

THE GRACE OF GOD THAT BRINGS SALVATION: PAUL'S EPISTLE TO TITUS

Week One: The Truth That Leads To Godliness (Titus 1:1-4)

The apostle Paul's letter to Titus is usually studied in connection with his letters to Timothy. Indeed, the occasions for writing and the ministries of the recipients both share some broad similarities; and there are several topics in Titus that are also addressed in the epistles to Timothy. Yet there were also some different challenges facing Titus, and as a result this epistle has its own thrust to it. Titus is thus fully worthy of study in its own right.

In particular, the letter to Titus gives particular emphasis to the role that God's grace plays in transforming our lives and our relationship with God. Many of the other teachings of the epistle are summarized in Paul's statement that, "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age . . ." (Titus 2:11-12).

In Paul's opening greeting, we can see his emphasis on truth, life, and light (1:1-3). Titus faced a considerable challenge in getting his fellow Christians to pull away from their sins and to develop more godly habits of living. Yet the apostle does not want him to try to bring about this change by the use of guilt, fear, or other such motivations. It is God and his own qualities that bring about the deepest and most lasting change.

Knowledge of the truth - in particular, the awareness of our mortality and of God's eternity - gives us a reason to live as God wishes us to (verse 1), even if it means sacrificing things of earthly value. Knowing that God never lies allows us to be confident that he will fulfill his promises (verse 2). Believing that we have found a true Savior helps us to take our focus off of the perishable things of this world, and to concentrate on eternal things (verse 3).

Though Timothy and his ministry are better known, Titus and his own faithfulness were just as dear to Paul (1:4). More importantly, Titus was just as valued by God. And there are many other faithful brothers and sisters of long ago, whose lives and ministries were never recorded for posterity, but who will share with us the same eternal home. The world may never know nor notice the things we do or the sacrifices we make, but we can be certain that God always does.

The apostle will continue by teaching Titus that "to the pure, all things are pure"; that is, that we should strive to purify ourselves inwardly, and allow this to produce outward change (1:5-16). Titus should teach others the link between sound doctrine and self-controlled living (2:1-10). The aim of Jesus is to redeem us and purify us (2:11-15), which then leads us to devote ourselves to doing good (3:1-8). The epistle closes with a contrast between divisiveness and godly fellowship (3:9-15). In all these matters, Paul exhorts Titus to live by God's grace, and to teach others to do the same.

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Week Two: To The Pure, All Things Are Pure (Titus 1:5-16)

When the apostle Paul wrote this letter to his friend and fellow servant Titus, he knew that Titus was facing many challenges in his ministry. Titus was serving God in Crete, an island that was home to one of the oldest civilizations in the Mediterranean region. Crete's history and culture combined to produce a situation that, while outwardly hostile to the teachings of the gospel, also pointed up the great need that Crete's inhabitants had for God.

Paul begins by instructing Titus to make sure that the believers in Crete are guided by godly elders (1:5-9). The apostle refers to this as 'straightening out what was left unfinished', since this is an essential characteristic of a stable church. The criteria for appointing elders reflect the apostle's hope for the believers to be blessed with pure, stable, self-controlled shepherds. This in turn will be an act of God's grace and compassion for those who seek and trust him.

It is unfortunate when we allow pagan standards of 'leadership' and 'organization' to influence our understanding and practice regarding positions of spiritual responsibility. Because we are so accustomed to fleshly society's glorification of selfish ambition, competition, and privilege, we sometimes assume without reason that 'leadership' in the church should follow the same pattern. But neither eldership nor any other form of ministry should carry with it any privilege, any exemption from inconvenience, or any personal authority.

In the church there should only be positions of responsibility. We are all exhorted (in various Scriptures) to be helpful and supportive of those who have these positions - but if we are in such a position ourselves, the Scriptures give no excuse or pretext to claim any superiority. Any beliefs to the contrary come from the world, not from God or his Word. In the church, talent and ability should not matter as much as purity, honesty, and godly humility.

In Crete, a purified eldership was particularly needed because of the rampant, blatant abuse of spiritual truths that the church faced (1:10-16). False teachings, exploitation for financial gain, and other such sins must be dealt with by spiritual means, not worldly tactics. Indeed, the troublemakers of whom Paul speaks are a perfect example of the kinds of worldly 'leadership' that the church of Christ must learn to avoid. Our leaders should not be expected to tell us what we want to hear, rather than the truth; and we must not mistake selfish ambition for 'leadership'.

To warn Titus of what he will face, Paul quotes the Cretan poet Epimenides's criticism of his own society. The real enemies we face are not sinful humans, but the evil desires of sinful human nature - and these lurk in all our hearts. The way to combat the sinfulness around us is not to rail against certain sins or to demand that secular society conform outwardly to rules of our making. It is to purify ourselves from the inside, through God's grace, and to help others to do the same.

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Week Three: Sound Doctrine & Self-Controlled Living (Titus 2:1-10)

In his ministry in Crete, Titus will contend with a wide range of sins and spiritual disorders. We can certainly sympathize with him in this, for we also live amidst all kinds of offensive and disturbing behavior, and we know that even believers can struggle with sin. So Paul teaches Titus to instill in other believers an appreciation for sound doctrine and self-controlled living.

The link between the two is immediately apparent in the apostle's instructions regarding the older men (2:1-2). Being known for qualities such as temperance, love, and endurance are the results of genuinely sound doctrine. Sound doctrine (literally, just 'teaching') is not a mere list of procedures or facts. Truly sound doctrine will affect our lives and make us more like Jesus.

Unfortunately, the church often misunderstands the proper meaning and importance of doctrine. Certainly, it is wise for us to refrain from the use of mechanical instruments, ceremonial robes, and other meaningless human toys during our worship assemblies. But this is not in order to comply with a mandated outward form, nor is it to determine who is more 'spiritual'. It is so that we learn not to rely on the material and the fleshly, so that we can focus on godly, eternal things.

Thus Paul urges Titus to help the older men, and also the older women (2:3), to learn and live so that their lives and teachings produce godly fruit of the Spirit. Being correct or 'right' about issues is not the point. If we happen to be 'correct' on something that matters to God, then we are only 'correct' by God's grace anyway, so that there is no question of superiority. If our beliefs and attitudes truly are those that God desires, then it will be clear from our way of life.

Instilling these qualities in older believers helps younger Christians learn sound doctrine and self-control from those who are older (2:4-8). While we may give lip service to the power of example, we tend to downplay it in our lives. If we want younger believers to devote themselves more to Jesus than to the world, then we should make sure that they see us doing the same.

Are sporting events more exciting to you than learning God's Word? Would you rather persuade someone to support a political candidate than persuade them that Jesus rose from the dead? Would you prefer that visitors be impressed with our congregation, or for them to see their need for God's grace? We can be certain that the answers to these questions will become obvious.

For this reason, even slaves are called to a life of continued sacrifice for the sake of the gospel (2:9-10). It is foolish to assume that the apostle tolerated the outrage of slavery. He simply was even more concerned that God's grace be proclaimed. It was more important to give even reprobate slave 'owners' the chance to know God, than it was to punish them for their sin. There was a time when Paul had badly harmed others, and God gave him the chance to know Jesus, instead of giving him the punishment he deserved. All of us who are honest will realize that this holds true for us too, and thus we ought to allow God to extend this same chance to others.

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Week Four: Redemption & Purification (Titus 2:11-15)

So far, Paul has given Titus a great deal of helpful guidance on helping the believers in Crete to develop a godly lifestyle and an awareness of God's truths. These practical suggestions are themselves based on some even more basic perspectives, which the apostle now discusses. Underneath everything in our lives that matters to God is the awareness of the grace that came to us through the blood of Jesus.

It is this grace that gives us the true motivation to live as God calls us to in this world (2:11-12). No matter how 'good' we are, we still can never deserve to go to heaven. This is what Paul sometimes calls the 'scandal' or 'offense' of the cross, because it is an outrage to the self-righteous and self-important. They are motivated to look good outwardly because they think it gives them a superior standing or status. But no act of righteousness, no ministry, no teaching or theology, has any value in God's eyes unless it based 100% on his grace.

Grace teaches us to turn away from wicked acts and worldly folly, but not out of the fear of punishment, and not even in the expectation of reward. Such motivations are childish or at best adolescent. God wants his children to learn to love him for his own sake - and to love one another for his sake. He wants us to do what is right because it is right, without regard to reward, punishment, or results. Anything less is not worthy of the love that Jesus showed on the cross when his blood was poured out for our sins.

Ironically, once we can learn to do what is right without expectation of reward, it is then that we can be certain of a reward far greater than we deserve or even understand (2:13). Blessings like eternal life, complete forgiveness of sins, removal of all fellowship barriers, and the like, are so much better than this world's rewards that we simply cannot understand them with our fleshly minds, unless we allow God's influence to rise above the noise of this world.

Redemption and purification (2:14) are, from an eternal perspective, the two most practical spiritual blessings, because without these we cannot have any of the others. The only way we can experience God's love, or share it with others, is if we are first purified from our sins. The reason we can have true security and hope, regardless of what happens in this world, is because we have been redeemed from all of the emptiness and fear of this world.

These are the things that Paul instructs Titus to teach and promote in his ministry (2:15). It is more important to understand these things than to know every sin a Christian must avoid, or to have the correct views on every doctrinal subject. It is only when we understand and live by what really matters to God that our thoughts and actions in these other areas can please him, anyway.

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Week Five: Devotion To Doing Good (Titus 3:1-8)

Throughout this brief letter, Paul has blended practical teachings with insights into God's nature and God's perspective. In order to please God, it is essential that we not merely conform to outward standards that others create for us. It is equally important that we not use the glorious truths of God as an excuse to live as the flesh pleases. If we have truly understood God's grace, then it will tell the Spirit 'Yes', but it will tell the flesh 'No'.

Thus Christians are called to conduct themselves in this world so as to be above reproach (3:1-2). We are told to accept the authorities our society has established, not because they are worthy of respect or because they do the right things, but because we have more important things to focus on than the daily activities of this world's self-important busybodies.

Most of society's authorities are vastly unqualified to be where they are, and all of them are worldly. But we also are vastly unqualified to be blessed with a relationship with the Creator of the universe, and we also have harbored many worldly desires in our hearts (3:3). Since we have been granted grace on an eternal scale, let us then accept the world's institutions for what they are, the vain attempts of pagans to control life on their own terms. We must not delude ourselves by expecting anything spiritual to come from worldly institutions, nor should we waste our time and displease God by fighting against them when we can instead be telling the lost about Jesus.

In Jesus we have the only real solution to the needs of the world (3:4-7). While the world thinks it needs more money, better governments, longer physical lives, more enjoyable activities, and other such things, God has the real answers and the things we really need. If we as believers refuse to accept this and appreciate this, then how can we possibly criticize unbelievers for their futile chasing after the wind?

Even in the church, we persistently resist focusing on the things that God really wants. To be sure, it is a real challenge to help one another to appreciate what a wonderful thing it is to have eternal life. It is an uphill battle to get others to value and treasure the washing of rebirth that comes through baptism into Christ. It is an unpopular viewpoint to remind one another that we stand before God on grace alone, through no merit or achievement of our own. But these things are merely difficult, not impossible. They only become impossible when we refuse to try.

This is why Paul repeatedly tells Titus that these are the things he must teach and emphasize (3:8). Having eternal life is a precious blessing, not just a vague insurance policy in case we don't get what we want today. Our sins create a deep debt of guilt before God; to have it wiped out by the blood of Christ, rather than by our own blood and suffering, is a blessing that we cannot possibly earn or deserve. It does not matter what others think about these things, or even whether we ourselves are 'excited' about them. This is what genuine Christianity is all about. It is a glorious thing, and we ought to set aside our foolish resistance to it.

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Week Six: Division Versus Fellowship (Titus 3:9-15)

As he prepares to close his letter, Paul makes some observations about our relations with one another in Jesus. It is a sad fact that even believers can succumb to the worldly impulse towards divisiveness and competition. And it is a precious blessing that in Jesus we can help one another in ways that the worldly cannot, because of the fellowship we share by God's grace. We will do well to pay attention to both sides of our relationships with Christians.

Debates, arguments, and simple differences of opinion are an endemic disease of the human species (3:9). Although it can give us a feeling of fleshly self-importance or fleshly self-worth to try to persuade others of our own views, it rarely results in anything constructive. In Christ, it is less important to be 'right' about a particular topic than it is to realize whether or not that topic matters to God. Many of our most passionate opinions - such as those about political issues or sports teams - have little or no spiritual content, and it is to our benefit for us to realize this, instead of making up artificially 'spiritual' arguments to support what we wish to be true.

Dealing with divisions over trivia is a regrettable necessity of Christian ministry (3:10-11). Notice that the apostle's advice centers on preventing such divisions from harming others, not on trying to prove who is 'right'. There are times when we must simply endure others thinking or doing something that we know (or think we know) to be incorrect. Even when we are certain that our way is best, we must remember that it is only by God's grace anyway that we have this awareness. In the church, then, potential divisions should not be resolved through debates or other pagan methods, but on the basis of relationships that are based on the blood of Christ.

Rather than focusing on and debating our differences, it is more constructive to look for ways in which we can encourage and help one another through this world's trials (3:12-13). The personal requests and greetings towards the end of Paul's epistles remind us that we depend on one another and need one another in our daily lives. Though we mistakenly exalt certain persons as spiritual 'giants', Paul knew that he was nothing of the kind. He hopes for Titus to meet him and help him before winter comes, and in turn looks for ways to help the other believers he mentions.

So Paul again tells Titus to exhort the Cretan believers to "devote themselves to doing what is good" (3:14), and he exchanges greetings across the miles between believers (3:15). To help and encourage one another in Jesus, we do not need to make elaborate plans, and we do not need to resort to comparisons or guilt. The apostle simply reminds us that there are always needs around us - those who need stronger faith, those struggling with sin, those who need practical assistance.

We cannot meet all of these needs, nor should we try. We should simply learn to live by grace and to focus on our spiritual blessings. Then our perspective will begin to change, as we see others and ourselves from a more godly point of view. Serving God and others naturally will be the inevitable result.

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