

Dorcas;

or, Garment-making for the poor.

Acts 9: 36-43.

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Tabitha, or rather Dorcas, has obtained a most unlooked-for notoriety. Almost every church and chapel boast of their "Dorcas Societies;" and "Dorcas" meetings are becoming well known even to those believers who are in professed separation from human systems and organizations. The aim, both in the one and the other, is laudable; and, doubtless, even if the objects of such charity are often not well chosen, the sufferings of many are thus alleviated. Without the slightest intention, therefore, of discouraging such efforts, it may still be well to examine a little the history of Dorcas, and to enquire what instruction therefrom the Spirit of God intended us to apprehend.

It is to be remarked, in the first place, that her activity was not confined to clothing the naked. "This woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." (v. 36.) This is a wonderful epitaph for a saint of God, and with this remarkable distinction from many such epitaphs written by men, that it was recorded by the unerring pen of the Holy Ghost. Her good works - *were* therefore good works — such as God had before prepared that she should walk in them (Eph. 2: 10), and such, on this account, as could only have been produced in the energy of the Spirit of God. It is profitable to remind ourselves of what is really good works; for while we have been taught the danger of restless activity and occupation with service, and have been led to admire, and to desire to possess, the good part which Mary chose (Luke 10: 42), we would also remember the words of St. Paul: "This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men." (Titus 3: 8.) Philanthropic efforts of many kinds are often dignified with the title of "good works," and are thus calculated to deceive many a simple soul; but, good works, those that are such before God, can only flow from the power of the Holy Ghost, and therefore in accordance with His mind and will. They can thus be wrought only by believers, and only by believers as actuated by divine power, and in subjection to the word of God. "The coats and garments which Dorcas made" (v. 39) were of this class by an infallible verdict.

The "almsdeeds" of Dorcas are recorded as well as her good works; and from the usage of the word (see Matt. 6: 1, 2, 34; Luke 11: 41, 12: 33; Acts 3: 2, 3, 10; Acts 10: 2, 4) there is no reason to doubt that these consisted in the ministration of money or food to those that were in need. The apostle, writing to Timothy, says, "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, *that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate*" (there is no foundation whatever for the marginal rendering — "sociable");

"laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal" (rather, on that which is really) "life." (1 Tim. 6: 17-19.) Dorcas was thus in the spirit of this exhortation. She was rich in good works, and she was ready to distribute, willing to communicate of her substance; for she had learned "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8: 9); and by that same grace she had become His representative in the world. She was a giver, because God, who had brought her to Himself, was a Giver. Knowing therefore that she was not her own, and that whatever she possessed she held only as a steward for Him, to whom she belonged, she placed both herself and her substance at His disposal, and served with both according to His will.

The objects of her charity or ministry are distinctly specified. When Peter had arrived, and had been introduced into the chamber of death, we read that "all the widows stood by him weeping, and showing the coats and garments which Dorcas made while she was with them." It is noteworthy also that these widows are distinguished from the saints. (v. 41.) There may be a reason for this — not to imply that none of these were saints, but rather, as we judge, to show that she laboured for widows as a class, and perhaps, too, in the spirit of the apostolic exhortation, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." (Gal. 6: 10.) It may then be concluded that her charitable activities were not solely expended upon believing widows; but, as one who knew the heart and mind of God, she sought to minister to need wherever it might exist, while owning the special claims of the household of faith. Every reader of the Old Testament must have been struck with the constant expression of God's care for the widow and the fatherless (and the two classes must often be found in combination), and James gives a voice to this for us when he says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (James 1: 27.) Paul likewise has given special instructions concerning these two classes. (1 Tim. 5.)

It is thus clear that Dorcas had the mind of God in the special work to which she was devoted. And indeed what service could be more blessed than to clothe the naked and feed the hungry? The Lord Himself, in the judgment of the living nations, when He shall sit on the throne of His glory, specifies these things services rendered to Himself in the person of His "brethren." He says, "I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat . . . naked, and ye clothed me." (Matt. 25: 35, 36.) This, as He explains, done unto one of the least of His brethren, was done to Himself. How unspeakable then the privilege to feed and clothe Christ in the person of one of His members. It is what He has done for us; for the apostle says, "For in this (our tabernacle-house) we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked" (that is, without Christ). (2 Cor. 5: 2, 3.) To clothe the naked and to feed the hungry — and He Himself is our food (John 6) — is consequently to act in His own spirit — the existence of the need drawing forth the affections of Christ from the hearts of His people.

A distinct lesson or two for our own guidance may be profitably collected from the whole history, confining ourselves now to that which is specially mentioned — making the coats and the garments.

First, it should be observed that the work of Dorcas was individual. There is not the slightest trace of any association with others. Evidently it was the special service to which the Lord had called her, and to which she willingly yielded herself. Her example cannot, therefore, be cited for anything beyond her individual line of service. Nothing is more blessed in Christian activity than fellowship - fellowship *in the Lord*. But the great danger of a day like this is association - association with others to obtain an object through the energy of co-operation rather than in the power of the Spirit. Satan often succeeds in this way in arresting even what might have been at the outset the action of the Spirit of God. Thus the Lord has laid some special thought of service upon the heart of one of His people; and instead of going forth to its accomplishment in the power of Him who has called to it, the effort is often made to associate others with it, or even to form a society for the end in view, and immediately the service, even if outwardly prosperous, is on the road to failure. Moses may well be a warning to us on this head. He complained to the Lord that the burden of the people was too heavy for him. The Lord permitted him to have seventy associates; but He took of the Spirit that was on Moses, and put it on them. (Num. 11: 11-17.) Not only was there no gain of power by the association, but enormous loss by the importation henceforward of seventy judgments into every question that had to be decided. No; service is intensely individual; for every servant is individually responsible to the Lord, even in garment-making, and hence cannot afford to subordinate his convictions to those of another, or to seek to walk upon the level (be it higher or lower) of another's faith.

Secondly, this history affords distinct guidance for sisters as to the occupation of their leisure time in their homes, or at least for such as have the means to purchase materials, and capacity to use the needle or the sewing-machine. It is to be noted very especially, that if Dorcas spent any of her time in fancy-work (and we by no means contend that she had not liberty to do so), the results of her labour in such a direction are not mentioned. This will surely be significant to every spiritual mind. It is "the coats and the garments" only that find a place in the word of God — teaching, at least this much, that it is labours of this kind that command the Lord's approbation. This is plain from the fact that Dorcas was raised to life again. Her loss was so keenly felt by the disciples that they sent for Peter, "desiring that he would not delay to come to them." The apostle went, and was permitted to restore her to life; and "when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive." (v. 41.) Thus the Lord interposed at the cry of His people, and comforted their hearts.

A last instruction may be added — one already obvious from what has been said — viz., that the work of Dorcas was for cases of need. There is some danger, if not watchful, of seeking to gratify ourselves in ministry of a Dorcas character; of expending our efforts upon selected cases, of choosing such as commend themselves to us in one way or another, so that it will often happen that the needs of some of the poor saints are abundantly met, while those of others are almost entirely overlooked. The antidote is to have Christ Himself before us as the object of our ministry, only remembering that, as it was not our merit, but our necessities, that drew forth His heart in service for us, so likewise the only incentive to our loving ministry to His own should be their needs. In other words, all our service must be drawn forth by the constraining love of Christ; for it is possible to bestow all our goods to feed the poor and yet to be without divine charity (1 Cor. 13), and hence without any promptings of the heart of Christ. Christ, therefore,

must be the motive; Christ must be the object, and Christ must be expressed in all our service. E.
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