

Doctrine Works: Lifelong Learners

Titus 3:12-15

I know for those of you working on a college degree it probably feels at times like you will never finish. When you get weary in studying I want you to remember Michael Nicholson, a man who lives in Kalamazoo Michigan. What's so special about Mike you might ask? Well, Michael is 77 years old and at this point he holds 30 earned degrees from a dozen different schools in Michigan, Texas, Indiana, and Canada. His first degree was in 1963 from William Tyndale College in Farmington Hills and was a Bachelor's in Religious Education. Some of his other degrees include a Master's in Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary, an MA in Classroom Teaching from Eastern Michigan, a Doctor of Education from Western Michigan, an MBA from Western Michigan, a Master of Science in Library Science from Wayne State, and a Masters in Health Administration from Grand Valley State. Of course, the list goes on and on.

They ought to put a picture of Michael next to the term "LifeLong Learner" in the dictionary. Now, no one in here has the time or the inclination to spend 45 plus years in school, but I do believe Scripture calls us to be lifelong learners in some specific areas. We never move away from the truths of the gospel that we have learned in this letter of Titus. We also never move away from the intentional pursuit to apply and live out those truths. It's the exhortation to lifelong apprenticeship that Paul addresses in his closing words in Titus 3:12-15.

Before we narrow in on the final command Paul gives in this letter in verse 14, let's look at the nature of his final words as a whole.

Paul's letters typically include a section of personal greetings and instructions at the end. This is the conclusion to the letter.

What is interesting here is that even Paul's conclusion to the letter is focused on the broader mission of the church in bringing the gospel to unbelievers, seeing the church built, and disciples matured.

You will notice here that he is sending two ministry partners to Crete to replace Titus and have him join Paul for the winter. He doesn't say for certain why he wants Titus to come to him, but presumably it is for coaching and instruction in how to handle the situation on Crete. He also encourages Titus to help other key

church leaders on the way in verse 13 so they can do their part in accomplishing their piece of the mission. Finally, in verse 15 Paul sends greetings from those who are with him, who are no doubt interested in Titus's important work on the island of Crete. All Scripture is profitable and we shouldn't just skip over these personal greetings and instructions. Paul was focused on the mission and this should challenge us to be fully engaged in God's mission in the world.

As we think about that mission, I want to spend our morning in verse 14. Paul gives one last imperative that helps to summarize the overall message of the letter. If the mission of God in spreading the gospel and building believers is so important, then the way we live in the world is significant. We cannot act as if there's no connection between lifestyle and witness. Look at this command with me.

Paul returns to the central theme of the letter and exhorts Titus one more time to make the connection between what we believe and how it works out in our lives.

This has been the overwhelming message of this letter and we have gone back to it time and time again. But I want to try to help all of us today to understand how this connection is made and how we learn to practice good works. In other words, we need to be lifelong learners who pursue the degree of living out sound doctrine.

You do not earn a degree overnight. Our friend Michael Nicholson had to work for each one of those degrees. Our lives are meant to be used up in connecting theology and lifestyle. But it's often hard to learn this and so I want to meditate this morning on this one command and try to help us in this process. This morning we will look at **2 Ways to turn Sound Doctrine into a Lifestyle of Good Works**.

1. Teaching

This word translated "learn" in verse 14 carries a couple of significant ideas. The first one of these is obvious. To learn something there must be the transfer of knowledge. As Christians we fully expect the Bible to give us the knowledge to know ethically what is right and wrong.

Listen to how our doctrinal statement puts this:

We believe the Holy Scriptures to be the very Word of God, the product of the breath of God and thus verbally inspired in all parts, and therefore wholly without error as originally given by God, altogether sufficient in themselves as our only infallible rule of faith and practice, the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds and opinions should be tried (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

So, we must be taught by the Bible how to live. But here's the problem we often run into. How exactly does the Bible teach us to engage in good works? To phrase this question with even more blunt force, let's say this: How does a 2K year old book teach me to do good works today? I want to suggest four ways and these are taken from an ethics book I read recently by a scholar named Richard Hays.

First, the Bible gives us commands or rules. Thou shalt not murder is a clear command. It's important that we know what the Bible prohibits and so we have to be aware of the commands of Scripture. It is not legalistic to recognize the commands of Scripture and then to obey those commands. God both prohibits certain actions and attitudes and commands others for our good. But, we cannot come to Scripture and think that rules or commands are the only way we learn to do what is good as Titus 2:14 tells us.

Second, the Bible gives us principles that must be worked out in life. Obeying commands is straightforward for the most part. But applying principles is really where we begin to **learn** what it means to connect theology and lifestyle. We are to love others. What does that look like? It depends. It may look like providing a meal to someone after surgery, or it may look like gracious confrontation when a brother or sister is caught in sin. Principles are general statements which are then applied in specific situations. The Bible is filled with principles and we must learn to faithfully and consistently apply these principles.

Third, the Bible gives us paradigms that shape our understanding and desires. What is a paradigm? Think about your reaction to the story of the Good Samaritan? As you read that account you are drawn to the sacrifice and kindness of the Samaritan traveler. You want to be like him. You are disgusted by the pious religious leaders who won't stop and help a dying man. Their religion clearly only goes skin deep. You read of the Samaritan and your heart wants to have a faith that impacts your actions. That is a paradigm and the Bible teaches us to devote ourselves to good works by paradigms.

Fourth, the Bible gives us a worldview, that puts all of life in context. In other words, the Bible tells the true story of the world and gives us theological realities that determine how we live. For example, every human being is made in the image of God and worthy of respect and dignity. That is a worldview that should shape how you treat people and how you value life from the womb to the tomb.

So, the Bible trains us to devote ourselves to good works in each of these four ways. This means to be people who learn to do good works we must be taught by the book. If the Bible intends to give us more than a list of do's and don'ts then we must immerse ourselves in this book and allow God to shape desires, passions, and dreams. You cannot learn to do good works without a thorough acquaintance with your Bible.

2. Training

According to verse 14 we are to learn to devote ourselves to good works. We talked about the intellectual component of learning, but now we need to talk about the practice element of it. This word has more to do with the type of learning that happens through *doing* than through classroom instruction.

This same word is used a couple of other key times in Scripture. You are very familiar with Paul's words in Philippians 4:11. Paul knew that he could affirm the truth that he should be content whether he has much or little. But here he says that he has learned that truth through experience. He has been both poor and rich and each circumstance has taught him by experience.

The wise theologian Mark Twain once said, *"If you hold a cat by the tail, you learn things that cannot be learned in any other way."*

You also know this to be true. One of the things we remind couples when we do pre-marital counseling is that the principles and knowledge they are taking in **before** marriage will be learned in a different way once they must apply it **in** marriage.

So, we must take the knowledge we have and use it over and over again. That is the very definition of training. If you work on an assembly line, you do the same task repeatedly in order to get proficient and quick at it. Through practice, it becomes second nature to you. You **learn** to do your job. So, what does it look like to be trained to do good works? Let's talk about 3 areas.

First, we must be trained in virtues or character. Doing good is not just a matter of discerning what works are good and then doing them. **It's a matter of what sort of person you are.** It's a matter of character development. I love the word virtue because I think it sums up much of the NT teaching on growth in godliness. The fruits of the Spirit are to become settled dispositions that show up naturally in the course of daily life. You are to be a gentle person, not just do gentle things. You are to be joyful, not just respond with joy. See the difference?

When you are trained in the virtues, you will more quickly and easily perform good works. I don't know if you saw the Southwest airline pilot Tammie Jo Shults who had an engine blow up during her flight a couple of weeks ago, kill one passenger, and blow a hole in the side of the plane? If you haven't heard the recording of her conversation with air traffic control during the incident you should go listen to it. She is calm, measured, and seems to have everything under control. She was able to land the plane successfully after all that damage and save many lives. Why? Courage and coolness came naturally to her in that moment because of her character development. Therefore, she did the right thing.

When Paul says to learn to devote yourself to good works, he means become the type of person who knows what is good and does it. Develop virtue. Now, how do we develop virtues? As believers, our character is trained and changed through the work of the Holy Spirit as we grow in grace.

Second area to be trained to do good works is that we must act. This sounds redundant. To be a person who does that which is good, do that which is good? Notice that Paul says here we must learn to devote ourselves to good works. Devoting has the idea of leading or presiding over an area. So, I think the implication here is that we want people to feel responsible for good works. We ought to care about the practicality of our faith. Each member of this body should be personally responsible for the way that the gospel works itself out in daily life.

Now, this doesn't mean that you have to give your car away this afternoon as a good work. The way to practice good works is to feel responsible for that which is in your immediate sphere of responsibility. Husbands, how will you treat your wife and kids today? What act of kindness can you take responsibility for that will help that co-worker in need? The point is to begin to make it a habit of acting in daily life and then it will become a natural part of life.

Third, to really be trained to devote ourselves to good works, we must practice the means of grace. To know what Scripture would have us do and to be trained in the Fruit of the Spirit we must practice the means of grace. What do I mean by the means of grace?

God, in His kindness, has given us practices that will do us good by forming virtues and right actions in us. We do not call them the means of grace because they earn us more of God's grace. We call them the means of grace because as we participate in these practices, we know and experience God's grace and kindness toward us. What are the means of grace? Bible Reading. Prayer. Fellowship. Worship on Sundays.

We so often twist these as that which we do to earn God's favor. You cannot read your bible enough to make God love you. But, the more you read your Bible in humility and a desire to learn, the more you will experience the reality of God's grace and be aware of it. You see the difference?

What is God's perspective of our time together in worship this morning and the fact that you are here? You do not earn your spouse's favor by reading the love letter he or she wrote you. But you do experience her love and affection by reading that letter. You see? When we show up in church we do not strong-arm God into liking us more. But we do position ourselves to open His love letter and bask in the glory of His love.

With this understanding of the means of grace, why do you suppose we don't practice them? What a joy to read God's Word and discover the character of this one so filled with love. And when we habitually give ourselves to the means of grace, we are trained to devote ourselves to good works.

So, Paul wants Titus to help the people learn to devote themselves to good works. But notice how verse 14 ends. Let's be lifelong learners who turn into lifelong fruit produces. We want to stand before that throne one day and hear, well done, good and faithful servant. You produced much fruit for God's glory.