

# Tabitha/Dorcas

Sermon Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 2022-03-20

Today I am going to preach on Tabitha - not Tabitha Swab, but her namesake in Acts 9. And if you would turn there, we will read verses 36-43. Please stand.

## I. Introduction

I recently came across a children's chorus that said this:

Shamgar had an ox-goad,  
David had a sling,  
Samson had a jawbone,  
Rahab had a string,  
Mary had some ointment,  
Aaron had a rod,  
Dorcas had a needle,  
All were used for God

And what I love about that poem is that it highlights the fact that God uses the ordinary things of life to advance his kingdom. Pietists think that the only way to serve God is to do “churchy” things. But if that was the case, Jesus didn't model that too well since He was a carpenter most of His life. Carpentry (along with theology and along with “churchy” things) was part of being about His Father's business. And we will see this morning that Tabitha (or her second name, Dorcas) used her needle to hugely minister on behalf of God's kingdom. Jesus said that even the giving of a cup of cold water in His name will receive a reward from God. But of course, it must be done *in His name*. Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

## II. Tabitha did her needlework as a disciple of Christ (v. 36b)

And that's the first thing that we see in Tabitha. Yes, she was a seamstress, but first and foremost she was a disciple - a follower of Christ. Verse 36 says, “At Joppa there was a certain disciple...” She is the only lady in the New Testament to be called a disciple, and this is the only occurrence of the feminine form of that Greek word for disciple in the Bible. So this is a deliberate deviation from convention. By using that word, Luke is highlighting the fact that her labors were done as a follower of Christ.

But there is more in that word “disciple” than simply being a follower of Jesus. The word μαθητρια also means a pupil, learner, or student and is an antonym (an antonym is the exact opposite of synonym - is an antonym) of the word ἀμαθής, which means ignorant or unlearned. So Luke is saying that she was learned in the Scriptures. Tabitha was a woman who (like the carpenter boy, Jesus) made it her goal to learn all she could about the Scriptures that her Lord had given to her. It's not only pastors who should be immersed in the Scripture.

And down through history it is astonishing to see how many ordinary men and women were good theologians on the side. You can think of Afra of Augsburg in the third century. She was a former prostitute, but (like Tabitha) she used her skills to help widows and other disadvantaged people - such as the abandoned children - and there were a lot of abandoned children. Prisoners, thieves, smugglers, pirates, and runaway slaves would often abandon their children. So she set up an adoption network among Christians. But even though she is most known for the work of her hands on behalf of those who were suffering, *it was the study of the Scriptures* that motivated her labors - labors that hugely influenced culture toward Christianity.

George Grant gives a beautiful portrait of Dymrna Caelrhynn (sometimes known as Dymrna of Gheel). She lived in the late 700s. As a child she fled from her father's incestuous advances with the help of a pastor. Yes, pastors were part of a protective underground in country after country over the past 2000 years. It's a form of interposition. Her pastor, Gerebernus, disciplined her in the Scriptures, and because of her solid transformational Biblical theology, she was moved to *do something* about the evils around her. She couldn't just know theology; she need to do something. So she began to rescue children and to speak out against abortion and infanticide. She also helped orphans and handicapped children, and according to George Grant was a major contributor to the Christianization of the Flemish lowlands. But she mainly did it with her hands - her service.

Read George Grant's lovely book *Third Time Around*, and you will see how God used 1000s of ordinary Christians with ordinary work to advance the cause of Christianity in the past 2000 years. You don't have to be a preacher to be used by God. Now, I will grant you that a few of these people that he talks about were really extraordinary in the labors of their hands. For example, Francis Cabrini came to America in 1889 and established six schools, four hospitals, seven orphanages, two maternity homes, and twenty-three prison ministries. Most people could not do that. She moved women away from feminism and abortion and into Christian thinking. But the vast majority of women that God used to turn nations upside down were relatively unknown.

The point of this sermon is that the carpentry of Jesus and the sewing of Tabitha are important for the advancement of God's kingdom. But you need to make sure that your carpentry and your needlework (or other similar work) is done for Christ and by His power. To quote Colossians 3:17 again, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

### **III. She was a converted Jewess (v. 36c)**

The second thing we see about Tabitha was that she was a converted Jewess. No Gentile would have had the name Tabitha. Tabitha is a Hebrew name that means Gazelle. And it is a beautiful name. The wife in the Song of Solomon is twice likened to a gazelle. And the fact that Luke translates the name into the Greek form for gazelle (Dorcas), shows that the *meaning* of the name had some significance for this woman. It wasn't just a name, or Luke could have transliterated it when talking about her. Instead, she exemplified it in some way. Perhaps she

had the graceful beauty of a gazelle or else had some of the lovingkindness associated with that word in the Old Testament.

In any case, she was a converted Hebrew woman. We aren't told whether she was young or old, a married widow or an unmarried young woman. All we can glean from the following verses is that she likely died prematurely, and so was likely not very old. The fact that she ministered to widows may or may not indicate that she herself had gone through the trauma of losing a husband. All we know with certainty is that she was a converted Jewess. And the significance of that fact will not be lost when it comes to the postponement for her burial. That was a strange postponement.

#### **IV. Her ministry reached across racial boundaries (v. 36a,c,d)**

But before we get to that, I want to point out a third thing that we can see in Tabitha's life - her ministry reached across racial boundaries. First, she lived in Joppa, which had a mix of Jews and Gentiles, and in earlier years was mainly Gentile. Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord to Joppa. That's not saying much about Joppa. The Gentiles of this city had killed 200 Jews during the time of the Maccabees. Anthony gave the city of Joppa to Cleopatra of Egypt. Later Rome gave this city to Herod. It was a beautiful city. But the point is that this was a port city that had a history of Jewish-Gentile conflicts. If you want to map it to modern cities, Tel Aviv annexed Joppa into its city not too long ago. So it wasn't that far from downtown Tel Aviv.

But the fact that she had two names shows that her ministry reached out beyond the Jewish community to the Gentiles of that city. She didn't make the Gentiles call her by a name that was Hebrew and unknown to them. Verse 36 says, "At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas." And it wasn't just translated so that we could know the meaning. Verse 39 uses Dorcas as the name that the widows used for her. She translated it for them; she used Dorcas with them. So she had two names. The Jews who knew her (like Peter) called her Tabitha, and the Gentiles who knew her called her Dorcas.

To me this shows her heart was gripped by the New Testament mandate to go beyond the Jews and to reach out to the Gentiles. When you read chapters 9 and 10 you realize that a Jewish-Gentile church was already thriving in this area.

And the application is obvious. It's easy for us to minister to family and friends, but God's grace causes us to get out of our comfort zone and to minister to those outside of our cultural and racial upbringing. In Luke 6:32-34 Jesus said this:

Luke 6:32 "But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back.

Her ministry across racial boundaries is another example of genuine grace at work in her life.

## V. She had pure and undefiled religion (v. v. 36e,39)

And verses 36 and 39 show that she didn't give to those who would be able to give much back to her - they were widows. Widows in those days were often destitute.

The second sentence in verse 36 says, "This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did." That sentence perfectly exemplifies the description of genuine Christianity in James 1:27, which says this: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

### ***A. God's grace was manifested in a life full of good works (v. 36d)***

And I want you to notice that this was not a once a week work for her. Either she was independently wealthy or the church had taken her into the number, and she was a deacon's assistant who worked full time in ministering to widows. We aren't told. But it does appear that she spent a lot of time in this ministry. It says that she was "full of good works" and that she was also full of "charitable deeds." Let's look at each clause.

Good works has gotten a bad rap in some Christian circles because evangelicals want to avoid a works righteousness salvation. But we aren't talking about how to *get* saved. We are talking about being saved *unto* a life of good works. The phrase "good works" in the plural occurs 15 times in the New Testament. Jesus said that He did good works in John 10:32 and in Matthew 5:16 he commands all believers to do good works so that their Father in heaven will be glorified. Indeed, Paul says you aren't a genuine Christian at all if you are not engaged in good works. Ephesians 2:10 says that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. We have been made new creatures *so that we could do good works*. 1 Timothy 2:10 says that all Christian women must engage in good works. 1 Timothy 5:10 says that a widow should be rejected from church financial help if she is not known for good works. And Titus 2:14 says that this was one of the purpose for our redemption. It says, "who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works." Hebrews 10:24 says that we are to stir each other up to love and good works. And there are other similar Scriptures. Let me read you a poem that says it quite well:

If a man would be a soldier  
He'd expect of course to fight;  
And he couldn't be an author  
If he didn't try to write.  
So it isn't common logic,-  
Doesn't have the right true ring,  
That a man, to be a Christian,  
Doesn't have to do a thing.

There are many Christians who show no evidence of good works. The question is, "Are they really Christians?" In contrast, the word "full" indicates that she overflowed in good works - probably to a degree that was greater than those around her. She was constantly trying to help

with the needs of those around her. Perhaps she bought a piece of fabric with a specific person in mind and imagined how it would be worn. A person who was in rags or soiled clothing could be pictured in her mind's eye as standing taller and feeling better about themselves. What she did may not have alleviated their poverty, but it probably ministered hugely to them emotionally and physically - as their tears for her seem to demonstrate. They loved her just as she had loved them.

### ***B. It was to those who could not repay her (v. 39)***

As already mentioned, verse 39 shows that she ministered to those who could not repay her. "Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them."

### ***C. She was "with them" when ministering (v. 39)***

Next, the same verse shows that she was actually "with them" when ministering. She didn't send others or do it from afar. She was ministering among them - probably ministering to them more than simply giving the clothing. She no doubt fellowshiped with them, hugged them, gave them advice, and hung around them. Perhaps they were in her home and she in theirs. She was with them. It was a service with a personal presence.

### ***D. She "made" the garments (v. 39)***

Next, the text says that she "made" the garments rather than giving them money to go to the Salvation Army to get used clothing. There is nothing wrong with used clothing. I buy second hand clothing myself. But there is something special about a new garment being given to a needy person. It's another indication of the personal touch in her ministry.

I ran across a story from a New England village. A home and barn had burned down, with only a few pieces of furniture and four cows making it out of the fire. Almost everything that family owned went up in flames, and the victims were in great need. A neighbor drove up to look at the smoldering ruins and after poking around in the embers a bit, shook his head in sadness and disbelief, and said, "If there's anything I can do, just let me know." Great sentiment, but no action; no good works. Other neighbors were different. They showed up with beds, mattresses, potatoes, vegetables, cooking pots, clothes, hay for the cows, a heifer to start up the family's herd again, and laborers to clean away the damage and to help them to rebuild. Christianity should look like that latter group.

### ***E. God's grace was manifested in a life full of merciful deeds (ἐλεημοσυνῶν v. 36e)***

The second phrase that describes her ministry in verse 36 is "charitable deeds which she did." The Greek word for charitable is made up of three Greek words - mercy, an ear, and character quality. It refers to a pity one takes on those who are hurting and (because of the word mercy) especially on those who don't necessarily deserve that help. But it is a compassionate action

and attitude toward the hurting. That word already implies deeds within it, but by adding the phrase, “which she did,” Luke shows that her pity was not just emotion; it was filled with action on behalf of those who were suffering.

Yes, verse 39 has the widows showing Peter their clothing that she had sewed, but it wasn't just the clothing that they were displaying. They were demonstrating that she had shown them friendship, love, and concern. She would be sorely missed. She touched *hearts* with her needle and thread. And many Dorcas societies have been named after her and modeled after her. And Dorcas societies don't just sew - they engage in other forms of tangible ministry to the needy.

## **VI. Tabitha was sorely missed when she died (v. 37-39)**

But the next point that I want to deal with is that Dorcas or Tabitha was dearly missed when she died.

### ***A. She died before anyone expected her to die (v. 37)***

We many times think that God's timing is wrong when God takes a talented or much needed person out of this world. I grieved greatly when Greg Bahnsen died at a relatively early age. God had already extended his life a couple of times with pig valves put into this heart, just as God extended Tabitha's life in this chapter one time, but Greg Bahnsen died during the last operation - and his life still seemed way too short for some of us. Here was a gifted man who was much needed in our age of apostasy. And I can think of many other men and women who *seem* to have died prematurely. But we can rest assured that God's timing is perfect. Tabitha got sick and died when it was God's time for her to die, and she died a second time when it was God's perfect time for her to die. It was not an accident. God had planned for her resurrection or resuscitation just as He had planned for her two deaths.

### ***B. Her death resulted in much weeping (v. 39)***

But like many deaths, her death resulted in much weeping in verse 39. She was sorely missed. Her service had impacted the lives of many people. Let me read you a scary medical story someone posted recently. He said,

Some years ago I was talking to a fellow who, for a year or so, worked in a hospital in the kidney dialysis unit. His job had been to clean out the dialysis machines after each use (where people are generally hooked up for several hours at a time). Well, as things would be, after one of these cleanings, he inadvertently forgot to flush the machine of the chemicals that were used to clean the machine. The next person to be hooked up to the machine was a man in his 90s. Upon being hooked up the man almost immediately went into shock and died. This fellow told me that he was sick over his mistake and expected there to be major ramifications against him. But as things would be, the old man was known to his family as a real grouch that no one liked and when word came of his death they were all filled with joy and relief.

That's no justification for the hospital employee's negligence; no justification at all. But it made me wonder - what will people's reactions be when you die or when I die? Will it be an “Oh, well”? Or will our good works have so contributed to Christ's kingdom that each of our deaths will mean a great loss to the kingdom? Keep in mind that death is still an enemy. Yes, we have

joy that the departed are in heaven with no more misery. But there is always loss from death down here below. We should aspire to be like Tabitha - men and women who are so used by God that we are missed when we die.

### ***C. Some in the church had faith that God could reverse this (v. 37b-39)***

But there is something strange in this text that shows me that some people in that church had faith that Peter might bring Tabitha back from the dead. It's not as if there was no precedent for this. Elijah and Elisha both had raised people from the dead - not into glorified bodies, but into their old bodies. Luke 7 records Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain from the dead, Matthew 9:25 shows Jesus raising the daughter of a scribe from the dead, and John 11 records Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Why do I say that verses 37 and following show faith that this might happen again? Four reasons. First, they violated Jewish custom by not burying her immediately. Verse 37 says, "When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room." Jews of that day (and even to the present) always buried bodies right away, as can be seen in Acts 5 where Ananias is buried immediately and three hours later Saphira dies on the same day and she is buried immediately. That was Jewish custom. She is Jewish, so why not follow Jewish custom? I believe they had faith that she would be raised, so they are storing her body for a while.

And there are other hints of this. My second reason is how long it took to fetch Peter. Verse 38 says that they sent two men to fetch Peter, who was at Lydda. Lydda is 17 miles away by their current highways. Using Naismith's Rule on [walkingenglishman.com](http://walkingenglishman.com), it would take 6 hours and 48 minutes to get to Lydda and another 6 hours and 48 minutes to get back. Unless Peter walked at night (unlikely) this would mean an overnight stay somewhere. That would definitely break the Jewish custom of burial on the same day.

But third, let's assume for the sake of argument that they did it all in one day. You can walk much faster than 3 miles an hour (which is Naismith's rule). But even assuming that, you still have to deal with the *urgency* of their request in verse 38. It says,

And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them.

Imploring him not to delay. Their urgency for Peter to come shows that they weren't inviting him to a funeral.

And fourth, verse 39 shows one more hint that they are not inviting Peter to a funeral or a memorial service. It says, "Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room." They are bringing him there for a purpose, and the purpose is not a funeral. A funeral would not involve Peter dropping his busy schedule in Lydda and hurrying to the upper room.

The point is that God gave some of these people the faith to believe that Peter *could* raise her from the dead and *should* raise her from the dead. She was that much of an asset to the church that they called Peter to hurry.

## VII. Her good works counted for the kingdom

But the last thing I want to mention is that Tabitha's good works counted for the kingdom. Not all can say that of *their* good works. Paul said that whatever is not of faith is sin. This means that good works not done in faith are sin. Even the plowing of the wicked is sin, according to the Proverbs 21:4. Isaiah says that all the righteousnesses of the wicked are like filthy rags. It doesn't deny that they have righteousnesses or good works, but they are not good in God's sight. The only thing that makes our good works *good* in God's sight is if God sees them as Christ's good works working through us. This means that we must do them in faith, to God's glory, by the power of the Spirit, who unites us to Christ. And we can. Dr. Gordon Clark told me after one class that even his going over Greek paradigms was a devotional act of service for Christ. Quoting Colossians 3:17 again, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." I believe that's what this woman did.

### ***A. Her works were "good works" because they were done for the right reasons and with the right motives (v. 36)***

Acts 9:36 makes clear that the sewing projects she had done were indeed "good works." You can sew to God's glory, cook to God's glory, do carpentry to God's glory, clean out drains to God's glory, and do all to God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). This means that you can do all those things in faith, *rather than trusting self*. That's key. This also means that the Holy Spirit can enable you to do *even menial tasks by His power* so that you find fulfillment, joy, and purpose in your menial tasks that you might otherwise not have had. And as those who are united to Christ's body, this means that what you do *can indeed be Christ doing it through you*. Paul characterized everything he did (including his making of tents out of leather) this way, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..." So Christ made tents through Paul because Paul made those tents by faith. Does that seem strange to you? It shouldn't. Ever since I started putting into practice Brother Lawrence's book, *Practicing the Presence*, washing dishes or emptying the trash has been done with the desire to please God. I sense His presence. 1 Corinthians 15:10 says, "I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." If God touches your common labors, they become uncommon - just like everything Joseph touched in the Old Testament was labor that was different and was blessed and was prospered.

But on the other side of the coin, this means that when your boss is mean to you or refuses to give you a well-deserved bonus or raise, it is Christ who is not getting that well-deserved bonus or raise. And you can tell Jesus that you desire Him to get that raise for kingdom purposes. After all, Jesus asked Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" What Saul did to believers, he was doing to Jesus. So if you are doing your computer programming as unto the Lord, and the boss does not reward you, your boss is not rewarding Jesus. And we can take that to Jesus in

prayer. We need to get used to seeing everything through the lens of Christ and His kingdom. The only reason Tabitha's works were *good* works was because she was doing them as a disciple should - as a follower of Jesus.

### ***B. Thus, her works positively impacted widows (v. 39)***

And thus, verse 39 shows that her works positively impacted the widows. They were not taken for granted. If our works are accompanied by the power of the Spirit, they are leveraged for kingdom purposes. They aren't just *us* doing them; they are *God* doing them through us.

### ***C. Thus, her works outlasted her life (v. 39)***

Verse 39 also shows that her works outlasted her life. They were continuing to benefit the widows after she died. God's grace can enable *our* works to do that. It's a huge motivational factor - knowing that cleaning the toilet and washing dishes is not wasted effort. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." And the word for labor there is κόπος, which refers to hard sweaty work that is exhausting. It's not in vain if it is done for the Lord. Both Colossians and Ephesians told slaves to do their work as unto the Lord.

### ***D. Her resurrection was God's leveraging of her works for even more impact (vv. 40-42)***

And lastly, her resurrection by God's power leveraged her good works for an even greater impact. Now I will hasten to say that not every believer has phenomenal leveraging. George Grant's book is filled with cool stories of Christians who made at least some impact. Some believers impact upon society was small, while others found their work leveraged through martyrdom (which made them famous), or through a king who stood behind what they were doing, through other means that made their works famous. But it doesn't matter whether our works are leveraged or not, they still count and receive God's "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

In her case I'm sure it was painful to come back into her body. She was leaving the joys of heaven for the discomforts of this life - not a fun thing. And in the same way, some of the men and women George Grant talks about in his book, *Third Time Around*, found their fame (which is what leveraged their good works) to be a huge burden. It was painful. They sometimes wished they weren't famous. Don't wish for what they got or what Tabitha got. Some people are ruined by fame and fortune. But let's read through verses 40-43 and see how her resurrection and continuation in this life for a while longer made a huge impact upon that city and beyond.

Verse 40 says, "But Peter put them all out..." We aren't told why. Was it because he didn't want any doubters present? Possibly. Lack of faith can negatively impact miracles. But it does seem that at least some already had faith that a miracle would happen, and here it wasn't just the

widows that were put out. All were. So it could simply be that he was following the pattern set by Jesus.

Continuing on: “But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed.” Healers don’t heal; God heals. And so Peter prayed to God, from whom all blessings flow. Having prayed, God gave Peter a supernatural sense of authority, and verse 40 continues:

Acts 9:40 ...And turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. 43 So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.

God used this sign and wonder to get people’s attention so that they would hear the message of the Gospel and believe it. And I have seen God use signs and wonders to do the same thing in our own age. I have seen no solid exegetical basis for saying that miracles have ceased. And I have experienced a number of miracles. And when I preached through Acts in 2005, most of my focus on this section was not on her biography (I skipped over almost everything I preached on today), but my emphasis was to prove that God still heals and still raises people from the dead on rare occasions. God’s hand is not too short to save and it is not too short to do miracles. Tabitha is a wonderful testimony to the fact that Christ is King and He is advancing His cause against every enemy. Over time life will get longer and death will be postponed more and more. Isaiah prophesies that. But the last enemy (which 1 Corinthians 15 calls death) will not be completely put under Christ’s feet until He returns in glory. Romans 8 says that that is the time when the final application of redemption will be applied to our bodies and the rest of physical creation. Every healing prior to that is simply a small foretaste or a small downpayment of the redemption of our bodies. It cannot be demanded. It is a gracious gift of mercy.

But one constant that *should* be a daily experience for every believer is that the same power that worked in Tabitha to do good works is a power that continues to work in us. Every task we do can be transformed from a task performed merely by the flesh into a work that has God’s anointing upon it - in other words, a *good* work. Joseph in the Old Testament is a prime example of this anointing by God. Genesis 39 says two times that everything Joseph’s hands touched was blessed and was prospered by the Lord (Gen. 39:3,23). And I would urge all of you to aspire to turn your manual labor from labor that will not last into labor that is good works that will last forever. Revelation 14:13 says,

“Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.””

I love that. Their works follow them. May your works follow you into heaven just as Tabitha’s did - because they were works made into good works by God Himself. Amen.