

Devoted to Good Works

Lesson for August 25, 2024

Unit III: Eternal Hope

Adult Topic: Grace and Good Works

Scriptural Background: Titus 3:3-11

Printed Text: Titus 3:3-11

Key verse: “*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,*” (Titus 3:4-5, NIV)

Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the town sage. The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, “You're absolutely right.” The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, “You're absolutely right.” Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband. “Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible – they can't both be absolutely right.” The sage turned to his wife and said, “You're absolutely right.”

David Moore in *Vital Speeches of the Day*.

Unifying Principle

Some people insist on picking fights and creating controversy. What is the best way to avoid a quarrel with a contentious person? Paul advised Titus to lead people away from the pointless controversies by directing their attention to the saving work of God in Christ and the hope of eternal life. (*Sunday School Commentary, 2023-2024*, Townsend Press, p. 454)

Key Terms

- 1. Disobedient** (verse 3) – Neglecting or refusing to obey; omitting to do what is commanded, or doing what is prohibited; refractory; not observant of duty or rules prescribed by authority.
- 2. Envy** (verse 3) – Pain, uneasiness, mortification or discontent excited by the sight of another's superiority or success, accompanied with some degree of hatred or malignity, and often or usually with a desire or an effort to depreciate the person, and with pleasure in seeing him depressed. Envy springs from pride, ambition or love, mortified that another has obtained what one has a strong desire to possess.
- 3. Grace** (verse 7) – Favor; good will; kindness; disposition to oblige another. The application of Christ's righteousness to the sinner.

4. **Kindness** (verse 4) – Act of good will; beneficence; any act of benevolence which promotes the happiness or welfare of others. Charity, hospitality, attentions to the wants of others. Preserved from evil; injury or destruction; kept frugally; prevented; spared.
5. **Saved** (verse 5) – Preserved from evil; injury or destruction; kept frugally; prevented; spared.
6. **Works** (verse 5) –Tasks, deeds, actions.

Lesson Background

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to his coworker Titus. The letter was probably written in the mid-60s A.D. between Paul's first imprisonment (Acts 28) and his second imprisonment, which is not mentioned in Acts.

The letter's theme is the unbreakable link between faith and practice, belief and behavior. This truth is the basis for Paul's criticism of false teaching, his instruction in Christian living, and standards he sets for church leaders.

Paul had recently completed a journey to Crete. He had left Titus there to teach the new church (see Acts 14:21–23).

False teachers were already a problem in the church (Titus 1:10–16), and the letter focuses primarily on that issue. The description of elders (1:5–9) and of proper Christian living (2:1–10; 3:1–3) appear to be worded for intentional contrast with these false teachers. The content of the false teaching is not fully explained (as in 1 Timothy). There appears to be a significant Jewish element to the teaching. The opponents come from “the circumcision party” (Titus 1:10). They are interested in “Jewish myths” (1:14) and perhaps ritual purity (1:15). Paul's primary concern, however, is with the practical effect of the false teaching. They taught ritual purity, but they lived in a way that proved they did not know God (1:16).

This false teaching would have been welcome in Crete, which was known in the ancient world for immorality. But Paul expected the gospel to produce real godliness in everyday life, even in Crete.

In dealing with the false teaching, Paul also provides Titus with a portrait of a healthy church. He describes proper leadership (1:5–9), proper handling of error (1:10–16; 3:9–11), proper Christian living (especially important for new believers in an immoral setting; 2:1–10; 3:1–2), and the gospel as the source of godliness (2:11–14; 3:3–7).

Titus chapter 3 applies the teachings which Paul gave in chapters 2 and 3. He encourages Christians to live separately from the immoral culture of Crete. Paul contrasts seven worthy behaviors with seven sins associated with unbelief. These are a reminder of what these believers had already been taught, not a new set of instructions.

Paul then explains that salvation is entirely on the basis of God's mercy. It is not something we earn by doing good works. When a person accepts Christ, they experience a spiritual cleansing, or “regeneration.” The Holy Spirit is given to us as a result of God's generosity and grace.

The text affirms that this depiction of grace is something to be trusted. Titus is given instructions to emphasize these basic principles—to insist on them. Paul also lists four activities which Titus is told to avoid. These are pointless debate, arguments over genealogy, quarrels, and debates over the law of Moses. These not only waste time, they give inappropriate attention to false teachers. Instead, those who teach false doctrine are to be warned, then cut off.

Lesson in Depth

I. The Motive for Godly Living (Titus 3:3-8)

For we ourselves were also once: This shows why Titus should remind them of the things mentioned in Titus 3:1-2. Remembering where we once were shows us that the fallen nature is not so far from us, and we need constant reminding to stay where we should be in the Lord.

Were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived: Remembering this work of God builds four things in us.

- First, *gratitude* for how God changed us.
- Second, *humility* as we see that it was His work that changed us.
- Third, *kindness* to others in the same place.
- Finally, *faith* that God can change those who are still in that place.

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared: When we were in the place described by Titus 3:3, we didn't rescue ourselves. We were rescued by the kindness and the love of God. He reached out to us long before we reached out to Him.

Not by works of righteousness which we have done: Our salvation isn't based on any works of righteousness which we have done. In and of itself, response to an altar call does not save. Saying the sinner's prayer does not save. Baptism does not save. Church attendance does not save. Giving does not save. Reading the Bible does not save. Each of these may be wonderful works of righteousness, but they do not save us. Instead, according to His mercy He saved us.

He saved us: This is the essence and distinctive of the gospel. We can notice the emphasis: of God... not by works... His mercy... He saved us... of the Holy Spirit... He poured... through Jesus... by His grace... heirs. God is always the initiator, and we receive from Him before we give anything back.

Through the washing of regeneration: These words are commonly taken as a reference to baptism, and this passage is sometimes quoted in support of the idea of baptismal regeneration. Yet we cannot say that Paul specifically mentions baptism here, and the only other use of the ancient Greek word translated washing here is connected with the spiritual cleansing of the believer by the Word of God through faith (Ephesians 5:26).

“Most commentators take the washing as a reference to water baptism. But if water baptism is the means that produces the spiritual rebirth, we then have the questionable teaching of a material agency as the indispensable means for producing a spiritual result (but cf. Matthew 15:1-20; Romans 2:25-29; Galatians 5:6). We accept the washing as a divine inner act, although the experience is viewed as openly confessed before men in baptism.” (Hiebert)

Those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works: This reminds us what we are saved for – to maintain good works. Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone. We must never put the cart of works before the horse of grace!

II. How to Handle Troublemakers (Titus 3:9-11)

Avoid foolish disputes: These are some of the things which ought not to be taught, which were warned against in Titus 1:11. These **foolish disputes** are simply **unprofitable and useless**. Instead, Titus should focus on the simple word of God.

Avoid: “The word *peristemi* literally meaning to turn oneself about so as to face the other way (cf. 2 Timothy 2:16 where it is used in a similar manner).” (Guthrie)
ii. “The Jewish Rabbis spent their time building up imaginary genealogies for the characters of the Old Testament.... It is much easier to discuss theological questions than to be kind and considerate and helpful at home, or efficient and diligent and honest at work.” (Barclay)

Reject a divisive man: Titus must take measures against those who insist on going their own way. Their self-will makes them **self-condemned**.

“Labor to convince him of his error; but if he will not receive instruction, if he has shut his heart against conviction, then – *burn him alive?* No, even if demonstrably a heretic in any one sense of that word, and a disturber of the peace of the church, God gives no man any other authority over him but to *shun him*. Do him no harm in body, soul, character, or substance; hold no communion with him; but leave him to God.” (Clarke)

Lesson Summary

Titus 3:3-11 contains valuable lessons on Christian conduct, grace, and the importance of good works. Here’s a breakdown of the key lessons:

1. Reminder of Past Sinfulness (Verse 3):

- Paul reminds Titus that all Christians were once foolish, disobedient, and enslaved by various passions and pleasures. This serves to remind believers of their own sinful past, fostering humility and empathy towards others who are still lost.

2. The Kindness and Love of God (Verses 4-5):

- Salvation is not earned by righteous deeds but is a result of God’s mercy. It highlights the importance of grace in the Christian faith—God’s kindness and love appeared, leading to salvation.

3. Regeneration and Renewal by the Holy Spirit (Verses 5-6):

- Believers are saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This underscores the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life, changing their hearts and minds to align with God’s will.

4. Justification by Grace (Verse 7):

- Through Jesus Christ, believers are justified by grace, becoming heirs with the hope of eternal life. This reinforces the doctrine of justification by faith, not by works, ensuring that salvation is a gift from God.

5. The Call to Good Works (Verse 8):

- Believers are encouraged to devote themselves to doing what is good. While salvation is by grace, good works are the natural result of a regenerated life and are beneficial to all.

6. Avoidance of Divisive Arguments (Verses 9-10):

- Christians are warned to avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, and arguments about the law because they are unprofitable and useless. Divisive individuals who persist in stirring up strife should be warned and, if unrepentant, avoided. This teaches the importance of unity and peace within the Christian community.

7. Focus on Constructive Faith (Verse 11):

- Those who are divisive and persist in their ways are described as warped and sinful. The passage emphasizes that unrepentant divisiveness leads to self-condemnation, highlighting the need for constructive and edifying discussions within the community.

This week's lesson teaches that Christians should remember their past to remain humble, rely on God's grace for salvation, live out their faith through good works, and avoid unnecessary and divisive arguments. It encourages believers to focus on what builds up the community and to maintain unity and peace.