

READY FOR GOOD WORKS



WHICH WORKS? (5)

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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Ready for Good Works
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Ready for Good Works*

With this installment, we bring our study, “Which Works?”, to its conclusion. In this study we’ll see how Paul emphasizes the role of good works in the life of faith, and consider how we can prepare ourselves for doing good works that glorify Jesus and our Father.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

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May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 At Work within Us

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Philippians 2.12, 13

Love works

In this series we have been addressing the question, “Which works?” Believers in Jesus Christ have been saved by the grace of God to do good works of love (Eph. 2.8-10). Salvation is not merely a subjective experience which assures us of God’s love and forgiveness, and that we will be with Him by and by and forever. Certainly, the faith which issues in salvation brings such assurance, and with it, peace and joy and abounding hope (Rom. 5.1-3).

But true, saving faith begins something new in the soul of one who has been saved by grace. Brimming with assurance of salvation, believers embrace the call to seek God’s Kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2.12) by working out their salvation in good works of love. Love – expressed in good works – is the evidence that saving faith has taken root in our soul and is bearing the fruit Christ intends (Heb. 11.1; cf. Jn. 14.12, 15, 21; Jn. 15.1-4, 9, 10, 12). The fruit of faith is expressed in good works of love for God and for our neighbors. The goal of all Christian instruction is to nurture such love (1 Tim. 1.5), so that believers may bear much fruit of love for the glory of God (Matt. 5.13-16).

We are not sufficiently clever to define the particular good works Jesus has in mind for us. We must look to Him, and to His Word. Paul explains that God has already ordained the good works He has in mind for us, and we may begin to discern them by reading and studying God’s Word, beginning with His Law (Rom. 3.31; 7.12). The Law provides a rich tapestry of commandments, precepts, examples, and rules to guide us in bearing the fruit of good works. The prophets and other Old Testament writers looked to the Law to exhort and instruct the people of their day in the wisdom, justice, and love of God. Jesus fulfilled all the Law, and He instructed us to follow His example so that we might be great in the Kingdom into which He has brought us (Jn. 15.9, 10; Matt. 5.17-19).

All the Law and the prophets reduce to two great commandments: Love God with all your soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. The works that are the evidence of true and lively faith – saving faith – are those which demonstrate love for God and neighbors. For such good works, Paul insisted, we must be zealous, ready, constant, and fruitful (Tit. 2.14; 3.1, 8, 14)

In this final installment in our series *Which Works?* we will unpack what is required of us in working out our salvation in good works of love, so that the *assurance* of salvation in which we rejoice glows with the *evidence* of salvation, expressed as love.

Salvation workout

I need to stress again: We do not take up good works in order to *be* saved. We are saved by the work of Jesus Christ and His Spirit. Jesus did all the work of righteousness that we require. Having borne our sins in His own body on the cross, He rose from the dead in the righteousness of new life. Our sins have been laid on Him, and His righteousness is ascribed to us (2 Cor. 5.21). Jesus has done all the work that is needed to reconcile us with the Father.

With the Father, Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to be with us and to dwell in us. By His work we are born again and enabled to believe the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom (Gal. 4.1-7). The Spirit has come to dwell in all who believe, reminding and assuring us that we belong to Jesus, and preparing us for lives of

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witness to Him (Jn. 14.26, 27; Acts 1.8). The Spirit of God is at work within us, teaching us the Law of God and all the Word of Jesus (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Jn. 15.14, 15). He convicts us of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16.8-11); brings to light the fruit of His Presence (Gal. 5.22, 23); adorns us with gifts for carrying out our role in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.7-11); and continues always to bear witness with our spirits that we are sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8.14-17).

The Spirit is at work within us, shaping our thoughts and understanding, purifying and enriching our affections, firming up Christian priorities, and guiding us into our individual callings as the followers of Christ. But we must join in His work, taking up whatever is required of us to work out the full promise of our salvation in good works of love for God and our neighbors.

Salvation leads to good works, but only in those who take up the daily salvation workout, relying on the power of God and the truth of His Word for the mercy and grace they need each day (Heb. 4.12-16).

The power within

What do we know about the Holy Spirit? We know that He is God, and that He is the power of the Kingdom of God, as it comes on earth (1 Cor. 4.20; Acts 1.8). The Spirit brings holy, spiritual power to bear on the inner workings of our soul, changing the way we think, the things we desire, and the values and priorities that guide us. He does this by bringing us to the Word of God, day by day, and showing us Jesus in all His grandeur, glory, and greatness. As He shows Jesus to us, He adjusts and improves and enlarges our thoughts, desires, and values, making us a little more like Jesus, that we might be fitted with the love of Jesus each day requires.

The Holy Spirit works gradually to grow us in love – here a little, there a little; line upon line, precept upon precept (Is. 28.9, 10). But though He works gradually, He works truly in all who have been saved and who take up the yoke of Jesus to learn from Him good works of love (Matt. 11.28-30). Plowing the furrows of our soul is hard work, but with each step we take in the yoke with Jesus, the Spirit meets us with power to bring about the inward assurance and outward evidence of true and lively faith – good works of love.

And the Spirit is able, by the work He does within us, to bring us exceedingly abundantly more than we have ever dared to ask or think into the pleasures of God that come from working out our salvation in fear and trembling (Eph. 3.20). The effort involved in doing good works can be considerable, but the Spirit has a more-than-ample supply of power for our needs. The pleasure that awaits us as we yield to the Spirit is unspeakably beyond anything we could ever imagine. There is more of satisfaction, fulfillment, joy, and hope to be discovered in working out our salvation than in anything else we might ever do.

The Spirit is within us, and He is ready and able to fit us for those good works that bring the love of God to light the darkness of sin and show the way to Jesus. But we must determine that we will take up the call, in the strength of the Spirit, to work out our salvation day by day, that we may be zealous, ready, constant, and fruitful in good works of love.

For reflection

1. Why must Christians be zealous to do good works?
2. How does the example of Jesus lead us to know which works are good works?
3. How does the Spirit work in you to fit you for a life of good works?

Next steps – Transformation: Ask the Spirit to show you what you can do today, in His power, to bear the fruit of salvation in your Personal Mission Field.

2 Zeal Check

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. Titus 2.11-14

Three problems

Three significant problems confront us as we think about taking up the good works which are the evidence and proof of our salvation.

First, *we* are not good (Rom. 7.18). We have no ability to gin up good works, just because we might think it's the sort of thing we Christians should do. We are not naturally inclined to do the works which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.10). We are naturally selfish, risk-averse, complacent, and otherwise unlikely to have much in the way of zeal for doing good.

Happily, we have the Spirit of God dwelling in us; through Him, and by His power, we are able to overcome all that is *not* good in us with the *good fruit* He brings as He forms us into the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 12.21; Gal. 5.22, 23; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). He renews our minds, refurbishes our affections, and resets our priorities as we feed on the Word of God and submit to the Spirit's teaching and filling.

Second, the people to whom we have been sent by God do not deserve any good that we might do for them. After all, what have they done for us lately?

Happily, as the Spirit works to bear the fruit of goodness in us, we realize that our neighbors don't have to earn the good works God has prepared for us to do for them. His grace, working *in* us, can reach them *through* us, with the result that thanksgiving and praise to God will increase as His grace flows through us to our world (2 Cor. 3.7-15).

Third, any kind of work is, well, work. And work that does not issue in some reward, some payback or paycheck or other personal benefit, typically keeps falling to the bottom of our "to do" list. Doing good works is *hard*, and that's just another reason why we need to ready ourselves for doing good. If we ready ourselves, as Paul says we must (Tit. 3.1), the zeal and ability will be there when we need them, to do the good works God has before ordained for us in His Law and all His Word.

So we should start by focusing on our attitude toward doing good – our zeal for this calling.

Keys to being zealous

How do we summon up and maintain a holy zeal for good works – an eagerness, an excitement about, and a constant readiness for doing good for others? Paul suggests three keys to being a person who is zealous for good works.

First, remember that it was a good and gracious work of God that brought you the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ (Tit. 2.11). Take time throughout your day to thank God for your salvation. Recall, as David did in Psalm 18, when you came to the Lord, and how His grace worked powerfully in you then. Remember the joy you have known in knowing Jesus. Sing praises to His Name, and celebrate His goodness to you in prayer.

The more you meditate on the grace of God and the great salvation He has given us through Jesus Christ, the more His grace will saturate, shape, and prepare your soul for doing good works.

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Second, work hard at your sanctification (v. 12) – at *working out* your salvation in fear and trembling. This means setting aside all worldly lusts and ways and pressing on to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age. Improve your prayer life. Spend more and better time in God’s Word. Confess your sins and repent of them as the Spirit leads. Step into the yoke with Jesus and let Him lead you through your day, as you grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord.

The more you become like Jesus, the more you will do good like Jesus did.

Finally, keep in mind – and look forward to with joy and anticipation – that Jesus is coming again (v. 13). What a day that will be! The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend in glory, and it will be well with our souls forevermore! Think of how those who have proved their faith in good works will rejoice to hear Jesus say to them, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Think of yourself hearing that, and of the many who might be there with you, hearing the same, because you showed them good works and pointed them to Jesus.

Remember your salvation; work it out daily; and long for the day of your salvation’s consummation at the return of our Lord Jesus. Keep turning these keys into your soul, and the Spirit of God will give you a zeal for good works that will know no end.

Focusing our zeal

We need to focus on cultivating zeal for good works. God wants us to be zealous for good works. Jesus has promised we will do great good works in His Name (Jn. 14:12). The Spirit of God within us is bristling with power to help us do good works at every opportunity.

But unless we are zealous for good works, we won’t be ready when opportunities arise.

To be zealous for *good* works, we need to learn to *bate* those works that are evil, including such forms of passive disobedience as complacency, indifference, and neglect (v. 14). Instead of continuing in *lawless* deeds, we must *work hard* to understand the good works outlined in God’s Law and all His Word. The more God’s good works appear on the radar screen of our soul, the readier we will be to act on them as His Spirit leads and empowers.

And we must embrace this calling to good works as our special privilege from the Lord (v. 14). We are His “own special people”, and part of what makes us special is our ability to do the kinds of works that point to Jesus and glorify God.

Finally, our zeal for good works will increase as we submit to and accept the teaching and equipping of those who love us and do good to us by teaching us the things of Christ and His Word. We must not be stiff-necked against the clear teaching of God’s Word. Rather, let us learn to feed with delight on all the counsel of God in Scripture, so that by such teaching the Spirit of God can form us increasingly into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works. If we are zealous about such works, and working daily to become more zealous, we will fulfill our calling and do good to others as often as we have opportunity.

For reflection

1. Why is it so hard for Christians to be consistent in doing good to others?
2. What are the keys to becoming zealous for good works?
3. What can you do to sharpen your focus on doing good works?

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Next steps – Preparation, Transformation: For the next two days, what will you do to work at becoming more zealous for good works?

3 Equipped for Good Works

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... Ephesians 4.11, 12

Building the Church

Jesus declared His agenda for the last days when He told His disciples that He would build His Church (Matt. 16.18), build it so strong that not even the cleverest counsels of hell could keep it from becoming the “chief among the mountains” of all earthly institutions (Mic. 4.1-8). Paul said that church leaders of all kinds are given to the churches “for the edifying of the body of Christ”. Individual church members are given spiritual endowments by the Holy Spirit to minister for the common good of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.7-11). Building His Church is Jesus’ focus, because His Church is the agency through which the rule and Kingdom of Christ come on earth unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

A local church grows as it increases in the likeness of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4.13-16). The greater the unity and maturity of a church, the more it will express love for God and neighbors in all its activities. Growing in Christlikeness is to be as much the focus of local churches as it is for individual believers. We get misdirected and off track in this matter of building-up the local church when we think primarily in terms of numbers – more attendees, more members, more baptisms, more programs, bigger budgets. All these can exist in a local church, so that outwardly it appears to be very dynamic; but these are not the true indicators of a healthy, growing church. Jesus is not looking primarily for numbers, but for lovers – churches where the love of God is richly and consistently expressed in worship, disciple-making and mission, and believers who love God and their neighbors by doing the good works God has before ordained for them (Eph. 2.10).

Churches grow as individual church members grow in zeal for good works, and do good to others at every opportunity, beginning within the household of faith. In Micah 4.1-8, the prophet envisions a scenario for the last days – the time in which we live, according to Peter (Acts 2.16, 17) – in which many people stream up to the mountain of the Lord’s house, the Old Testament precursor and type of the Church. These people are coming from “many nations”, and they have one common desire: to learn the ways of the Lord, so that they can walk in His paths (Mic. 4.2).

But how does this happen? What alerted these people from many nations to turn to the Church, that they might find there the teaching of God that leads to new life? The prophet tells us: “For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (v. 2). When God’s people, equipped with His Law and all His Word, go forth into their Personal Mission Fields to live and proclaim the Good News of Christ and His Kingdom, the world will respond, and the churches will grow, and not just numerically, but with people from every nation, eager to learn the paths of love from God.

Churches grow in direct proportion to the good works their members do throughout the local community. But such good works do not come naturally to us. If we are to be faithful in doing those good works that build up the church in the love of God’s Law and Word, we must be equipped.

Equipment for good works

What kind of equipment is needed for believers to make the most of every opportunity to do good to people, especially to their fellow believers (Eph. 5.15-17; Gal. 6.9, 10)?

First, of course, we must *know which works are good works*. The works we do for others are not good works just because *we* think they are. *God* defines the true nature of good works, and we must look to Him and His Word to help us understand which works are the works we must learn to do. As we have seen, the Law of

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God is the place to begin, since, as Paul wrote, the Law is “holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7.12). But all the rest of Scripture is given to us as well, so that we might be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17). Scripture can shape our *minds* so that we think with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), and thus will always be ready to do good as opportunities arise.

We must be equipped with the right *knowledge* about which works are good works. But we must also be equipping in our *hearts*, so that the love of God and neighbors is the guiding affection in all we do. It takes love to turn the other cheek, love the unlovely, go the extra mile with someone, initiate friendships, take a genuine interest in a co-worker, and live as a holy sacrifice to God throughout the day. Prayer is the forge in which our affections are all brought together under the tutelage of love.

To love others and work for a loving church, we must have the right *knowledge* and the right *affections*. We must study God’s Law and Word, and we must labor to improve in prayer. But we must also establish doing good works as a defining *priority* of life. We must ask the Lord daily to help us number the times of our lives and embrace the good works He has prepared for us, that we might glorify Him in all we do (Ps. 90.12, 16, 17). Our *conscience* must be set for good works, as well as our *mind* and our *heart*, so that doing good to others becomes increasingly our default disposition.

Our soul being properly equipped – mind, heart, and conscience – we shall then have to acquire those practical skills of conversation, helps, friendship, availability, and more that convey the good works that can bring God glory.

So where do we get such equipping?

Getting equipped

You must begin with your own efforts, making time to grow in the reading and study of God’s Word, increasing in prayer and meditation, and taking up new and unfamiliar skills, like Peter, getting out of the boat to walk on water, eyes fixed on Jesus, trusting solely in His Word. Map out your Personal Mission Field. Begin praying for and getting to know the people who are there. Then search the Scriptures day by day, and plead with God in prayer to learn just the right works to do each day that will touch the people to whom God sends you with His truth and love.

But we must also submit to be equipped for ministries of good works by those whom God has given for such a purpose – pastors, teachers, writers, Bible study leaders, and all the rest. Remember, the word *disciple* means, first of all, *learner*. There’s no end to what we can learn, and God has lavished His Church with all manner of qualified equippers – present and past – whose skills in preaching, teaching, mentoring, writing, and more can help us to acquire the good works we need to reach the souls of others and build the church of our Lord.

You have been begotten again in Christ Jesus to do the good works God beforehand ordained for His glory. Don’t wait around for this to just happen in you. Seek the equipping you need, so that you may become increasingly a vessel for God’s grace and glory to the people to whom He sends you each day.

For reflection

1. Why must we work hard at being equipped for good works?
2. How does doing good works help to build the local church?
3. What can you do to improve the equipment you need for doing good works?

Next steps- Transformation: Assess the state of your “good works equipment.” Where do you need to improve? How might you do so? Set up a plan for continuing to be equipped for good works.

4 Ready for Good Works

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work... Titus 3.1

Missed opportunities

The question arises as to how we may be “ready” for good works when the opportunities arise.

You’ve probably seen the commercial in which a woman is working at her desk, with a soft drink close at hand. A colleague walks by with a healthy, vegetable drink and greets her. She looks up, smacks her forehead and says, “Agh! I could have had a V8!”

Well, why didn’t she? Why, when the opportunity arose to make a choice of refreshment, did she choose the sugar-packed soft drink over the nutritious vegetable drink? We can only speculate, of course, and that’s not my purpose here.

My purpose is to help us think about what is involved in being “ready for every good work” that we may have opportunity to do throughout the course of our day. If we are zealous for good works, good works are what we’ll want to do. If we are equipped to do good works, doing good works will not be beyond our capacity. And if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, Who is at work within us to will and do of God’s good pleasure, we should have everything we need when the opportunity for doing good arises.

Let me make a few suggestions to help you maintain a state of readiness in doing the good works which God has before ordained for us who have come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Meditate on God’s good works

We will be more likely to do good works at every opportunity if our souls are basking in the good works God does for us. The exhortations of Scripture to remember the good works of God are many. Psalm 145 is typical of many other passages. There we are instructed to praise the works of God to others (v. 4). As we think of His works of creation, redemption, provision, providence, and glorification, we are overwhelmed with His greatness, and we praise Him abundantly (vv. 1-3). Meditating on the specific ways God has done good for us will equip us to speak of His works and declare His greatness, goodness, and righteousness (vv. 5-8). Meditating on the good works of God provides substance for praise and conversation (vv. 10-12), and a way to explain the Good News of Christ and His Kingdom (v. 13).

As we meditate on God, we can see Him upholding those who fall, raising those who are burdened and bowed down, providing for the daily bread of all people, and bringing satisfaction and goodness into our lives (vv. 14-16). His works remind us that He is near to us at all times, and ready to respond to our appeals for help (vv. 17-20). God’s works provide the template for ours. As we contemplate Him doing good throughout all the earth (Ps. 33.5), we will begin to see ways that we can fit into *God’s* works with good works *of our own*.

Review in prayer all the many good works Jesus did while He was on earth, and for which He became well known (Acts 10.36-38). Wait on the Lord to teach you how His good works can come to expression through you with the people in your Personal Mission Field. Then pray about the people you will see in the day ahead, and ask God to prepare you with good works that will touch them with the grace of Jesus Christ.

Having our soul inclined to and disposed for doing good begins in meditating on the good works of our God. Do this every day, with praise and rejoicing, and you will be ready for every opportunity for doing good that may arise.

Bonhoeffer, Life Together

In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaches us how to be ready for opportunities to do good to others. We need to work hard at sharpening our focus on God, by reading His Word, meditating on Him and His works, and spending time alone with God, so that we learn to know His Presence with us always. This will help to prepare us for those works of ministry for which we have become equipped.

In his chapter on “Ministry”, Bonhoeffer explains in simple and practical terms how we can become more consistent in doing the good works for which we have been redeemed. First, he writes, we must learn the art of holding our tongues. This is a way to keep evil thoughts from spoiling any opportunities for doing good. He reminds us that the person “who holds his tongue in check controls both mind and body”, and those are key components of a lifestyle of doing good.

Next, Bonhoeffer counsels us to adopt a posture of meekness in every situation: “He who would learn to serve must first learn to think little of himself.” That is, we need to always be focusing on others, listening and observing, and, at the same time, listening to the Lord to lead or prompt us to some good work.

Third, become a good listener: “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.” This is true for all our relationships. Listening shows we care. It can alert us to needs or concerns. And it allows us time to think about the best way to serve.

Improving our skills of listening and observing will allow us to employ the ministry of helpfulness: “This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters.” Looking for ways to be helpful to others will allow us to bear their burdens: “To bear the burden of another person means involvement with the created reality of the other, to accept and affirm it, in bearing with it, to break through to the point where we take joy in it.” We come alongside people, get to know them better, and let them know that we are available in any way they might need help.

Being ready at all times with these good works will earn us the right to talk about the Lord and His love. We must be ready to share a word from the Lord to address people at their point of need: “We are thinking of that unique situation in which one person bears witness in human words to another person, bespeaking the whole consolation of God, the admonition, the kindness, and the severity of God.”

By practicing these disciplines, Bonhoeffer explains, we will be ready at all times to serve others with good works of love. From this will grow a kind of authority which lends weight to all we are, do, and believe in: “Genuine spiritual authority is found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out.”

Look to the Lord, then learn to look and listen to the people to whom the Lord sends you. He will guide and empower to be ready for every good work, whenever opportunities for doing good appear.

For reflection

1. How does meditating on the good works of God help us to be ready for every good work?
2. What’s involved in becoming a good listener? How does being a good listener help us in being ready for good works?
3. What are some ways you might like someone to help you today? Make a list, then go forth into your Personal Mission Field and do those good works for others?

Next steps – Preparation: How will you prepare for doing good works today?

5 Constant in Good Works

And let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful. Titus 3.14

The school of discipleship

In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded His apostles to make all the nations disciples (Matt. 28.18-20). He is building His Church as the forge in and the force through which this great work goes forward (Matt. 16.18). Every local church is charged with three primary tasks which help to shape it into a community of love (Eph. 4.12-16). Churches are to worship God according to the pattern of worship He has revealed in His Word. Churches are to extend the Good News of Christ and His Kingdom, by word and deed, into their community and world. And churches are to make disciples. Only disciples – true followers of Jesus Christ – can worship as God intends, encourage their fellow disciples to love and good works, and be witnesses for Jesus in their Personal Mission Field.

Disciples are learners. What they're learning is Jesus (Eph. 4.17-24), Who was renowned in His day for good works. In our text, Paul says "let our *people* also learn to maintain good works". The Greek word for "make disciples" and "let our *people* learn" is the same word. If we translated Titus 3.14 literally from the Greek, we could say, "let our people be disciplined to maintain good works." Doing good works – those which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.10) – is the goal of the school of discipleship. All Christian teaching and preaching must aim at nurturing disciples in love for God and neighbors (1 Tim. 1.5). We are not learning to be disciples, and we will not grow as disciples of the Lord, if our focus in all we do is something other than to improve in doing good works to God and the people to whom God sends us each day.

We do not attain a life of good works without effort. We must work out our salvation in fear and trembling, because God, Who is at work within us, intends to deploy us in ways that manifest His glory and realize His pleasure in all we do (1 Cor. 10.31; Phil. 2.12, 13). By believing in Jesus and abiding in Him day by day, we may expect to be fruitful in good works (Jn. 14.12; 15.1-17). Being fruitful in good works is the mark of those who are truly abiding in Jesus, learning Jesus, and having Jesus live in His power through them.

But merely *learning* to do good works is not the proof of discipleship Paul intends.

Devoted and striving

Paul instructed Titus not just that the people should *learn* good works, but that they should *learn to maintain* good works. The word here, a form of the Greek προΐστασθαι, *proistasthai*, means "to engage in something with intense devotion – to strive for, to devote oneself to" (Louw and Nida).

Knowing which works are good is a start. We can't *do* good works if we don't *know* which works are good works. Beginning with the Law of God, ranging throughout all of Scripture, and staying focused on Jesus, we can train our souls – heart, mind, and conscience – to know which works are good, and to be ready to do good works when "urgent needs" arise.

But knowing is not enough. We must actually *do* good works. Only they who know what is good and actually do it will realize the blessing God has in store for them (Jms. 1.22-25). The writer of Hebrews reminds us that doing good works of love is the mark of those who are truly saved (Heb. 6.9, 10). If we are saved, our salvation will be accompanied by the good works we are learning from God's Word. If the set of our soul is on doing good works, then we will be more likely to do them as the opportunities arise; and thus we will bear the fruit of abiding in Christ, and give evidence of true and lively faith (Heb. 11.1).

Ready for Good Works

But Paul adds a standard for doing good that all true disciples must seek to achieve. It's not enough to do an occasional good work. Anybody can do that. Or to do good works because you have committed to some program or church structure that channels your efforts for good in some task or other (feeding the poor, teaching the young, whatever). These are important, and we should seek out such opportunities as arenas in which we can bear the fruit of love toward God and our neighbors.

But Paul says that those who are disciples of Jesus Christ must *maintain* good works. As mentioned earlier, this word means "to engage in something with intense devotion – to strive for, to devote oneself to."

In other words, for all who are saved and are disciples of Jesus Christ, doing good works must be our constant focus, daily commitment, and moment-by-moment labor as channels of God's grace to the world.

If we are *zealous* for good works, we will do whatever is necessary to become *equipped* to do them. As we go into our Personal Mission Field *ready* for good works, we will be more likely to undertake the effort, make the sacrifices, and invest the energy needed to *engage* in good works with a *devotion* that marks us as true followers of Jesus Christ. Paul instructed Titus to settle for nothing less.

A contrary devotion

We live in a day when the focus of people's attention is on themselves and their concerns above all else. A "culture of narcissism" (Christopher Lasch) has enveloped our society, and, increasingly, the question people ask about any situation, opportunity, or challenge is "What's in it for me?"

Even Christians get caught up in this. They expect worship to do something for them. If their church doesn't provide programs or music or worship as they like, they'll go somewhere else. Every Bible study has to have something for them. Every sermon must leave them with a good feeling. And nothing in the church – nothing, and especially not any calls to learning or service – must be allowed to interfere with their comfort or convenience.

As long as this is true, we'll never be the kind of people who look out for the needs of others, take the initiative of love and good works, and stay the course of doing good as channels of God's grace. To the extent that this culture of narcissism characterizes our walk with the Lord, we must repent and seek a new heart and a new focus – on God and others. We must work hard at devoting ourselves to being *filled with Jesus* and *emptied of self-interest* so that we can engage in, be devoted to, and strive to do good works at every opportunity, in every situation, with all our soul and strength.

This kind of commitment flies in the face of our narcissistic age, and it may not always be welcomed or appreciated. But we are the people of Jesus Christ, and we are called to be His disciples, by good works, for making disciples of all nations.

For reflection

1. What's the difference between learning about good works and actually engaging in them?
2. What does it mean to abide in Jesus? How does such abiding lead to a fruitful life of good works?
3. Believers are to consider how to encourage one another in love and good works (Heb. 10.24). Whom will you encourage this week?

Next steps – Preparation: Pray for the opportunities you will have to do good today, so that you'll be ready and zealous and fruitful in doing them. Pray the same for your Christian friends.

6 Which Works?

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5.16

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10.31

Ready for good works

We began this series of studies with one driving assumption: All believers have been created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.10). We have been clear that we are not created in Christ Jesus *by* good works, as if salvation were something we could earn. Salvation is ours by the grace of God alone, and it is received by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. And even that is the gift of God (Eph. 2.8, 9).

So we’re not looking at good works as if by doing them we might earn favor with God, or merit saving mercy from Him. We are not saved *by* works, but *unto* them. Good works are the *evidence* of saving faith and the *fruit* of being united with and abiding in Jesus Christ. Every believer should thus be zealous, equipped, and ready for, and constant in good works.

That immediately raised the question, “Which works?” That is, *which* works might we do that are truly the *good* works unto which God has redeemed us? Are they merely whatever works *we* might regard as good? Or that our society and culture might describe as good? Or are they *other* good works?

We saw that the good works for which we have been made new creatures in Christ Jesus are those which God *before ordained* that we should walk in them – before Paul’s day, that is, before he wrote Ephesians 2.10. These are the works of the holy and righteous and good Law of God which, Paul says, is *established* for us by the grace of God as the standard for knowing sin and determining what is good. The Law of God is the acorn to the oak of Scripture, and the rest of Scripture enlarges, elaborates, clarifies, and explains the good works which are found in seed form in the Law.

These good works may be sorted into two categories: works that express love for God, and works that express love for our neighbors. On such good works, Jesus said, hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22.34-40). We must *work out* – not *for* – our salvation in fear and trembling, for as we do, God Who is at work within us by His Holy Spirit fits us to understand and do the works God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Phil. 2.12, 13). We must not grow weary of doing good works (Gal. 6.9), for we are the Lord’s vessels by which His goodness comes to light in the land of the living (2 Cor. 4.7, 15, 16; Ps. 27.13, 14).

Loving God and loving our neighbors are the sum and substance of good works. The more we devote ourselves to God’s Word, give ourselves to prayer, and prepare ourselves to serve God in this world, the more consistent we will be in doing the good works for which we have been redeemed.

And as we do, we will shine like lights in a world of darkness, and will bring glory and honor and praise to our God and Savior.

For the glory of God

In every good work for which we prepare, become equipped, nurture zeal, make ready, and seek to be constant in, our prayer must at all times be, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your Name give glory” (Ps. 115.1). People who experience our good works, whether by word or deed, should know that they have been reached and wrought upon by the grace of God. They should sense from us a genuineness, a sincerity, and a hope that resonates with the longings of their heart, but which is all too uncommon in their experience.

Ready for Good Works

We won't have to say much to effect this result. A simple "God bless you" or "I'll be praying for you" or "Thanks be to God" will go far to deflect any attention or merit off ourselves, and to direct credit to God, Who guides, empowers, prompts, and moves us for good works. In due course, such a consistent referring upward of credit will open opportunities for longer and more detailed explanations, and for helping others either to be strengthened in the Gospel or to hear it for perhaps the first time.

We want our good works to shine in the darkness of uncertainty, fear, loneliness, unbelief, and sin. But we do not blare them in people's faces; rather, we want the light of Christ's love to glow in our works and to warm those who benefit from them with the comforting Presence of the Lord Himself.

And all our works, even the most everyday and seemingly insignificant, have the potential for bringing glory to God.

Whatever you do

Or so the apostle Paul teaches. We must believe that it can be so, that even those ordinary daily tasks, those fleeting conversations, passing greetings, aids and helps, words of affirmation and encouragement – all of these have the potential to touch the soul of another and turn their attention to God.

We must not limit the good works for which we have been saved to those programs and activities sponsored by our local churches or other ministries. Truly, we need all the good works these entities can organize and carry out.

Nor must we limit our thinking about good works to those extraordinary, out-of-the-way, go-the-extra-mile good works that sometimes open up before us; we must be ready for these as well, and not in the least reluctant to take them on.

But much more than either of these do we need the everyday, ordinary, done-as-unto-the-Lord works that reach people where they are and buoy them with the touch of Jesus' love. Each of us has abundant opportunities for doing good to people every day, and thus to become agents of the grace of God into the world, filling it with the fragrance of Jesus and the glory of God. We must prepare well, walk circumspectly, and reach out as often as we can; for as we do, our heavenly Father gets the glory and praise – if only from us – that He deserves, and for which He has saved us through His own Son.

And we must not grow weary, never give up, nor ever think that any of our labors, thus engaged for God's glory, will ever be in vain.

For reflection

1. What are you doing to improve your readiness for doing good works each day?
2. What are the greatest obstacles that can keep you from letting your good works shine in the world? How can you overcome these?
3. How can believers "consider" and "stimulate" one another to love and good works (Heb. 10.24)?

Next steps – Transformation: Review the studies in this series. Where do you need to improve in being zealous, ready, and constant in good works?

7 Greater Works than These

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.” John 14.12-14

Greater works than these?

This has to rank as one of the verses most difficult to believe in all of Scripture. Its focus is “whoever believes” in Jesus – that would include you and me. It instructs us to do the works that Jesus did, works which we can easily trace through His earthly sojourn in the gospels. And it promises that we will do *greater works* even than those Jesus did, because He is going to the Father, and from the Father’s right hand He will give us the Kingdom in the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Which works should you be doing as a follower of Jesus Christ? The same works Jesus did. What standard for doing good works does Jesus hold out to you? “Greater works than these”.

How can that be?

“Because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do *it*.”

James reminds us that we have not because we ask not (Jms. 4.2). Paul says that power is at work within us – the power of the Holy Spirit, sent from Jesus and the Father – is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3.20). Perhaps the reason we have such difficulty believing Jesus and His promise that we will do greater works than He did is that we have not yet dared to *think* that way, much less to *ask* God for His power to work through us for good works, following the teaching and promise of the Lord.

Calvin was right when he wrote, “Many are perplexed by the statement of Christ, that the Apostles [and we as their spiritual descendants] *would do greater works than He had done*” (*Commentary on John 14.12*). We just don’t see how this can be so.

How can we possibly hope to obey this instruction and realize this great promise?

Aim for the same

We have to begin our obedience of this Word where Jesus did: “the works that I do he will do”. What works did Jesus do? He did works of love for God and for His neighbors, beginning with His friends. He did the works which the Law and the Prophets explained, those acts of daily obedience that enrich our love for God and express our love for the people around us.

We must seek to do the works Jesus did, and this means becoming ever-increasingly more familiar with the teaching of all God’s Word about which works are the good works we, following Jesus’ example, must seek to do each day.

Don’t get hung up on the unlikelihood of your healing a leper or raising someone from the dead. These are works unique to Jesus in His Person, place, and time. You have works to do which are unique to you in your person, place, and time. But like the works of Jesus, your good works will be shaped by the Word of God, and the more you learn about those good works – becoming equipped, zealous, and ready to do them – the more constant you will be in doing the works that Jesus did.

Ready for Good Works

So aim to do the same works Jesus did. Make it a matter of daily prayer and creative seeking to discover new ways to do good works to others. This is what Jesus did. Everybody knows that! And Jesus said, “the works that I do”, all who believe in Him must do as well. Jesus became renowned for good works, known to all as One Who was reliably, consistently, and powerfully ready and constant in doing good to others.

Make that you aim as well.

And the “greater than these”?

The Greek word *μείζονα*, *meizonna*, “greater”, has the sense of “more” or “larger than.” Jesus was not thinking *qualitatively* at this point, but *quantitatively*. And it’s quite likely that He intended His disciples, and us as their spiritual descendants, to think of ourselves as one family, one body – the body of Christ. If we understand Jesus in this way, then it’s quite clear that the body of Christ down through the ages – the Church of our Lord – has indeed accomplished more numerous and varied good works than Jesus was able to do while He was on earth. But God’s people have not accomplished these good works on their own, and we will not be able to accomplish any good works whatsoever without, first, knowing which works are good works, and then relying on the means Jesus has provided for us to greater works than He did.

Those means are the Spirit of God and prayer. When we pray, we must seek the Lord according to His will, in the pursuit of His glory and the glory of God the Father (v. 13), and in line with what we have learned from Him about which works are the good works He is looking for in us. We pray in Jesus’ Name not just by ending our prayer with that default phrase, but by making sure our requests line up with what He teaches and what will glorify both Jesus and His Father. When we pray this way, we can know that *Jesus will do* what we have asked, and He will do it by His Spirit at work within us.

So we rely on the Spirit to equip and empower us for good works. As He bears fruit in us, and fits us with gifts for ministry and power to be witnesses for Jesus, the Spirit works within us to make us willing and able to do that which is pleasing to God (Phil. 2.13; cf. Ezek. 36.26, 27). We must therefore seek to be filled with the Spirit, rather than any lesser interests or concerns (Eph. 5.18-21). We must walk in the Spirit and not in the ways of the flesh (Gal. 5.16-23). And we must nurture the mind of the Spirit so that we love and plan for and carry out by faith those good works which are consistent with His instruction and ends (Rom. 8.5-9).

All of which should create in us an *expectation* of good works – that we *will have opportunities* for doing good; that we will *be able to know which works are good works*; that as opportunities arise, we will be *eagerly disposed to do good works*; and that the good works we do will enable us to thank and praise our God and to bring honor to Jesus and our heavenly Father.

The psalmist reminds us that the goodness of God is in all the earth (Jer. 33.5), and this includes the goodness He manifests through the “greater than these” good works of His people – you and me and all those who believe in Jesus. May God richly bless and use us all for His glory as we abound in good works of love in all we do.

For reflection or discussion

1. How can we know which works are the good works Jesus expects us to do?
2. What is the role of prayer in a life of good works?
3. How can our good works glorify Jesus and the Father?

Next steps – Transformation: Pray daily that God will make you zealous, equipped, ready, and constant in good works, to the glory of Jesus and the Father.

Ready for Good Works

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What does it mean to be *zealous* for good works? How can someone become more zealous for good works?
2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to do good works?
3. What can you do to become more alert to the opportunities for doing good works that are presented to you each day?
4. Christians are commanded to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works (Heb. 10.24) What does that involve?
5. How would you explain to a new believer what it means to have been created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2.10)?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.