

Why We Do What We Do

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Titus 3:1-8a (Good News Translation) ¹Remind your people to submit to rulers and authorities, to obey them, and to be ready to do good in every way. ²Tell them not to speak evil of anyone, but to be peaceful and friendly, and always to show a gentle attitude toward everyone. ³For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, and wrong. We were slaves to passions and pleasures of all kinds. We spent our lives in malice and envy; others hated us and we hated them. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior was revealed, ⁵he saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us. ⁶God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for. ⁸This is a true saying. I want you to give special emphasis to these matters, so that those who believe in God may be concerned with giving their time to doing good deeds, which are good and useful for everyone.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our good deeds don't earn us God's love; they confirm that we live in God's love.

Today we heard a brief excerpt from the apostle Paul's letter to his protégé Titus. This letter gives us a behind-the-scenes look at how Paul guided Titus in his first missionary assignment. He had assigned Titus to help the fledgling Christian church on Mediterranean island of Crete. Then in this letter Paul gave Titus a specific plan for that church: he wanted Titus to give "special emphasis" to encouraging the believers to give their "time to doing good deeds."¹

What's so special about that? Isn't it natural that God-loving people should focus on carrying out good works that benefit others?

In Paul's mind, what was special was the *reason* for carrying out good deeds. As you can imagine, sometimes good deeds are done with ulterior motives:

- seeking to impress;
- trying to get on someone's good side;
- angling to get something in return.

In other words, some good deeds are done with the express purpose of trying to gain something.

Among the pagan religions of Paul's day it was commonly understood that one did good deeds in order to please or appease the gods. You hoped that your offerings and deeds would persuade the deities to bless you rather than neglect you or, even worse, punish you. The new Christian converts in Crete would be accustomed to making offerings and performing good deeds in order to curry the favor of the gods.

Paul knew that we don't have to curry God's favor. By coming among us in Jesus, God had deemed us already worthy, already acceptable in God's eyes. The challenge, Paul realized, was to help these new Christians discover that they didn't need to try to earn God's favor; God had taken the initiative and already deemed us acceptable and, indeed, beloved. In Titus Chapter 3 Paul stated what scholars view as "one of the clearest statements in all the Bible that... God's saving purpose is wholly at the initiative of God"² Hear again those words from verses 4 through 7:

⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior was revealed, ⁵he saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of [God's] own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us. ⁶God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so

¹ Titus 3:8a Good News Translation

² New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI. Nashville: Abington Press, 2000, p. 876b

that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for.

Why do we do *what* we do? We don't need good deeds to earn us God's love. Good deeds are not at the *root* of earning God's love; they're not the *root* but the *fruit* of God's love at work in us. The good things we do are a sign that God's love is prompting us to try to surrender our self-centeredness and live in way that *shows* that we belong to God.

So for Christians *then* on the isle of Crete and for Christians *here* on the banks of Lake Erie, the good deeds we do are our way of proclaiming who we are: grateful recipients of God's undeserved, all-encompassing love. So for example:

- Why do we gather for worship? Not to beg for God's love; God loved us before we even knew what love is. We worship not to get something out of God; we worship to show our joy in being God's beloved children – it's who we are.
- Or why do we volunteer time and spend money for food for a community meal every quarter? We didn't provide that free meal to the community last Thursday as a way of luring people into our church building so we could hit them up for money or try to guilt them into becoming affiliated with our church. No, we offered that free meal as a signal to the community that God has blessed us with love. Because we are blessed, we are moved to provide strangers and friends alike with fellowship and nourishment – it's who we are.
- What about VBS? We provide the experience of Vacation Bible School every summer not to raise money, or to lure people to this church from other churches. We invest countless volunteer hours and some funds into staging a Vacation Bible School each year because we want to share the gospel with the littlest, youngest disciples – helping them learn at an early age that they, too, are loved unconditionally by a mighty, gentle, understanding, compassionate God. We share the good news of God's love because that's who we are: children loved by the Heavenly Father.

I could go on:

- Our annual Charity Bazaar offered as an alternative to society's commercialized Christmas – we stage that because encouraging charity signals to our community that we serve a loving and generous God.
- Our Presbyterian Women-sponsored Trash & Treasure Sale doesn't generate funds to enrich this congregation; you know that we give away all the proceeds. The countless good deeds that come together to produce that event are evidence that God's love for us inspires us to serve others.

Why do we do what we do? Because we are already, unconditionally loved by God – that's who we are. That was Paul's strategy for the Christians in Crete: to show the world around them that their loving and merciful God motivated them to live lives characterized by good works.

A quick look at the calendar reminds us that we are now – finally! – in the long-awaited summer season. Family vacations will take some of us away from this church for periods of time. And of course, the Sabbatical Summer that starts next week will have me away from this church for an extended time. But summer travel or a pastor's sabbatical are no reason for us to ease up on the gas when it comes to doing good deeds. Over the summer doing good deeds to show that we serve a loving and merciful God could send an even stronger message to those who will visit our church this summer and to the communities we live in:

- good deeds like participating in the monthly mission projects staged by our Mission Committee;
- good deeds as simple as offering a smile and greeting to people visiting our church this summer, and perhaps resolving to introduce yourself to a fellow worshiper who you don't know;
- a good deed like inviting a good friend to experience your church with you some Sunday.

In Crete way back then and in Rocky River today, we don't do the good works we do because of something we're trying to gain; the good works we do are a sign of who we are: undeserving but grateful recipients of God's gracious and generous and abundant love. As another New Testament letter proclaims, "We love because God first loved us."³

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³ 1 John 4:19 Good News Translation