

"FULL OF GOOD WORKS"

"Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." Acts 9:36.

In the town of Joppa on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea there lived a woman whose name was "Tabitha," "Dorcas" or "Gazelle." The ancients frequently compared a bold man to a lion, and a beautiful woman to a gazelle. The gazelle, or antelope, which was celebrated for its slender form, its fiery and beautiful eyes, its graceful motions and its swift feet, was frequently employed by the Hebrews and other Orientals as a type of female loveliness. "Gazelle" was a popular name for women, suggesting beauty of form and feature, gentleness of character and gracefulness of action. So the name given to this lovely and noble woman suggests that she was attractive and graceful.

Names are often the expressions of character and of incidents in life. Just as the name of Dorcas became a synonym for loveliness of character and life, so our names become the synonyms of our conduct. Every community has one or more citizens whose name stands for honor, kindness, charitableness, faithfulness and kindred things. The very mention of their names suggests those admirable qualities. The very mention of other names suggests certain weaknesses, faults and sins. For example, who can hear the name "Judas" without associating it with treachery and treason? Judas may have had many commendable qualities, but this bad one colored his entire life. Who can hear the name "Thomas" without associating it with doubt? It is a tradition that George Washington told the truth when his father asked, "Who cut down the cherry tree?" It may not be anything more than a tradition, but it has gained such currency that the name of George Washington stands for truthfulness and honesty. One deed may mark a person for life. One speech may make a man immortal, as was true of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Live in such a manner that your name will stand for things that are noble and worthwhile. Remember that greater than any achievement and better than any record is the individual himself. Every man should be better than anything that he may produce. Let your life be such that others will think of you rather than of what you have done.

Of Dorcas, whose life was full of good works, four things are noteworthy:

I. Her Discipleship.

Our text presents Dorcas as a disciple. Dorcas had heard the gospel of Christ, believed it with all her heart, received Christ as her Saviour and identified herself with the Lord's people.

Touched by divine love and transformed by God's grace, Dorcas realized that she had been made a new creature in Christ in order that she might do good works for Him.

Dorcas was not ashamed or afraid to let the world know that she had received Christ as her Saviour and enthroned Him as her Lord, even though it was very unpopular to be His follower. Real discipleship is never easy. It always demands conviction.

Dorcas lived to the glory of God, so all of her acquaintances knew that she was a Christian. By her life she proved that she was faithful to her Lord in prayer, Bible study, church attendance, separation from the world and witnessing for Christ.

II. Her Deeds.

We do not know much about Dorcas except what we are told in the ninth chapter of Acts, but this is enough to give her a place among the great characters in history.

Dorcas knew that when the Lord loved people He was not content simply to speak of His love, but He did the things which would demonstrate it clearly, such as healing the sick, feeding the hungry and saving the lost. Neither could Dorcas, who had broad sympathies and deep love, see the needs of others and remain unmoved. Love always finds expression in deeds of compassion and helpfulness. Loving her Lord supremely, Dorcas was ready and anxious to minister to others in their poverty, sickness and despair. She was not satisfied with merely reading the Scriptures and then going around with a long, melancholy face and a "holier-than-thou" attitude. Being a genial and warm-hearted Christian, she was vitally interested in other people and diligently sought to do what she could to help them. If some of you, who are not satisfied with your own lives, would only follow her example and get busy helping others, you would be greatly surprised at the tremendous improvement in your own spiritual condition. Start thinking about others and doing things for them and you will get along so much better.

Dorcas did not seek any publicity because of her good deeds. She simply went about her daily tasks in an humble and unselfish way, without any desire whatever for the plaudits of the world. Being orthodox in faith, as well as in her manner of life, she sought to keep faith and works in proper balance. Her faith simply gushed out in works of beneficence to others. She busied herself at the task of administering to the necessities of the poor, and particularly in making garments for poor widows, many of whose husbands had been lost at sea. She probably purchased the material with her own earnings, wove it with her own labor and fashioned it into articles of wearing apparel with her own hands. The garments she made and distributed were substantial tokens of her industry and charity. Moreover, she did not delay her beneficence, but gave to others while she was yet with them.

Dying alms arise from necessity rather than choice. There is little merit in distributing what you can hold no longer. Dorcas found great joy in thinking of others, working for them and giving to them.

This Christian woman merited high commendation because she did not have to go to any strange land to find a place of large and useful service. She found plenty of opportunities to serve at her very door. Some think that opportunities for service and greatness are better away from home, but Dorcas gave herself to the doing of good deeds right where she lived. She was perfectly willing to serve and be forgotten, but such service is never forgotten. Before one is aware of it his little kindnesses will weave themselves into a garment of glory. Many are willing to do great things, but are unwilling to do the little ones. Such people can never become great. Greatness comes from doing little things in a great way. Anyone who is unwilling to do the little things in the right spirit will never achieve the ability nor the opportunity to do great things.

Fortunate is the man who trains his eyes to see opportunities when they come. The man who can see the unseen is the one who will succeed. What is the difference between the average man and the junk man? The junk man sees a fortune in what others consider valueless and throw away. He comes down our alleys and to our back doors gathering up the rubbish which we have cast aside, and from these cast-off things he makes his living and builds his fortune. The difference is in what one is able to see. For ages the Niagara Falls flowed over that fearful precipice, a thing to be wondered at and talked about, but of no practical value to anyone. Finally, someone who could see more than others conceived the idea of harnessing a part of that wasted power. He dug a channel under the city and built his machinery over that channel, then opened it into the river above the city, thus allowing a part of the river to run under the city and turn the wheels of machinery. It was discovered that power sufficient to supply not only Niagara itself, but also many other towns and cities, was being wasted every day. The ability to see the unseen is a wonderful achievement. Until a man is able to do this he is not even a candidate for success. No artist can paint his picture unless he can see it in all its glory on the white and untouched canvas. No sculptor can carve an angel from a stone unless he has been able to see the angel in the stone before he ever touched it. No teacher can lead his pupils to understand truths that he has not seen himself. Our world needs men and women who can see the unseen. What do you see in your environment, in your difficulties, in your handicaps, in your sorrows, in your joys, in your friends, in your opportunities, in your life? The ability to see things helps one's usefulness.

Dorcas was a useful woman. She did not live to or for herself. Her home was a haven for those who were in distress or need. She devoted her talent and energies to meeting the needs of widows and orphans. With her own hands she plied the needle and made garments for them. Back of her labor was her love.

Don't underestimate the common, unknown and seemingly unimportant person. Some of the greatest characters in the world are the unobserved and unheralded Christians who serve their Lord in an unobtrusive manner, as Dorcas did. If her actions had proceeded from an ostentatious or self-righteous principle, they would have displeased the Lord. He will reward His followers for all that they do for Him from the time they are saved until they leave the scene of action.

III. Her Death.

Notwithstanding her lovely character and useful life, death suddenly and unexpectedly removed this woman from her sphere of service. It was not surprising that the recipients of her benefactions were in deep mourning. Doubtless some of them wondered how they would ever get along without this wonderful Christian lady. They felt that she had died all too soon. With loving hearts and tender hands they prepared her body for burial. Ordinarily a burial took place on the day of death, but in this case they placed her body in an upper room. Then, they sent for Peter, who was only a few miles away, probably to conduct a funeral service.

IV. Her Deliverance.

Many of those whom Dorcas had helped gathered around her lifeless frame and wept. Our appreciation of those who have enriched our lives heightens when they leave us. We readily recall the good deeds of our loved ones and friends when we see them in their caskets or follow their remains to the cemetery.

Peter came to Joppa, entered the house, heard the wailing of the widows, went into the room where the body of Dorcas was lying, witnessed the tears of the mourners who showed him the garments which she had made for them, and then asked them to leave the room. When they had done so, Peter knelt and prayed. Then turning to the corpse Peter said, "Tabitha, arise." Instantly she opened her eyes and sat up. As soon as she was delivered from death Peter took hold of her hand. To have touched her while she was yet dead would have made him unclean according to the ritual of Judaism.

Naturally, all of those who were wearing the garments which she had made for them rejoiced greatly that Dorcas had been raised from the dead. News of what had taken place spread outside and made a great impression on the people, so much so that many believed and were added to the church.