

‘TRUTH AND GODLINESS’ TITUS 1:1-4

[St Mark’s, Sunday June 27, 2021, All Services]

1. Paul & Titus.

We don’t know lots about Titus from the pages of the New Testament. For example, he’s not mentioned in the book of Acts at all. But from Paul’s letters we work out that he was one of Paul’s trusted co-workers. Titus is mentioned many times in 2 Corinthians¹ because he had visited Corinth on Paul’s behalf previously and because it seems he was going to be the one returning to Corinth to deliver that letter². And what becomes obvious from 2 Corinthians is that Titus is someone for whom Paul had a lot of affection and respect. At one point Paul describes him as his ‘partner and co-worker’³.

So it’s no surprise to find that we have in the New Testament a personal letter written from Paul to Titus. And it’s a wonderful gift to us that we do. Because as we read this letter, simply known as ‘Titus’, we get not only more insight into Paul’s relationship with him, but also a lot of insight into how Paul thinks ministry in the churches should be conducted and led. And we also get to see how he understands the gospel and the life lived in response to the gospel. It’s a rich letter and there’s a lot of gold in just these three short chapters.

But what we’re looking at today is just the introduction to the letter. And the introduction concludes in verse 4 with Paul tenderly describing Titus as his ‘true son’ in their ‘common faith’. He’s a son, I presume, in that Paul was a spiritual father-figure to him. He’s a true son in that Paul has found him to be loyal and faithful. But most striking of all is that Paul doesn’t think that any authority he might have over Titus ultimately defines their relationship. Because whatever else you might say about their relationship, they are brothers. Both are sons of God their Father. They fellowship together in faith. By their common trust in Jesus they are united. And so Paul opens his letter by expressing his desire that Titus might know the grace and peace that come from God the Father through Christ the Saviour.

2. Reflections on a Long Sentence.

But of course, before he does that, he introduces himself. And he does so in a particularly long and content-charged sentence. That’s what we have in verses 1-3. And what I want to do this morning/evening is to offer four reflections on Paul’s very long first

¹ 2:13, 7:6, 7:13, 7:14, 8:6, 8:16, 8:17, 8:23, 12:18. See also Galatians 2:1-3, and 2 Timothy 4:10 for other mentions of him outside of *Titus*.

² 2 Corinthians 8:17

³ 2 Corinthians 8:23

sentence. And then I want to offer four more reflections on a significant theme in *Titus* that emerges from this opening sentence.

- purpose in the service of God

And we start with verse 1.

[Read 1:1]

Paul serves God and has been sent by Jesus Christ. And he is crystal clear on his purpose. So often in so many different contexts, the work people do suffers from a lack of clear purpose. And the same is true in our churches. When ministries carry on without a clear sense of what they're aiming at, they can become confused, unnecessary, or even counter-productive. But Paul didn't have that problem. And because of what he says here, nor should we.

His purpose in ministry was to further the faith of God's people. They're called God's 'elect' here because they are the ones God has chosen. Paul is underlining the sovereignty of God in calling people to belong to him. And Paul is crystal clear about the fact that these people, chosen and gathered together by God, are the ones he is responsible to serve. And he serves them that their faith might grow, that they might move forwards in the Christian life as their knowledge of God and his gospel deepens. He's all about furthering people's faith.

And specifically, he wants to further their knowledge of God's truth which lead them into godliness. And we'll come back to that phrase later.

But see what clarity Paul has here. And see what clarity he offers to us for our ministry too. When I preach a sermon this should be my aim. When our Home Group leaders or Youth and Kids Church leaders teach this should be their goal too. If you're involved in encouraging other Christians at your school or University or in your work place, this is your purpose as well. And I would suggest that this should be the focus every one of us has when we walk into church on a Sunday, or whenever we interact with or pray for our sisters and brothers here. We seek to further the faith of God's people. We don't have to guess at a purpose, or invent one. God's word gives us one here, through the apostle Paul. He is a servant of God to further the faith of God's elect.

- eternal life

But we also notice, verse 2, that he gives himself to this goal in the 'hope of eternal life'. The reason Paul cares about furthering people's faith is because he knows the prize that Christ has stored up for his elect. And this spurs Paul on. Would you really pour yourself out night and day to help people grow in Christ if they simply came to the end of their lives and their relationship with Jesus finished at the same time as their heart stopped beating? But Paul knows that those for whom he labours have a relationship

with Jesus which outlasts their life on this earth- a relationship with Jesus that never ends. Eternal life.

Now I think sometimes people are blasé about this. I know there are many unbelievers, for example, who can't see the point. They think the only life there is is the one we have in the body for our 70 or 80 years (if we're lucky) and they don't believe in eternity at all. Others may be willing to accept the possibility of life beyond death, but they still presume that this life now is where the real action is. Perhaps they think they can worry about eternity later? And just in case there's anyone here this morning/evening who thinks along those lines can I say to you in the nicest possible way- please don't be foolish about this. The evidence that eternal life is real is compelling. Jesus who himself rose from death speaks about it plainly. Every one of us will live for ever. And so, our life on earth here is actually indecisibly short. But this life is given to us that we might get to know Jesus, and so that faith in him might be formed in us. And it's only through Christ that we find eternal life. And the alternative is not just death. If only that were all people needed to fear. The alternative is also eternal. So I want to urge you to wisely see that eternity is not something to worry about later. Rather, eternal life is something to seek and have right now.

But I would also say that there are sometimes even believers in Jesus who become a bit blasé about eternal life. It's one of those Christian phrases that we get used to saying often. It's a concept we're all very familiar with. But I do wonder whether it's something we don't think very deeply about, or something we don't treasure as much as we could. I hope eternal life is not something that's lost its shine for you? Of course the mistake Christians often make is to think of eternal life primarily in terms of quantity. But I think Biblically that eternal life is primarily something to be thought of in terms of quality. What makes eternal life so wonderful is not just that it goes on for ever. What's precious about eternal life is that it's a life lived with our Heavenly Father, and his son our gracious Saviour. It's life lived with them and life lived under their blessing. Of course, it is for ever- which is mind-bending. But it's grace forever, purity forever, rest forever, joy forever. This is our hope. And it's a precious hope indeed. Eternal life.

- the promise of God

But thirdly the promise of God. I wonder what you'd say if I asked you this question: what is the first promise God ever made? I suspect a lot of people would answer that by talking about the ancient promise God made to Abraham- the promise that he would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. Some Bible nerds might go even further back and talk about the promise God made to Adam after he was cursed for his sin, the promise that one day his descendants would crush the head of the serpent. But surely that's as far back as its possible to go. Certainly if someone had asked me that question a little while ago I would have talked about Abraham and Adam. But then I started to think about what this phrase in Titus 1:2 means. Because here Paul says that God promised eternal life to his elect before the beginning of time! It's a fascinating claim isn't it? And what it's meant to highlight, I

suppose, is that God's purposes to make people and then to draw them into relationship with himself pre-dated the creation of those people, and even the creation of the world. It's remarkable. Paul is underlining God's sovereignty, his purposefulness, his love.

And, of course, the other thing that verse 2 tells us is that God never breaks his promises. Because he does not lie. He's the truthful God. He's faithful. He can be utterly depended upon. No matter when the promise was made!

Praise God for his eternal intention to share his everlasting life with us. Praise God that he bound himself to that intention by uttering it as a promise. Praise God that he keeps every promise he ever made.

- enlightenment

But fourthly, enlightenment. Because if God first made that promise before he created a single soul, how did we find out about it? Well, as we know, God revealed it. The promise may've been made in the darkness, but God brings that promise into the light. I'll read again from verse 2.

[Read 1:2-3]

Paul says that his role as an apostle has been to make the promise of eternal life known. What a job! What a privilege! And of course, this is a joy that you and I share in. We too have received the words of eternal life from Jesus. We too have his light to share with the world. What a job! What a privilege!

And what grace God has shown by bringing enlightenment to people. How kind he has been not only to make the promise of eternal life, but to raise up messengers who can make the promise known.

And this verse makes me think with great gratitude of those who God used to enlighten me as well. And each of us who believe have a similar story, don't we? There was a moment, according to the perfection of God's timing, when this promise was brought into the light for us. And we heard it and found our hearts being drawn to Jesus. But we heard it because God raised up a person, or perhaps many people, to tell us about it. And God's grace lies here as well as in the promise itself. And so we praise him- not only for the gospel itself, but for his kindness in revealing it to us, in giving us people to speak it in our hearing.

3. Reflections on a Major Theme.

So they're my reflections on Paul's long opening sentence. But what I also want to do this morning/evening is take a key phrase from this sentence and to reflect on it- a phrase that introduces a major theme in this letter. And the phrase I'm referring to is at

the end of verse 1. There Paul talks about the ‘knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness’. And this idea really is very central to *Titus* as a whole.

Paul starts his letter by saying he seeks to further the faith of God’s people. And he does so by helping them to know deeply the truth of God which leads to godliness. Then later in chapter 1 he talks about those who’ve rejected the truth and so become corrupt in conscience, and disobedient, and unfit for doing good⁴. Thus he affirms the truth of this opening sentence by showing the opposite- that the rejection of the truth leads to ungodliness. And then in chapter 2 he says that godly conduct amongst everyone in the church is a product of sound doctrine⁵. And he goes on to show how people living well for Christ will cause the word of God to be honoured- because godliness reflects well on the truth⁶. And this culminates in 2:11-12 where Paul says that it’s the grace of God which teaches us to say “no” to ungodliness and to live an upright and good life instead. And then in chapter 3 he says the same thing again. After summarising the gospel in verses 3-7, Paul then tells Titus that if he stresses the truth of the gospel, then God’s people will learn how to be devoted to doing good.

My point here is simply to demonstrate that this really is a central theme in the book of *Titus*. It’s like the chorus Paul keeps coming back to. In various ways Paul says through this letter that it’s the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness. So as we commence this sermon series I wanted to simply point out some implications of this major theme. If it’s true that godliness comes from knowing the truth then what does that mean for us? Let me finish today by mentioning four things in answer to that question.

- you need God to tell you what godliness is

Number 1, if knowing the truth is what leads to godliness then we must need God to tell us what godliness is. We don’t get to decide this for ourselves.

Last week I was reading in the North Shore Times an article about a local paediatrician, art collector and philanthropist- a man called Dr John Yu. And the article explained that though he grew up as a Christian he questioned it as he grew older and became more and more uncomfortable with the Christian faith. And the article quoted him as saying this: ‘I’m not a Buddhist but I find the teachings of the Buddha much more compatible with the way I feel’⁷. And you know this is how so many people make their faith choices these days. They choose something to believe that’s compatible with how they feel. Truth doesn’t come into it. But of course, you don’t have to have a PhD in Philosophy to know that if there really is a God he may not necessarily always say things that conform to your own sentiments.

⁴ 1:13-16

⁵ 2:1

⁶ 2:5, 2:10

⁷ *North Shore Times*, Thursday June 17, 2021, p.9

And that's why at the heart of the Christian faith is a deep humility- a willingness to listen to what God says- about us, and about himself. That's why the two key ingredients in becoming a Christian are faith- trust in God's word, and God's work, and also repentance- a resolve to turn away from just living life according to how I feel, and to live instead in obedience to the word of God. And the way the Christian life begins is also the way it continues. With faith and repentance. With deep humility. So we don't determine for ourselves what it means to be godly. We don't follow our instincts. We don't just listen to how we feel. Rather we submit ourselves to God. We hear and embrace his truth. God tells us what it means to be godly.

- you're not a Christian if you have truth without godliness

But the second implication I want to point out here is that you're not a Christian if you have truth with without godliness. That is, if the knowledge of the truth always leads to godliness then you can't be the real deal if you claim to have some kind of truth but it doesn't produce a changed life. This is the point James makes in his letter when he talks about those who have faith without deeds⁸. He says they're dead. They're like the demons who believe there's only one God but who reject his authority over them. James' point is that it's possible to believe true things about God without those things affecting you. But anyone who lives like that is not a Christian. They might be a theist. They might even be what previous generations called a God-fearer. But they're not a disciple of Jesus Christ. Because when a person comes to Jesus, and when Jesus' Spirit comes to them, the truth always leads to godliness.

- if you seek greater godliness, you must turn to the truth

And so my third implication is the other side of that coin. If you're a Christian who wants to be more godly, then you must seek godliness' source. And Paul says that that's the knowledge of the truth.

I fear we often make mistakes here. We want to be more godly so we just try harder. We want to be more godly so we ask someone to keep us accountable. We want to be more godly so we try to introduce more structure into our life. We want to be more godly but we become frustrated by our failures and we just give up. Or we want to be more godly so we pray and pray that God would change us but we don't really make any effort to open our Bibles at the same time.

Paul suggest to us here that whilst there may be wisdom in some of those things, the central thing, the thing we most need is God's truth. And so Paul urges us to seek godliness by going back time and time again to the gospel. Paul urges us to learn and re-learn who God is, and what he's like. Paul urges us to open our Bibles every day to read the Scriptures voraciously. All this is to say that if you claim to be someone who pursues godliness but your life is not gospel saturated and Scripture soaked, then you're

⁸ James 2:14-26

going about it the wrong way! If knowing the truth leads to godliness, then it's to the truth we must turn.

- you need the truth to do more than just tell you what godliness is

And then fourthly, I want to point out that you need the truth to do more than just tell you what godliness is. I hope this has been clear in what I've already said. But when Paul says that the knowledge of the truth leads to godliness he doesn't just mean that the Bible gives us some instructions to obey. When he talks about the truth here he doesn't just mean the truth about what godliness looks like. He means the truth about God, the truth of the gospel, the truth about who we are in Christ. And that's why I think our Bible translates this using the word 'leads'. The truth doesn't just teach us about godliness. The truth actually leads us into it. The truth makes us more godly. The truth itself transforms us. And I think it does that in many different ways.

For example, God's truth shows us the wisdom of God's ways as opposed to the foolishness of life lived without him. God's truth shows us how good for us living in godliness is. It makes the godly life attractive.

For example, God's truth shows us what God is like and how righteous, and beautiful his character is. And so his truth invites us to imitate the holiness of God in a way that's deeply compelling.

For example, God's truth teaches us about what God has done for us in Jesus, and so it stirs our hearts to thankfulness and worship. It moves us to want to give ourselves to him, as he's given himself to us.

For example, God's truth reconstructs our sense of identity in Christ. It shows us who we are- now that we belong to Jesus and are part of God's family. And as it shapes our sense of identity it encourages us to live in a way that's consistent with who we are.

And these really are just some examples. Examples of the way God's truth operates upon us and in us. I want you to see that when Paul says what he does here in Titus 1:1 he's saying so much more than that you should read your Bible to learn what godliness is. Because we need more than that. And God's truth does more than that. His truth is the life of God and the power of God at work within us to renew us, and sanctify us, and to mature us. And when we understand that, I think the truth of God will be so precious to us that our appetite for it will grow and grow.

May it be so with us.

[Read Titus 1:1-4]