A Woman like Dorcas
5 Bible studies on Christian Service

Study 1. The story of Dorcas - Acts 9:36-42

Study 2. ‘Doing good’: What does it look like today?

Study 3. ‘Doing good’: What’s the Standard?
   Who’s our Example?

Study 4. ‘Doing good’: Help for the tough times.

Study 5. ‘Doing good’: What results can we expect?’

Appendix (1) + (2)
Introduction and guidelines for use of the studies

This series of 5 studies is the foundation of the Dorcas programme.

They are based on the account of the life, death and resurrection of a 1st century disciple called Dorcas. Indeed, the story of Dorcas has been the inspiration for this programme. Quite simply, Dorcas used her talents and her means to serve the needy in her community; she was a woman who ‘did good.’ Her life brought glory to God and souls to His kingdom. Isn’t that the greatest desire of every Christian – that our lives, however ordinary or amazing, bring glory to our heavenly Father and are useful in drawing others to our Saviour?

We all remember the parable Jesus told about the Wise and Foolish builders in Matthew chapter 7. The Lord Jesus told his disciples that the person who listens to his words and puts them into practice is wise. So, through these studies we hope to see what the Scriptural basis is for Christian Service, that we may be ‘wise’ and motivated to put what we know into practice.

The studies begin with a close examination of the biblical account in Acts 9:36-42. We then consider that ‘doing good’ is God’s will for every Christian and that he gives each one talents and gifts that are to be used for the sake of others, and that as a grateful response to his love and the gift of salvation. In the third study we will consider the standard that Jesus set for his followers, namely to show mercy, and the example of self-sacrificial service that he gave and which he expects us to follow.

The fourth study concentrates on the resources that God provides to enable his people to obey and to live a life of service: the Holy Spirit, his Word and the Church. You might want to consider splitting this study into two (finishing one part after the section on the work of the Holy Spirit), because it is longer than the others.

The series closes with a consideration of the positive and glorious results of the believer’s good works. Not only is the believer sanctified as he/she strives to obey and serve others, so also other members of Christ’s body are helped, people who do not trust Christ see God at work and praise him and quite amazingly, God himself is glorified through our lives of service and ‘good deeds.’

It is our prayer that these studies will turn our focus to Jesus himself and from him to the needy world around us. We can’t be like the foolish man hearing God’s words and choosing to ignore them – the world needs to see God’s people living obedient lives and needs to hear them proclaim the good news of the Gospel.
Guidelines to use the studies

The studies have been written to use with groups who want to learn about the Biblical basis for Christian Service. They are not intended to be an introduction to the Christian faith. It has been taken for granted that the majority of the group will be familiar with reading and studying the Bible.

You may choose to hold the studies wherever and whenever are most convenient for your group – in a home or church, on a Sunday or weekday.

Bible verses quoted are from the NIV version.

A work book is required for each participant. You can photocopy the workbook or order them from the office in Cardiff 02920 627465.

One or two people will be needed to facilitate the studies. Hopefully the notes provided will be adequate, but it is always a good idea to read other commentaries too. The leader/s must spend time before the actual study reading the notes carefully, looking at the workbook and praying.

There are different types of questions to answer throughout: some are for consideration as individuals; some to be answered as a whole group. The leader’s notes contain suggested answers in italics.

Leading a group can be daunting, and if there is no-one in your group who feels able to lead you could invite someone else to lead – your minister or an elder or someone who preaches at your church or perhaps a member from a neighbouring church could be approached. Please contact us if you need help to find someone to lead the studies for you.

Some tips on leading a small group

The success of any small group starts with the leader. Effective leaders are not teachers or lecturers. They are facilitators whose primary job is to get people to interact with each other. Almost anyone can lead a useful discussion by following certain guidelines.

Come to the study prepared. Ask God to help you understand and apply the passage to your own life. Unless that happens, you will not be ready to lead others. It will probably take you an hour to read the passage, work through each question in the guide, and become familiar with the leader’s notes.

Pray for the members of your group before the study. If the Bible is to have an impact on their lives, the Holy Spirit must be at work in their hearts before, during, and after the study.

Begin the study on time. If people know the study begins on schedule, they will work harder to arrive on time.

Explain that the studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures. Encourage everyone to participate, but realize some may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions.

Encourage more than one answer to each question. A good question should have more than one possible answer, and each person has his or her unique perspective. Ask, “What do the rest of you think?” or “Anyone else?” until several people have responded.
Affirm people’s answers. People often are reluctant to speak up unless they know you appreciate their insights. Simple words such as “That’s a great insight,” “Good response,” “Excellent idea,” or “I hadn’t thought of that before” are enough to show people you value their comments.

Don’t be afraid of silence. It usually seems longer to you than to the other members of the group.

Resist the temptation to answer your own question. Rephrase the question until the group understands what you are asking. A group will become passive and silent if they think you will do most of the talking.

Never reject an answer, even if you think it is wrong. When you reject people’s answers, they feel rejected as well, and they may decide it is too risky to give their opinion again. A better response would be, “Which verse led you to that conclusion?” Or let the group handle the problem by asking them what they think.

End the study on time. A healthy small group will do more than study the Bible together, so leave enough time for other activities such as sharing and prayer. If these are merely tacked on at the end, the health of the group will suffer.


Another useful article on leading small groups can be found at http://www.richardbewes.com/forum/for-8.html
1. **The story of Dorcas - Acts 9:36-42**

In this study we will look in detail at the story of Dorcas as recorded in the book of Acts in the New Testament.

The story of Dorcas, has been an inspiration to women through the ages. It contains many valuable lessons for those who want to follow Jesus, but we are hoping to see in particular how Dorcas teaches us more about the meaning of Christian love and service.

**Ice-breaker: “The trouble with clothes…”**

Ask everyone to turn to the person next to them and tell them briefly about one of the following: a favourite item of clothing/the best clothes bargain they can remember getting/the worst clothes buy they can remember. After a minute the roles are reversed, with the second person having a chance to speak.

1. **Read the following summary of the story of Dorcas from Acts 9:36-43 to the group.**

The story of Dorcas, which forms the subject of this study, has been an inspiration to women through the ages. It contains many valuable lessons for those who want to follow Jesus, but we are hoping to see in particular how Dorcas teaches us more about the meaning of Christian love and service.

Dorcas was a disciple of Jesus who lived in Joppa, a town situated on the shore of the Mediterranean, which at that time was the chief seaport of Palestine. There was a Christian church at Joppa, and it’s possible that the believers met for worship in Dorcas’s home, which in those early days was the custom (see Acts 12:12 and Romans 16:5).

Dorcas was well known in Joppa for her kindness to the poor and her good deeds. She spent her time making clothes for those who were needy, and she had a special concern for widows and their children. To the dismay of all who knew her, she became ill and died. But, someone had an idea. Why not go to the near-by town of Lydda to get the apostle Peter – he’ll know what to do! Peter came. He prayed and told Dorcas to get up – and she did! News of Dorcas’s resurrection obviously spread through Joppa like wild fire, and many people believed in Jesus as a result.

2. **Studying the Bible account in detail**

This can be done in one group, although it’s more likely that people will talk more freely in smaller groups. If you split the group it will be essential to have someone in each group who is willing to guide the group and who has had time before hand to read over the questions.

**Read verse 36.**

What do we learn about Dorcas from this verse?

She lived in Joppa, she was also known as Tabitha, she was a disciple, she was always doing good and helping the poor.

**Notes:** Tabitha is Aramaic, Dorcas is Greek: both mean ‘gazelle’, a deer.
Read verse 39.
What exactly did Dorcas do to help the poor people of Joppa?
*She made robes and clothes for them.*
What kind of people in particular had she helped?
*Widows.*

Notes: It’s likely that because Joppa was a port, that many sailors’ widows and children would have lived there.
*Robs would have been difficult and expensive items to make, requiring time and resources.*
*It’s probable that Dorcas was a woman of means, who didn’t have to work for a living herself, but who used her time and money to provide for others.*

Read verses 32-34 and verse 38.
Why did the disciples in Joppa send for Peter?
*They had heard that Peter had healed Aeneas and wanted him to do something for Dorcas.*

Read verses 40-41.
What did Peter do after he arrived?
*He sent everyone out of the room, he prayed, he spoke to Dorcas, he helped her up and presented her to the believers.*

Read verse 42.
What effect did this event have in Joppa?
*Many people believed in the Lord.*

What do we learn about Dorcas?
- Dorcas was a disciple of Jesus
- Dorcas loved the poor and needy of Joppa

1. Dorcas the disciple

The word used here for ‘disciple’ (Greek *mathetes*) means ‘one who receives instruction, a learner.’

Dorcas had obviously heard someone tell the story about Jesus and believed.
The disciples had begun preaching about Jesus in the Temple and in synagogues throughout the country after the day of Pentecost. Dorcas may have heard one of them preaching herself or been told about Jesus by a friend or neighbour.

Questions:
Who are Jesus’s disciples today?
Mark 1:16-20: *people Jesus called to follow him*
Acts 2:37-39: *people who repent, are baptised, forgiven, have received the Holy Spirit.*
Acts 11:25,26: *disciples = Christians*
How do these verses help us understand how a person can become a disciple of Jesus?
Do you consider that you are a disciple of Jesus?

2. Dorcas shows love for the poor

- Dorcas’s love was practical – read verse 39 together.
  She saw that the widows in Joppa and their children needed clothes, and so she set out to provide clothes for them. She had the money to buy material and the skill to design and sew suitable garments for them.
- Dorcas’s love meant hard work – read verse 36 together.
  She did good ‘all the time.’ And remember, they didn’t have electric sewing machines, all the clothes were hand sewn!

Questions:
What did Jesus say was the most important commandment? Matthew 22:36,37
What was the next most important? Matthew 22:39
How can we love God like this? 1 John 4:19; Romans 5:5
How can we love our neighbour like this? Romans 5:5; 1 John 4:19

Notes:
It is true to say that people who do not claim to be disciples of Jesus can show immense love for others, even sacrificial love. But, when a person becomes a disciple of the Lord Jesus, he or she becomes a channel of His love and when we love others, we are demonstrating Jesus’s love. Further, our love has a spiritual dimension, because we care about the eternal souls of those around us.

What do I need to learn from Dorcas’s story?
Over the next four weeks we’ll be using Dorcas’s story and what we can learn from it to look at the following points and to answer these questions:

Study 2. ‘Doing good’: What does it look like today?
God has given us talents to use for the good of others. What talents/skills do you have? How are you using them?

Study 3. ‘Doing good’: What’s the Standard? Who’s our example?
Looking at Jesus’s teaching on serving others and his own example as a servant.

Study 4. ‘Doing good’: Help for the tough times!
What resources are available to the Christian to serve God and others?

Study 5. ‘Doing good’: What results can we expect?
Can God use us to help others come to believe in Jesus as their Saviour and Lord?
2. ‘Doing good’: What does it look like today?

In this second study we will consider how Dorcas is an example to encourage us to a life of ‘doing good.’ In the New Testament different phrases are used to describe the life of a Christian: a life of service; a life of self-sacrifice; a life of obedience. Dorcas is described as ‘always doing good’, and this is the phrase we will be using.

We will consider what motivates the Christian to ‘do good’ and what does ‘doing good’ look like practically.

Ice-breaker

You’ll need 2 large sheets of paper or flipchart and suitable pens.

Ask everyone to turn to the person next to them and tell them about an occasion when they have helped to organise an event. Both people should have a turn to do this.

Ask the group to imagine that you’re going to arrange an Open Evening to raise money for a local charity. What can each person contribute? Write the suggestions on your paper for everyone to see. Think of some prompts before -hand e.g. who can help with the advertising? Getting the hall ready? Preparing refreshments? Give a short talk about the charity? Look after the money? Clear up after? Make stuff to sell? Invite friends/neighbours along?

Hopefully it will be clear by the end of 5 minutes that everyone would have a valuable role to play.

1. Recap of Dorcas’s Story: Acts 9:36

Read the verse and ask the group what do they recall about Dorcas.

Explain that in this study we will be considering that God’s people today are to ‘do good’ like Dorcas.

2. Doing good – God’s will for His people

Read Ephesians 2:8-10.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In these verses the apostle Paul firstly confirms that salvation is a gift of God. God in his grace has done everything necessary through the death of his Son Jesus to make the way of salvation possible. Through faith we receive God’s gift.

He then tells his readers that their purpose now is to do the good works that God has planned for them to do.
What are the good works that God has planned for us to do?

It can be helpful to separate these good works into 2 categories:

a) The good works that are a result of **Spiritual gifts**.

b) The good works that stem from **Talents**.

### a) Spiritual gifts

The apostle Paul talks about ‘spiritual gifts’ that are given by God to his people to enable them to fulfil specific roles or tasks. So there are good works that come from the spiritual gifts we have.

Look up the following verses for some examples:

**Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.**

God has appointed (i.e. given the gift to be) apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, administrators, speaking in tongues.

**Read Romans 12:6-8.**

God has given gifts of prophesying, teaching, serving, encouraging, giving to the needy, leading, showing mercy.

You probably know people that have obvious spiritual gifts. A preacher who can explain God's Word clearly and in a way that helps you understand what the Bible means for your life; a person who seems to know the right counsel to give when you need advice on spiritual matters; a person who has an acute ability to see the needs of others and has the desire to help; a person whom others are willing to listen to and follow because they are obviously ‘in tune' with God.

These gifts are given for definite reasons.

**Read 1 Peter 4:10-11.**

To serve others, to be a channel of God’s grace to others, that God may be praised.

**Read Ephesians 4:11,12.**

God has given specific gifts to some so that they can prepare others to serve – and as they serve, the body of Christ (the church) is built up.

**Read Matthew 5:14-16.**

Jesus also said that our good works will result in God’s name being glorified.

### b) Natural gifts or talents

God created each one of us with a great variety of talents. These natural abilities are in our genetic make-up, and they develop through life. You may be able to sing or paint or teach or write. Perhaps you can sew or do accounts. There are good works that we can do using these talents, to care for others and to serve others. Again, these good works bring praise to God and are a channel of his grace to others.

Not all Christians are called to be preachers or teachers. But we can all use our talents for the good of others. You probably know a Christian who is a nurse or doctor, who is aware that God has given them special talents in the field of medicine.

We recently met a young man who is a solicitor specialising in helping churches in the area of employment issues and personnel matters.
Many churches have activities reaching out to the community, where members use their talents to play with pre-schoolers, chat to young mums, listen to lonely folk at a coffee morning, or give advice to those with money problems. And all our churches rely on people using their talents in order to function from week to week – playing the piano, arranging the flowers, or keeping the building safe and warm and tidy.

The Bible also teaches that we should also use our resources to do good to others.

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.
Command those who are rich in this present world not to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure in heaven for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Paul says at least 7 things to wealthy Christians in these verses. Can you list them?

To think about:
• What spiritual gift/s has God given you? How are you using that gift? Perhaps you will need the help of a more mature Christian to see what gift/s God has given you and how you can use them.
• What natural talents do you have? Are you using them to do good to other people?
• What is your attitude to your financial resources? Are you generously using your wealth for the good of others?
• Read Colossians 3:17. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

We should be doing EVERYTHING in his name – as Jesus’s representatives and for him.
We should be doing EVERYTHING thankfully – gladly not grudgingly.

3. Doing good – our response to God’s love
Talk to the group about an occasion when you personally have responded to a specific need or situation. For example, perhaps you have seen a news report from somewhere in the world where there has been a disaster, and have phoned at once to give money, or contributed the requested goods. Or perhaps you have realised that a neighbour or friend is feeling lonely and have decided to spend time with them. Or perhaps someone has been very kind to you and you have done something to show you appreciate their kindness.
Ask the group if they have an example to share. What motivated them?
*You might like to invite people to write an example in their workbooks.*

We are motivated to give and behave by feelings of compassion or of thanks or of concern. We are motivated by what’s within us.

When we become God’s children we are motivated to do good by two factors:

1. The Holy Spirit who now dwells in our hearts prompts us to obey God’s commands and act as he would.

2. A grateful response to God’s love and mercy shown to us in the sacrifice of his Son Jesus on Calvary.

We will be looking at the role the Holy Spirit plays in the life of the believer in detail in the 4th study.

We began this study by considering the verses in Ephesians 2 that explain that it is God’s will that his people do good works. The verse begins with a précis of the good news of the gospel – that we are saved by grace, through faith.

Time and time again, the apostle Paul tells his readers to consider what God has done for them in order to be inspired to live for him wholeheartedly.

*If you have time you could look at these verses: Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 2:1,2; Colossians 3:12.*

Day by day we must remember what God has done for us, how he has loved us and given his Son to die for the world. As we do so, our hearts will be filled with gratitude to our Father and with his love, and we will be inspired to live for him wholeheartedly too.

**To conclude**

Dorcas used her natural talent to sew to make clothes for the poor widows of Joppa and their families. She obviously had the means to buy material to do this, so she used her financial resources in this venture too.

Perhaps she also had been given one of the spiritual gifts that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12 – possibly the gift of helping or serving? Her good works had made an impact on the whole town.

What impact could our good works have?
3. ‘Doing good’:
What’s the Standard? Who’s our Example?

The aims of this session are to:
• Explore what the Bible has to say about serving others
• Consider the standard that Jesus set his followers
• Consider Jesus’s example as the ‘Servant King’

Ice-breaker

You will need a square of paper for each person, including yourself, an origami elephant that you have made beforehand and a copy of the instructions in Appendix 1!

Show the origami elephant to the group, give them all a square of paper, and invite them to make an elephant themselves. After a minute or so, show them how to fold the paper step by step until each person has an elephant. Make the point that seeing the elephant wasn’t quite enough to enable them to make their own – they needed step by step help. In this study we’ll be considering the standard that Jesus sets for our good works (the elephant) and also how he leads by example – an example we, as his people, are to follow.

Recap

1. Remembering Dorcas.

Read Acts 9 verses 36-42.
What does verse 36 say about Dorcas?
She lived in Joppa; she was always doing good; she helped the poor.

What does verse 39 say that Dorcas had been doing to help others?
She had made clothes and robes.

Some points to remember from the story of Dorcas:
• Joppa was a busy port so it’s possible that many sailors’ widows and children lived there – there was a needy group of people.
• Buying material to make clothes was probably expensive so Dorcas may have been a relatively wealthy woman – she had the means to meet some of their need.
• She could sew! Her talents were put to good use.

2. What does the Bible say about doing good?

Read Ephesians 2:10.
What has God planned for his people to do?
God has planned for his people to do good deeds.
**Read Matthew 5:16.**
What should be the result of our good deeds?
*These deeds draw people to God.*

**Read 1 Timothy 6:17,18.**
What are rich believers to do?
*To do good, to be generous and willing to share.*

**For personal reflection**
Think back over the past week. Have you had an opportunity to be generous and to share with someone else? Have you prayed that your good deeds will draw others to Jesus?

**Loving my ‘neighbour’ as myself – The Standard**
Introduce the reading by explaining that Jesus was answering a question posed by an expert in the Jewish law. This expert had asked Jesus how a person could get eternal life.

**Read Luke 10:25-37.**
The Good Samaritan.

- What do verses 27 and 28 say a person must do to attain eternal life?  
  *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself.*

- Jesus then goes on to explain what it means to be a ‘neighbour.’  
  **Read verses 30-37.**
  Who has been a ‘neighbour’ to the injured Samaritan according to Jesus?
  *The person who showed mercy to him.*

So, loving someone as ourselves means showing them mercy.

- The standard Jesus sets is to ‘show mercy’. This wasn’t just feeling sorry for someone who had had a misfortune. The mercy that the Samaritan showed was practical, costly and sacrificial.  
  Practical = he treated his wounds at once, and took him to a safe place for further treatment and help;  
  Costly = he interrupted his own schedule and paid for the care of the injured man;  
  Sacrificial = for all of the above reasons and because he overcame the inherent hatred between Jew and Samaritan in the interests of the injured man – he was willing to put aside his prejudice and tradition for the sake of another.

- Jesus’s teaching here reflects the standards that God had set for his people, the Jews, through the Law. Many of the laws that God gave the Israelites were to protect the poor and needy in society. God wanted widows and orphans to be taken care of. He didn’t want people to exploit one another. There was economic protection for the poor, there were unprecedented social protections and special provision was made for the inclusion of the poor in community worship.
These laws and others illustrate God’s deep concern for the poor. Ignoring or taking advantage of them brought God’s wrath (Exodus 22:22-24; Job 31:21-23). Care for the poor was such a serious matter that God viewed giving to the poor as the indispensable sign of obedience to his law (Deuteronomy 16:12-13), and when Israel failed to do so they suffered God’s judgment (Isaiah 1:15-17; Jeremiah 5:28-29).

Jesus’s attitude obviously reflected the compassionate and just heart of his Father. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus displayed his identification with and concern for the poor and oppressed (Matthew 6:3; 11:12-5; Mark 10:21; Luke 4:18-19; 6:20; 10:25-37; 12:32-34; 14:12-14; 16:19-31; 18:22-24; 19:1-10). He even presented care for needy brothers and sisters as the sign that we know God and are saved (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus was serious about caring for the poor and needy, and he requires that his followers are too.

Question

You could split into pairs or small groups and then have feedback, or encourage people to answer individually.

Can you think of someone who needs to be shown mercy in your church or locality? Remember, this means something practical and it may be costly.

If you can’t, perhaps you could spend time over the coming days asking God to show you someone to whom you or the church should be showing mercy.

Loving my ‘neighbour’ as myself – The example

Read John 13:1-17.

Jesus washes his disciples’ feet.

Explain that this event took place just several days before Jesus’s crucifixion, when Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem.

- Can someone put verses 14 and 15 into their own words?
  What jobs that you have to do would you compare to Jesus washing the disciples’ feet?
  What ‘Christian’ jobs would you compare to Jesus washing their feet?
  Would you be willing to do these jobs?

- What is Jesus’s desire for his followers according to these verses?

- Jesus’s own life and death was of course the ultimate act of service. He left heaven, became a man, and died on our behalf. No-one can do more for another human being than sacrifice their life for them. Jesus warned his disciples that following him would be costly, and that it would even cost some of them their lives. Throughout history Christians have followed Jesus’s example even to the extreme of sacrificing their lives as they have witnessed to, and served others in Jesus’s name. The majority of us will never have to make this sacrifice but even in the world today there are believers for whom following Jesus could mean death where they live. It is good for us to remember them in our prayers.

- Not only does Jesus want his followers to follow his example, but, and it’s an amazing truth for the Christian to consider, God actually wants us to
become like his Son. From the moment we receive the Holy Spirit, we are being transformed into Jesus’s likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we seek to obey God’s Word and follow Jesus’s example, the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts and minds transforming us to be more like Jesus himself. But following his example is not always easy, and we’ll be considering this in more detail in the next study.

**During the week, spend time:**

- Thanking God for his love and forgiveness. Read and meditate on Romans 5:8. Jesus loved us first when we were sinners – we don’t have to earn his favour by our good works.
- Considering: Have I been trying to earn God’s favour? Or have I been ‘doing good’ as a response to his love?
- Remembering those believers who face persecution and even death because they are followers of Jesus.

**Further Notes on the Law and the poor and needy in Jewish Society**

There was **economic protection** for the poor: they were allowed to glean grain from the corners of fields and creditors could not take their blanket or tools (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:17). Men were to be paid on the day of their labour (Leviticus 19:13), and family members were to help each other repurchase their land if they fell into debt and lost it (Leviticus 25:23-34).

The laws God had given also gave the poor unprecedented **social protections**: judges were not allowed to show partiality to the rich (Leviticus 19:15); women who became widows were allowed to marry their brothers in law to secure an heir to care for them in their old age (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

Finally, God’s law made special provision for the poor’s inclusion in **community worship**: servants, slaves, strangers and even animals were to participate in the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:1-15); poor people who could not afford to present costly sacrifices and offerings were allowed to sacrifice less costly sacrifices that they could afford (Leviticus 5:7, 11; 14:21). One of the **tithes** was collected with a particular command to include aliens, the fatherless, widows and other poor people in a yearly community feast and celebration (Deuteronomy 14:22-29).
4. ‘Doing good’: Help for the tough times!

We saw in the second study that Dorcas was described as a woman who was ‘always doing good’ Acts 9:36. The third study concentrated on Jesus’s command to love our neighbour i.e. to show mercy, and his own example of serving others.

In this study we will consider the resources that are available to the Christian as he/she endeavours to live a life that is full of ‘good works.’ The importance of prayer in the life of a Christian is also considered.

Our heavenly Father gives his children everything they need to live a life that pleases him, a life that is full of ‘good works’ – those good works that he has purposely prepared for them to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

The primary resources that empower a Christian are the Holy Spirit, the Church and God’s Word – the Bible.

Ice-breaker

Ask the group to split into pairs and give each pair a copy of the puzzle on Appendix 2. Allow a few minutes for them to try and solve the puzzle before showing the solution. Probably they couldn’t solve the problem on their own – they needed your help. Make the point that God doesn’t expect Christians to ‘go it alone’ – there are resources to help us live day by day, and we can’t get by without them.

1. The Holy Spirit

*There are lots of Bible references in this study. You may like to choose some of them or ask different people to find one verse each to read to the group.*

The Person of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the Third person of the Trinity. He has a mind, emotions and will. He is equal to God the Father and God the Son, and has the same nature. The Holy Spirit is God’s gift to begin and complete the work of building the Body of Christ, the Church, on the earth. The Spirit reveals sin, glorifies Christ and transforms the believer.

(See Matthew 28:19; Romans 8:11; Isaiah 63:10; Romans 15:30; Romans 8:27; John 16:8; John 14:26; 1 John 2:27)

The Work of the Holy Spirit

a) His work in creation. *Genesis 1:2-3*

b) His work in communicating God’s truth. His main work is to testify to (point to) Christ. *2 Timothy 3:15-16 [2 Peter 1:19-21 John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-14] John 16:13-14*

c) He is involved in Christ’s work. *Luke 1:35; Matthew 3:16*

d) His work in human beings is extensive.
The Spirit = Power to live

We finished the third study noting that it isn’t always easy for us to follow Jesus’s example and serve others as he expects. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus who lives within the believer and is the source of power who enables the Christian to live life as God intends.

Read Romans 8:11.
… the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you.

Read Galatians 2:20.
I have been crucified with Christ: and I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the real life I now have within this body is a result of my trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Read Philippians 4:13.
For I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me strength and power.

Spend a few minutes discussing these verses and the implications for the Christian who desires to follow Jesus’s example to show mercy and serve others.

You may be thinking, I need the Holy Spirit in my life! If you are a Christian, He is already there.

Read Romans 8:9.
You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.

The Holy Spirit resides in you, but you may not be yielding your life to His direction. He may be a resident – without being president.

Being Led by the Spirit

In his letter to the Galatian Christians Paul talks about being “led” by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16,25. cf Romans 8:15). That implies we obey what He says: He leads, we follow. Simple enough. But usually we don’t like anyone telling us what to do – even if it’s God! Being led by the Holy Spirit means allowing the Spirit of God and the Word of God to tell us what to do.

As we read God’s Word, the Holy Spirit shows us the sin in our lives, sin that we must get rid of. The apostle Paul constantly urges his readers to get rid of sin, to put death to sin and to flee from sin in order that their lives will be what God desires – holy, pure, like Jesus. Again, it is by the power of the Holy Spirit we can deal with the sin in our lives. Dealing with sin is part of being ‘led by the Spirit’ and ‘living by the Spirit.’
We have the choice each day: Will we let the Holy Spirit lead us, or will we be controlled by something else? Will fear about the future, or our desire to get what we want, become more important than obeying Christ? When the Holy Spirit fills you, He controls your thoughts and your actions, he helps you get rid of sin. You can’t be filled with hatred, fear or worry while you are filled with the Spirit. There isn’t room.

Read Ephesians 5:17.
Therefore don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine … But be filled with the Spirit.

Unlike alcohol, the changes the Holy Spirit produces aren’t artificial. They don’t wear off with time. The Bible calls these lasting changes the ‘fruit’ that is produced by the Holy Spirit.

Read Galatians 5:22.23.
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against these things there is no law.

When the Holy Spirit controls our lives fruit is produced – i.e., the character of Jesus develops in us. We are being transformed into his likeness, 2 Corinthians 3:18. We will increasingly think and act like our Saviour, showing mercy like he did and serving others like he did.

Questions
Do you consciously seek to let the Holy Spirit guide you every day?
Are there sins in your life that must be got rid of with the Spirit’s help and power?
Can you see the fruit of the Holy Spirit growing in your life?

The Spirit = Help to Pray

The Holy Spirit also helps us to pray. Prayer is one of the most important things a Christian does because it is one way in which our relationship with God develops and grows. We can pray anywhere and at any time. Prayer brings joy and peace to the believer’s soul, even in difficult times. When we pray we are following Jesus’s own example – he prayed frequently and often for long periods of time.

The Christian is to pray for all manner of things and it would be helpful to spend time considering Jesus’s teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 as well as to look at the many references to prayer in the epistles. Those things that we are urged to pray for include:

- that God’s name will be exalted and his kingdom extended on the earth (Matthew 6);
- to ask for the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:19); to ask for the sick to be healed and for other miracles (James 5:14, Acts 4:30); unity (John 17:20,21); discernment (Philippians 1:9,10); to know God and his will better (Colossians 1:10,19);
- for strength and endurance and to do good works (Colossians 1:10,11); for protection and forgiveness (Matthew 6:12, 13).
Prayer changes things – when we pray in line with God’s will! God loves to give good gifts to his children, and answered prayer is one of those gifts. (Matthew 7:11, Luke 11:13)

Read Romans 8:26, 27.
In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.

These verses reveal that it is the Holy Spirit who teaches us what to pray, who leads our prayers and who inspires prayers in our hearts. Often, it is difficult to find the words to say, perhaps we can only sigh or cry because our feelings and experiences are too profound, perhaps we are at a loss as to what God’s will is in a particular situation. In such circumstances the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, he prays for us and that according to God’s will. What an amazing comfort and encouragement this is. That as we pray for needy people and situations the Holy Spirit leads our prayers and prays for us too.

Does God answer our every prayer?
Sometimes, the way we live creates barriers between us and God: perhaps we are disobedient; perhaps we refuse to forgive; perhaps there is unconfessed sin in our lives or perhaps we are praying with the wrong motives or for things that are not for our good. God answers the prayers of those whose hearts are pure. That isn’t to say we must be perfect before God will answer us. But we must be humble and repentant when we pray.

How do we pray?
People have different patterns and preferences for prayer and these often depend on a person’s lifestyle and personality. Those who work full time may pray on the way to work in the car or at lunch time; some pray whilst jogging or walking the dog; those with small babies and children may find it almost impossible to find a time to pray – and stay awake! Despite the difficulties, it’s essential that the Christian finds a method that suits and makes time to pray.

Questions
Is prayer an essential part of your daily life?
Are there things in your life right now that are obstacles in your relationship with God?
Have you considered spending time praying with one or two friends regularly?

2. The Church
The second resource God has given us to help us to live a life that pleases him is the Church. When a person becomes a Christian through the work of the Holy Spirit on the heart, they become a child of God and a member of his family, the Church. The Church is also called the Body of Christ. The different members of Christ’s body need and rely on one another just as members of the physical body need and rely on one another.
Read Ephesians 4:11-12.
It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...

What roles are listed here? Apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors.
What is the aim of these leaders? To prepare God’s people for works of service.
What is the result of ‘works of service’? The body grows and is built up.

Here are some more responsibilities that all members of Christ’s body have to one another:
- To carry each others burdens: Galatians 6:2.
- To pray for one another: Ephesians 6:18.
- To encourage one another: 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Questions
The Church is also described as ‘Christ’s bride’: Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:7-9. What ideas does this give us about our relationship to Christ?
The Church is also described as a ‘holy temple’: Ephesians 2:19-21. What sort of people and Church does God want?

To consider
Think about your role in the Church. How are you fulfilling your role? Do you need the members to help you in specific ways right now?

3. The Bible – God’s Word
Thirdly, God has given us the Bible, His Word.

Read 2 Timothy 3:16.
All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

What is Scripture useful for?
Teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness.

What result does the application of Scripture have in the believers life?
To equip them for every good work.
The Scripture has been given to us to equip us to do ‘GOOD WORK’.

God has chosen to communicate with us through creation, through his Word and through his Son. Before we become Christians, God speaks to us through his Word, to bring us to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Our relationship then grows as he speaks with us through his Word. Of course, we must make time to listen to God speak. We have to read his Word, we have to study it and listen to others explain the Word.
As with prayer, different people have different preferences, but we must spend quality time listening to God speaking to us through his Word and applying that Word to ourselves.

We will then be equipped to do the ‘good work’ that Paul referred to in the above verses.

As our bodies need adequate nutrition in order to flourish and function properly, so our spiritual life must be tended to. The sources of our spiritual nutrition are God’s Word, depending on the Holy Spirit, other Christians and prayer. Filling our lives with these things will equip us to serve others. Our hearts will be filled with God’s love and compassion for others as we understand more of his love and compassion for us.

To Discuss

What different methods do people find useful to study the Bible?
How do we get over the difficulties of making time to read and study God’s Word?

A Final thought

Even though our heavenly Father has provided all that we need to live for Him and to do good to others, we still face difficulties.

The author to the Hebrews knew how important it was for Christians to encourage one another:

Read Hebrews 10:24, 25.
And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Obviously, the early Christians had been helped by the encouragement of other believers, so the author urges them to continue to meet together to study the Scripture and to pray because,

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.”
Matthew 18:20. God himself is with us when we get together with other believers.

To Consider

Are we making an effort to meet up with other Christians regularly in order to encourage them and be encouraged by them?

Resources

‘Youth Alpha Leader’s Guide’:
Alpha International; 2002, London

Barbara Hughes, ‘The Disciplines of a Godly Woman’:
5. ‘Doing good’:
What results can we expect?’

Aim of the study: In this study we are going to consider what the Bible says is the purpose of our good works and what will be the outcome of a life of ‘doing good’, for the church, for people outside the church fellowship, for ourselves and for God. We will then conclude our series by reconsidering Dorcas’s story and how we can apply lessons learnt through this series of studies to our lives.

Ice-breaker
Ask the group to turn to the person next to them and tell them what they dreamed of being as a child. Allow a few minutes for this and then ask if anyone is willing to share their memory with the group.

Or, ask the pairs to share a story of a time when things didn’t turn out as anticipated!

Make the point that sometimes things turn out as we desire but that very often they don’t. The Bible has many encouraging words for the Christian about what results we can expect from the good that we do, and this is the theme of this study.

What good works are not!!
They are not done to “buy” or “earn” God’s favour or a place in heaven.
What do these verses say about gaining God’s favour?

Isaiah 64:6
All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

Romans 3:28
A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

John 5:24
I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life.

Titus 3:5
He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

What good works are!!
They are:

• Our response to God’s love and mercy.

Romans 12:1
Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God.
It is because our sins have been forgiven by the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary, that we desire to show our thankfulness by doing those things that please God.

- God’s Will for His People

**Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:11-14; 3:1,8,14**

... *created in Christ Jesus to do good works.*

- The work of God’s Spirit within

**Colossians 1:10**

... *we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you ... that you may live a life worthy of the Lord.*

**The purpose of our good works**

Our good works have purpose and there are consequences, not only for those whom we seek to serve and show mercy to.

They also have purpose and consequences for the Church, for those outside the church, that is ‘the world’, for ourselves, and for the glory of God.

1. For the sake of the Church

**Read Galatians 6:9,10.**

*Let us not become weary in doing good ... let us do good to all people especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

We should first of all try to do good to other believers. This doesn’t mean that we ignore those who don’t belong to God’s family. But, as we do good to our brothers and sisters in the faith, so God’s family on the earth is nurtured and cared for. The relationship between Christians is very special: God is our loving heavenly Father, Jesus is our all-sufficient Saviour, the Holy Spirit lives within us. The apostle Paul uses the analogy of the human body in his letter to the Corinthian Christians to help them understand the unique relationship Christ has with his people (1 Corinthians 12).

We are members of Christ’s body, to support one another and to work together. Every member is essential. If one member suffers in any way, the whole body suffers, if one member rejoices, the whole body is glad and rejoices.

**Question**

Think about the ‘family of faith’ that you belong to.

How are you showing concern for the other members of the family?

Is there something you should be doing for the members, bearing in mind your talents and gifts?

What about the world wide ‘family of faith’?

Are there opportunities to care for the wider family?
2. For the sake of ‘the world’

Often in the Bible the term ‘the world’ is used to denote people who do not belong to God.

We have seen in study 3 that many of the laws given to the Jews and recorded in the Old Testament reflected God’s concern that the poor and needy in society should be taken care of properly. Jesus also displayed great compassion and concern for people in need.

But, God’s Word also emphasizes that people have spiritual needs and that their need to come into a right relationship with God is more important than even their physical needs.

Read Matthew 4:4 and John 6:35, 40.

What needs are described in these verses?

- The need to hear God’s Words.
  *It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*

- The need to believe in Jesus.
  *Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty … For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.*

The purpose of our good works is that people around us will ‘see’ God at work in us and through us – as one popular saying goes, “actions speak louder than words” – and so come to God themselves. Many people that we meet never go to church or chapel, so how will they come to know God? Our lives can be a witness. We can show that we belong to God by the way we live. We can show God’s love and mercy to people as we love them and are kind and compassionate. The Christian can be like a mirror, reflecting God to people who don’t know him, and we can be channels of his love to them too.

Gwenda’s Story

In 2004 Gwenda, her husband, Ray, and their 2 children moved home, to live next door to Owain and Siân Edwards in Y Ffôr, Pwllheli. It wasn’t long before Gwenda noticed there was something different about the family next door!

Siân would go out of her way to help Gwenda, and she remembers being surprised at her warmth and willingness to look after their youngest daughter, who was only two years old. Gwenda noticed that Siân always made time for people, despite her own responsibilities, to listen to them and to show real interest in them.

Siân’s behavior had a big impact on Gwenda, and they became firm friends – just like David and Jonathan of the Old Testament. They enjoyed talking and spending time together but it was only after their friendship was established that Siân began to share her faith with Gwenda: before that they had only received a Bible and a CD of Christian songs as gifts from Owain and Siân.

Up until this point Gwenda hadn’t really felt the need for close friends, but Siân’s love and care for them as a family influenced her greatly.
Gwenda came to know Jesus as her personal Saviour in September 2005, and Ray a month later.

Within 2 years Siân and Owain left Y Ffôr, to take responsibility for the work in Coleg y Bala. Although Ray and Gwenda were extremely sad to see them leave Y Ffôr they were sure that Owain and Siân were the right people to carry on the Lord’s work in the Coleg.

This is how Gwenda describes Siân: “Siân is a doer. She doesn’t hang around, she knows that time is short, and that many souls need Jesus. Her love for us led us to experience God’s love for us.’

To discuss
How can our good works reveal God to other people?

3. For my sanctification
As we seek to obey God’s Word, and as we seek to ‘do good’ our lives are transformed – another word for this is ‘sanctification.’ We have touched on this in the third and fourth studies.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Romans 8:29.
And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever – increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.

What change takes place in the lives of God’s people?
They are transformed, they become conformed to the image of God’s Son.

It is amazing to think that it is God’s will that his people become like his Son, Jesus Christ. This of course is an ongoing process that doesn’t happen overnight. One way in which our lives are changed and made more like Jesus is as we ‘do good’. We have already considered how the Holy Spirit helps us to get rid of sin and gives us power to obey. The work of sanctification is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit as we obey and submit to God’s will day by day.

Read 1 Peter 2:20 and 1 Peter 3:13,14.
But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.
Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

Peter reminds his readers that God’s people are called to do good even in difficult situations, when they may suffer as a result.

Linda’s Story
Linda and her family returned to the U.S.A after a difficult time of missionary service in the Philippines. They managed to buy a small, cosy house that Linda enjoyed turning into a comfortable home for them all. She particularly loved
the small garden at the back of the house where she would escape to read her Bible and pray. Soon after, a new family moved in next door. The new neighbours were loud and coarse. They screamed at the children, let the garden become overgrown, and even allowed their boys to urinate against the garden fence that divided the two properties.

Linda was at her wit’s end. She knew she should try to ‘do good’ to her neighbours, but truth be told, she hated them. When she felt she could take no more she returned home one afternoon to find the boys from next door climbing over the fence, after having sprayed her garden furniture with orange paint. She broke down and cried, “Lord, I know I should love my neighbours, but I can’t. I hate them!” She turned to her Bible and read these verses from Colossians 3:12-14: “therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion ... And over all these virtues put on love.” Once again she cried to God, asking him to show her how she could possibly love her horrible neighbours!

The idea came to her that she should make a list of the things she would do for a family she did love.

1. I’d ask the mum over for coffee
2. I’d offer to baby sit
3. I’d make them cookies

And so, with much fear and prayer she began to do those things on her list. The first time she went next door with a plate of cookies the mum was obviously touched by Linda’s kindness. In the following months, over many visits, the mum began to open up to Linda and share her story. They had taken in the children who belonged to distant relatives, when they had been abandoned. She and her husband were poorly educated, struggling to make ends meet and look after the boys. Living next to this family was still very difficult, but Linda’s heart was changing as she tried to show God’s love in practical ways to them. After a while, the family had to move on and Linda was genuinely sad. She knew she had been able to help them, but she also knew that the experience had helped sanctify her too, and the hatred in her heart had been replaced by love.

4. For God’s glory

Read 1 Peter 2:12.
*Live such good lives among the pagans that … They may see your good works and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

What will the ‘pagans’ do when they see our good works?

Read Matthew 5:16.
*… in the same way let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

What will people do when they see our ‘light’ according to Jesus?

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31.
*So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*

What can we do to glorify God?
To discuss:

Many people say that there's too much hypocrisy in chapel, and that's why they don't go near!

Why do people say this?

How can we make sure that it's God who gets the glory from our good works?

What attitudes do we need to display as Christians that will prevent others from seeing us as hypocrites? **Humility – to acknowledge constantly that we are far from perfect; confession – seeking forgiveness and cleansing; acknowledge grace – knowing that even our good works are gifts from God.**

What does Dorcas's story teach us about doing good?

1. She must have done good to the family of faith – the believers in Joppa obviously thought a great deal of her and that would explain why they sent for Peter after her death. Acts 9:38.

2. She must have done good in her community. People from the town gathered at her home to show Peter the clothes she had made for them. Acts 9:39.

3. She had a ‘Christ - like’ character – she is described as being ‘full of good works’ just like Jesus her Saviour who came ‘not to be served but to serve’. Acts 9:36; Mark 10:45.

4. Many people came to believe in the Lord as a result of her life and miraculous resurrection. Acts 9:42. And of course, the salvation of eternal souls is one of the major events that glorify God.

Questions

1. What sort of relationship do I have with my brothers and sisters in Christ? Do I need to make an effort to ‘do good’ to them? What would this mean practically?

2. How can I ‘do good’ in my community?

3. Am I being transformed to be more like Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit in my life – getting rid of sin and seeing his fruit grow? Does something specific in my life need attention?

4. Does my life bring glory to God? Who are the people that I need to pray to come to believe in Jesus? How can I present Jesus to them?
Appendix (1)

An Elephant (face)

Origami: © Fumiaki Shingu
Appendix (2)

Make a copy for each person and ask each one to cut around each box, so they have 3 pieces. Lay the pieces in front of you in the order shown in the Appendix before you had cut them out. The aim is to arrange the riders on the backs of the horses without cutting or folding any of the 3 parts.

Rotate the top horse 90° anti clockwise. Rotate the other horse 90° anti clockwise and lay them side by side. The horse on the left looks as if it is now standing on its hind legs and the horse on the right looks as if it is standing on its head.

Rotate the piece with the riders 90° clockwise and lay it on top of the horses. You should now see 2 horses with riders – one is the right way up with a rider on its back, the other however is upside down, but also with a rider on its back. Both horses seem to be jumping over an obstacle!

"P.T. Barnum's trick mules" by Sam Loyd (1842–1911)
Permission is given to make photocopies for the use of the owner’s local church.

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