

Grace Leads to Doing

Acts 9:36-42 (NIV)

³⁶ In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which is translated Dorcas). She was always doing good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ About that time she became sick and died. After washing her, they placed her in a room upstairs. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples heard that Peter was there and sent two men to him who urged him, "Don't delay in coming with us." ³⁹ Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they led him to the room upstairs. And all the widows approached him, weeping and showing him the robes and clothes that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ Peter sent them all out of the room. He knelt down, prayed, and turning toward the body said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her stand up. He called the saints and widows and presented her alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Glance back to our first reading from Acts chapter 9. What stands out to you? The wow moment should rightly be that Peter just raised this dead woman Tabitha back to life. That's amazing! I mean, this is the first recorded resurrection in the Bible since Jesus was raised from the dead, and there is only one other person in the whole book of Acts who is raised from death to life. We've never seen such a thing with our own eyes, but for these saints and widows in Joppa, this seaport city on the western coast of Judea by the Mediterranean Sea, it happened.

However, while I studied these words from Acts chapter 9, I realized that Tabitha's resurrection wasn't what kept standing out to me. Instead, it was the person of Tabitha. She's known as a disciple, a learner or student of Jesus. (In fact, this is the only time in the Bible that the female version of that word disciple is used for someone.) Tabitha always jumped at the chance to hear and study God's Word with her fellow saints. This immersed her in God's grace, soaking in all that he had done for her. Tabitha, like us, reveled in her Savior having come, Jesus, who had lived a perfect life for her in her place as well as ours, had died on the cross to remove all her and our sins, and had risen from the dead assuring her and us that we are accepted and viewed as perfect before God right now.

God did all this by grace, and his grace always leads us to action. That was true for Tabitha as well. "She was always doing good works and acts of charity." (verse 36) As we find out at her funeral wake, some of those good works and acts of charity were making robes and clothes for widows. God's grace led Tabitha to doing and inspired many other believers to do the same. Although the name Dorcas, her name translated into Greek, doesn't seem very flattering to our 21st century English language ears, you may have heard of these things called "Dorcas Societies" all over the world, which are church groups of people who generally provide clothing to people in need.

Although our Bible reading from Acts chapter 4 last week was more internally focused, that believers were selling their lands, homes, and fields and giving the money to help other believers in need, Tabitha seems to have formed a ministry of providing clothing to widows in need who are outside of the church. I think this is a safe correlation to make because when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead, Peter "called the saints and widows and presented her [to them] alive." (verse 41) Believers are the saints, regular, average, typical believers. Saints don't need to be canonized through a church committee or have their image on a medallion or immortalized as a statue. They were saints because Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, which they had learned about, had made them holy and perfect before God right then and there. That's why we are saints too right now. And then the widows are mentioned separately, probably to show us two groups of people who cared about and appreciated Tabitha and all that she did for them. While Tabitha connected with her fellow saints at the synagogue learning and being filled with the grace of God, she connected with the widows of her community by making clothes for them.

This is where the resurrection of Tabitha takes on a special significance. Tabitha was not raised from the dead because she always did good works and acts of charity. This was not a miracle that God owed to her because she had done so much for God. This was another act of grace by God to her, but an act of grace that would benefit more than just Tabitha. Her resurrection benefited these widows who were mourning her death. When they saw what the Lord did through the apostle Peter, we find out: "This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord." (verse 42) Since Tabitha had connected with people of her community of Joppa through her acts of charity, through all the clothes she made for widows in need, this was their way to experience the grace of God and, through the news of Tabitha's resurrection, came to believe in the Lord and so were made saints themselves.

Instead of God's grace that came in the form of money as we heard about other saints like Barnabas who sold land and homes and gave the money to help other saints, Tabitha was given grace from God in the form of talent with needle and thread. Reveling in that gift of grace, she did good works as her way of sharing God's grace for others. God's grace led her to do these good works for people in need.

Why do any of us do good works or acts of charity? Do we do them because that's the rule? Do we do them because we think God demands those good works from us? Do we do them because we need to outweigh our bad works, our sins, with good works? Do we do them because we want to earn for ourselves a better place in heaven? Do we do them to cement a legacy for us, that some kind of charitable organization will form because of our good works? Do we do them so that God would give me good things in return, bless me, make me live longer, maybe even raise me from the dead? I mean, it worked for Dorcas, right?

Again, reiterating from last week, God doesn't need your money nor does God need your good works. God already did all the work for you, living a perfect life for you, completing all of his laws flawlessly for you, then sacrificing his life in place of yours, forgiving you, reconciling you to God. Out of grace, God has made you complete, filled with good works done by Jesus, our Risen Lord.

And God's grace doesn't stop there. Although he doesn't need your good works, people do. So, by his grace to you, he gives us talents and time and energy to do good works and then also puts people around you for whom you can do those good works and then they get to know and experience the grace of God through you. You may not have more money than what you need to do good to others, but undoubtedly you have skills and talents and time that you can use to do good to other people, particularly people who are not saints, not a part of the church, for unbelievers, like what Tabitha did. Being given your time and talents by the grace of God and people around you who need good works done for them, what good will you do for them, especially to connect with those who are not a part of our church?

There are endless good works that we can do for others, but maybe start today by considering what are the felt needs of people outside of our church. Are there widows who need clothing, a felt need that Tabitha saw? Am I talented enough with needle and thread to form a kind of Dorcas Society? Maybe you want to check out this Comforter Ministry, which are fellow saints from our national church body who reach out to women with cancer with journals and quilts.

If you're like me and are not good with a needle and thread, there are plenty of other felt needs. Maybe you have the time to listen and talk to people, and you don't mind playing games or cards. Then I think it's time to call up or go to one of the local nursing homes like Fairfield Village or Chancellor Gardens and ask if they could use a volunteer who would just spend time with people, their residents.

Maybe you want to do good to the homeless. Many times social workers and community leaders have told me that if we really want to help those who are homeless, don't feed them. There's plenty of food available to them. But socks? Shampoo? Deodorant? Soap? Shaving kits? Hats? Shoes? Gloves? Is that something that you can use your energy to make or collect and then give to others? Even if we don't throw in a Gospel presentation with it, it is good and right to simply do good to them, like Tabitha did.

Maybe you enjoy cutting grass and you have enough time to do another yard from time to time. Have you asked around for someone who could use that? Although you're not a teacher, you know how to read. Maybe it's time to ask around at the public library or at a school like E.G. King just down the road if they could use you to tutor some kids who need help reading. Weber County specifically has a program for this.

By the grace of God, we have talents, time, and treasures. We may not have so much wealth to give to all the needy people we want to help. But we do have time and talents that we can use to show God's grace to other people, like Tabitha did. When we do good works, particularly for people who are not a part of our church, we can make a connection to then show them a God who doesn't need their good works but has already done every good work perfectly for them. God's grace leads us to do good works for others. Amen.