



Gospel Works in Controversial Times

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Our passage is quite timely. It brings three things into focus that Paul has been writing about all along: sound doctrine, good works, and obstacles to both. To be a people of peculiar goodness we must *do gospel works, avoid controversies, and correct division*.

Gospel Works

The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things. (8). In an age of hype and spin, outrage and fragility, fear and anger, we need trustworthy sayings. Cable news won't give it to you. One outlet plays on fear; the other on anger. Twitter and Facebook won't give it to you. Hot takes and half-truths abound. No, we need a source without bias, news without manipulation, something clear and true; we need the gospel of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (13)! And *that* is what this verse refers to. The saying that is trustworthy comes before it, verses 4-7, which are clearly set apart in the original text forming a single sentence. Probably an early creed. It begins with the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior and ends with the hope of eternal life. Goodness that culminates in an eternity of life, not death, hope not despair, runs *right through the cross and explodes out the other side of death.* Jesus: the sin-swallower, death-defeater, mercy-giver, justice-securer, shalom-maker, the Just and True. That is trustworthy news. News Jesus died and rose to get it to us. So what should we do with it? He says, *I want you to insist on these things.* The word for **insist** means to speak confidently. It's news not for sheepish acceptance but confident embrace, not ideas for mere debate but news for holy conviction. If someone comes running up to you and says, my house is on fire and the fire truck is on the way, you don't say let me think about that. You accept it and get on with helping. And that's how insist works here; it's in a voice that means we should be *personally* invested insisting on the liberating news of Christ. Now why? Well, he gives a *particular* reason, *so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.* Insisting on gospel-rich teaching is not a substitute for good works; just the opposite, *the good news triggers good works.* Remember, it is news that true King has landed and put sin, death, and evil on notice. He will return to close the deal—life eternal. In light of this good



news, what kind of good works should we be doing? Well, the letter has called us to cultivate virtue in every chapter: the character of an elder, godliness in men and women, peculiarly good speech, *but here* the good works have an *overtone of mercy*, of deeds done for others. The word **devoted** means *to show concern for, to give aid*. How can we give aid? Well, many have given financial aid to our COVID19 benevolence fund. We've been able to pay rent, medical bills for those struggling in this time. No doubt we will need more. But what about those outside our church? Mission Capital conducted a survey of 400 agencies in the Austin-area concluding nonprofits serving *minority communities* have been hit *harder* than other nonprofits in this time. Half of them will not be able to operate at current capacity six months. Hispanics have been the hardest hit with a 24% positive testing rate. *Give* to those organizations. We have a list of mercy ministries on our site. *Ask* how your CG can volunteer. These are precarious times for human contact, but did not Christ place himself in our midst to knowingly contract our disease? Then let us, at least, cautiously serve those in need. The gospel compels good works. Another way to do good works is to seek the welfare of our African-American brothers and sisters. This week unarmed George Floyd was struck down by those sworn to protect him. MLK said "[the arc of the moral universe is long \(it takes time to get there\), but it bends toward justice.](#)" MLK knew the universe was moral because he knew his Maker; the one who fashioned the universe with a framework reflecting his own character. So history will bend towards justice, but not because *we* establish justice but *God* establishes justice. Evil will win battles here and there as it did this week until Jesus returns to claim his full victory. MLK: "[Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name.](#)" God is greater than evil; Christ stronger than Caesar. So let's bring the future into the present, work for justice in Jesus' name for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others. *Reach* out to your African-American friends to offer sympathy, *serve* in your mercy ministry, *pray* for justice, *love* your neighbor. Let's write a different narrative, one of life not death, of love not hate, a life lived in the wake of our crucified King.

Avoiding Controversies



Now, it times like this, when emotions run high and hot takes multiply like rabbits, *we must not lose our heads*: **But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless** (9). If insisting on the gospel and good works is excellent and profitable *for all people*, then foolish controversies and dissensions are unprofitable and worthless. How do you want to spend your life? On what profits? Then avoid foolish controversies. To **avoid** is to go around, to deliberately evade, walk away. You see that click bait and instead of biting down, you move on. Hear that juicy gossip and exhort instead of indulge. Hot take? Not even worth your time. Avoid *foolish* controversies. How do you know if they are foolish? Some controversies are worth wading into, like the 16th century Reformation against salvation by works for sola fide, sola Christus: salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. Or like standing for racial justice. *But even a worthy controversy can turn foolish*. How? By the way we participate. Divisive speech creates more heat than light; building straw men dishonors the opposing view, insubordinate attitudes dishonors authority, gossip dismembers the body of Christ. Don't be foolish. **Quarrels about the law: theological nit-picking that is more about spiritual bravado than theocentric humility.** It's the person with secret spiritual knowledge, a pet way of doing things they urge on others. It happens when someone treats a secondary issue like primary issue. We were having breakfast with a famous OT scholar discussing some secondary issues. Someone asked, but isn't this issue important? He said, important yes, but important for salvation, no. Order your issues under the gospel. In the essentials unity, non-essentials diversity, in all things charity. Now, in the local church we have to clarify our position on essentials and non-essentials, which we have done in our doctrinal statement online. This fosters thick unity. If you can't submit to our elders' teaching, then you may need to repent of a quarrelling spirit *or* find elders you can submit to, *or* both. Now, it's fine to not have settled a view on something; we're here to help with that. But wrestle *with God's Word* in respectful submission to your spiritual authorities. Don't make a stink; that's **dissent**. Dissentions are controversies with an edge, a rebellious, self-promoting spirit. This person loves a fight instead of loving the truth. Avoid foolish controversies. Live a profitable life.

Correct Division

This brings us to division. In verses 10-11 Paul returns to the counsel he gave Titus at the beginning of the letter: *protect the flock by silencing self-absorbed, insubordinate people: As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.* Now, most of the time **divisive people** don't appear divisive. They rarely come from above saying, *You shouldn't trust your elders. They have it all wrong. The Bible isn't true.* They often come from below, as though they've been mistreated. Their agenda is often cloaked in "concern" or "hurt" when really it's about getting attention or validation. They play on compassion and sympathy to bend an ear. They may be quiet, mild, and yet speak critically of the group, judgmentally of the church, leaders. How do you spot them? They're the people who assume they're right and everyone else is wrong. They lack humility, speaking freely of *others* flaws but rarely of their own. *Gossip is the doorway into their destructive path.* It takes two to gossip: a speaker and a listener. Both are responsible. You are responsible to avoid, walk away. Excuse yourself and exhort them to go to person with whom they have the issue. **Leaders** are to warn them once or twice and then have nothing to do with them. Now this can sound harsh. But it's actually a grace. If someone was doing the same job as you, making the same amount of money, but only doing half the work, wouldn't you want them to get a warning? Say they misrepresent the company to a journalist. It's in the company's best interest to warn them. This protects the viability of the company and you, the employee. The divisive person is a threat to the whole church. You don't overlook them; you warn them. Don't sacrifice the many for the one. This warning is a grace, so they can learn their lesson. I've been slow to warn out of a false sense of compassion, when I should have corrected more quickly. Warning is a grace; it is not condemning. They condemn *themselves* when they choose the divisive path. Now, if you fear your own reputation you will not say what needs to be said, fail to protect the church and promote the glory Christ. If you are more concerned with with being liked than being godly then you need to come back to the gospel: *I've made a god of being liked, forgive me, that I might enjoy your love, O God, most.* A trustworthy saying. And get on with doing good works, avoiding controversy, correcting division. Will we do it? Will we choose the most profitable life? Trust the most trustworthy saying? Let's put our weight, our life, our



reputation on the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we do, we will be thrilled when the King returns to make all things new.