

Pursuing Good in the Power of the Gospel

Titus 3

The Connection Between Grace and Graceliness

A couple of weeks ago I asked a question after the sermon at 5pm. I went back through my text messages and found it:

It seems like there's an almost automatic connection in these passages between sound doctrine and sound life. How do we make sense of those times when people who seem to teach what is true turn out not to be living it?

I've continued to reflect on that connection between the gospel and goodness as we've worked through Titus. And once again we see that connection stated plainly in chapter 3. I wonder if you noticed it as we read through in verse 8:

This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

These things is the gospel. And Paul urges Titus to *stress the good news* so that the church would be devoted to good deeds. Teach *grace*, in order to grow *graceliness*. (As Rus coined for us last week).

But when the Bible speaks about this connection, I don't think it speaks as if it's automatic. Rather, God reveals in his Word an *organic connection* between the gospel and goodness.

So consider some of the images that the Bible uses to explain the Christian life. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." It's as we're connected with *him* that we bear the fruit of love in our lives.

Or we're told that the church is a body that *grows* as it is nourished by the truth of God's word.

And here in this passage, Paul twice uses the picture of water. We are washed and made new. The Spirit is poured out upon us, so that we might overflow with good deeds to the world.

There is a connection, an *organic connection* between the good news of the gospel, and the good works of the Christian life. And so we stress *these things*, because when we take hold of the gospel we are connected to Christ, we are nourished by His Word, and we are filled to overflowing with his Spirit.

So today I want to consider the three movements of Paul's explanation of the gospel, and see how the gospel truths flow out into transformed lives. Then we'll finish with some thoughts on how we might pursue goodness in the power of the gospel.

1. The Problem of Sin → Humility

So right at the heart of Titus 3 is another pure gold statement of the gospel. And it lays out for us in three movements the good news of the Christian gospel:

Verse 3 tells us about the *problem of our sin*. Verses 4 and 5 describe *the appearing of our Saviour*. Then verses 6 and 7 speak of *the pouring out of the Spirit*. And each of those movements serves as a foundation, or a fountain, from which goodness will flow forth.

Look with me at verse 3:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

It's not pretty is it. This is the Christian doctrine of sin. And it doesn't usually get very good PR. Why does the Bible insist on such a relentlessly negative view of of humanity? Surely if we want people to be good, then we need to tell them that they are good – that's certainly the modern assumption. But not so fast.

Because there is something about these verses that rings true to our experience. We know, don't we, the way that our passions and pleasures can rule us. How we can do those things that we ought not to do, how we can follow *too much* our desires – pursuing even good things in ways that harm ourselves and are hurtful to others.

And oh how easily our relationships with others break down. We need to *work* on maintaining peace, but division and discord come so naturally! How quickly hurtful words come to our lips, how quickly we can exclude or ignore, how slow we can be to reach out in love.

Our own lives, and all of human history, bear witness to this description of the human condition. As the mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal pondered:

Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine; and yet, without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves.

Or as another author says a little more crassly, this teaching on sin explains our *high propensity to stuff things up*.

And so at the very least, facing up to the problem of sin helps us to be honest. We don't need to put on a show, we don't need to keep up appearances. We can finally open up because we don't have to pretend to our selves or each other that everything's fine all the time. This doctrine ought to liberate us into a culture of freedom and fellowship. "Oh, you're a bit of a mess – me too!"

But even more than that, the doctrine of sin grows in us *humility*. And the key words here are right at the beginning of verse 3: At one time we too... We too! One of the biggest barriers to our service of others is that we think people either don't deserve our goodness or they don't need it. We think we are either too good or too bad to help the people around us.

We say, "Yes I would respect and obey the government, if they weren't so terrible!"

"Yes, I would speak to that lonely person at school, but have you ever spent even one minute with them, they are SO annoying."

"Maybe I should reach out to that person, but what could I do for them, they are so rich/powerful/popular/clever (take your pick)."

"I would share the gospel with them but they would never believe."

But when we behold ourselves in the mirror of Scripture, when the “we too” of Titus 3 rings on our ears, we find a surprising but powerful grounds for the ultimate equality of all people. We discover a true humility when we realise that everyone comes empty and poor before God, and so no one is too far beneath us, and no one is too high above us.

I love the way G.K. Chesterton said it:

Christianity preaches an obviously unattractive idea, such as original sin; but when we wait for its results, they are pathos and brotherhood, and a thunder of laughter and pity; for only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king.

When we confess our sin, our pointing fingers can become helping hands. Out of the doctrine of sin flows an honest and powerful humility.

2. The appearing of the Saviour → Hope

But the power of this humility is only really unlocked when we pair it with the profound hope that flows forth from grace. For if verse three is confronting to us, verse 4 is equally surprising to our ears. We read here that God *appeared*. And how would you expect God to appear to a bunch of poor and pitiful sinners:

Paul continues, when the judgement and wrath of God our judge appeared. No. It's not even when the power and might of God our creator appeared.

Titus 3:4

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, 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...

We bring our bucketfuls of sin and lay them at his crucified feet. He brings his oceans of grace and pours them over our heads.¹

We come empty to the foot of the cross. He fills us up with his kindness and love. We come dirty and he washes us clean. We come dead and he raises us to life.

And so whatever else we say about our goodness. We must say clearly again that our goodness can in no way earn our salvation. Salvation is not held out as a possibility if only we can be good enough. It is lavished on us freely, motivated entirely by God's mercy.

As Martin Luther said, "God does not need your good works, but your neighbour does."

¹ This is a tweet from a UK pastor called Andrew Wilson.

And so as those filled up with kindness we overflow with kindness to the world. As those made alive, we can really *live* to love our neighbours just as God has loved us.

And we can do so with **hope**. See, I think our culture understands the brokenness of the world. More and more we see the way people are reeling from the fact that supposedly trustworthy institutions and people are just as foolish and disobedient as the rest of us. What we don't see or hear is hope. And so in many ways the most radical and revolutionary thing we can do as Christians is to hope! To engage in the world – in our work and study and politics and all the rest – but without fear and angst and ever-growing outrage.

Yes, we look out into a world ruined by sin. But we also look out into a world where the kindness and love of God has appeared. As one theologian puts it, Christians can have a “sober optimism”. For we learn in the gospel that truth is stronger than lies, that the light overcomes the darkness, that life conquers death, and suffering for the sake of Christ ultimately ends in glory.

And again, the history of the church bears this out. Our world has been utterly transformed through the gospel-driven goodness of Jesus' disciples. I think sometimes we forget how radical Paul's instructions are at the beginning of this chapter:

To be peaceable, considerate and gentle seems like common sense ethical teaching to us. But that's only because faithful men and women of the past have dared to live it out in a violent, selfish, and power-hungry world. All because they believed that the power and might of people was not the last word. The kindness and love of God had *appeared*, and so there was hope. Hope for now, and hope for ever.

3. The Pouring Out of the Spirit → Heirs

And here we come to the very heart of the matter. The connection between the gospel and goodness is not automatic because we do not live in a mechanical universe. We believe in an infinite-*personal* God, who has showed up in real history – he appeared in Christ! AND we believe that the infinite personal God also shows up to real people. Paul continues to say in verse 5 that the Holy Spirit has been

*poured out on **us** generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, **we** might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

The gospel is not merely an abstract body of truth. It is the personal promise of the personal God to real people like you and me, here and now. The pouring out of the Spirit is not vague spirituality. It is God, giving himself to us, so that we might become part of his royal family. That we would be *heirs* with Christ in his Kingdom! It's not automatic! It's organic!

This is why we read Psalm 72 just before. We're told there of the righteous King who spreads righteousness throughout the land. The anointing of kings was a powerful symbol of God's equipping them for righteous rule. The King receives justice from God and so overflows in mercy and justice to the world. They are filled in order to overflow.

And of course this is a picture of King Jesus. He really is the rain that falls on a mown field, showering down his Spirit and watering the earth. His royal rain falls from heaven to earth and we're united with him by faith. And that changes everything. The living water of the Spirit satisfies us and fills us, so that we might overflow with love and service. As Peter Leithart says,

United with the King, we're kings and queens, new Adams and Eves. [Washed by the Spirit], we dissonant children of Adam begin to resonate with creation. Soaked with heavenly rain, we become refreshing water for the world. The church is a cascade that sweeps away brutes and thugs; the church is a gentle shower to revive the thirsty and a cooling cup of mercy and justice offered in compassion and humility.

Sadly, of course, the church has often become a haven for brutes and thugs. Christians have often parched the land by pursuing their own power. Many times we have lost our way.

But now we can see what is actually happening when Christians don't live the good lives we are called to. In small failures and big, it is not that the gospel has failed. It's that we have let go of the gospel. We can believe all the right things, and we can even have apparently effective ministries. But if we are not connected to Christ, if we are not relying on the Spirit's strength, then we will not – we cannot – bear the fruit of goodness in our lives.

But even when we abandon God, he doesn't abandon us. And the gospel remains as a promise that calls us back when we wander. And when we return to him in humble confession he pours out his grace, and sends us out again in his service.

This is what the gospel does. Reminded of our sin we grow in humility. Remembering the gospel we abound in hope. Receiving the Spirit we are heirs in the Kingdom of God.

We who were empty are now filled with compassion. We have moved from death to life, so we possess an unshakable courage. And as Kings and Queens we are commissioned to carry God's healing justice and mercy out into the world.

Pursuing Goodness...

And so we pursue goodness – in the power of the gospel. There is an inseparable and organic connection between truth and love, between good news and good works, between grace and graceliness.

And so to finish today I want to focus on each side of that equation. What would it mean for us to pursue goodness, and how exactly can we do that in the power of the gospel.

So how do we pursue goodness? Well, we shouldn't overcomplicate it. Basically, we need to look around, figure out what people need, and seek to serve them. This really has been what Paul has been doing for Titus in this letter:

There are churches who need leaders, so appoint faithful, godly leaders.

There are young men and women in the church who need guidance, so have the older men and women come alongside them to set an example for them, to teach them, to encourage them in the faith.

And then here in chapter 3. There are leaders trying to govern us, so be obedient to them. There are pointless controversies and arguments that cause division, so avoid them. There are people who are travelling, so be generous and hospitable. Even the little note about greeting in verse 15 is a pursuit of goodness: there are people that we miss, so say hello to them! Paul says there are all sorts of urgent needs, so we must learn to discern them, and then devote ourselves to serving them.

And we might read this and think it all sounds pretty mundane and unimpressive. Especially in our day of 24 hour news streams, and social media feeds. This seems like a just a drop in the tsunami of global need that is thrust before us every day.

And yet, remember what Jesus said to his disciples. He didn't call them to save the world, or to "be the change", rather he said "love your neighbour". And that's not a cop out! Jesus is the ultimate realist, and he knows how challenging, and how transforming it is, when we show love and kindness to the people who are there, right in front of us.

For it is so much easier isn't it to complain about the government on social media than it is to quietly get on with being a good citizen.

It's so much easier to use our phones to fire off angry posts about the latest thing that's got our goat, than it is to use them to send an encouraging message or to call someone and offer to pray for them.

It's much easier to bemoan the way our family and friends let us down, than to commit to being a faithful brother or sister or husband or wife or friend.

It's so easy to join in the division than to lovingly warn a divisive person.

It's much easier to argue than offer encouragement.

It's so much easier to protect our own comfort and peace than to be generous and hospitable.

It's so easy to grumble and complain about our own needs and not see the needs of the people around us.

It's so easy to complacently fritter away the time, and not act upon our good intentions.

If the message of Titus 3 was: "save the world", that would hardly be good news as we look ahead to weeks of lockdown. What a crushing burden! Rather, Titus 3 is calling us to the much more reasonable, and yet totally radical task of loving our *neighbours*.

According to Jesus there are no little people, and no little places. And so the task of the Christian is to be faithful to him in our particular time and place, to the particular people he has placed around us.

So how can we pursue good in our place at this time? For most of us I reckon it will be as simple as picking up the phone, shooting off a text, giving someone a call, sending your Bible study an encouragement during the week, saying hello to your neighbours and asking them how they are going, dropping off a meal to someone wrangling kids all week, organising to have dinner over Zoom with someone who is living alone.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if as a church family we didn't just get through lockdown but we grew through it. And I don't mean we get better at the guitar, or expand our baking repertoire. I mean pursuing the good to which God calls us here.

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle to everyone.

...In the power of the gospel.

And as we pursue this good, we need to go again and again to the fountain of love in the gospel, and let that flow out in lives of love moment by moment and day by day.

Which, I think, most basically means we need to pray. It's so easy to think that prayer is impractical. We can find ourselves saying, "Yes I will pray for you, but is there anything *practical* that I can do for you."

But if the connection between the gospel and goodness is organic – then prayer is *how* we tap into the life and love of God. If you want to be connected to Christ the vine, then pray. If you want the nourishing food of God's word to grow you up in goodness, then pray. If you want the living water of the Spirit to satisfy you, and become a spring of goodness within you, then pray.

If you want to grow in humility and hope, and to live as an heir of God's kingdom, then pray.

If you want to have compassion, and courage as you fulfil God's commission for your life, then pray.

Prayer is deeply practical, because it is the deeply personal communion with the personal God of the universe, who is really there, who is really listening, who really answers us, and who really equips us to serve him in the world. I say this to myself, as much as all of you, we must, must, must pray!

This little letter is a precious gift. It teaches us about the gospel of grace in the appearing of the God of grace, so that we might live lives of grace. So is it any wonder that Paul finishes with this simple but profound prayer: **Grace** *be with you all*.