



Zealous for Good Works: New Life Comes First Titus 3:3-8

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INTRODUCTION

If you consider yourself a Christian, I have a question for you. Why are you different? Why are you different from your coworkers? Why are you different from your siblings or parents? Why are you different from your neighbors? If you're still exploring the faith, answer the question for a Christian friend. What makes them different?

To quote Titus 3:1-2, why are the people of God characterized by submission to authority, readiness to do good, and a refusal to speak evil? Why do we pursue what makes for peace in relationships instead of insisting on our own rights? Why do we consider the needs of others more important than our own? Why is your Christian friend joyful, even when life is hard or generous, even when money is tight? Why are they faithful, even when their spouse is unavailable? What makes them different?

May we never answer, "Because we go to church, read our Bible every day, grew up in a Christian home, found a religion that works for us, or happen to be a really nice person." May we always answer with the only true answer. I am different, you are different, we are different, because God, in the greatness of his mercy, imparted spiritual life to our souls! There are no self-made Christians. We are a company of once dead hearts whom the Holy Spirit has made gloriously alive.

Ezekiel 37:13-14, "And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live...I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

The world is filled with people who would say they are trying to be good, to be kind, to pay it forward, to listen to their better angels, or practice good karma. A Christian is not a religious version of that sort of person. A Christian is an entirely different kind of person, a person where new behavior on the outside is the overflow of new life on the inside. **Good works don't come first. New life comes first.**



The transformation doesn't start with something you do for God. It starts with something God does for you, or rather, something God does in you. He imparts a

new principle of spiritual life in your soul effecting a change that's so radical, so complete, it's described as being born again. 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

The Apostle Paul's letter to Titus exhorts us to be a people who are devoted to good works. But the Lord is jealous that we do not forget why that's the case and what makes good works possible. He doesn't want a believer in 1st century Crete or 21st century RVA to think, "I'm different because I'm better or I'm better because I'm different." No! **New behavior on the outside begins with new life on the inside** and that new life is God's work, God's doing, God's gift from beginning to end.

To undercut all self-righteousness, to make sure we know not just how to be different but why we are different, Paul turns our attention in Titus 3:3-8 to the story of the gospel, a story he tells in three parts. Part 1: We need a Savior, Part 2: Jesus is our Savior, Part 3: Faith in Jesus creates devotion to good works. We'll spend less time on points 1 and 3, and most of our time on point 2.

1) WE ALL NEED A SAVIOR (verse 3)

Look at verse 3. "For we ourselves were once foolish," Paul writes. He's not talking about raw intelligence. You can be the smartest person in the room and still be a fool. To be a fool is to live in a way that's inconsistent with the truth. If wisdom is the art of living skillfully in God's world, folly is living as if God is not there at all. As if it's my world and whatever I choose to make of it.

Notice Paul isn't describing really bad people who show up in history books or the evening news. He's talking about every Christian, himself included. And he uses not one but two first person plural pronouns in verse 3 to make the point even stronger. "WE OURSELVES were once foolish."

He's not just talking about what we do or that we all make mistakes. He is not just saying that no one's perfect. He's talking about who we are, our fundamental identity from conception. "We ourselves WERE once foolish." Image-bearers of God? Yes. But from a moral perspective, we're fools. And our folly plays out in three directions.



First, we're "disobedient". Our relationship toward God is characterized by a refusal to submit to his authority. **Second, we're "led astray."** Our relationship toward the world and the Prince of this world is characterized by deception. We

think we're chasing our best life now when we're actually running headlong toward death. **Third, we're "slaves to various passions and pleasures."** We are ruled by every whim of desire. What do I want? What would feel good right now? We're mastered by the flesh instead of our Creator.

Fourth, we spend our days "in malice and envy." We crave the material goods other people have and get angry when we don't get what we think we deserve. Conflict, strife, and hatred are the name of the game. We tell ourselves we're not so bad. We think of ourselves as generally loving, but we only love those who love us. Our folly runs deeper than what we do. It's who we are.

If you are a Christian, verse 3 no longer describes your fundamental identity. Do you still sin? Yes. 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But do you remain a fool at the core of who you are? No. You're a new creation. You're a saint – a saint who still sins, but a saint nonetheless. The word "Once" in verse 3 is critical. To say, "We once were foolish," indicates we are such no longer, and why verses 4-7 go on to celebrate the wonder of our new identity in Christ.

But don't miss the point of verse 3. Friend, if you're a Christian, do not stop remembering who you once were apart from Christ. We all like to think of ourselves as basically good people. Why is the world so messed up? It's not my fault. It's yours! Anyone's but mine! I'm one of the good guys. I'm on the right side of history.

Thank you, God, that I'm not like other men! Those other guys vaping in the bathroom. Those other employees who cheat on their time sheets. Those other parents who let their kids watch whatever they want. I'm a good Christian. I live in America. I pay my taxes. I cut my neighbor's grass. I go to church on Sunday morning. The world would be such a better place if more people were like me.

Brothers and sisters, "For we ourselves were once foolish." Do not think for a moment that you come from morally superior stock. We all need a Savior. We all need someone who can rescue us from ourselves and the divine judgment we deserve on account of our sin. Psalms 53:2-3, "God looks down from heaven on



the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”

2) JESUS IS OUR SAVIOR (verses. 4-7)

Verses 4-7 are a single, glorious sentence, and the main subject and verb are found at the beginning of verse 5. What did God do in response to our folly, disobedience, deception, slavery, malice, envy, and hatred? “He saved us.” What did we deserve from God? Condemnation. What have we received from God? Salvation.

Only the Lord can rescue you from yourself, friend. Getting back to church cannot save you. Trying to be a better parent cannot save you. Making more money this year than you made last year cannot save you. Getting promoted to a more selective sports team cannot save you. Jesus is the Savior we need! And in verses 4-7, Paul helps us to grasp the fullness of the salvation Jesus provides by summarizing the motive, the basis, the means, and the purpose of God’s salvation.

A) CONSIDER GOD’S MOTIVE

What would you expect would appear in response to the mess of verse 3? What would you expect to receive from a God who is “Of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13)? Who is “High and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy” (Isa 57:15)? Divine justice. Righteous judgment. Certain death. None would have cause to find fault with the Almighty if that were all that appeared in response to sin.

The contrast between who we are verse 3 and who God is in verse. 4 could not be greater! Verse 4, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us...” The wonder of the gospel is that the last thing we deserved is the very thing that appeared. The Eternal Son of God broke into human history as God incarnate, God in human flesh.

When the person of the Son of God appeared, the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared. What did Simeon say in Jerusalem when Joseph and Mary brought the child Jesus into the temple? Luke 2:29-30, “Lord, now you



are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation..."

The gold standard, the definitive display of God's goodness and loving kindness in your life is not the house, spouse, wealth, or health God has given you. It's the person and work of Jesus Christ. Which means we are not waiting for God's goodness. We are not holding out for God's loving kindness. We have received the supreme expression of God's goodness and loving kindness. When Jesus appeared, the goodness and loving kindness of God appeared!

Take care, my friend, that you do not hold God hostage to what has appeared in your life lately. Has illness or suffering appeared? Has conflict or disappointment appeared? They are real but they are not alone. Something else has also appeared. The goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior has appeared.

No one forced his hand or guilted him into doing it. He delighted to save you. He rejoiced to save you. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus on your behalf is fueled by the stupendous fact God is full of goodness and loving kindness.

B) CONSIDER GOD'S BASIS

If goodness and loving kindness motivated God to act, on what basis does his salvation come to you in particular, brother, and not one of your siblings. Or to you in particular, sister, and not your parents? Verse 5, "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy"

Does God see and rejoice in your present good works, Christian? Yes! Does God see and rejoice in your future good works? Yes! Does God care about good works? Yes! It's the main point of the entire book of Titus. But you will never be able to persevere in good works if you assign a saving significance to your works.

So Paul comes right out in the middle of a passage that culminates with an exhortation to good works and says, "Titus, make sure the men and women in your church understand that God did not save me, or you, or them, "Because of good works done by us in righteousness." Are good works necessary for salvation? Yes. Are they the basis of salvation? Never.

Out of millions lost, why did God lavish his goodness and loving kindness on you, Christian? It was because of "His own mercy." His disposition of heart toward his



chosen people is one of mercy. What's mercy? Giving someone the opposite of what they deserve. God delights to do that. It's why he saved you! Because he is full of mercy, which is why we don't lose our salvation on the days we disobey God and gain it again on the days we obey God.

Why doesn't salvation work that way? Because the basis is not our obedience. It's God's mercy. I love the way Paul speaks of God's *own* mercy. It's not just something he occasionally does on weekends and holidays when he feels like being merciful. It's who he eternally is. It's the essence of his nature. Exodus 34:6, "The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious..."

C) CONSIDER GOD'S MEANS

With loving kindness as the motive and mercy as the basis, what did God do to save us? Our salvation was accomplished through the person and work of Christ in history. He lived. He died. He rose from the grave. But how does God bring the salvation Christ accomplished to pass in our lives? How is it applied? Look at verse 5. "He saved us...by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit."

Regeneration and renewal are two expressions of a miraculous work the Spirit does at the very beginning of the Christian life. He spiritually unites us to Jesus such that Jesus' life becomes our life. When we are regenerated by the Spirit, we go from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive, from being disinterested in God to desiring God, from wanting to live for ourselves to wanting to please the Lord. A regenerate man or woman is someone to whom the Spirit has imparted a new principle of spiritual life in keeping with his promise in Ezekiel 36:25-27.

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

Regeneration or renewal is the spiritual work Jesus describes in John 3:5 as being born again. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." In other words, becoming a Christian doesn't start with you changing your behavior. It starts with God changing your heart. It starts with God giving you a new heart – a heart that perceives the



supremacy of his worth, a heart that feels your desperate need for a Savior, a heart that sees in Jesus the Savior you need, and a heart that is able to trust and obey Jesus accordingly!

What separates a Christian from a non-Christian is not that one goes to church on Sunday and the other plays golf on Sunday. Or that one obeys their parents and the other refuses. Or that one reads their Bible and the other never reads their Bible. Or that one believes in the existence of God and the other is unsure he's really there. What separates a Christian from a non-Christian is that God has worked a spiritual miracle within the Christian whereby two things happen:

First, you are made clean – washed from the guilt and shame of all your sin by the blood of Jesus. Second, you are made new – the Holy Spirit decisively

transforms your mind, your affections, and your will such that you are able to trust Jesus and want to obey Jesus. John Piper summarizes it this way:

“What happens in the new birth is not getting a new religion but getting a new life. What happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. What happens in the new birth is not the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature – a nature that is really you, and is forgiven and cleansed; a nature that is really new, and is being formed by the indwelling Spirit of God.”

There's only one other place in the Bible where the word regeneration appears. It's Matthew 19:28 where Jesus speaks of the “regenerate world” or the “new world” he will bring to pass when he returns. In other words, our individual regeneration in the present is a foretaste of a universal regeneration in the future. The new creation is literally breaking into the present. Two more observations from verse 5 are in order.

First, while there's a real sense in which we are being progressively renewed by the Spirit into the image of God throughout the Christian life, it's the definitive, once-for-all, renewal the Spirit works at the beginning of the Christian life that makes it possible! In the words of John Owen, “Men may be more or less holy, more or less sanctified, but they cannot be more or less regenerate.”

Second, the new life God imparts within us both enables faith and repentance and is always expressed through faith and repentance. As Piper goes on to say, “Therefore, should never separate the new birth from faith in Jesus. From God's



side, we are united to Christ in the new birth. That's what the Holy Spirit does. From our side, we experience this union by faith in Jesus."

If regeneration and renewal is one side of the coin, repentance and faith are the other. Scripture never separates them. But there is a clear order of operations. B. B. Warfield is exactly right. "The initiative is taken by God: man is renewed unto repentance: he does not repent that he may be renewed."

If we are going to be saved, brothers and sisters, we need more than atonement for our guilt and pardon for our transgressions. We need the Spirit to regenerate our hearts, to renew our inner man from depravity so that we might walk in newness of life. That is the very Spirit the Father has "Poured out on us richly," verse 6, "Through Jesus Christ our Savior."

His atoning death fits us to become temples of the Spirit. His request secures the gift of the Spirit. Along with the Father, he personally sends the person of the Spirit. And he remains with us through the indwelling presence of the Spirit. So take heart, fearful saint. The moment you became a Christian, the Father poured the Spirit out on you "Richly" through Jesus Christ our Savior. He's not waiting for you to speak in tongues or practice the higher life. From the moment of regeneration onward, you receive the Spirit in abundant measure.

D) CONSIDER GOD'S PURPOSE

Verse 7 reveals God's ultimate purpose in salvation. "So that being justified (or declared righteous) by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." The "Hope of eternal life" is immeasurably more than a promise of unending life. It's the promise of an entirely new kind of life. 1 Peter 1:3-4, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you..."

What is our eternal inheritance, brothers and sisters? It's the joy of being God's people, in God's place, under God's rule. We're not heirs in an optimistic sense, believing tomorrow will be better than today. We're heirs in a "Fellow heirs with Christ" sense (Romans 8:17). Jesus' inheritance is our inheritance. Jesus' reward



is our reward. Jesus' joy and life will be our joy and life. We taste it now in part. One day, we will know it in full.

Friend, do not confine the purpose of God's saving work to the paltry scope of your felt needs. Jesus lived, died, and rose to do something immeasurably greater and infinitely more satisfying than to give you a nice job, with a nice salary, in a nice house. That's as good as it gets in the board-game called *Life*. Not so in the kingdom of God! We were made for more than this, my friends. We were made for him – to know him, to love him, and to enjoy him forever.

Life with God as the people of God in the heavenly kingdom of God is our eternal inheritance in Christ Jesus. That's the purpose of our salvation. So what difference does our salvation make while we're still waiting? All the difference in the world.

3) FAITH IN JESUS CREATES DEVOTION TO GOOD WORKS (verse 8)

“The saying (or the Word) is trustworthy...” Our salvation is neither a fairy tale nor a spiritual figment of the imagination. It is a past, present, and future reality built on the historical truth of the gospel. And when your life is built on the gospel, it will make you a very different kind of person. Why? Because genuine faith in Jesus creates devotion to good works. “I want you to insist on these things, SO THAT those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.”

Good works are not a random byproduct of our salvation. They are the overflow of every aspect of our salvation! **Consider the motive.** Remembering God's goodness and loving kindness frees us from the trap of legalism. It teaches us to obey because God loves us, not to make God love us. **Consider the basis.** Remembering God's mercy protects us from the debtor's ethic that would attempt to pay God back for saving us. It teaches us to receive our salvation with humble gratitude, a gift that compels us to live in a way that makes much of the Giver!

Consider the means of our salvation. Remembering the regenerating and renewing work of the Spirit strengthens us when we encounter a temptation to sin or an opportunity to sacrificially love someone. It teaches to walk into the



battle with more than a list of rights and wrongs. We step onto the field as new creations. The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, which means you are not an underdog. You are more than a conqueror!

Finally, consider the purpose of our salvation. How does our promised inheritance make us devoted to good works? It reminds us that nothing we give up for Jesus' sake or the cause of the gospel is ever in vain. Every sacrifice you have ever made will be rewarded. We'll see Jesus face to face and realize in a moment it was all worth it. From beginning to end, the gospel of our salvation makes us zealous for good works.

CONCLUSION

As Christians, we need to know not just how to be different but why we are different. The answer is found in the gospel. We need a Savior. Jesus is our Savior. And faith in Jesus creates devotion to good works. That's the reason. That's the explanation. Our righteous deeds do not produce the new birth. The new birth produces righteous deeds. **New behavior on the outside begins with new life on the inside.**

If you're not a Christian, I have good news for you. What you most need – the supernatural gift of a new heart – is something God is eager to give. It's a work the Spirit is ready to do right now. Don't spend another minute trying to live the Christian life apart from the life of Christ. Ask the Lord to regenerate you. Ask the Lord to renew you. Ask the Spirit to unite you to the Son in repentance and faith so that his life may become your life!

And for those of you who are unsure – “Am I a Christian or am I not? Sometimes I look at my life and don't know!” Remember this. If you look at your life and see days you say no to sin and days you say yes, days you treasure Jesus, and days you turn away from him, the most likely explanation is not a lack of new life in your heart. The most likely explanation is that the new life in your heart is creating a struggle that would not exist without it. The fight is living proof that your faith is real.

In the words of B.B. Warfield, “The very presence of the strife within us is the sign of life and the promise of victory.” God will complete the good work he has begun, friend. Let's pray and ask for the Spirit's help.