

Full of Good Works

1 Kings 18:1–15; Acts 9:36–39

Today our church received two fine young men as communicant members. As they took their vows, we heard Jacob and John solemnly promise, among other things, that they would *serve God* and *lead a godly life*. Many of us have taken these vows as well. It is worth asking, how *do* we serve God and lead a godly life? We do that by being full of the good works that are pleasing to God, as was Dorcas.

The phrase *good works* occurs only in the New Testament, where it is found 16 times. The phrase *good work* (singular) occurs another 12 times, as well as once in the Old Testament. It is not as though there are no good works in the Old Testament, for its pages certainly describe many good works, such as Obadiah's heroic actions in hiding and providing food for 100 of the Lord's prophets when wicked queen Jezebel was using the power of the state to carry out a campaign of slaughter against the religion of Yahweh. Can you imagine the effort it would take to feed 100 people hiding for their lives in two separate caves out in the wilderness? A neighbor of ours used to be the head chef in a large hotel; he sometimes fed crowds of hundreds, but he had a large, well-equipped staff to help him do it, and the task was aided by vendors and suppliers and truckers who backed up their large trailers against the hotel's loading dock, as well as an unseen number of farmers, ranchers and butchers who provided the food. But feeding the Lord's prophets was just a side job for Obadiah. His day job was serving as governor of the house of Ahab, king of Samaria. This was Ahab who was married to wicked Jezebel, who was carrying out the slaughter of Lord's prophets. How ironic that the man who dedicated himself to preserve these godly men was employed by the very woman who was trying to destroy them! By the way, so there's no confusion, this was not the same Obadiah who wrote the little Old Testament book that bears his name. The name Obadiah means *servant of the Lord*. It was a common Old Testament name; Easton's Bible Dictionary lists ten different Obadiahs. By the way, children, there is nothing more honorable than being a servant of the Lord—nothing! And I don't mean paid service like being employed as a pastor. Serving the Lord is for us all: "Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing."

Our New Testament text this morning has a remarkable phrase that occurs just this one time in the entire Bible. Fittingly, it is the title of our sermon: "Full of Good Works." As Acts 9 draws to a close we are introduced to a woman "full of good works."

When we are introduced to someone new, it is helpful to learn a unique quality about that person, to help us remember him. Perhaps it's an occupation; most of us could identify who is the builder, the lawyer, the I.T. guy, the retired nurse, the

professor, the millwright, the real estate agent, the homeschooling mom in our congregation. Or maybe it's a special interest: the MSU fan, the concealed-carry guy, the video game programmer, the piano player. Hopefully, *all* of us would like to be known as "Christian"—a committed follower of Christ. Here in our text we are introduced to a woman who was "full of good works." She was a servant of the Lord, and she didn't get paid for it.

Ironically, we are introduced to the woman just after she had *died*—perhaps the only time in the whole Bible this ever happens—but of course that is not the end of her; in the ensuing verses we will discover that she is raised to life by the power of Christ. The best is yet to come! Let's look at her story. Dr. Luke writes,

"At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was *full of good works* and charitable deeds which she did." Tabitha was an Aramaic name for a girl or woman. Luke gives its interpretation as Dorcas, a Greek name. Both Tabitha and Dorcas mean *roe*, or *doe*—a graceful female deer, antelope or gazelle (the word is still in use with that meaning in modern Greek). The fact that Luke gives both her Aramaic and Greek names suggests that Dorcas was a Hellenist Jew, that is a Jewish woman who spoke Greek.

Remember how chapter six began with the words "in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." The Hellenists were Jews who spoke Greek. From the time of Abraham the true religion—belief in Yahweh, the God of heaven—had predominated among the Jews, but because of the conquests of Alexander the Great and others, there were Greek-speaking communities in the Holy Land. The apostle Paul would later write that the gospel of Christ is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the *Jew* first, and also to the *Greek*" (Rom. 1:16). Thank God that the gospel—the good news of Christ—is *universal*; it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. You don't have to be from a particular people group to obtain salvation; you just have to be *human*; the good news of Christ is offered to men, women, boys and girls of every tribe, tongue and nation—praise his name!

So here's a woman. Her Jewish name is Tabitha, and her Greek name is Dorcas. She has the distinction of being the only person in the Bible who is specifically said to be "full of good works." She is also the only person in the Bible who is called *μαθήτρια*, a special term for a woman disciple. Dorcas was a Greek-speaking Jew who, unlike many of the Jewish leaders, embraced Jesus as the Messiah. She recognized Jesus for who he was—the Messiah of Israel. She was a Christian—a believer in Jesus the Christ. And she was "full of good works."

Now there were others as well of whom the same could be said—surely Obadiah in our Old Testament text is one. And preeminent among them all would be the Lord Jesus Christ, who “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38)—that is, doing good works.¹ The expression in the original implies that Jesus’ whole life was involved in doing the good works that please our gracious God. Yes, Jesus, too, was full of good works, but it is Dorcas who is specifically so described. Dorcas, a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian—and a woman. Here is a woman who is a credit to her sex. Often it is women, because of their focus in bringing up and nurturing the new generation, who are full of good works. Norma and I have certainly been the beneficiaries of the labors of the women of our church as she faces knee replacement surgery tomorrow—women who have sent meals that could be heated up and eaten. I can certainly testify what a blessing this has been to a man who only a year or so ago never did anything in the kitchen except put away the silverware when Norma unloaded the dishwasher. Now I have learned to make a couple basic recipes, but when I can pull a home-cooked meal out of the freezer, warm it in the microwave and bring a delicious hot dinner to the table, thanks to the good works of loving women, that has been a tremendous blessing. And I have never once asked anyone for help, but the women of our church sensed the need and rose up to meet it, asking nothing for their services.

But preparing and sending meals is not the only good work. Others have used other skills—keeping good financial records for the church, piano playing, Sunday school teaching, coming over early to help prepare for hosting women’s Bible study, praying, calling on the phone to see how we’re doing, sending cards and letters, coming over to our home to offer practical help. All of these and more have been a tremendous blessing to our family in our time of need, and we are profoundly grateful.

What kind of good works characterized the life of Dorcas? We learn from our text that when Peter arrived, he was brought to an upper room. “All the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them.” Dorcas was a seamstress. That was her special gift. She sewed tunics and garments for needy widows. Apparently it was something she enjoyed doing, something she was good at. Being a seamstress, especially in the days before sewing machines, was not easy work, but it was a necessity. The Bible says that “having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8). Jesus taught, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matt. 6:31–32). Isn’t that amazing! Here we are, living in the computer age, with nuclear warheads and jet

¹ εὐεργετῶν (“doing good”)—a verb (present participle) implying continuous action

travel, and disposable diapers; and human beings still need such basic things as food, clothing and drinking water! How do these things get provided? They can be purchased by those who can afford them. But some people cannot afford them, either because of poverty, or because a family emergency is filling up all their time, and they cannot for the moment provide them for themselves. And make no mistake: the God of heaven did not set up a giant welfare state with a huge bureaucracy to help his people. No! The divine solution is much more localized, involving men and women in congregations of his people, desiring to live a life of good works in obedience to his will, observing needs and rising to the occasion to meet those needs. It is a perfect, divinely-ordained solution to the basic needs of mankind, and if all God's people stop lobbying the government to grow bigger and take over more responsibilities and do more, and instead endeavor each one to live a simple life of good works, then it *works*—it's effective, it gets the job done. Do we believe it? Can we really trust God's plan to work? O dear people of God, trust the words of our Lord—you can take them to the bank—"your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." Say them with me: "Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." Once again: "Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." Will God be faithful to his promise? You know he will!

So here is the story about a simple woman—Tabitha, Dorcas, a graceful roe or gazelle. She wasn't a government official, she wasn't a church officer. She held no public office. She was a simple person who loved to sew, and she was good at it. She saw a need—poor widows around her who were destitute, who had no husband to support them, who had no prospects for remarriage, some who had children dependent upon them. They were in need of clothing. There was no Walmart. There were no credit cards. There were no government welfare programs. But there was Dorcas, a woman who used her limited means, her love for Christ and her hobby of sewing to do the Lord's work. She dedicated herself to the Lord and she sat down to sew. She spent many long hours at the task. No doubt there were other women in the congregation who donated cloth or thread or sewing needles. Maybe there were young women or girls that she trained to help, too. Hers was not a glamorous, exciting work, but it was necessary. Our heavenly Father knows that his children need to be clothed and fed. He promises to care for us. He has staked his whole reputation on it. And his plan works! It doesn't require a large bureaucracy. It's low-tech, decentralized. Power-grabbers don't like it, Bolsheviks don't like it, tyrants don't like it. They see it as competition for the state. Their goal is to enslave a population. On the other hand, Dorcas don't hog the limelight, they just get to work and help. Their goal is not high-sounding talk, but practical good deeds. And some of them get so absorbed in what they are doing that, without knowing it, they become "*full* of good works." Maybe they don't even realize it.

Maybe they, like the Dorcas in the Bible, will only be recognized for all they good they have done, after their deaths, when the poor widows of this world will realize all that their departed benefactress has meant to them. But our heavenly Father takes notice; he promises that those who have labored in his service will *not* lose their reward—praise his holy name!

And good works are not just for women. There are men in our congregation who will help a woman with managing their finances, planning for the future, fixing things around the home, hauling things away, hosting a family for a meal. These, too, are good works that please the Lord.

As we seek to apply this Scripture, let us consider four points: (1) What are good works? (2) What is the relationship between faith and works? (3) What is being “full of” good works? (4) How can I become full of good works? First,

1. What are good works?

What are good works? They are a regenerated person’s outward actions or deeds, in contrast to inner qualities such as faith.² In other words, good works are the living out of a person’s faith. They are what the Westminster Confession of Faith calls “the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.”³

An unregenerate person (that is, a person who is dead in sins, unconverted, who has not been born again by God’s Holy Spirit) can *not* do good works in the biblical sense. He cannot! Yet some unconverted persons surpass Christians in doing good deeds. Yet the Westminster Confession of Faith observes (I’m paraphrasing now) that though works done by the unconverted may in themselves be things that God commands and that benefit society, yet—because they do not come from a heart of faith, and are not done for the right purpose, which is to glorify God—they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God.⁴ I have a neighbor who for the past several winters, every time it snows, without being asked, comes over to clear and salt my walks and driveway. He was out there early this morning doing it. I am very grateful for his labors and seek to show my gratitude by taking over a pie or some special cookies. Why does he do it? He’s never said, but perhaps he sees that I’m an old guy and he doesn’t want me to fall over and die from a heart attack. What he does is very kind and charitable. He’ll never get an income tax write-off for it. He doesn’t want money. Outwardly, what he does is a good work. But he doesn’t confess Christ. He’s a great neighbor—I couldn’t have a better neighbor. He, like me, is a sinner in need of Christ, but he hasn’t recognized

² Adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_works

³ WCF 16.2

⁴ Adapted from the Modern English Study Version of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.7, https://opc.org/documents/MESV_frames.html

his need. The Bible commands, “whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord”⁵—*whatever* you do, everything you do. “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”⁶ “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”⁷ Brothers and sisters, your neighbor may be the nicest person around. She might win the award for Miss Congeniality. But unless she is born again by God’s Holy Spirit, she is inherently selfish, incapable of loving God. It is contrary to her nature to do things for the Lord, in the name of the Lord Jesus, with a heart of thankfulness to God the Father. She is incapable of doing all to the glory of God. She lives for self, not for Christ, so her good works are as filthy rags in the sight of a holy God. Her good works will not save her on the day of judgment. Secondly, consider,

2. What is the relationship between faith and works?

This is a very important question. A lot of bad theology is the result of failure to understand this correctly. Turn with me to a key text, Ephesians 2:8–10 (p. 618 in your pew Bible). Here we read, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Note the pattern: *by* grace, *through* faith, *for* good works. Memorize that! Say it with me: *by* grace, *through* faith, *for* good works; once again: *by* grace, *through* faith, *for* good works. The apostle Paul clearly says that we are saved *through* faith. *By* and *through* are essentially the same; the big difference is *for*. A sinner is saved *for* (or *unto*) good works. A sinner is saved by faith for the purpose of doing good works that glorify God. Dorcas’s good work of sewing clothing for the needy, since it was done in the name of the Messiah Jesus, glorified God. Was it a perfect work? Was it done with perfect motivation? No. We all fall short. But since it was done out of a heart of faith, for the glory of the Lord, it was accepted through the mediation of the only Mediator between God and man. Just as “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness,” so Dorcas believed God, and it was accounted to her for righteousness. And the good works that she did, flowed from her true and lively faith.

Are we saved because of our good works? No. And neither was Dorcas. Her good works flowed out of her faith. Are we saved *without* good works? No, for good works are the fruit and evidence of a true and lively faith. A tree is known by its fruit. An apple tree brings forth apples, a grapefruit tree brings forth grapefruit.

⁵ Col. 3:23

⁶ Col. 3:17

⁷ 1 Cor. 10:31

A pear tree brings forth pears. A fig tree brings forth figs. What's true in the natural world is true in the spiritual world. If a person has a true and lively faith in Jesus Christ, that faith is going to produce fruit—the fruit of good works. Faith without works is dead. If there are no God-glorifying fruit in a person's life, then his or her faith is dead. Thirdly,

3. What is being “full of” good works?

Remember that Lydia is the only person in the Bible who is said to be “full of good works.” Her good works are said to have been “charitable deeds.” She did not do them for applause or recognition, she did them for her Master, Jesus Christ. And she was full of them! Apparently, doing them gave her pleasure. There was joy in serving Jesus. When she got up in the morning she said, “This is the day which the Lord hath made—another day to serve him.” She washed, dressed and ate her breakfast quickly, so she could get started on her sewing. Perhaps another widow was due to come that day for a fitting, or to pick up a finished garment. She loved her work, and did it for God's glory. She was “full of” good works. Lastly,

4. How can I become full of good works?

Have a strong faith in God. Fortify yourself in God's word. Pray through the Scriptures—personalize them, pray that God would help you grow in love and obedience. Cry out to God, “God, I want to glorify you, I want to bring forth fruit for you, I want to excel in the good deeds that glorify you. I do not want merely to exist, to take up space on this earth, to live only for myself. I see that your purpose for me is *fruitfulness*. I do not want to have a dead faith. I want—I desire more than anything else—to have a lively faith, a faith that shows itself to be alive. I don't want to be a tree that has just one measly fruit on its branches. I want to *teem* with truth. I want fruit to the full.”

My daughter and son-in-law have an apple tree in their backyard that brings forth huge amounts of apples every summer—so many that their large family cannot possibly eat them all themselves. After all, a family can only eat just so many fresh apples, so many apple pies, so many mason jars of applesauce. They have to *give* them away—hand them out to extended family, give them as gifts to friends, give them to the poor. Such is how God wants us to be in the spiritual realm. A tree is known by its fruit.

James says that “faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:20). A dead faith cannot save. It is worse than worthless. A faith without works gives the false impression that everything is OK between the sinner and God, that because he went forward in an evangelistic meeting, and prayed the sinner's prayer, and asked God to save him, his sins are forgiven and he is on his way to heaven. But if a person feels no love for God, if he still loves his sin and is unwilling to repent of it and forsake it, if he lives only for self and closes his eyes to his suffering neighbor—and he's OK with that—then his is a dead faith that's worth than worthless. His dead faith is like

a vaccination that gives him just a little bit of religiosity and keeps him from getting the real thing, a true heart for God and a desire to take up his cross daily and follow Christ.

We have considered four points: (1) What are good works? (2) What is the relationship between faith and works? (3) What is being “full of” good works? (4) How can I become full of good works? May each of us learn to be full of good works.

Jacob and John, today you have taken vows, solemnly promising, among other things, that you would “serve” God and “lead a godly life.” Others in the congregation have taken the same vows. To all of you I would remind you that the way you can serve God and lead a godly life is to live a life full of good works, that is, to use the opportunities God sovereignly brings into your life to serve him, as Dorcas did, by helping others. May he give us grace to do just that.