

# Explore: Look for Good Works

May 10, 2013

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 26 focuses on Titus 3:1-15.*

This is the final passage in the letter to Titus, which also makes it the final lesson of the unit. Within this section of text, we find typical concluding comments to a letter. However, we also find substantive content we should not overlook simply because it appears at the end of the letter.

The first two verses contain ethical instructions, but not in the manner we might expect. Contemporary ethical reflection usually takes the form of asking “What should I do?” This type of question can be asked at any time with no regard for context or history.

Titus 3:1-2, by emphasizing qualities or dispositions rather than actions—“Remind them... to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show every courtesy to everyone”—makes the focal ethical question, “What type of people ought we to be?” This changes the moral conversation by highlighting the role behaviors and actions have in shaping our moral character—that core from which we engage in moral discernment—and how moral character disposes us to certain actions.

## **Moral character**

In other words, bad behavior contributes to a bad moral character, which makes us more prone to future bad behavior. This passage’s exhortation makes it clear that good moral action means taking the long view and paying attention to history and context—that is, what type of people we have been.

The next section of this passage contains a portion of an early confessional

statement that provides an overview of the contours of Christian salvation, punctuated by the succinct, “This is a trustworthy saying,” a common phrase in the pastoral letters (1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11). Even though this affirmation may seem to rehearse familiar material, it always is good to remember our past, how “at one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures” (v. 3). Yet, this is not the end of the story, because “when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us” (vv. 4-5).

## **Salvation together**

This conversion, or transferral, from sinfulness to salvation centers on Christ’s work alone so “having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (v. 7). However, salvation is not simply a “Jesus-and-me” moment. It places a person within a community—the people of God, the church. This is marked by the act of baptism, which is a “washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). Thus, salvation is not a path walked alone; we walk it with all disciples of Jesus.

Titus 3:8-9 brings good works back into the spotlight. While it is true Christ saved us not because of our righteous deeds (v. 5), these actions still are expected of us now that we are part of the people of God. This was mentioned in last week’s passage as well, but it also should remind us of the famous “faith and works” discussion in the letter from James: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26).

## **Doing what is good**

This passage then offers some advice about “doing what is good” (v. 8), followed by some warnings about actions to avoid: “foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law” (v. 9). Notice

the parallel structure in these verses between what is “excellent and profitable” and what is “unprofitable and useless” (vv. 8-9). This should provide some advice regarding moral instruction.

Often, this takes the form of a list of “don’ts.” That is, being a good person is described in terms what you avoid—drinking, smoking, etc. Here, while there still are admonitions to avoid certain behaviors, the weight of the passage is on the actions a good person does. This creates a positive vision of morality much more effective in forming Christian disciples.

## **Schisms**

Titus 3:10-11 offers advice regarding people who aim to divide the community of faith. These verses, although brief, propose a few attempts to reconcile with the “divisive person” before the final admonition to “have nothing to do with them” (v. 11). Moreover, this passage resonates quite strongly with Jesus’ words in Matthew 18, where one is instructed in three steps: 1) Confront the person; 2) bring two or three witnesses; and finally, 3) bring the matter before the entire church (Matthew 18:15-17).

The final portions of the letter include greetings, requests and travel plans. Some people mentioned here have been seen elsewhere—Tychicus and Apollos, for example—while others are only found in this passage, like Artemas and Zenas. Before the final parting words in verse 15, the letter issues one more plea to be devoted to “doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives” (v. 14).