has planned for us in our lives in the power of the spirit that we have been given.

The guarantee that we are redeemed. That spirit is the same spirit who empowers us. Remember that from chapter 1 verses 18 to 21.

[25 : 08] I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he's called you the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

We're empowered to do what he wants of us. And what will that look like? Well it will be very different for all of us.

look again at chapter 4 verses 1 to 3. This gives you some idea of what good works are going to look like.

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle. Does this remind you of someone like Jesus?

Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace.

[26 : 12] We're to be Christ-like. This is why the Bible doesn't lay down a whole lot of legalism. I was talking to somebody earlier today who grew up with legalism.

You know, you mustn't do this, you must do that. And the Bible doesn't have a lot of that. The Bible takes you where you are and says, God's placed you where you are and he's given you good works to do.

What will they look like? Well, it may be that you're a teacher, it may be that you're a care worker, it may be whatever you are, you may be retired, and what will it look like to be doing good works?

Well, it will look like you doing those works, but doing them with patience and kindness and with love and showing forth the attitude to the people you're working with and dealing with, the attitude that Christ would have to them, an attitude of mercy and forgiveness and acceptance and so on.

So this is more about being Christ-like and then saying, okay, God, so you've put me here now, how do I imitate God here?

[27 : 27] and you look at Christ and you say, this is the person he is, that is the person I have to be as a teacher, as a grandparent, whatever we are.

So that's where Paul leaves us in the section that we've been looking at over the last few days, that we can indeed bring glory to God, because God has prepared for us the works to walk in.

The course is that