

THE PROFIT OF OUR PURIFICATION¹: A SERMON ON TITUS 3:1-7 AND WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM Q&A 167

by Jeff Scott

Scripture Reading: Titus 2:11—3:15

Sermon Text: Titus 3:1-7 & Westminster Larger Catechism Q/A 167

Sermonic Theme: By washing us clean, Christ has made us a people ready for good works.

Sermonic Divisions:

- (1) The characteristics of our good works (3:1-2)
- (2) The hindrance of our good works removed (3:3)
- (3) The fountain of our good works (3:4-7)

ANYONE WHO HAS ever played the game Monopoly is familiar with the difference between improved and unimproved property. Improved properties are the spaces you have purchased on the board and on which house and hotels are built. These properties are far more profitable than your unimproved spaces that sit vacant. It is just like owning a piece of land in real life. You can own acres of land that you do nothing with but hope to one day profit from. But everyone who is into real estate knows that it is far better to make use of the land you possess today. You might plant corn or soybeans, or lease the land to a farmer who will grow something on it to make it immediately profitable. Whether you improve your land or not, you still own it. But how much better is it to make profitable use of what belongs to us?

Today I want to talk to you about improving something that does belong to you—your baptism. The Westminster Larger Catechism Q/A 167 talks about the “needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism...all our life long.” The catechism doesn’t mean we are to improve our baptism in the sense of making it better. The word *improve*, here, is used more like the way the game of Monopoly uses it. It means to make profitable use of, or to employ to one’s advantage as the Old English Dictionary defines it in its older use. Our baptism is like a well-watered piece of land with rich soil

1. Editor’s note: This sermon was originally prepared to fulfill one of the requirements for the course, PP 131 Catechism Sermon. It was submitted to the editors of the *Mid-America Reformed Seminary Journal* by the course instructor, Rev. Paul Ipema, as a fine example of a sermon utilizing the Westminster Larger Catechism.

out of which profitable, fruit bearing crops spring up. If it is improved, that is.

The idea of improving our baptism is taught in many passages of Scripture. Tonight we will focus our attention on one passage in particular: Titus 3:1-7. This passage, as the catechism teaches, implies that the wonderful realities vividly signified to us in baptism are profitable. They are fruit bearing, because that is exactly what Jesus Christ has intended by our baptism. We have been purified so that we would be zealous for good works, which Paul says in 3:8 are profitable, for they are fruitful as he implies in 3:14.

We will consider this passage together, along with LC Q/A 167, under this theme: *By washing us clean, Christ has made us a people ready for every good work.* The sermon will unfold in three parts: first, the characteristics of our good works; second, the hindrance of our good works removed; and third, the fountain of our good works.

Before we dive into our first point, let's take a look at the surrounding context. In the verses immediately preceding our passage, Paul discloses to Titus, and to us, that our great God and Savior Jesus Christ gave himself for us, "that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works." Paul, then, comes back to the theme of purification in 3:5-7, where he reminds us that the Father has saved us, not by works that we have done, but through the "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

What we see here, then, is that our passage is sandwiched together by the great theme of washing and purification, which, of course, the sacrament of baptism signifies. This means that everything that Paul says here in 3:1-7 is to be seen through this lens, we could say, through the lens of baptism. In the language of WLC Q/A 167, it is about improving our baptism by profiting from it in all of life. By washing us clean, Christ has made us a people ready for every good work.

Our first point, found in 3:1-2, is about *what characterizes our good works.* The Christians this letter was originally written to lived on the island of Crete. And, Cretans were infamous for their bigoted dislike of the Romans who ruled over them. They were known for their insubordination and disobedience to the Roman authorities. In 1:12, Paul talks about some being idle talkers and deceivers. Apparently, they felt some people weren't worthy of respect and basic courtesies. They felt free to speak evil and unkind things about them. Paul says in 1:16 that this behavior disqualified them for every good work.

It is not that they were unwilling to submit to or speak kindly of some. It is that they were partial and selective. That is why Paul says they are to be subject to rulers *and* authorities. They are not to withhold what is due to anyone, not even to the Roman rulers who

oppressed them. They are to speak evil of no one, the emphasis in the original on “no one.” Be peaceable, gentle showing all humility to *all* men. In other words, you are only truly zealous for good works when you are ready to show love, honor, and good to all men, withholding it from no one.

We are often ready for some good works, but not *every* good work. Whether you are aware of it or not, you already have a preselected, narrow group of people that you are willing to love and do them good. We each have a list of people that we find it difficult, if not impossible, for whom to do good. But isn’t that the way that the Gentiles behave? Didn’t Jesus tell his disciples that even the wicked love those who love them? But God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust.

WLC Q/A 167 says that we improve our baptism by “endeavoring to live by faith,” having our “conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ.” We have, in our baptism, taken Christ’s name. We now have the privilege of doing the things that he does by the power of the Spirit he has poured out on us. And our great God and Savior does good to all.

To all men, Paul says. We withhold humility, gentleness, peace, and good from no one. If we are selective in our obedience to authorities or selective in kindness to people, the good works we think we do are like that of the unbeliever. We aren’t ready for every good work; we are disqualified for every good work. When we grumble about our boss to our coworkers, dishonor and disobey our parents, slander or gossip about people, we have forgotten about our baptism. When we are reminded that we were baptized into Christ, our desire to extend love and good works to all men increases for in this we imitate God our Savior. We, then, profit from our baptism. We improve it.

What strengthens us in our tendency to be selective in loving and doing good to all? Isn’t it that we believe some people are not worthy of our love and good works? There are people who are lousy leaders and make things difficult for us; people who have foolishly made a wreck of their lives and always need to be bailed out; people who repeatedly reject the gospel and antagonize us; people who wouldn’t lift a finger to do something good for us but are always imposing on us. There is a tendency in all of us to believe that these people are disqualified from receiving our love and good works. We reason they are not worthy of it.

But Paul doesn’t argue that outsiders are worthy of our obedience, kindness, gentleness, courtesy, or love. He couldn’t, for it isn’t true that they are worthy. Rather, in the second part of our passage, Paul seeks to strengthen our zeal for good works by

highlighting our own unworthiness. In our second point, found in v. 3, we see *the hindrances of our good works removed*.

When we neglect to see our own unworthiness, pride weakens our zeal for good works. Paul's language is very emphatic in v. 3 when he says "we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, deceived..." Paul silences all our excuses for not being eagerly willing to show grace toward outsiders, for we were on the outside even as they are. We too were lying in our own filth, deserving the scorn we are tempted to heap upon those we believe unworthy of our love and good works.

Paul takes us back to the reality of what we formerly were. We need to be reminded of who and what we were before God saved us. Our baptism doesn't make us forgetful about what we once were. Actually, as the catechism tells us, it humbles us "for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements." We need to think about being purified and washed, because we are, in and of ourselves, defiled. Our baptism teaches us this and it stirs up within us feelings of kinship and sympathy for those outside of Christ. Profiting from our baptism in this way will strengthen us to walk by faith in Christ and be zealous for doing good to all men.

With his description here, Paul paints a picture of the Christian drowning in a stagnant swamp of sin—no hope or help present to rescue or pull them out. But just then, as if out of nowhere, "the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior." In this we see our third point, *the fountain of our good works*.

We could lift vv. 4-7 out of the context of our passage and profitably meditate on them in multiple sermons. These verses offer one of the most precious descriptions of our salvation in all of Scripture. But we don't want to lose sight now of how Paul is using them here. He wants this church to behold the greatness of God's saving grace because this overthrows our pride and strengthens our zeal for good works.

We were foolish slaves of passion, envious and hateful, Paul says. But that is when God's love and goodness were made known to us. We had not done one thing to invite God's love or warrant his goodness. But that is when he showed us mercy, washed us, gave us new life. That is when he poured out the Holy Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ, by whose righteousness and death we are justified. That is when he sealed to us the promised inheritance of eternal life that belongs to his Son, the rightful heir. Notice how all-encompassing this statement is. It ascribes salvation in its root to God's love; it ascribes it in every one of its details to God's loving

activities and to them alone; it ascribes its beginning and middle and end to God and to God alone—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The sign of baptism is the perfect illustration of what Paul describes here, and that is just what it is intended to be. We are like helpless little babies, who could do nothing for ourselves and were capable only of sin. We were not innocent at the time of our natural birth. We were born polluted and defiled. And then, in the waters of baptism, God washes us, while we were yet without strength. That is what we need. The Father, through the Son, pours out the Holy Spirit to wash and regenerate. That is the nature of our baptism that we are to seriously and thankfully consider, as the catechism says.

Our salvation, the greatest work of mercy, love, and kindness that has ever appeared before men, was not based on the works we have done. It came to us, in fact, when we were actively de-meriting God's favor and provoking him to anger. If that is when God's love, or literally in v. 4, his philanthropy, how can we pridefully demand anything of anyone before we make them the recipients of our love and good works?

We see from this passage that we will only become what Christ has purified us to be when we are improving our baptism. Only when we thankfully consider its nature, are humbled by our need for it, and give up our names to Christ will we be ready for every good work.

Because of our sinful pride, we lack zeal for good works. It is Christ at work in us as we hear the gospel who makes us willing. The Westminster Confession of Faith 16.3 (Of Good Works) says it beautifully. The Christians "ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure: yet are they not to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them."

God would have us stir up the grace of God that is already in us, looking back and affirming constantly the greatness of God's love shown to us in our baptism. Do you ever think about your baptism? Most of us here were not old enough at the time to remember the actual event itself. But that shouldn't hinder us from improving upon and profiting from it. The event was momentary, but its benefits are for our lifetime. Like a wedding ring that a husband and wife gave to each other on a special day in the past, our baptism still speaks today of promises made. It is always to remind us of our great need to be washed, the grace that has been poured out on us

for new life in the Spirit by Christ, and the ongoing gift of Christ's name given to us.

As Titus 3:1-7 and the LC Q/A 167 teach us, by washing us clean, Christ has made us people ready for good works. What we have been called to, as those who bear Christ's name, is a holy, righteous, and good life. But it is not natural. The springs that run from our hearts are polluted. The fountain that we must draw from is the cleansing, regenerating, life-giving Spirit of Christ promised to us in our baptism. May we draw strength from it even today. Amen.