

FORWARD

Week Five | February 4, 2018 | Moving Forward in Our Serving, Part 1

PREPARATION

GETTING READY:

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through James 2:14–17, Ephesians 2:8–10, Titus 2:7–8, and 1 Peter 2:15, 3:15–16. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and how they apply to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Believers perform works of service God has prepared for them to do in order to give evidence of their genuine faith to others and silence the accusations of Christ's opponents.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we perform acts of service, we prove our faith is real. When we do not perform acts of service, our salvation is questionable, and unbelievers also have grounds to accuse us of hypocrisy.

MEDITATE

"So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:17)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *What comes to mind when you hear the term “good works”?*

Q: *Give some examples of what you consider a good deed. Give some examples of what you would consider a bad deed.*

As the story goes, there was a couple who lived in a home with a beautiful yard. Keeping up with all the planting and blooming was their delight. They planted ferns, lilies, tulips, azaleas, and any beautiful flower they could get their hands on. The only bush they asked the kids to tend was a rose bush.

After several weeks, the roses started to wilt and the whole bush was looking a bit sad. The parents scolded their kids for not keeping up with their part in the yard work. One early morning, the kids went out, and instead of watering and pruning the plant, they purchased some beautiful red roses from the grocery store, headed home, and stapled the store-bought roses onto the rose bush.

When the parents came home from work, they saw the rose bush from far down the road. It seemed to be in full bloom again! But as they got closer, they realized exactly what the kids had done. The bush itself was officially dead at this point, with bright red roses stapled on!

The parents had to sit down with their kids and teach them about what real growth looks like. Though the store-bought roses *looked* like evidence of a healthy rose bush, they were really just covering up a dead plant. If the plant were truly alive and thriving, it would be producing clear evidence of that—roses it grew all on its own.

In today’s lesson, we will learn that faith and good works can be understood along the same lines. Good works are supposed to adorn the community of faith, giving evidence that their faith is truly vibrant. A healthy, saving faith produces good deeds. There are times, however, that some in the Christian community can seem like they are producing good works, but on closer inspection, their attempts are covering up a dead faith. As we delve into the various passages in today’s lesson, we will learn about the value and purpose of good works, and why God considers them so important for our Christian life.

Q: *Share about a Christian’s act of service that helped you understand the Lord more and also confirmed that person’s faith.*

Q: *Why do you think the church has become less known for its good works over the years compared to the early church?*

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Over the past few weeks in this series, we've learned much about the way God moves us forward in our faith and our character. Today we will start a two-part lesson on how God moves us forward in our *servicing*. Whether we serve believers or unbelievers, good works are a vital part of the Christian life. When the passages we will explore were written, believers were facing all sorts of accusations, difficulties, and trials. James, Paul, and Peter all give them the same advice, to be diligent to do good works to everyone! As we study these passages, we will see why they all offer the same instruction, observing three things about Christian service and the value of good works:

- 1. OUR WORKS OF SERVICE GIVE EVIDENCE OF OUR FAITH**
- 2. OUR WORKS OF SERVICE ARE PREPARED BY GOD**
- 3. OUR WORKS OF SERVICE SILENCE CHRIST'S OPPONENTS**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

OUR WORKS OF SERVICE GIVE EVIDENCE OF OUR FAITH

▣ JAMES 2:14-17

Q: *What does the world think of people who say they are Christians, yet never act in a Christian way?*

Q: *What kind of good works was Jesus known for (including toward His own disciples and lost people He encountered)? Does it follow that His people should be known for similar works? Why or why not?*

Q: *What is James' overall point in this passage? How would you explain it to a new believer?*

It's not hard to hear the echoes of Jesus when we read the book of James. This makes perfect sense when we consider that James was Jesus' brother. Having grown up with Him, and then subsequently watching His ministry, James would know Christ's values quite well. Much like the places where Jesus teaches on the hypocrisy seen in God's people, James follows His lead and makes the same case regarding faith and works. He even starts this section much like Jesus did in His earthly ministry, with a pointed question: "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" (v. 14).

James is asking how someone can proclaim real faith when it's not demonstrated by any sort of Christian action. To James, and also to Jesus, the two go hand in hand. To be a true Christian is to behave like a true Christian, especially in the area of service. Just as Jesus came "not to be served," but to give His life in service "as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28), His followers should live in the world in the same way. We should not seek to be served by our church or our culture, but to serve them in a way that lays down our lives every day, as Christ modeled for us. A Christian's attitude is to daily live out the gospel, which means dying to self so that others can live. We embody this through benevolent acts of service, or what James calls "good works."

The example of hypocrisy James gives is that of a Christian who sees a person in need of a warm coat and a meal. Instead of meeting their physical need in the name of Christ, he leaves them hungry and cold with only an empty prayer to "be blessed" for them to hold on to while they shiver. Sharing the gospel and praying for those in need are sincere and important things to do, but James says meeting the physical need is vitally important, too, because it shows the person in need a tangible, physical example of the gospel.

If we truly believe in the God who clothed us in Christ's righteousness and fed us with heavenly "bread," why would we not serve others in tangible, physical ways that demonstrate this reality? Meeting physical and spiritual needs, according to Jesus and James, go hand in hand. While some will try to separate proclaiming the gospel from pursuing good works on a social or church level, the Bible always joins the two.

As believers do good works in their church and community, the world will see clear evidence of our faith in Jesus Christ, the One who came to help all of us in need, in both our physical and spiritual woes. A faith that does not demonstrate itself in good works isn't a genuine faith. However, a faith that does show itself by good works gives godly evidence that a person is a true believer, and that the gospel really does have the power to transform a life.

Q: *In what ways do you intend to do well, but end up doing what James talks about in verse 16?*

Q: *In what areas of your life are you not serving others the way God has served you in the gospel?*

OUR WORKS OF SERVICE ARE PREPARED BY GOD

EPHESIANS 2:8-10

Q: *What types of things do we usually give God credit for planning in advance?*

Q: *In this passage what is the role of good works in relation to our salvation?*

Before getting into the concept of good works, Paul makes sure to drive home the important point that Christians are *not* saved by their deeds. They are saved by Christ's work on their behalf, a gracious gift of God accessed by faith. As God saves us each by grace, He adds us to a people called the Church, who Paul calls the Lord's "workmanship," a beautiful masterpiece God is building. But it's not just a masterpiece that hangs on a wall like a piece of art. It's a creation that has an active purpose. We are added to the church in Christ Jesus "for good works."

Paul's point is clear. We weren't saved *by* good works, but we *were* saved *for* good works. The Lord didn't add us to His number to let us gather dust in the corner. No, He saved us for the very purpose of making us useful and productive in His kingdom. As Jesus would say, our good works are a way to shine a light before others so they may finally see God and glorify Him (Matthew 5:16). Our acts of service aren't just nice things to do. They operate as a means for others to see God in a fallen world where they otherwise would not! While they certainly give evidence to our faith, they also have the power to let others observe what God is like.

On one hand, what a high honor! On the other, what a heavy responsibility! We could easily get overwhelmed, wondering how in the world we will pull off such an important task. How will we know which good works to do? How will we plan out the ways God might have us reflect who He is with our acts of service? To keep us from being intimidated by the daunting task of being God's workmanship, Paul ends with the refreshing and comforting

promise that the Lord Himself has prepared the specific good works He wants us to do. Instead of viewing our acts of service as “all up to us,” we can take heart that God has planned them in advance, and will lead us to exactly what He wants us to do and who He wants us to serve in His good timing and direction.

Q: *Though we often speak about God preparing our salvation in advance, why do you think we forget He has also planned our good works in advance?*

Q: *Share about a time God led you to a specific act of service He wanted you to accomplish.*

OUR WORKS OF SERVICE SILENCE CHRIST'S OPPONENTS

■ ■ **TITUS 2:7-8 AND 1 PETER 2:15, 3:15-16**

Q: *What similarities do you see in these passages?*

Q: *What is the common response of unbelievers when they observe Christians who don't practice what they preach? How do Paul and Peter address that in these passages?*

Until now, we've seen that a Christian's good works are evidences of genuine faith and that they are also prepared by God. Next, we will see that our works of service have a third purpose, to silence those who seek to criticize or even harm believers. In Titus 2, along with prioritizing solid teaching, Paul instructs that we should also be a “model of good works” so that Christ's opponents will have “nothing evil to say about us.” Peter gives the same directions to the church by saying that “by doing good works you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

Over the course of our lives, we will face various opponents to the faith, whether minor or severe. Paul and Peter knew what that's like, and they have given us great wisdom by telling us to combat any accusation or attack with good works. Though the culture around us may not agree with our message, when they look at our good works, they won't be able to slander us or consider us hypocrites. Indeed, Peter goes on to say that one of the best ways to

defend the gospel is by maintaining good behavior and pursuing acts of service, even if those around you are hostile to Christianity. While our beliefs may differ from opponents of the faith, our honorable behavior will give them no grounds for an argument against us.

In this lesson, we've learned much from James, Paul, and Peter about works of service and their great value. As we look to them for direction, we also must look through them to Christ, who informs all their instructions. In loving and serving our neighbors as ourselves, whether they are believers or not, we must love and serve like Jesus did during His earthly ministry. That may mean washing the feet of other believers in our midst, which usually takes the form of serving in some sort of ministry of the church or meeting the needs of individuals in the body. It may also mean helping our non-Christian neighbors in times of need, meeting both their physical and spiritual needs. No matter what it looks like, we must trust that God has prepared each opportunity for good works and is using it to demonstrate our faith to the world and silence the mouths of His opponents.

- ♀: *Why do you think some Christians separate “giving a defense of the gospel” and practicing good deeds?*
- ♀: *What barrier holds you back from serving in your local church or community?*
- ♀: *Which do you struggle with more, serving fellow believers or serving unbelievers? Why?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- ♀: *How can you overcome the stumbling blocks that keep you from doing good works in your church and community?*
- ♀: *How can you slow down and tune into God's leading this week, so that you may live out the various acts of service He has prepared for you to do?*

Q: *Who in your life speaks against your faith? In what ways can you love these neighbors, though they are against you, in ways that serve their needs and show them the ways of Christ?*

Q: *Who in your local church could you partner with to pursue a common work of service?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- God, give me eyes to see where Your great gospel has not impacted my works.
- God, remind me often that You are the one preparing the good works You have for me to do, and all I must do is trust Your leading.
- God, use my good works this week to give evidence of my faith and also to make unbelievers curious about my life and unable to speak against my actions.
- God, help our church grow in good works as we all seek to help our church and community see you more clearly.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 2:14 The form of James' question indicates that a negative answer (i.e., "no good") is expected. The Greek particle *mē* at the beginning of the next question (Can that faith save him?) shows that James again expects a negative answer. If someone says he has faith but lacks the resulting evidential works, one must consider his salvation questionable. James is also following Christ's practice of starting a spiritual lesson with a rhetorical question, many times with the very phrase, "what good is it?"

JAMES 2:15–16 In these verses, James illustrates what faith without works looks like in everyday life. While the phrase “Go in peace, be warmed and filled” is a good prayer in and of itself, in reality it is a cop-out for a person without true faith, masking a refusal to help the person in need. There is no good (the Greek can be read “profit” or “honor” as well) in such a prayer.

It is also important to note that this is one example of many regarding good works. Feeding and clothing the poor is certainly one wonderful way to do God’s work in the world, however, good deeds can take many forms.

TITUS 2:7–8 These verses (and the ones preceding it) show us the desired result of “gospel living.” Such living keeps Christians from providing any legitimate grounds for the gospel (the “word of God”) to be slandered. More positively, such living highlights the attractiveness of the gospel (“adorn”). In keeping with the overall thrust of the letter, living with good deeds “proves” the gospel. While this letter was written to Titus, its principles apply to all believers today.

1 PETER 3:15–17 Believers should always be ready to verbally provide a rationale for their faith, but they should do so winsomely and righteously, and paired with good works. While we often elevate sharing the gospel verbally, the Scriptures make sure to balance this with good works that back up the message we proclaim. For Christians, the gospel is shared in word and deed.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes and the New American Commentary Series. The introductory illustration is paraphrased and was originally heard in a sermon delivered by J.D. Greear at The Summit Church in North Carolina.*

