

Titus 3:4-7

⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

God Saved Us

I.

When I was a kid I admired the high school basketball players. I didn't think I would ever be a star in the NBA—such things weren't even on my radar when I was in grade school. But what kid watching the older kids doesn't want to get better at something?

In 1993 Anders Ericsson posited a theory that to become an expert at something required 10,000 hours of deliberate practice (<http://tinyurl.com/3zhgktj>). I spent hours in the driveway of my childhood home shooting hoops and practicing basketball skills. Ericsson hadn't written his paper yet, but there were already maxims like “practice makes perfect.”

No matter how many sayings you come up with, deliberate practice is only part of the equation. A person has to have some innate talent, or they will never become truly great at something.

Some people have talent and are truly great. People like Michael Jordan in the old days or Giannis Antetokounmpo—better known as the Greek Freak—of today put in a great deal of effort into playing basketball at a high level. Their seemingly tireless effort seems to pay off. They get even *better* with practice! They have talent, and additional effort hones their talent and makes it even greater.

Not me.

“You get an ‘A’ for effort.” The sad reality is that effort or desire or heart can only carry a person so far. If you have no propensity for something—no talent to begin with—tireless effort can help you show an improvement, but you'll never really be very good. “You get an ‘A’ for effort” is just one of those phrases people come up with to help soften the blow.

II.

“[God] saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves” (Titus 3:5, EHV). Do you have any talent in the area of righteousness? Do you work hard to do what is right and avoid what is wrong? What's your success rate?

The first thing people do in evaluating their efforts to be a good person is to look at the big sins—things like “You shall not steal.” Ok. Get out my checklist here. I haven't knocked off any banks lately. In fact, I've *never* pulled off a bank heist. I've never even tried. That's pretty good. How about petty larceny? Most states define that as stealing money or property of less than \$500 in value. If you shoplift, even for amounts well under \$500 you will run afoul of the legal system. Perhaps even *that* has never been a problem for you. The police will never be called for the pencil or pen you “borrowed” from a classmate without ever telling him—or giving it back. Your employer probably isn't going to hunt you down for the little items that found their way into your pocket or your car as you left work—they might never even notice those items are gone.

There is little doubt that at one time or another you have stolen something at some point

in your life. But even if you are one of those rare people who *never* have, did you ever have cross the line into a sinful desire for something that isn't yours? How about greed? Did you ever have a desire for more wealth or more stuff than you had?

The prophet Isaiah wrote: "All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth" (Isaiah 64:6, EHV). Put what Isaiah says in the context of the Seventh Commandment about stealing. Perhaps you had a desire for more wealth or more stuff, but didn't act on it. You didn't act on it, but your righteous act of avoiding sin is still a filthy cloth because the underlying greed is still there. Perhaps you wanted to rob a bank, or just shoplift a few small, expensive items. You didn't do it, because the threat of punishment kept your sin in check. Your seemingly "righteous" act of leaving the merchandise on the shelves is just a filthy cloth, because it was only your fear of being caught that kept you from your sinful actions.

"[God] saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves" (Titus 3:5, EHV). When you carefully examine each one of your "righteous works," what you find is that they're not righteous at all—they are all just like the oil-soaked rags in the garage.

In fact, take things a step further and we realize that the thing we are really good at is sin. In the verse before this lesson Paul says: "At one time we ourselves were also foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by many kinds of evil desires and pleasures, living in malice and jealousy, being hated and hating one another" (Titus 3:3, EHV).

Little sins, big sins. You and I have put in the 10,000 hours of practice necessary at achieving expert status when it comes to sin. If you need to be really good at something to get scholarship offers, the offers are coming from Satan for our accomplishments at evil, not from God to be admitted to the Academy of Righteousness.

III.

"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:4-5, EHV).

What is important in our spiritual lives is not our own pitiful efforts at righteousness. What stands out is the kindness and love of God. God's kindness and love toward mankind appeared with Jesus.

Our journey in the Church Year has suddenly jumped from the events of Jesus' birth to his inauguration. In the Gospel for today Jesus was baptized. That was his installation into office—the office to be the Messiah God had promised who would deal with the sin problem we have spent years honing and perfecting. God knew *we* couldn't deal with it, no matter how much practice we put in. We could not become righteous. We could not really even get close. Our best attempts would still be dirty cloths.

Jesus did it for us.

It takes 10,000 hours to become an expert, given some native talent you must begin with. As we confess, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He was already born an expert, because he was born perfect, but he put in his 10,000 hours of practice at remaining perfect by the time he was about 14 months old. In his 33 years of life, Jesus never sinned—not even once. He put in 289,278 hours of practice at living the perfect life in our place. He did this to be the sacrifice God required for the imperfections of every one of us.

“[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5-6, EHV). Believers are baptized into the work Christ did for us in his perfection. A washing of renewal means that in baptism we are made new all over again. A washing of rebirth means that in baptism we are born again.

Rebirth and renewal were not there before, but in baptism you and I received faith as the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are clothed with Christ. That means we put on *his* righteousness in place of our own unrighteousness like a piece of clothing. Paul says: “Indeed, as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27, EHV). We received what Jesus already completed—all his substitutionary work for us on the cross. In Christ and his work, we are perfect and holy in God’s sight. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, by cleansing her with the washing of water in connection with the Word” (Ephesians 5:26, EHV).

IV.

For what, or too what, did God save us in baptism into Christ Jesus? “So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7, EHV).

“Practice makes perfect.” Not so when it comes to righteousness in this life. No matter how much practice we put in, we will just be the pathetically untalented lad shooting hoops in the driveway.

No, we have been *declared* righteous by God. That’s what that word “justified” means. God’s grace—God’s undeserved love—has declared us righteous for Jesus’ sake—because of what he has done.

It is because of Jesus that we have become heirs of heaven. We will inherit the gift of eternal life. That’s how we live now. God saved us to live for him.

Practice in righteousness is no longer something we do trying to earn God’s favor. Practice in righteousness is now something we do because already *have* God’s favor in Jesus. Practice in righteousness now means a desire to learn more and more about God’s love for us. We now have a *joie de vivre*—a joy in living as Children of God—because we understand more fully the kindness and love our Savior-God has displayed toward us in such abundance in sending Jesus to be anointed as our Savior.

Keep putting in the practice to show others your righteousness in Christ. Amen.