

Text: Titus 3:12-15

Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

Wouldn't it be fun, Charity and I were thinking, to have the kids plant some vegetables this summer? They will be able to watch them grow, and they will have a chance to see where our food comes from – before the grocery store. Someone gave Charity a couple of small tomato plants, and we bought a bag of soil, and some flower pots, and we were really getting excited. The problem is that neither one of us has much of a green thumb. Before we were able to transplant the tomatoes into the pots, they had already withered, and were looking pretty sad. I don't know if a squirrel nibbled on it, or if it was just too hot... I guess you are supposed to water these things. We debated whether or not to try to revive them, but I don't know if there's much hope (the bag says miracle grow, but I don't think resurrection is what they had in mind). I guess we'll find out.

I know that a lot of you enjoy gardening, and unlike me, the things that you plant actually do grow. You're out there watering every day, and everything is green, and vibrant, and full of life. Before long, your garden is producing all kinds of wonderful fruit and vegetables – tomatoes, corn, squash, cucumbers... the best part is enjoying what you have grown.

Our passage this morning reminds us that our lives, as Christians, are to be fruitful and productive. The Lord doesn't want us to look like this sad, withered tomato plant. He wants us to be full of compassion, overflowing with love, eager to help others, doing good in the world.

That's been one of the themes that the apostle Paul has woven throughout the letter to Titus. The phrase: "good deeds," appears at least six times.

- In Titus 2:7 he tells the missionary pastor to be "...an example of good deeds."
- In chapter 2 verse 14 he tells believers we must be "...zealous for good works."
- And here, in our passage this morning, Titus 3:14 says, "*Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.*"

That's not to suggest that a person can be saved by good works; Scripture makes it very clear that salvation is by grace, through faith, and not by our own human effort. Only by trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can we enter a relationship with God. But once we have entered that relationship, and are alive in Christ, it's going to show.

A life that's been changed by the good news should overflow with good works.

In the closing verses of the letter, Paul reminds believers, to live out their faith, bearing fruit, in their daily lives. He even points to a real life opportunity where Titus (and believers in Crete) would be able to do that very thing. In verse 13 he tells them, "*Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need.*" We don't know anything about Zenas, other than what we read here, but Apollos is mentioned a number of times in the NT. They were likely the ones who delivered this letter to Titus, and

must have been passing through, on their way to another mission field. As traveling missionaries, they would have relied on the generosity and support of God's people to help them carry out their work. The churches of Crete had an opportunity to do good, and help. The missionaries may have needed a place to stay for a few nights, before heading out. Someone could open up their home to them, and demonstrate hospitality. They may have needed supplies for the journey. Believers could chip in, together, and supply those needs. They may have needed transportation to get to wherever they were going. Some of the people in the churches might have had contacts, at the docks, and could help them make necessary arrangements. And this was just one opportunity. The Lord creates opportunities everyday for His people to do good, and we need to seize them.

There are several passages throughout the NT that deal with this same subject, and show us the secret of bearing good fruit in our Christian lives.

1. John 15:4-5 tells us that if we want to live fruitful lives, we need to get planted in Christ.

We must spend time cultivating our relationship with the Lord. If we think about all of the good things that were accomplished in Paul's life, all of the churches that were planted and all of the people who were led to the Lord, we might start to wonder what made him so effective. Was it his determination? Was it his expertise? Was it his strategy? I'm sure Paul would be the first person to tell us that these good works were not of his own doing, it was of Christ. He was only the instrument that the Lord used, but all the credit and all the glory belongs to God. God was working through him. We need to remember that. We can't accomplish anything, of lasting value, on our own. But if we allow God to work through us, there is no limit to what He might accomplish.

That's what the Lord told his disciples, in **John 15:4-5**. (if you will turn there with me) Jesus is preparing his disciples for the ministry they would have after his resurrection, and He wanted them to realize that their relationship with Him was the key. If they continued to trust in Him, and continued to rely on Him, they would accomplish much. In order to help them understand this important principle, the Lord used the example of a grapevine. In John 15:4-5 Jesus said,

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

Vineyards would have been a familiar sight for these men. They were used to seeing long branches, shooting off from the vine, with clusters of grapes. Jesus explains that everything we need flows from Him. He is the vine, the source of our spiritual life. We are the branches, we share a connection, and are joined in a relationship to Him. We are called to "abide," or to remain in constant fellowship with our Savior, to make this relationship our priority, allowing His power to flow through us. We know that the Lord will never leave us. Wherever we are, His presence will go with us. The question is whether or not we will remain in constant fellowship with Him. It is possible for us to become disconnected, in the sense that He gets

pushed out of our thoughts, pushed out of our daily lives, and we begin to rely on ourselves instead. That always leads to trouble.

A branch doesn't do much if disconnected from the vine; it wilt and wither (like my tomato plant). The branch needs the vine to bear fruit, and we need Christ. If our relationship with Him is neglected, our spiritual vitality will wither. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing. Seems obvious, but it is easy to forget: get caught up in doing things for Christ that we forget all about spending time in fellowship with Christ, we can exert all kinds of energy but have little to show for it because we are not drawing from His power.

I remember an older pastor asking me, when I was first ordained, if spent time daily in God's Word. Well yes, obviously, I'm always in God's Word preparing sermons, writing Sunday School lessons, putting together Bible Studies... no are you in God's Word for no other reason except to hear Him speak to you? To draw close and listen to His voice? Sure, it's likely that plenty of sermons will result, but that's not why you do it, you do it because you want to spend time with the Lord

You will bear fruit if you cultivate a close relationship with God, it will happen naturally, you won't have to worry about it. One commentator notes, "Fruitbearing is not only possible but certain if the branch remains in union with the vine... if the life of Christ permeates a disciple, fruit will be inevitable." (Expositors Bible Commentator). This plant can do nothing unless it is planted, we can do nothing if we are not planted in Christ

2. If we want to live fruitful lives, we have to pull the weeds.

Crabgrass, thistles, dandelions, clover... they pop up overnight and take over. When left unchecked, weeds can ruin any garden. They can choke the life out of your plants, robbing them of valuable resources. They only thing you can do is get down on your knees and root them out, one at a time. In **Ephesians 5:8** we are shown that this is the same kind of effect sin can have in a believer's life. If we ignore it, and allow our old selfish desires to remain unchecked, it will hinder us from bearing good fruit for the Lord. When that happens, we need to get down on our knees in prayer.

Every day there is a choice we have to make: to follow Christ, or to follow this world. I can either surrender to His will, seeking to please God, or I can insist on doing things my way, seeking to please myself. It's going to be one or the other. If I say yes to the Lord, and allow Him to have His way in my life, then good fruit will be the result. But if I don't, all I'm going to have are a bunch of weeds. Ephesians 5:8 tells us:

"...for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them."

There was a time when we really didn't have a choice. We were in the dark. That was what we knew. And that's how we lived. But we aren't there any longer. The light of Christ has come into our lives, chasing away the darkness. And now we're able to shine forth with His light. But's easy to go back to our old ways, and join in with the rest of the world.

A young man tells himself, "I know that God's Word says that this is sin, but the whole world seems to think it is okay, and all my friends think it's okay. Can't I go with the world on this one thing, and go with God on the other things?" It's doesn't work that way. How can we think that we can honor God in one area of our lives when we are disobeying Him in another area of our lives, at the same time? That's like trying to plant tomatoes and thistles in the same garden. It doesn't work. Why would you want to grow thistles anyways, they are worthless, and have no practical value. Worse than that, thistles cause a great deal of pain if you happen to step on them with bare feet. We can't afford to be indifferent towards sin in our lives. Sin is destructive, in our lives, and the lives of others. It is displeasing to God. And it is counterproductive to our spiritual growth. Now that we have entered the light, we need to walk in the light. Don't participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness. Don't join in, or go along with the rest of the world. Allow God's truth to fill us, so that we know what pleasing to Him

3. If we want to live fruitful lives, we need to fill our heart with the right attitude.

Picture an old watering can, the kind with an opening on the top where you fill it up with water, with a handle on one side, and a spout on the other. You carry it around the garden, on a hot summer day, to give all of the thirst plants a drink of water. Why do you go to all that trouble? It takes a little energy to lug that thing back and forth. You do it to see fruit.

Turn with me to 2 Peter 1:5. The apostle Peter lists some of the attitudes that promote fruit in the Christian life. **2 Peter 1:5-8** tells us

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The passage identifies 8 areas where believers should be constantly growing. We won't go through all of them, but among the list are attitudes like: godliness, perseverance, kindness, and love. If these qualities are present, Peter tells us, we will not be unfruitful. But what if we harbor negative attitudes, instead? Instead of godliness, what if we allowed worldliness to fill our heart? Instead of perseverance, what if we allow ourselves to give up when things get tough? Instead of brotherly kindness, what if our we are consumed with jealousy? Instead of love, what if there is bitterness. That would be like filling your watering can with poisonous chemicals. We need good attitudes to produce good fruit. Bad attitudes are toxic, and stifle can fruit in the believer.

As we read through the book of Acts, we see that the early church faced all kinds of challenges. The apostles went through all kinds of difficult ordeals. It would have been so easy for them to become frustrated or discouraged. But they didn't. When they were thrown into prison, or beaten, for sharing their faith they kept a good attitude, and continued to trust God. H. We can't control everything that happens in our lives, but one thing we can control is our attitude. It's important. It will make a world of difference as to whether or our lives bear good fruit that is pleasing to God.

Conclusion –

This morning, as we finish the letter, we see how Paul wanted believers to live fruitful lives. He had seen what the Lord can accomplish through His people if we abide with Christ. Don't neglect your walk with God, but draw close to Him, He is the source of your life. Watch out for the weeds of sin and worldliness that can choke the good that the Lord is doing in our hearts. And fill your watering can with positive attitudes that will help create fertile environment for good fruit to grow.